

# **The King's Justice**

Two Novellas

## **“The Augur's Gambit”**

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## The Augur's Gambit

Deep in what I pleased to call my laborium, surrounded by walls of dark stone, by trestle tables black with old blood, by vessels for discarded bones, tissues, offal, and rank fluids, and also--a much-needed improvement--by foul drains that emptied into fouler sewers, I strove by the guttering light of candles to surmount the obstacles arrayed against me.

Of course, by arrayed against me I mean that they had nothing whatever to do with me personally. I was merely a servant. The obstacles were not mine, and their participants took no more than private notice of my existence. Rather they pertained to the doings--that is, the machinations, chicanery, and obfuscations in pursuit of obscure ends--the doings, I say, of my Queen, Inimica Phlegathon deVry, the fourth of that name, and the first monarch in seven generations of queens to hold sway over a court largely embroiled in treachery.

On its face, such engagement in double-dealing and the general quest for advantage was strange in a realm as prosperous as Indemnie, blessed as it was with nature's abundance in every form. Streams that became rivers poured fresh and cleanly from the Fount Peaks which dominated the heart of the island. Rich forests draped down the slopes of the Peaks gave timber aplenty for every purpose. Mines among the Fount foothills yielded necessary ores and meretricious gold enough to sate most appetites for wealth. In every direction from those foothills to the coasts lay arable fields of such fertility that crops of every description appeared to spring forth unbidden by effort or indeed attendance. And the seas themselves teemed with edible life. Our horses grew fat, our cattle fatter, and many of our folk both high-born and low fattest of all.

True, the isle was not large--or so I deemed it, though it was larger than my knowledge of it. By the vast measure of the surrounding seas, Indemnie was little more than a scrap of flotsam alone in an immeasurable world. A determined man on a good horse could have ridden the land from south to north in four or five days, had he not been compelled to skirt the Fount Peaks. A more leisurely canter around our coasts would have occupied no more than two fortnights.

Still my Queen's realm was altogether comfortable. Gifted in every way by earth and weather, Indemnie's five barons and their sovereign had no obvious cause to strive against each other with such stubborn duplicity.

During the first years of my service to Her Majesty, I had conceived that our populace must have come to the island from some savage people passionate for slaughter and cruelty--come, and then lost either the ability or the will to return to their homelands. Spared by wealth from the impulse to kill each other, they sought advantage by less bloody means. Now, however, events and demands had taught me better wisdom.

The reign of Queen Inimica Phlegathon deVry III, like that of her mother, and of her mother before her--indeed, like those of Indemnie's seven generations of monarchs--had been admirably placid. The court's present thirst for conniving was too recent to be blamed upon our forebears.

In some other life, I might have grown as fat as Indemnie's folk, and cared as little. Alas, I was cursed by one small gift--and as a youth I had been foolish or foolhardy enough to make it known. Therefore I was now my Queen's Hieronomer, her seer into the unknown--indeed, into the unknowable. It was my task to advise her in all matters pertaining to Indemnie's future.

Hence the obstacles arrayed against me. And in this opaque endeavor I had but one ally--one ally, and no resources apart from a devoted heart and a desire for comprehension to keep my head upon my shoulders.

Of my gift itself I seldom spoke. Oh, I was no charlatan. I gained insights of substance from blood and offal, intestines and malformations. In my own fashion, and on my own terms, I could scry more keenly than any practitioner of catoptromancy, certainly more than any mere caster of bones or interpreter of dreams. But the fashions of Inimica Phlegathon deVry IV were not my own--and her terms were decidedly not. It was chiefly by devotion rather than by augury that I served her, fearing for my head as I did so only somewhat less than I feared for Indemie.

With the precision of entrails--the squirming of my own would have sufficed, but I read the same outcomes in chickens, lambs, piglets, and one still-born infant--I saw that the island and all its people were doomed.

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