## The Lamentably Comical Tragedy (or the Laughably Tragic Comedy) of Lixal Laqavee

Tad Williams

“I am not a magician,” Lixal Laqavee announced to the shopkeeper who had come forward at the ringing of the bell upon the counter, “but I play one in a traveling show.”

“Then you have come to precisely the right place, sir,” the man said, smiling and nodding. “Twitterel’s Emporium is known throughout the length of Almery for its unrivaled selection of effects, marvels, and confidence enhancers.”

“And are you Twitterel?” Lixal inquired. “The one whose name is above the door of this establishment?”

“I have that honor,” said the small, bewhiskered man and brushed a fleck of dust from his velvet robe. “But let us not waste time on such trivia as my name. How may I serve you, sir? Flash-dust, perhaps? It gives the impression of a great outrush of thaumaturgical energies while posing no great danger to its employer.” Twitterel reached into a ceramic jar on the scarred counterop and produced a handful of silvery dust, which he threw to the floor with a flick of his wrist. It burst with a percussive crack and produced a voluminous puff of white smoke. The shopkeeper then fanned vigorously with his hand until he and Lixal were face to face again. “As you see, it also provides ample distraction for a well-conceived disappearance or sleight-of-hand effect.”

Lixal nodded thoughtfully. “Yes, I think a portion or two of flash-dust might serve admirably, although by no means will it fulfill all my needs.”

“Ah!” Twitterel smiled, showing fewer teeth than one might expect even in a man his age. “A gentleman who wishes his impostures to be both believable and exciting. May I say, sir, that your audience will thank you for your care. Perhaps this length of rope, which when properly exhibited seems to have the living qualities of a serpent? Or this Benaraxian Cabinet, whose interior can comfortably contain a shapely female assistant — the type whose curvaceous form, and your menacing of same with these cleverly constructed sabers, will particularly stimulate your audience...”

“No, no,” said Lixal, waving his hand. “You have incorrectly conceived my needs. I do not wish to employ mere trickery, especially of the expensive variety embodied in this monstrous, mirrored sarcophagus.” He flicked a finger at the lacquered surface of the Benaraxian Cabinet. “The performing troop with which I ply my trade is a small one, accustomed to the back roads of Almery, and we have but one wagon to carry all our goods. Also, and far more importantly, in the vicinities we frequent the distinction between performing the role of magician and being a magician is often a blurry one.”

The shopkeeper Twitterel paused. He reached up and plucked out a bit of his breakfast that had lodged in his beard (or at least Lixal hoped it was from a meal no less recent.) The old man seemed oddly disturbed by his customer’s words. “I am not sure I grasp the sum of your meaning, sir,” Twitterel said. “Elucidate, please, so that I may better serve your needs?”

Lixal frowned. “You force me to greater crudity than I would prefer. However, I will do my best to make plain my desire.” He cleared his throat.

“I travel with a troop of performers, providing entertainment and instruction, and sometimes even hope to those who previously found that quality in short supply. Not all perceive us in this wise — in fact, some ungenerous souls have suggested that I and my associates are little better than venal tricksters, a claim I reject vigorously.

“In the course of our educational performances we offer to our auditors certain medicines and tonics of a curative nature. Despite the slurs of the uncomprehending, our record of cure is bettered by no other similar organization, and even compares favorably with the more common medicinal advice offered by the sort of physic to which our rustic audiences generally have access. Do you grasp my meaning?”

“You sell dubious cures to the peasantry.”

“In a nutshell, good shopkeeper, in a nutshell, although I might take exception to the word ‘dubious’. By certain measures life itself is dubious. However, generally speaking, your perception is admirable. Now, because my part in this organization is a portrayal of magicianship, at times I am approached by members of the buying public separately from the rest of the cast, customers who believe the illusions they have seen are real. Many of them wish only to know whether the silver coin I produced had truly been lodged in their ear in the first place, and if so should it not then belong to them.” Lixal shook his head ruefully. “Others, though, have requests for magical assistance of a more precise nature, usually concering some petty problem in their lives — a failure of certain human apparatus of a privy nature being the most common. Then there are those who would like to see a family member hastened to peace so that the division of his or her possessions might be practiced sooner rather than later.” Lixal held up his finger. “These commissions I would not take, I hasten to assure you, even had I the means, and not only because of my naturally ethical composition. Our rural folk tend to carry both grudges and sharp hand tools, so I have no urge to excite malice.” He cleared his throat. “Other supplicants have desired lost objects found, unpleasant creatures or relatives confined, and so on — in short, a galaxy of requests, most of which I am unable to fulfill, and so a healthy sum remains dispersed in the pockets of the rustic population instead of concentrated in my own where it might form the foundation of a burgeoning fortune.” Lixal shook his head sadly. “I have come to tire of this woefully imbalanced state of affairs. So I come to you, good shopkeeper.”

Twitterel looked back at Lixal with more consternation than the casual observer might have expected. “I still do not grasp with certainty your desires, sir,” the old man said nervously. “Perhaps you would be better off visiting the shop of my good friend and colleague Dekionas Kroon a scant four leagues away in the pleasant hamlet of Blixingby Crown Gate — he also specializes in fine acoutrements for the performing of magic to discerning audiences...”

“You tease me, sir,” said Lixal sternly. “You must have grasped by now that I am not interested in the acoutrements of the magical arts, not in elaborate stage artifices or even the potware and piping of alchemy or other scholarly but unsatisfying pursuits. I wish to buy actual spells. There — I can make it no clearer. Just a few, selected for one like myself who has no magical training — although, it must be said, I do have a wonderful, firm voice that any magician might envy, and a certain physical presence concomitant with a true thaumaturge, as you must have noticed yourself.” Lixal Laqavee stroked his full brown beard slowly, as if comparing its lushness to the sparse clump of yellowed whiskers which decorated the shopkeeper’s receding chin.

“Why would I, a mere merchant, have such things?” Twitterel questioned in what was almost a squeak. “And why, even if I did possess such objects of powerful wisdom, would I share them with someone whose only claim to wizardly dessert is a velvet robe and an admittedly handsome beard? Sooner would I put a flaming brand into the hands of a child residing in a house made of twigs and dry leaves!”

“You misunderstand me again, good Twitterel,” Lixal replied. “You protest that you are a mere merchant, and yet unless I much mistake things, the name etched above your door does not conform to your true identity. In other words, I believe you are in fact not ‘Twitterel’ at all, but rather Eliastre of Octorus, who was once reknowned in the most powerful circles as ‘The Scarlet Sorceror’ — a pleasantly dramatic name, by the way, that I would quickly adopt for my own performances were it not that I make a better appearance in dark colors such as blacks and moody, late-evening blues.” Lixal smiled. “You see, it happens that by mere chance I studied your career while honing my impersonation of someone in your line of endeavor. That is also how I recognized you when I saw you drinking in the tavern up the road yesterday and began to conceive of my current plan. What a piece of luck!”

“I...I do not understand.” Twitterel, or Eliastre, if that was indeed his name, retreated a little farther from the countertop behind which he stood. “Why would such an unlikely set of affairs mean luck for you?”

“Step back in this direction, please. Do not think to escape me,” Lixal said. “And neither should you attempt to bluff me with the powers you once so famously owned. I know full well that after you failed in an attempt to seize leadership among your fellow magicians and wizards, the Council of Thaumaturgic Practitioners removed said powers and placed you under a ban of trying to regain them or in any other way dabbling in the profession of wizardry, under pain of humiliating, excruciating and lingering death. Please understand that I will happily inform the Council of your whereabouts and your current occupation if you resist me. I am inclined to believe your current profession, peddling alembics and flash-dust, might well fall within the scope of their ban.”

Twitterel seemed to have aged twenty years — decades he could ill-afford to add to his tally — in a matter of moments. “I could find no other way to make a living,” he admitted sadly. “It is the only craft I know. The Council did not take that into account. Better they should have executed me outright than condemn me to starve. In any case, I wished only to reform certain insufficiencies of the transubstantive oversight process — what was once a mere prophylactic has become a hideous, grinding bureaucracy...”

Lixal held up his hand. “Spare me. I care not for the details of your rebellion but only for what you will do next — namely, provide me with several easily-learned spells that will allow me to supplement my performing income by rendering assistance to those pastorals who seek my aid. I am not a greedy man — I do not wish to raise the dead or render gold from dry leaves and river mud. Rather I ask only a few simple nostrums that will put me in good odor with the country-folk — perhaps a charm for the locating of lost livestock...” He considered. “And surely there is some minor malediction which would allow the sending of a plague of boils to unpleasant neighbors. Such a thing has been requested of me many times but heretofore I had no means of answering the call.”

Eliastre, or Twitterel as was, rubbed his hands together in what looked like genuine unease. “But even such minor spells can be dangerous when improperly used — not to mention expensive!”

“Never fear,” said Lixal, with a certain air of noblesse oblige. “When I have begun to earn the money I so richly deserve by employing these spells, I will most certainly return and pay you their full worth.”

“So,” the shopkeeper said bitterly. “You would extort me and rob me.”

“Not at all.” Lixal shook his head. “But lest such an ill-considered notion set you scheming to punish me somehow for merely trying to better my situation in this uncertain life, let show you the warding bracelet on my wrist, an object of true power.” He flourished the twist of copper he wore around his arm, which indeed seemed to have a glow greater than the ordinary reflection of metal. It had been given to Lixal by a young lady of the troop during a time of pleasurable intimacy — a charm that she swore would protect him from premature death, inherited by her from her aunt at the time of that elderly lady’s quite timely demise. “Oh, by the by,” Lixal continued, made uneasy by the speculative way Eliastre was examining his wrist jewelry, “if in your misdirected bitterness you decide that some knowledge or stratagem of yours could overcome the efficacy of this ornament, I would like you to be aware that the bracelet is not my only protection. Should anything untoward happen to me an associate of mine unknown to you will immediately dispatch to the Council of Thaumatrugic Practitioners a letter I have prepared, detailing both your recent crimes and your exact location. Remember that as I choose my spells and you guide me in their recommended usages.”

The old man stared at him for a long time with an expression on his face that it would have been difficult to call either friendly or forgiving. “Ah, well,” Eliastre said at last. “My hands appear tied, as it were, and the longer I resist the more the binding rope shall chafe me. Let us proceed.”

When he had completed the transaction with the ex-wizard to his satisfaction, Lixal took the manuscript pages of the new spells and bade Eliastre goodbye.

“By the by, I frown on the word ‘extortion’,” Lixal called back to the old man, who was still glaring at him from the doorway of the shop. “Especially when I have given you my word of honor that I will come back at a time when my pockets are full and repay you at market rate. The expression on your face suggests that you doubt this promise, or else that you are otherwise unsatisfied with our exchange, which to me seems to have been more than fair. In either case, I am displeased. Until that cheerful day when we meet again, I suggest you cultivate an attitude of greater humility.”

Lixal made his way back out of the city of Catechumia toward the forested outskirts where his traveling theatrical company had made its camp. He wished he had been able to force the old man to recite the spells himself, as proof that none of them had been primed like a springe trap to rebound painfully or even fatally on its user, but since Eliastre had been forcibly curtailed from using magic by the Council of Thaumaturgic Practitioners Lixal knew there would have been little point: no flaws would have been exposed because the spells themselves would not have worked. He would have to trust to the curbing effect of his threat to have a colleague notify the Council if anything hurtful should happen to Lixal. The fact that this colleague was an invention, created on the spur of the moment — Lixal had long practice in improvisation — would be unknown to Eliastre, and therefore no less effective an intimidation than an actual confederate would have been.

Most of the rest of his fellow players were still in town, but Ferlash, a squat, ill-favored man wearing the cassock of a priest of the Church of the Approaching Horizon was toasting a heel of bread at the campfire. He looked up at Lixal’s approach.

“Ho!” he called sourly. “You look cheerful. Did you bring something to eat? Something which, by sharing it with a deserving priest, you could store up goodwill in the afterlife? I do not doubt your soul’s post-horizontal standing has need of a little improvement”

Lixal shook his head in irritation. “As everyone in our company knows, Ferlash, you have not been a celebrant in good standing of your order since they expelled you years ago for egregious impregnation of congregants. Thus, I suggest you leave off discussion of my own particular afterlife. I would no more listen to your speculations about the health of my soul than I would accept similar advice from the piece of bread you are toasting.”

“You are a testy young man,” Ferlash said, “and too pleased with yourself by half. In fact, I must say that you seem even more self-satisfied than usual today.”

“If I am, it is a condition well-earned. I have made no small contribution today to my own well-being and, indirectly, yours as well, since the spread of my fame as a thaumaturge will bolster the reputation of our entire troop.”

Ferlash scowled. Along with Lixal and another man who called himself Kwerion the Apothecary, the once-priest acted the part of authority figure for the troop, explaining matters of religion and its accommodations with commerce to the rural audiences. “Your thaumaturgic credentials are even more tenuous than mine as a priest,” he now told Lixal, “since I at least once legitimately wore the sacred mantle. What claim to genuine wizardship have you?”

“All the claim in the world, as of today.” And, because he was indeed pleased with himself, he went on to tell Ferlash what he had done. “So here you see the fruits of my intellect and ambition,” he finished, waving the sheaf of spells. “Once I have conned these, I shall be a form of magician in truth and thereafter I will rapidly better myself.”

Ferlash nodded his head slowly. “I see that you have indeed done well today, Lixal Laqavee, and I apologize for lumping you in with the rest of us poor posers and counterfeits. Since you are soon to become such an accomplished wonder-worker, I suppose you will no longer have any use for that bracelet you wear, the one that is such a fine talisman against premature death? There are times during our travels when the agnosticism of our audiences slips from doubt of my sincerity into actual bad temper — especially among those for whom the prayers and holy artifacts I sold to them did not work as effectively as they had hoped. I would value such a protection around my own wrist against those more strenuous gainsayers of my methods.”

Lixal drew back in irritation. “Nothing like that shall happen, Ferlash. The bracelet is mine and mine alone, given to me by a woman who loved me dearly, even though she chose security over romance and married that toadlike proprietor of a livery stable last year. The idea that you would be rewarded for nothing but beggary with such a puissant token is laughable.” He sniffed. “I go now to learn my spells. When next you see me, I shall be even less a person with whom you might wish to trifle.”

The thaumaturge-to-be left Ferlash sitting by the fire, staring after him with envy and dissatisfaction.

Lixal Laqavee had chosen the incantations carefully, because without the decades of conscientious practice which most wizards devoted to their craft — a routine far too much like hard work to attract Lixal, who knew there were many more amusing uses for his spare time — it was entirely possible to misspeak an incantation or muddle a gesture and find oneself in an extremely perilous situation, taslismanic bracelet or no. Also, due to his lack of experience, it was doubtful that Lixal Laqavee would be able to employ more than one spell at a time, and of course after each employment he would need to learn the spell anew before its next usage. Thus, Lixal had demanded only four spells of Twitterel-who-was-in-truth-Eliastre, a selection that he believed would prove both versatile and easy to manage.

The first was the Rhinocratic Oath, which allowed its perpetrator to create amusing or horrifying changes to the nose of anyone he designated, and then to undo those changes again if he so desired. The second, the Cantrip of Notional Belittlement, allowed its wielder to make any idea or sight seem smaller or less important to one or more people, the length of the effect varying with the amount of people ensorceled. The third was a charm of romance named Dormousion’s Pseudo-Philtre, which tended to create lust even when lust would normally not have existed or exacerbate it in even its most tenuous manifestations until the designated recipient of the pseudo-philtre would take ridiculous risks to scratch the amatory itch.

Last, most difficult to memorize, but also undoubtedly the most powerful of all the spells he had chosen, was the Thunderous Exhalation of Banishment, a weapon which would instantly move an unwanted personage or creature to the farthest end of the earth from the point at which the spell was employed, and then keep that individual there perpetually. An enraged husband or hungry leucomorph so banished anywhere in Almery would instantaneously be flung to the farthest ends of the unknown regions of ice on the far side of the world, and be held in that vicinity in perpetuity as long as he lived.

This spell drew such great reserves of strength from its user that it was practical only for select occasions, but since those occasions would likely be of the life-or-death variety, Lixal did not doubt it had been a wise and valuable choice. In fact, his selection of the Thunderous Exhalation had particularly seemed to nettle old Elisatre, so that the shopkeeper muttered the entire time he transcribed it, which only convinced Lixal he had done well in his selection.

And indeed, over the following months Lixal and his newfound thaumaturgical skills did indeed prosper. He enlivened countless local feuds with the sudden provision and subsequent recusal of nasal grotesqueries, and created a giant efflorescence so like a starfish on the end of one old woman’s nose that she completely rewrote her will in favor of a nephew she had not previously favored, who happily passed on a percentage to Lixal, who then rewarded the old woman’s good sense by returning her proboscis to its natural (if only slightly less unlovely) state. On separate occasions he used the Exhalation to banish three mad dogs, one dauntingly large and aggressive tree-weasel, and two husbands and a father who had all taken violent issue with Lixal’s use of the pseudo-philtre on their wives and daughters, respectively. (Two wives and two daughters, because one of the cuckolded husbands also had a comely daughter slightly past the age of consent. Lixal had made sure of this last — he was scrupulous that his amatory coercions should be used only on adults, another of his many traits that he felt was deserving of greater admiration than it received.) And the belittling cantrip had also been employed in several cases where his other methods could not prevail, enabling Lixal to find escape and even reward when he might otherwise fail in one or both areas. He began to develop no small reputation in the environs through which his troop traveled.

Thus, one evening, in a town called Saepia, a committee of local grandees led by Saepia’s aldermayor approached Lixal at the conclusion of the troop’s nightly show with a request for his assistance. He invited them to drink a glass of stock wine with him and discuss their needs. After a string of successes in surrounding towns Lixal felt secure in what he had to offer, and thus in what he was empowered to charge.

“We could not help admiring your demonstrations tonight,” the aldermayor opened, clutching his many-pointed ceremonial wool hat in his hands in the submissive manner of a tardy schoolboy. “Nor could we help to be impressed by the arguments of your colleagues, Kwerion and Reverend Ferlash, as to the value to a town like ours of being forward-thinking in regard to the benefits of your advanced knowledge.”

“By the way, speaking of such aids to fortune, is it true that those apothecarical potions will allow me to satisfy my wife?” asked one of the grandees shyly. “If so, I would like to buy some from your colleague Kwerion. My lady has a powerful appetite, if you know what I mean, and I often despair of being able to keep her from looking elsewhere for sustenance.”

“Oh, Kwerion’s potions could no doubt help,” Lixal assured him. “But if you will send your wife to me to be examined, as a personal favor I will give her something to curb those hungers — and I will not charge you a single terce! Is that all you good folk wished, then?” he asked as the local grandee stammered his thanks.

“In fact, there is another matter,” said the aldermayor. “Small and insignificant to the great and powerful Lixal Laqavee, but large and ruinous to such as ourselves, and to the resources of our small backwater. A deodand has taken up residence in the local cuttlestone quarry, and we can no longer work the crystal beds there, which had long been source of the greatest part of our revenue. To add to the indignity, not only does his presence inhibit the quarry’s workings but also he sallies forth at intervals to steal our town’s babies from their cribs or seize unwary citizens walking home by night. He then takes these unfortunates back to his cavern and devours them. We have sent several doughty hunters after him and he has defeated and digested them all. It has cast a pall over even the smallest activities in Saepia’s usually vibrant civic life.”

“And you would like me to rid you of this vile creature?” said Lixal, thinking cheerfully of the Thunderous Exhalation of Banishment. “Easily done, but owing to the danger of the work, even to a trained and experienced practitioner of the mystical arts such as myself, the price will not be insignificant.” And he quoted them an amount in gold that made the grandees blanch and the aldermayor fretfully detach one of the wool horns from his ceremonial hat.

After a great deal of bargaining they settled on a slightly lower amount, although it was still as much as Lixal would have expected to make over the next half-year in the ordinary course of things. He pleaded weariness that evening, wanting a chance to study and memorize the banishing spell, then bade them goodnight with a promise to meet them in the morning and solve their problem.

The next day, after a leisurely breakfast with the grandee’s wife, whose curative visit had run long, Lixal made his way from his wagon in the troop’s camp — he now had one all to himself — to the aldemayor’s house, a humble but well-constructed building in the domelike local style. That gentleman stood waiting in the road with an even larger swarm of townsfolk than had accompanied him the previous night. Lixal greeted them with casual nonchalance and allowed himself to be led up the hill toward the cuttlestone quarry behind the town.

He was left at the edge of it, without guides, but with directions toward the deodand’s cave. Lixal made his way across the floor of the silent quarry, noting with interest the tools dropped as though their users had simply run away and never returned, which had likely been the case. Dispersed among these discarded tools were the bones of both animals and people, most of which had been snapped in half so that their marrow could be accessed. The quarry itself was hung with early morning mist that mostly blocked the sun and made it hard for Lixal to see what was around him, which might have made a less confident man nervous, but he knew it took only a heartbeat to shout the single, percussive syllable which enacted the Thunderous Oath. After all, had he not been surprised by that cuckold back in Taudis, so that he had only begun to speak the word as the ax was already swinging at his head? And yet was not he, Lixal, still here, while the ax-wielder was doubtless shivering miserably in the snows of uttermost Ultramondia, wishing he had thought twice before assaulting the Dire Mage Laqavee?

“Hello!” he called now, tiring of the walk. “Is anyone here? For I am a lost traveler, plump and out of shape, wandering helplessly in your abandoned quarry.”

As he expected, a dark form came toward him out of the mists, in no great hurry, lured by the promise of such an easy meal. The deodand, in the manner of its kind, looked much like a man except for the flat, sooty black of its skin and the bright gleam of its claws and fangs. It stopped now to inspect him through slitted, bile-yellow eyes.

“You exaggerate your own plumpness, traveler,” it said disapprovingly. “Except for that moderate roll of fat around your middle I would not call you plump at all.”

“Your eyes are as faulty as they are inhumanly strange,” cried Lixal, nettled. “There is no such roll of fat. I described myself thusly merely to lure you out so that I might dispose of you without wasting my entire morning in search.”

The deodand looked at him curiously. “Are you a warrior, then? I confess you do not resemble it. In fact, you have the slack, well-fed look of a merchant. Do you plan to end my reign of terror here in Saepia by offering me better employment elsewhere? I confess that I feel an urge to explore other places and to eat newer, more exotic people.”

Lixal laughed in scorn. “Do not be impertinent. I am no simple merchant, but Lixal Laqavee, the Dire Mage in Late-Evening Blue. If you do not know my name already you will have ample time to reflect on it with rue in the cold place to which I will send you.”

The deodand moved closer, stopping only when Lixal raised a hand in warning. “Strange. I have never heard of such a magician as yourself, and other than that small talisman on your wrist I see no evidence of power about you. If I wrong you please forgive me, but you do not strike me as much of a wizard at all. Could you be mistaken?”

“Mistaken? Can you mistake this?” His irritation now become something closer to blind rage, Lixal waved his hand and uttered the Thunderous Exhalation of Banishment in his loudest and most impressive voice. The sky rumbled as if in terror at the great forces employed and a flash of light surrounded the deodand as though lightning had sprung out of the creature’s carbon-colored pores. But the next instant, instead of shrinking into utter vanishment like a man falling down an endless well, as all the previous men and beasts struck with the Exhalation had done, the deodand suddenly came sliding toward Lixal as rapidly as if the foul creature were a canal boat dragged by a magically superanimated donkey. Lixal had time only to throw his hands in front of his face and give out a brief squeak of terror, then the deodand smacked to a sudden halt a scant two paces away from him as though the creature had run into a soft but inflexible and unseen wall.

Lixal looked between his fingers at the deodand, whose hideous aspect was not improved a whit by close proximity. The deodand looked back at him, an expression of bemusement on its cruel, inhuman features.

“A strange kind of banishment,” it said, taking a step back. A moment later it leaped at Lixal, fangs bared. Whatever had prevented it from reaching him before stopped it this time as well: the deodand bounced harmlessly back from him. “Hmmm,” the creature said. “Your spell seems to have worked in reverse of the way you intended it, drawing me toward you instead of exiling me.” The deodand turned and tried to walk away but could not get more than a step before it was again brought up short. “I am held like a leashed moon circling a planet, unable to move away from you,” it said in frustration. “But that talisman on your wrist seems to prevent me reaching you and completing my earlier intention, namely, to destroy you and eat you.” It frowned, hiding its terrifying pointed teeth behind a pouting lower lip. “I am not happy with this state of affairs, magician. Release me and I will go my way without molesting you further. You have my word.”

Lixal stared at the creature, who was so close he could smell its sour, feral scent, the odor of bones and rotting flesh that hovered in its proximity like the morning fogs that hung over the quarry. “I...I cannot,” he said at last. “I have not the capability to undo the spell.”

The deodand made a noise of disgust. “As a both a wizard and deodand-slayer, then, you are close to an utter failure. What are we to do now?” A look of calculation entered its yellow eyes. “If you cannot release me in the conventional way, you must consider removing your bracelet and letting me kill you. That way at least one of us will live his life out the way the spirits of the void intended.”

“On the contrary!” said Lixal, piqued. “Why would I permit you to kill me? You may just as easily kill yourself — I imagine those sharp claws will work as efficaciously on your own jugular as mine. Then I can go on with my own life, which has much more to recommend it than your skulking, marrow-guzzling, baby-stealing existence.”

“Clearly we will not easily find agreement on this,” said the deodand. “A thought occurs to me. Have you offended another wizard lately?”

Lixal thought immediately of Eliastre and the impression of dissatisfaction he had displayed at their parting, but was unwilling to broach the subject to the deodand after such a short acquaintance. “Anything is possible in the rarefied yet contentious circles in which I travel. Why do you ask?”

“Because if so, it is likely that even death will not release us. If this misfiring of your incantation is the result of thaumaturgical malice, it may well be designed so that even if one of us dies, the other’s fortunes will not improve. For instance, I am compelled to be in your vicinity. If you die and become motionless bones, it is quite logical that I will be compelled to remain in the spot where you fell. Similarly, should you achieve the unlikely result of killing me, the corpse would probably still adhere to your person no matter where you traveled. The material shells of my tribe decay loathsomely but extremely slowly. In short, you would spend the rest of your life dragging my rotting corpse behind you.”

Lixal closed his eyes in disgust and dismay. “Eliastre!” he said, and it was a bitter curse upon his tongue. “I know this is his hand at work. He has treated me shamefully with this trick and I will have revenge on him, somehow!”

The deodand stared at him. “What name is this?”

“It is the name of one we apparently must visit,” Lixal said. “That is our only hope to escape our unpleasantly twinned fate. Come with me.” He grimaced sadly. “I think we must steer clear of Saepia as we leave these environs. The townspeople now will have several reasons not to love me, and I will tell you honestly that they never cared much for you.”

Like two climbers bound by a rope, Lixal and the deodand made their way through the forest and back to the camp outside town where the traveling troop was still ensconced. The players would have been at worst indifferent to the arrival of Lixal in other circumstances, but his companion filled the whole camp with unhappiness.

“Do not move,” shouted the apothecary Kwerion. “A terrible beast pursues you! Throw yourself down on the ground and we will do our best to slay it!”

“Please offer the creature no harm,” said Lixal. “Otherwise, and in the doubtful circumstance that you destroy it, I will be condemned to drag its stinking, putrefying corpse around with me for the rest of my natural days beneath our dying sun.”

When Lixal had explained what had befallen, the rest of the troop was much amazed. “You must find a sorceror of great power to help you,” said Kwerion.

“Or a sympathetic god,” suggested Ferlash, who was having trouble keeping amusement off his face.

“Surely someone as clever as yourself will find a solution,” said a young woman named Minka, who had replaced the young woman who had given Lixal the bracelet in the role of the troop’s primary educational dancer. Minka had of late expressed a certain warmness toward Lixal, and though she was clearly disappointed by this latest turn of events, she seemed determined to at least keep her options open. “Then you will find your way back to us.”

“In any case,” Kwerion said authoritatively, “you must embark on your quest for salvation immediately!”

“But I think I should prefer to remain with you — the troop is headed back toward Catechumia soon,” Lixal said. “I would appreciate the security of company. I will find some way to incorporate the deodand into our presentation. It will be a sensation! What other troop has ever boasted such a thing?”

“No other troop has ever performed while infected with the Yellow Death, either,” said Ferlash. “Novelty alone is not enough to promote attendance, especially when it is the novelty of horrid mortal danger, and is accompanied by such a dreadfully noisome and pervasive odor of decomposing flesh.”

The rest, even Minka, seemed to agree with the false priest’s objections, and despite Lixal’s arguments and pleading he and the deodand were at last forced to set off on their own toward distant Catechumia with nothing more in the way of possessions than what they could carry, since the troop also saw fit to withdraw their gift to Lixal of a private wagon, as being inappropriate for one no longer appearing in their nightly dissemination of knowledge to the deserving public.

Lixal Laqavee’s first night in the wilderness was an uncomfortable one, and the idea that he was sleeping next to an inhuman creature who would happily murder him if it could did not make Lixal’s slumbers any easier. At last, in the cold hours before dawn, he sat up.

The deodand, which did not seem to have even tried to sleep, was visible only as a pair of gleaming eyes in the darkness. “You awaken early. Have you reconsidered letting me take your life and now find yourself eager to begin your adventurous journey into That Which Lies Beyond?”

“Unequivocally, no.” Lixal built the fire back up, blowing until it filled the forest dell with reddish light, although the deodand itself was still scarcely more than a shadow. He had no particular urge to converse with the ghastly thing, but neither did he want to sit beside it in silence until sunrise. At last, Lixal reached into the rucksack that contained most of his remaining possessions and pulled out a box which unfolded into a gaming board of polished wood covered with small holes. He then shook a handful of nail-shaped ivory spikes from a bag that had been inside the box and began to place them in holes along the outer edge of the board.

“What is that?” asked the deodand. “An altar to your god? Some kind of religious ritual?”

“No, far more important than that,” Lixal said. “Have you ever played King’s Compass?”

The glowing eyes blinked slowly — once, twice, three times. “Played King’s Compass? What do these words mean?”

“It is a contest — a game. In my childhood home in the Misty Isles we play it for amusement, or sometimes as a test of skill. At the latter times money is wagered. Would you like to learn the game?”

“I have no money. I have no need of money.”

“Then we will play for the sheer pleasure of the thing.” Lixal extended his arms and set the game down an equal distance between the two of them. “As for the distance that perforce must always separate us, when you wish to reach out and move your pieces I shall lean back a compensatory amount, allowing you to manipulate the spinari.”

The deodand stared at him, eyes narrowed in suspicion. “What is a spinari?”

“Not ‘a spinari’ — it is plural. One is called a ‘spinar’. The collective refers to these pale spikes. For every one you move to your right, you must move another to your left. Or you may choose to move two in the same direction. Do you see?”

The deodand was silent for long moments. “Move one to my right...? What is the point of it?”

Lixal smiled. “I will show you. You will learn it in no time — in the Isles even the youngest children play!”

By the time they reached Catechumia they had traveled together nearly a month and played several hundred games of King’s Compass, each of which Lixal had won handily. The deodand was somewhat literal in its employment of strategy and had trouble understanding Lixal’s more spontaneous decisions. Also, the concept of bluffing and feinting had not yet impinged on the creature’s consciousness in the least. Still, the deodand had improved to the point where the games were now genuine, if one-sided and for that at least Lixal was grateful. The life of a man tethered to a living deodand was bound to be a lonely one, and so his had proved in these last weeks. Solitary travelers fled them without even stopping to converse on the novelty of Lixal’s situation. Larger groups often tried to kill the deodand, the reputation of whose kind was deservedly dark, and such groups bore scarcely more good will toward Lixal, who they deemed a traitor to his species: more than once he was forced to flee with the creature beneath a hail of fist-sized stones. Twice the barns in which they had taken refuge for the night were set on fire with them inside, and both times escape had been no certain thing.

“I confess I had not fully understood the unhappiness of your existence,” Lixal told the deodand. “You are hunted by one and all, with no succor to be found anywhere.”

The creature gave him a look that mingled amusement with scorn. “On the contrary, in the general run of things one and all are hunted by me. In any average meeting, even with three or four of your fellows, the advantage is mine owing to my superior speed and strength. Our current plight is unusual — no sensible deodand would go into the midst of so many of his enemies in broad daylight when his inherent duskiness provides no shield against discovery. It is only being tethered to you by this confluence of spells that puts me in such a vulnerable position. Not to mention how it hampers my diet.”

This last remark, the most recent of several, pertained to Lixal’s insistence that the creature with whom he was bound up not consume the flesh of human beings while they were in each other’s company — which meant, perforce, all the time. This the deodand had acceded to with bad grace, and only after Lixal pointed out that he could easily warn away all but the most deaf and blind of potential victims. When he accompanied this injunction by employing the Rhinocratic Oath, showing the deodand how Lixal could cause the creature’s nose to grow so large as to block its creature’s sight entirely, the deodand at last submitted.

They both needed to eat, however, so Lixal had a first hand view of the sharpness and utility of the deodand’s claws and teeth when they were employed catching birds or animals. Because the distance between them had to remain more or less identical at all times, it meant that Lixal himself also needed to learn something of the deodand’s arts of silent hunting and swift attack. However, this level of cooperation between the two distinct species, although interesting and unusual, only made Lixal Laqavee more aware of how desperately he wanted to be out of the creature’s presence.

Since the Exhalation of Thunderous Banishment had proved worse than useless when employed on deodands — and that, Lixal suspected, had been the exact nature of Eliastre’s deadly ruse — it was only the talismanic bracelet around his wrist which kept the deodand at a distance. He no longer had any illusions that he could resist the creature’s fatal strike in any other way: the Rhinocratic Oath would not deter it for more than a moment, the Pseudo-Philtre was laughably inappropriate, and even the Cantrip of Notional Belittlement, which Lixal had employed early on in their forced companionship, had only slightly reduced the creature’s obsession with the day when it would be free of him (and, the implication was clear, equally free to destroy him.) He might have used the cantrip on himself to reduce his own level of unease but feared becoming oblivious to looming danger.

One interesting concomitant of the situation was that the cantrip-calmed deodand became more conversational as the weeks rolled on. There were evenings, as they leaned back and forth like rowers to access the King’s Compass gaming board that the creature became almost chatty, telling of his upbringing as an anonymous youngster in a teeming nest, surviving against his fellows only by employing those impressive fangs and talons until he was old enough to escape the nest and begin killing things other than his own siblings.

“We do not build towns as your kind does,” the deodand explained. “We share territories, but only at a distance except for those times when we are drawn together to mate and settle grievances, the latter of which we effect by contests of strength which inevitably end in exoneration for one party, death for the other. I myself have survived a dozen such disputes. Here, see the deep scar of one such honorably concluded disagreement.” The creature raised its arm to show Lixal, but in the firelight he could make out nothing against the flat darkness of its skin. “It has never been in our nature to cluster together as your kind does or to build as your kind builds. We have always been content to take shelter where it is found. However, as I play this game of yours I begin to see advantages in the way your kind thinks. We deodands seldom plan ahead beyond the successful conclusion of a given hunt, but I see now that one of the advantages your people has over mine is this very quality of forward thinking. Also, I begin to comprehend how misdirection and even outright untruth can be useful for more than simply catching a wary traveler off-guard.” The deodand abruptly moved two spinari in the same direction, revealing a sortie he had prepared, but which had been previously hidden behind them. “As you see,” he pointed out with a baring of fangs which was the deodand equivalent of a self-satisfied smile.

Despite the creature’s unusual strategem, Lixal won again that night. He had been put on notice, however: the deodand was learning and he would have to increase the effort he put into the games if he wished to maintain his supremacy and his unbroken record. He found himself regretting, as he had many times before, that hundreds of consecutive victories in a game of skill should net him exactly nothing in the way of monetary reward. It was a suffering more poignant than anything Eliastre could have devised for him.

At last they reached the small metropolis of Catechumia, home of Twitterel’s Emporium. Lixal and the deodand paused and waited for nightfall in a glade on the outskirts of town, not far from the place where Lixal’s troop had once camped.

“Do not trouble yourself with speech when we meet Eliastre,” he warned the deodand. “It will be a tense negotiation and best served by devices I alone can bring to bear. In fact,” he said after a moment’s thought, “It may be best if you remain outside the door while I step just inside it, so that the treacherous onetime mage knows nothing of your presence and can prepare no defense against you, should I find it necessary to call upon you.”

“You have tried once already to trap me on the other side of a door, Laqavee,” the deodand said sourly. “Not only that, but it was a church door, which you thought might increase the efficacy of the strategem. And what happened?”

“You wrong me! That was weeks ago and I intend no such trickery here...!”

“You discovered you could not go forward while I remained on the other side of the door,” the creature reminded him. “Like the golden links of a magister’s cuff, we are bound together, willy-nilly — one cannot proceed without the other.”

“As far as our current plan, I desired only to keep your presence a secret at the outset,” Lixal said in a sulky voice. “But you will do as you feel you must.”

“Yes, I shall,” said the deodand. “And you would be wise to remember that.”

When midnight came they crossed town swiftly and mostly silently, although Lixal was forced to remonstrate severely with the deodand who would have eaten a drunkard he found sleeping in an alcove outside a shuttered tavern.

“He is of no interest to anyone except me,” the creature argued. “How can you prevent me when you have starved me of proper man-flesh for so long?”

“Because if we are discovered things will go badly for both of us. If the gnawed bones of even the lowliest of townsfolk come to public attention, will not the presence of such as yourself in Catechumia instantly be inferred?”

“They might suppose a wolf had snuck into town,” suggested the deodand. “Why do you continually thwart me? You will not even let me eat the flesh of the dead of your species, which your people scorn so much they bury it in the ground, far from their habitations!”

“I do not let you eat the flesh of corpses because it sickens me,” replied Lixal coldly. “It is proof that, no matter how you aspire to be otherwise, you and your ilk are no better than beasts.”

“Like those you call beasts, we do not waste perfectly edible tissues. Our own kind, at the end of their days, are perfectly happy to be returned to the communal stomach.”

Lixal shuddered. “Enough. This is the street.”

But to his great unhappiness, when Lixal approached the doorway of what had once been Twitterel’s Emporium it gave every sign of being long deserted. “Here,” Lixal cried, “this is wretched in the extreme! The coward has decamped. Let us enter and see if there is any clue to his present whereabouts.”

The deodand easily, if somewhat noisily, broke the bolt on the door and they went into the large, dark room that had once been densely packed with Twitterel-who-was-Eliastre’s stock in trade. Now nothing lined the shelves but cobwebs, and even these looked long-abandoned. A rat, perhaps disturbed by the deodand’s unusual scent, scurried into a corner hole and disappeared.

“He seems to have left you a note, Laqavee,” said the deodand, pointing. “It has your name on it.”

Lixal, who did not have the creature’s sharp vision, had to locate the folded parchment nailed to the wall by touch, then take it outside into the flickering glow of the street-lantern to read it. To Lixal Laqavee, extortionist and counterfeit thaumaturge, the missive began, If you are reading this, one of two things has occurred. If you have come to pay what you owe me, I stand surprised and pleased. In this case you may give thirteen thousand terces to the landlord of this establishment (he lives next door) and I will receive it from him at a time in the future and in a manner known only to myself. In a spirit of forgiveness, I will also warn you that at no time should you attempt the Exhalation of Thunderous Banishment on a deodand. If you have not returned to erase your debt, as I think more likely, it is because you have used the Exhalation on one of the dusky creatures, but for some reason my intention of teaching you a lesson has been thwarted and you mean to remonstrate with me. (It is possible that my transposition of two key words, because hurried, was not as damaging to the effect as I hoped. It is even remotely possible that the protective charm you wore on your wrist was more useful than it appeared, in which case I must blame my own overconfidence.) If any combination of these is the case for your return, my various curses upon you remain in force and I inform you also that I have moved my business to another town and chosen another name, so that any attempt by you to stir up trouble for me with the Council of Thaumaturgic Practitioners will be doomed to failure. You, sir, may rot in hell with my congenial approval. signed, He Who Was Twitterel

Lixal crumpled the parchment in his fist. “Repay him?” he growled. “His purse will groan indeed with the weight of my repayment. His account shall be paid to bursting!”

“Your metaphors are inexact,” the deodand said. “I take it we shall not be parting company as quickly as we both had hoped.”

Like two prisoners condemned to share a cell, Lixal and the deodand grew weary of each other’s company in the weeks and months after they left Catechumia. Lixal searched half-heartedly for news of the ex-wizard Eliastre, but he was inhibited by the constant presence of the deodand, who proved a dampening influence on conversation with most of humankind, and so he all but gave up hope of ever locating the author of his predicament, who could have set up shop anew in any one of hundreds of towns and cities across Almery or even farther countries still.

While they were everywhere shunned by men, they came occasionally into contact with other deodands, who looked on Lixal not with fear or curiosity, but rather as a potential source of nutrients. When his bracelet proved more than these new deodands could overcome, they settled instead for desultory gossip with their trapped comrade. Lixal was forced to listen to long discussions criticizing what all parties but himself saw as his ridiculous opposition to the eating of human flesh, living or dead. The deodand bound to him by the Exhalation was inevitably buoyed after these discussions with like-minded peers, and would often bring an even greater energy to bear on their nightly games of King’s Compass: at times Lixal was hard-pressed to keep up his unbroken record of victories, but keep it he did, and, stinging from the deodandic imputation of his prudishness, did not hesitate to remind his opponent as often as possible of that creature’s campaign of futility.

“Yes, it is easy to criticize,” Lixal often said as the board was packed away. “But one has only to review our sporting history to see who has the superior approach to life.” He was even beginning to grow used to this mode of existence, despite the inadequate nature of the deodand as both a conversationalist and competitor.

Then, almost a year after their initial joining, came the day when the talismanic bracelet, the admirer’s gift that had so long protected Lixal Laqavee’s life, suddenly ceased to function.

Lixal discovered that the spell was no longer efficacious in a sudden and extremely unpleasant manner: one moment he slept, dreaming of a charmed scenario in which he was causing Eliastre’s bony nose to sprout carbuncles that were actually bigger than the ex-wizard himself, and laughing as the old man screeched and pleaded for mercy. Then he awoke to discover the deodand’s stinking breath on his face and the demonic yellow eyes only an inch or two from his own.

Lixal had time only for a choked squeal, then the taloned hand closed on his neck.

“Oh, but you are soft, you humans,” the thing whispered, not from stealth it seemed but from pure pleasure in the moment, as if to speak loudly would be to induce a jarring note into an otherwise sublime melody. “My claws would pass through your throat like butter. I will certainly have to choose a slower and more satisfying method of dispatching you.”

“M-my b-b-bracelet,” stuttered Lixal. “What have you done to it?”

“I?” The deodand chortled. “I have done nothing. But as I recall, it was meant to protect you from untimely death. Apparently in whatever way these things are calculated your time of dying has arrived. Perhaps in a different state of affairs, a paralleled existence of some sort, this is the moment when you would have been struck lifeless by a falling slate from a roof or mowed down by an overladen horse cart whose driver had lost his grip on the reins. But fear not! In this plane of reality you shall not have to go searching for your death, Laqavee, since by convenience I am here to make certain that things proceed for you as just the Fates desire they should!”

“But why? Have I mistreated you so badly? We have traveled together for a full round of seasons.” Lixal raised a trembling hand with the intention of giving the deodand an encouraging, brotherly pat, but at the sight of the creature’s bared fangs he swiftly withdrew it again. “We are as close as any of our two kinds have ever been — we understand each other as well as our two species have ever managed. Surely it would be a shame to throw all that away!”

The deodand made a noise of sarcastic amusement. “What does that mean? Had you spent a year chained against your will to a standing rib roast, do you suggest that when the fetters were removed you would suddenly wish to preserve your friendship with it? You are my prey, Laqavee. Circumstances have pressed us together. Now circumstances have released me to destroy you.”

The grip on his neck was tightening now. “Hold, hold!” Lixal cried. “Do you not remember what you yourself suggested? That if I were to die you would be held to the spot where my bones fell?”

“I have considered just that during this long night, since I first realized your magical bracelet no longer dissuaded me. My solution is elegant: I shall devour you bones and all. Thus I will be confined only to the vicinity of my own stomach, something that is already the case.” The deodand laughed in pleasure. “After all, you spoke glowingly yourself of the closeness of our acquaintanceship, Laqavee — surely you could wish no greater proximity than within my gut!”

The foul stench of the thing’s breath was almost enough to snatch away what little remained of Lixal’s dizzied consciousness. He closed his eyes so that he would not have to see the deodand’s terrible gaze when it murdered him. “Very well, then,” he said with as much aplomb as he could muster, although every limb in his body trembled as though he had an ague. “At least I die with the satisfaction of knowing that a deodand has never beaten a human at King’s Compass and now never shall.”

He waited.

He continued to wait.

Lixal could not help remembering that the deodand had earlier spoken of a death both slower and more satisfying than simply having his throat torn out — satisfying to the murderous creature, Lixal had no doubt, rather than to himself. Was that why the thing hesitated?

At last he opened his eyes again. The fiery yellow orbs were asquint in anger and some other emotion, harder to discern.

“You have put your finger on a problem,” the deodand admitted. “By my account, you have beaten me thrice-three-hundred and forty-four times out of an equal number of contests. And yet I have felt for some time now that I was on the verge of mastering the game and defeating you. You yourself must admit that our matches have become more competitive.”

“In all fairness, I must agree with your assertion,” said Lixal. “You have improved both your hoarding and your double sentry maneuver.”

The deodand stood, keeping its claw wrapped around Lixal Laqavee’s neck and thus forcing him to stand as well. “Here is my solution,” the creature told him. “We will continue to play. As long as you can defeat me I will let you live, because I must know that when I win, as ultimately I feel sure I must, it will be by the sole fact of my own improving skill.”

Lixal felt a little relieved — his death was to be at least momentarily postponed — but the knowledge did not bring the quickening of hope that might have accompanied such a reprieve in other circumstances. The deodand did not sleep, while Lixal felt the need to do so for many hours of every day. The deodand was swift and powerful while he, Lixal, was a great deal less so. And no human with any wit at all would try to help him.

Still, perhaps something unforeseen might happen that would allow him to conquer the beast or escape. The events of Lixal’s life had taught him that circumstances were bound to change, and occasionally even for the better.

“You must also keep me well-fed and healthy,” he told the deodand. “If I am weakened by hunger or illness any victory of yours would be hollow.”

“Fair enough.” The creature transferred its iron grip to his arm, then without further conversation began to walk. It made a good speed through the patchy forest, forcing Lixal to hurry to keep up or risk having his limb pulled from its socket.

“Where are we going?” Lixal called breathlessly. “What was wrong with that particular camping spot? We had a fire, and could have started a game at our leisure once you had provided us with some dinner.”

“I am doing just that, but dinner of the kind I seek is not so easily obtained near our previous camping site.”

Sometime after this unsettling declaration, just as the morning sun began to bring light to the forest, the deodand dragged Lixel out of the thickest part of the trees and into an open grassy space dotted with lumps of worked stone, some standing upright but many others tumbled and broken, all of them much patched with moss.

“Why have we come here?” Lixal asked. “This is some ancient graveyard.”

“Just so,” said the deodand. “But not truly ancient — burials have taken place here within relatively recent years. You have long forbidden me the chance to dine as I please, on the meat that I most like. Now I shall no longer be bound by your absurd and cruel strictures. And yet I do not want the vigilante impulses of your kind to interfere with our contest, so instead of sallying forth for live human flesh we will encamp ourselves here, where suitably aged and cured specimens wait beneath only a shallow span of topsoil.” The creature grinned hugely. “I confess I have dreamed of such toothsome delicacies for the entire span of our annoying and undesired companionship.”

“But what about me?” said Lixal. “What shall I eat? Will you hunt game for me?”

“You seem to think you still hold the upper hand, Laqavee.” The deodand spoke as sternly as a disappointed father. “You are far away from the assistance of any of your fellows and in the passing of a single heartbeat I can tear your throat with my talons. Hunt game for you? Nonsense.” The deodand shook its head and shoved him down onto his knees. “You will eat what I do. You will learn thrift as the deodands practice it! Now set up the gaming board and prepare to defend the honor of your species, Lixal Laqavee! In the meantime, I will begin digging for breakfast.”