
The Cosmopolis Literary Supplement

No. 3

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The Zael Inheritance

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by Tim Stretton

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Chapter 2

by Till Noever

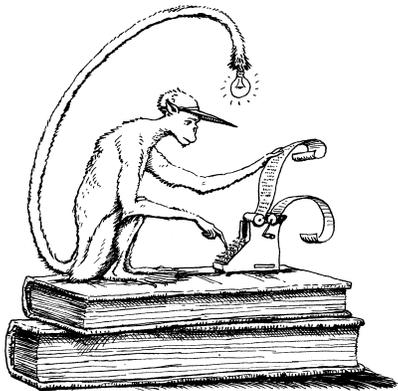
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The CLS is devoted to showcasing literary work in any form, including fragmentary, which bears the influence of Jack Vance. Letters to the editor will also be published on a discretionary basis. Letters and submissions should be addressed to: Paul Rhoads, at prhoads@club-internet.fr

The *Cosmopolis Literary Supplement*, we are glad to say, is enjoying some success. Readers in whom this review stimulates thoughts on the nature of that quality we call “vancian”, or have reactions to any of the stories, are invited to share them in letters to the editors.

CLS No. 3 introduces a writer new to our pages, Raphaël Mesa. Though clearly of an original inspiration, the vancian influence in *Prince Jaquard* is instantly recognizable. It is not an aspect of Vance that has been exploited in the CLS so far. For those readers who may not be equipped to enjoy *Prince Jaquard* in all its aspects, we provide the following translation of the opening paragraphs:

Prince Jacquard was marketing, one beautiful summer afternoon, when he encountered his old friend, Grimmault the Wise, lost in meditation. Prince Jacquard, always dressed in black, had bought three heads of cosmic garlic, a delicacy both rare and of great price. He knew that friend-Grimmault was partial to this root, which is why, interrupting the meditation, he invited him to come and dine at the chateau.

Grimmault, a small man, both skinny and close to his coin, never refused an invitation, above all those of Prince Jacquard the Benefice, friend of Telepathic Martian roosters.

They mounted Prince Jacquard’s flying carriage, all gilded and with arm-rests encrusted with precious stones — for Prince Jacquard, as all the world knows, was a great megalomaniac . . .

“Well then, friend-Grimmault, do you have the news of the market, on this beautiful afternoon?” asked Jacquard.

“I have none, Prince; at least none susceptible to interest your Grandeur”, replied Grimmault as he drank a beaker of wine. “It is true that, in recent times, the market has been peaceful.”

We are privileged to have further installments this month from Till Noever and Tim Stretton. Zack Fance is reportedly on assignment somewhere in the Reach, but we hope to discover what happened to Mars in the next issue.

Joel Anderson and Paul Rhoads

The Zael Inheritance

* * *

Chapter 4

When Lamarck arrived back at his desk Rolando and Voorhies were waiting, and the trio smartly conducted themselves to the Puissant Apprehensor's office.

"Well: a lead. The resemblance is more than coincidental. What are your views?" asked Rolando.

"A cheap and unsubtle actress," declared Voorhies. "She has gambled on nano-surgery and hoped we would pay out without a DNA test."

"Unconvincing!" argued Lamarck. "You would do your research a little better before you invested in nano-surgery. Either she is Taslana Zael — which I admit I don't believe — or she is part of something rather more professional than what Kate is suggesting."

"It isn't even a good imposture: she is *too* identical. Thinner, maybe, but her *hair!*"

"What was wrong with her hair? Well maintained and stylishly cut . . ." asked Lamarck.

"So you observed. But what about the colour? Even in your droolings you could not describe it as anything other than 'mouse'. Taslana Zael could have afforded to change it to a more 'stylish' colour. The only reason she came in with that mousy shade was that it's Taslana's natural colour."

"This is absurd!" cried Lamarck. "Before we move on to the psychological significance of her hair colour, there are more routine tests we can perform. It's time to check Laura Glyde's records on Heimat, and there's still the DNA test. Kate isn't being completely rational."

"At least I wasn't slavering over her! You were a disgrace, Geir! It was conduct to be expected from a fump, not from a Contracts professional. I wouldn't mind if she really was poised, cool and sophisticated — but men are so easily bewitched. The more she licked her lips, the more you drooled! And she's skinny and flat-chested!"

Rolando cast Voorhies a quizzical glance. "I watched the initial interview on closed-circuit: I think you exaggerate Prime Apprehensor Lamarck's responses. In my opinion overt hostility is not the way to advance this case. Although it seems most unlikely that she is Taslana

Zael, the chances of her being part of some organised fraud are strong. If that's so, she can lead us to a crime against the Chrysopolitan Code, with a significant contractual bonus if proved."

"You are right in that, sir," admitted Voorhies. "It is not so much that I am hostile to her, as that I think that Geir's responses to her are not putting her under the kind of strain we need to get anything out of her."

"The time for that is when we have evidence," countered Lamarck. "None of us believes that she will satisfy the DNA criteria. Once that is confirmed, then we apply pressure."

"Sound reasoning, Geir," endorsed Rolando. "It might also be opportune to review the com-link calls from the Anastasia."

"Unauthorised taps are illegal under Chrysopolitan law!" objected Voorhies. "I know that we do tap com-links in the city, but aside from the moral questions, any evidence we obtained would be inadmissible in a Chrysopolitan court."

"You are being too naive, Kate," said Rolando. "Anything we find out from the tap can inform the questions we subsequently ask. The fact that com-taps are unlawful simply makes it likelier that Laura Glyde will prove injudicious in her use of telecommunications. Lamarck, see to the call review."

"At once, sir," said Lamarck, and he and Voorhies strode out.

"What is the matter with you?" hissed Voorhies.

"Me?" said Lamarck harshly. "I haven't called out my partner for 'drooling' in front of the Puissant Apprehensor."

"He was watching it on screen; he could form his own judgement. But you are acting so bizarrely over this case. You can't deny that you behaved abnormally with the Glyde girl, and you were so *enthusiastic* to run the com-taps on her. It is hardly the kind of detachment you normally show. And whatever Rolando says, unauthorised com-taps are plain *wrong*."

"When you've done the kind of operations that Rolando and I have conducted offplanet, you'll see unlawful com-taps are minor. It's a way of redressing the balance."

"Go on, call me *naive* again," spat Voorhies. "Prissy Missy Voorhies, no experience of the real universe, everything by the book. Why do we have a book, if we're not supposed to follow it? And this is a simple missing persons case! There is no question of planetary security here."

"Kate, I'm sorry if you think I'm using my offworld and undercover experience to belittle you. That isn't my intention: but if my experience has taught me anything, it's this: nothing is 'simple' where TLZ is concerned. Trust me: there is something big behind this, something which will make unauthorised com-taps as nothing"

"Oh, Geir, I don't recognise this sort of policing! I don't even recognise you!"

Lamarck smiled and touched her arm. "For all of us, there is a moment when we realise that for Pangalactic to enforce the law, it has to be outside of it sometimes. 'No-one is above the law', they say. Kate: Pangalactic is the law. Its shareholders are as venal and avaricious as the rest of us, probably more so — but Pangalactic is the sole force of order in the galaxy. Without it, the Hegemony would disintegrate. That's why its Historic Monopoly has lasted."

"Geir, you're wrong. The Hegemonic Constitution can only work as long as its law enforcement agency respects it. If Pangalactic can be above the law, why should anyone else stick to it?"

Lamarck smiled sadly. "You might not believe me, but I thought the same as you when I started. Some of us learn differently."

Voorhies looked at Lamarck. She realised that, partners and friends as they had been, there was a lot she did not know about Geir Lamarck.

It was the next morning before the three glaxes made their way to a private suite on one of the very highest floors. Lamarck accessed the com-link and rapped out his instructions.

"Computer, access program 'Lamarck Transmission Review, Level 14, code Red 491-29-82'"

"Access complete. Program title: 'Communication Taps, Mezzanotte City'. Please specify com-link required"

"Grand Duchess Anastasia Hotel, all incoming or outgoing transmissions, charged to 'Glyde', past month."

"One transmission meets specified criteria. Awaiting instructions."

"Download transmission details, voice back-up."

"Call made by Laura Glyde yesterday, 18:06, duration three minutes."

"What was the destination of the transmission?"

"Destination was a re-route satellite in Chrysopolis orbit. Ultimate recipient of transmission unknown."

"Replay transmission from the start," said Lamarck. He and Rolando were tense and attentive; Voorhies had still not reconciled her distaste for unauthorised com-taps and preserved a detachment from the proceedings.

The screen briefly went blank, then a split screen com-link replay lit the display. On one side was the image of Laura Glyde; the other was blank, indicating the computer's inability to trace the recipient of the call.

The three glaxes were rapt as Laura Glyde began to speak. "*It's me — I have been to the Pangalactic offices.*"

There was a pause, then a voice, clearly synthesised, said: "With what result? Are the Chrysopolitan authorities prepared to support your claim?"

"It is far too early for that. I have submitted to DNA, fingerprint and retina scans. The glaxes obviously did not believe me, but they are waiting until the bio-tests come through before they commit themselves."

"Very sensible," said the synthetic voice. "What impression did you form of the Pangalactic officers?"

"I was interviewed by two glaxes. Prime Apprehensor Lamarck concealed his feelings behind a mask of urbanity. He appeared a reasonable man, and I felt him to be fair-minded. Apprehensor Voorhies was something of a shrew —"

"Impudent hussy!" cried the maligned Apprehensor. "I will not forget this!"

" — thirty-five or so,"

"Thirty-five!"

" — unkempt black hair, cheap shoes and determinedly hostile. I felt certain that she had taken against me from the start. There is no evidence, biological or otherwise, that will convince her that I am Taslana Zael."

"Hmmm," said the disembodied voice. "It would seem that your attentions must be focused on Prime Apprehensor Lamarck. There are ways, are there not," continued the voice, metallic and silky at the same time, "of ensuring that a man could be made inclined to interpret the benefit of the doubt in your favour?"

"I suppose there are," said Laura Glyde dully. "I rather liked him, though."

"My dear," said the voice with soft menace, "you remember our arrangement . . . Now is not a time for — feminine weakness."

"I am not displaying any," said Laura Glyde with a trace of irritation. "I will do what I have to."

"One more thing. I believe that Pangalactic are not overscrupulous about illegal monitoring of conversations. Now that you have come to their attention, we cannot communicate safely any longer. Do not contact me again. Should further communication be necessary, I will instigate it. Goodbye."

The connection was immediately broken off.

"Comments," said Rolando crisply. "Geir, begin."

"The recording would appear to advance the conspiracy theory," said Lamarck dryly. "That is clearly not the call of an innocent woman. We are dealing with some kind of serious offence, conspiracy to defraud at the very least."

"I am still puzzled by their relaxed attitude to the bio-tests. She cannot possibly fool the DNA scan. Their approach seems well thought out, and it must be that they have some contingency. Once we confront her with the scan results the situation will become more transparent."

"There was an clear impression that Laura Glyde considers me more pliant than Voorhies, and a determination to use that as her point of entry. Conclusion: Laura Glyde believes that I can be brought to endorse her claim, and will act in such a way as to elicit my co-operation."

"Exactly right," said Voorhies. "I regret ever opposing the tap now! This is serious malfeasance, and all means are legitimate in halting their activities. I am only glad that we began our tap before they suspected — we have gained a valuable advantage."

Rolando smiled. "There are times when a small wrong outweighs a great one. We do indeed hold a priceless advantage: when Laura Glyde attempts her puppetry, we will be alert for the strings."

"We can turn her own scheme against her," suggested Voorhies. "She admitted, however bizarrely, to an initial rapport with Geir. Knowing that, Geir can manipulate her feelings when she believes she is controlling Geir."

"The conspiracy undoubtedly depends on Laura Glyde 'turning' Geir: we must give her every opportunity to do so. We can use her to trace this conspiracy back to its source," agreed Rolando.

Lamarck made a rueful face. "I see the necessity and the practicality of the approach. Nonetheless, I don't like it. I have a queasiness about it."

"Geir!" cried Voorhies. "They say women are irrational! You are the one who endorsed the com-tap. Now, when it provides the requisite information, you are coy of using it!"

"Kate, there is more to this than you realise. It is all too close to undercover work, at which I have had more than my share. I have been involved in more than one operation which has gone wrong: and it is a lonely place to be. I had hoped that the New Church contract would be the last. There is something I find disturbing in this."

"I would not dispute that, Geir," said Rolando gravely.

"This is a case, however, where we are not able to choose our operative. And this is not undercover work in any real sense: Laura Glyde knows who you are. All you need to conceal are your feelings — not your identity. I understand your distaste for the work, but remember this: you are good at such operations. What happened in the past was not your fault — and this is by no means full undercover. You can do this work, and you will. Remember the skill with which you put away the New Church contract."

Lamarck nodded. "You're right, of course. It was never my intention to decline the assignment."

Later that morning Voorhies went over to Lamarck's desk. "Are you all right?" she asked.

"Yes. I am just — unsettled — by the way the case is going. There is something uniquely unpleasant about these cases which require a glax to gain a suspect's confidence that I had hoped to avoid, especially so soon after the last case. However: we cannot choose, and Rolando's decision is clearly the correct one"

"Don't feel sorry for her, Geir. She is trying to manipulate you. Dissembling is no shame under those circumstances."

"I know, and I ought to be glad to get such a good lead. But . . . remind me to tell you about my undercover career sometime," replied Lamarck with a strained laugh.

Voorhies smiled. "Let's have lunch at Casimondo's. We have to go over to the Genix lab this afternoon to pick up the DNA test results, and it's on the way."

Lamarck made a face of distaste. "Why do we have to go to Genix? Can't Nina tell us over the com-link that there's no match?"

"You know the answer to that," smiled Voorhies. "Nina doesn't want to talk to you on the com-link."

"Can't you go, Kate?" asked Lamarck. "You know that Nina and I no longer see eye to eye."

"I still don't understand why you jilted her. She is intelligent, attractive, even I admit she has poise and, for whatever odd reasons, was clearly crazed about you. Why don't you . . . ?"

"Enough!" cried Lamarck. "I know she is your intimate and you are sworn to mention her in a flattering light at every possible opportunity: but no blandishment or rhetoric can regenerate a former relationship. Nina Haecht is not for me. She is too — perfect."

"If there is a logic to that reasoning, it is so abstruse as to evade my poor female mind. Take your jacket: Casimondo awaits."

The morning had passed rapidly, and the glaxes decided to take an auto-tram to Casimondo's. Mezzanotte City was unusually busy, but as ever in the early afternoon, Casimondo's upper terrace was sparsely populated. A couple of lizardskin girls flaunted their polished new scales in mid-terrace; Voorhies ostentatiously looked away, while Lamarck subjected them to surreptitious inspection from the corner of his eyes.

"Stop ogling them!" whispered Voorhies sharply. "Why is it every man's fantasy to go to bed with a lizardskin girl?"

"I don't know," said Lamarck. "It is something cultural. Men are brought up with the idea of lizardskin girls as the acme of sexuality. Clearly there is no biological basis for it."

"I should say not! Be rational! These vacuous bubble-heads pay to get their DNA altered so that their skin turns to scales. How is that sexy? My brother has a pet komodo dragon if you want the thrill of bedding a giant lizard . . ."

"You wouldn't understand, Kate. By choosing to become a lizardskin girl, a woman makes a statement —"

"— That she's a tart! Is it really as banal as that?"

"Maybe it is. Now, let's swap places so you don't have to look at them."

No sooner had the smarses rearranged their seating plan than Casimondo, a small florid man, appeared.

"Ah, Prime Apprehensor! Apprehensor! A pleasure to see you. What will you have?"

"This is attentive service!" exclaimed Lamarck, wresting his attention back from the lizardskin girls. "We would have been content to order from the screen."

"Alas! My com-screens are off-line," said the proprietor. "Poor Casimondo must collect the orders himself."

"Grim news indeed, Casimondo," said Lamarck sadly. "I hope you can provide a surpassing spread to compensate."

"I am sure you will be impressed, Prime Apprehensor. Only today a shipment from Earth arrives — can I tempt you with the delicacies of the planet: satay of baby rat for starters, followed by devilled dog?"

"Casimondo!" cried Voorhies in delight. "I haven't had dog for years! The baby rat sounds tasty too. I will follow your advice — and wash it down with your best long tongue-twister."

"The day begins to improve. Devilled dog it is, although you may skip the satay. I never much enjoyed rat," said Lamarck. "Make sure the dog is not cloned, though: you know Kate will never eat clone."

"You may be assured that the dog was whelped in conventional manner. I am happy to serve clone, but I always advertise it as such, in accordance with relevant ordinances."

"I expect you to say no less to two glaxes," said Voorhies. "But I believe you: serve up the devilled dog!"

Lamarck found himself in much better humour once the spicy viands arrived: Casimondo's tongue-twister was also of a high standard. The sight of the lizardskin girls twisting about so that their green-gold scales caught the sun also improved his humour. The morning's worries faded away: if he had to feign attraction to Laura Glyde, so be it; and Nina Haecht would hardly create an embarrassing situation as long as Voorhies was there. He tucked into the dog with renewed gusto.

Voorhies sensed Lamarck's relaxation, and congratulated herself and Casimondo on the soundness of her management. The lizardskin girls she absolved from credit.

This case had put them both under stress, she reflected, and the recent developments with Laura Glyde had only heightened this.

"You have known Rolando longer than me," she said. "I have never seen him like this. He seems less preoccupied with trivia. Is this how he used to be?"

"Yes," said Lamarck. "When I first worked for him, he was Prime Investigative Puissant on Coralla, and obviously destined for greatness. It was reputed that he was lined up to be Puissant Apprehensor on Corinth, or Deputy Global Puissant on Heimat. He was a real smarse and snoop in one, not an administrator in the way he's become. He'd been a snoop's snoop, so good that he didn't last long at it — he was promoted into the upper echelons too quickly. But he was always interested in the cases for their own sake. Keen smarses and snoops wanted to work for him — including Apprehensor Lamarck."

"What happened? He is hardly a failure now, but he is head of a small smarse section on a quiet world, and a bureaucrat, not a snoop. How could that change happen?" asked Voorhies, sensing that Lamarck was ready to be more communicative than usual on the subject.

"Our fortunes declined simultaneously. We had a major operation — it was both large and controversial. There were those on the board of Pangalactic who wanted to refuse the commission. Rolando was convinced we should take it, and sold it on the grounds that it would be a coup if we made a success of it."

"I take it you didn't?"

"It was a long, deep undercover exercise. We put two

operatives where they could do the most damage, and were in the most danger. Rolando was never overscrupulous, but this one he had to play by the book: we couldn't afford the risk of a high-profile prosecution collapsing on a technicality.

"Things went badly wrong. One snoop's cover was blown and he was killed on the spot. Rolando acted quickly and ended the operation immediately to save the other agent. But it meant he didn't have the evidence he needed to fulfil the contract.

"The agent who survived was me. The operation had been a big failure, and inevitably there were scapegoats. Rolando was the major victim: he was shunted off to Chrysopolis with a token promotion. We all knew he had reached the top of his trajectory.

"In the eyes of the hierarchy at Coralla I was almost as bad: I had survived and not got the necessary evidence. I was promoted to Prime Apprehensor — and I had deserved it, if not for that operation, then for any number of others — and re-assigned to Enforcements on Arcopia pending 'psychological re-evaluation'. Rolando is an honourable man, and after six months he had me transferred here. I admit to being grateful and resentful at the same time."

Voorhies looked carefully at Lamarck. "Geir, I'm sorry. I would never had asked about Rolando if I had realised it was about you too, or if I had known how personal it was."

Lamarck smiled. "Do you know, I'm relieved. I've always wanted to tell you about it, just the outline. You know that I couldn't tell you more, even if I wanted to. That's the undercover code. The events themselves never worry me now: I know I made the only decisions I could have, and I was luckier than Pincarion. He didn't die as a result of any act of mine, and nothing I could have done would have saved him. It's changed me, of course, and I've never felt the same about undercover work since. Pincarion was a good friend of mine. But I don't lie awake at night thinking about it. I never felt it was something I couldn't talk about if I wanted to. And I'm glad it's you I've told about it."

Voorhies touched Lamarck's hand. "Thank you for telling me. You are the best smarse I ever worked with. We will crack this case, you will drag Laura Glyde through the courts of Chrysopolis, and your fortunes will be restored."

"It's an attractive fantasy," laughed Lamarck, "made doubly so for you by the thought of Laura Glyde trying to look poised in chains for a thousand years. I'm not sure

that I want to be Puissant Apprehensor on Byzantium or wherever any more, though. I can't see status within Pangalactic in quite the same light as I used to."

Draining his tongue-twister, Lamarck rose. "Time to go. The lovely Dr Haecht awaits."

They walked out past the lizardskin girls, Voorhies sweeping past with a disdainful frown as the girls began to oil each other's scales, while Lamarck, following, favoured them with his dryest expression.

Chapter 5

The offices of Genix, another of the Historic Monopolies, were in an exclusive service area of Mezzanotte City. Unlike Pangalactic, who chose to occupy a highly visible city-centre location, Genix aimed for inconspicuousness. Its only touch of flamboyance was a discreet double-helix hologram some ten feet high projected from the main building. Of all the Historic Monopolies, Genix was perhaps the least popular, and certainly the least understood. On Chrysoopolis, as on all developed worlds, the fruits of Genix's genetic manipulations were welcomed, while the processes themselves aroused instinctive aversion and even antipathy.

Over time, Genix had reached critical mass, and although the rationale for its Historic Monopoly had arisen from its pioneering work in the field of genetics, increasingly its scope had widened to include almost all aspects of medical care. The burgeoning technical growth of medical science had not been accompanied, even on the richest planets, by increases in wealth sufficient to pay for the new treatments. Most planetary governments opted to take out a Planetary Healthcare Contract with Genix, guaranteeing all citizens, theoretically at least, free access to a limited range of medical procedures. Those treatments which fell outside of the Contract Annex were paid for either through individuals' insurance, or a direct cash payment.

Genix was unusual among the Historic Monopolies in that the bulk of its business came from sidelines rather than the Monopoly itself. The Patent of Monopoly applied only to treatments involving genetic manipulation, but the corporation had become so vast that no competitors were able to offer planetary healthcare so cheaply, and the influence of Genix became unchallengeable. Much of its revenue now came from cosmetic treatments such as Adiposity Realignments and the "Lizardskin Look".

The auto-tram carrying Lamarck and Voorhies threaded its rapid way on its magnetic guide among the countless other auto-trams gliding smoothly to their varied destinations. Each auto-tram was linked into the city's central computer, which was aware of the location of all and was able to propel them at high speeds with no danger of collision. An observer from the skies — a rare being, since private aircars were forbidden to overfly the city — might have been reminded of a colony of ants, going inscrutably about its complex and sober business.

The traffic began to thin out as the auto-tram moved towards the select area in which Genix had its offices. Shortly before arriving at Genix, the glaxes chose to alight and walk the last part of the journey. The climate of Mezzanotte City, always clement, was particularly refreshing this afternoon, with both sun and breeze raising the spirits of the officers.

Arriving at the main reception, Lamarck and Voorhies were waved through with a smile by the receptionist, who recognised the glaxes from many previous visits. "I'll tell Dr Haecht that you're here," she called.

Lamarck suppressed a sour expression; Voorhies merely smiled. The airlift took them to Dr Haecht's laboratory, which she shared with the facility's Chief Forensic Analyst, Dr Mamoulian, who rarely deigned to do anything as mundane as actual forensic analysis.

"Nina!" cried Voorhies as they entered the laboratory. "It's good to see you! We haven't had any blood and gore for you to analyse for an aeon."

"I thought you two had been avoiding me!" exclaimed Dr Nina Haecht, a small, neat blonde, with a meaningful glance at Lamarck.

"Indeed not," said Lamarck, with an unbecoming heartiness. "We haven't had any cases to interest you recently . . . you know how it is."

"You don't need a case," said Nina. "You are both welcome any time — as long as Big Mama isn't around."

"Where is the old dragon this afternoon?" asked Voorhies.

Nina smiled. "She is at a seminar on 'Comparative Genetics among the Ravale Rou on Franziclan', or so the invoice says. My suspicions that 'Comparative Inebriation among the Geneticists of Ten Worlds' would be a more appropriate title cannot be proved. Perhaps I should hire Pangalactic," she laughed.

Lamarck said: "The Contracts Division is unusually busy at the moment. Profit targets being what they are, though, I am sure Kate and I could do you a special deal."

"I keep seeing your boss on the sensopics," said Nina. "It must be exciting to be a glax when you get a big case like finding that Zael girl. Isn't it strange the way she just ran away from all that money? And then stayed away. They say she had a very unhappy childhood."

"So they say," replied Lamarck. "You know as well as me that most Pangalactic business is far less glamorous. Sometimes we even have to visit the Genix lab," he continued wryly.

Nina laughed. "You know how to flatter a girl, Geir. You don't have to remind me that life does not proceed

apace here.”

“That depends. The results of this test could have a major influence on one of our investigations,” said Lamarck.

“This isn’t another paternity suit, is it?” asked Nina. “We seem to have had so many of those recently.”

“It’s the benign climate of Chrysopolis. It impels folk to outdoor pursuits they ought not to attempt,” said Lamarck. “But no, this one isn’t a paternity.”

“You said the results of the test were interesting on the link this morning,” said Voorhies, dragging the conversation away from the unwise destination Lamarck appeared to be intent on reaching.

“Interesting’ is hardly the word, Kate. Come and look at the screen,” said Nina.

The glaxes looked on as Nina summoned a file to the screen. “This is the target DNA which you supplied me with,” indicating the results of the sample of the newborn Taslana Zael which were on the Zael’s World central databank.

The sample looked, to an untrained eye, much like any other DNA sample, a bar chart of many columns filling the screen. Nina touched a button.

“This, on the other hand, is the sample you sent in yesterday.”

The screen was virtually blank, with the odd partial column and wild lines veering at fantastical angles. It was as if a child had rubbed out many of the original columns, and then scribbled across what was left.

“I’m no geneticist,” said Lamarck, “but something tells me that isn’t a match.”

“No, it isn’t,” replied Nina, “but neither is it a non-match. There isn’t enough there to form an opinion.”

“What are you saying? Did Geir do the sampling wrong?” asked Voorhies.

“Kate!” exclaimed Nina. “I said no such thing. It’s not that the sample is incomplete or corrupt: I have as much genetic material to work on as I need. The point is that my techniques — the standard Genix procedures — are not able to analyse this DNA.”

“That’s bizarre, Nina!” said Lamarck. “Does this often happen?”

“I’ve never experienced it or read about it,” she replied. “I can’t say for certain what’s happened. My initial thought is that some agent has been added to her DNA to mask it in some way. I don’t know how that could be done in practice, though.”

“You are Genix! If they don’t know how to do it, then the technology doesn’t exist to make it happen,” said

Lamarck.

“True, but I don’t know everything that Genix knows,” she replied. “This kind of thing would be at the cutting edge of applied genetics: I’m just an ordinary analyst. Big Mama might have some more ideas — or I could talk to some of the theoretical geneticists I trained with.”

“Don’t do that: this is something of a sensitive case,” said Voorhies. “See what Dr Mamouljian thinks, but don’t ask any further afield than that. If it is screened in some way, is there anything you can do to identify and eliminate the masking agent?”

“In theory, yes, but it may be time-consuming and expensive.”

“Do it. This is an ‘expenses plus mark-up’ case: the client will ultimately pay your fees,” commanded Lamarck ironically.

“Nina, could this ‘masking’ occur naturally? Or can this only be deliberate?” asked Voorhies.

“I cannot imagine, even theoretically, how this could be a sport of the genes: in principle one could envisage it happening synthetically. So, with the caveat that this is unknown to me, I can’t see it as natural; someone has altered this DNA.”

“Is there any legitimate purpose for such modification?” asked Lamarck sharply. “Other than concealing identity in a DNA test, why would someone want to hide their DNA code?”

“Offhand I can see no purpose to the technique. There could, I suppose, be a lawful reason why a person might want to hide not their identity, but a part of their DNA sequence. You obscure the fact that two people are related, or that one carries an undesirable genetic mutation, I suppose.”

“True, but if I had a mutated gene, Genix could replace it. Why would I need to hide it?”

“You overrate Genix’s capacities. There are some elements of the human genome that we still don’t fully understand. We cannot cure all genetic disorders. You should know better than to believe our propaganda.”

“There is much to be done here. Nina, can you research the matter discreetly with Dr Mamouljian, and do what you can to crack the screen? It may be important that we get at the DNA behind the mask,” said Lamarck crisply.

Nina smiled. Her features were perfectly regular. “Of course, Geir. I’ll keep you posted on my progress.”

Lamarck said: “You’ll have to excuse us, Nina. This has disrupted our afternoon somewhat. I’ll give you a call tomorrow see if there’s anything new to know.”

Voorhies shook hands with Nina as she took her leave. "It's been too long, Nina. We will have to get together again."

"Yes," said Nina, "we have a lot to catch up on."

With that, the glaxes left the building rather more pensively than they had entered it. They were quiet in the auto-tram as it took them back to the Tower of Commerce. At last Lamarck said:

"That explains her confidence. Even if she can't fool the DNA test, she believes she can neutralise it. Without bio-test evidence, it will be harder to disprove her story. If we can't uncover the real Taslana, we may have to declare Laura Glyde the heiress."

"Genix will crack the screen: if the technology exists to mask her DNA, they will have the craft to penetrate it," said Voorhies.

"I'm not so sure. There is a time aspect to this — we can't simply sit on the case for five years and hope Genix make the breakthrough. There will be too much pressure on Rolando from Corinth to close the case and pick up the fee. Think of the cash-flow implications if we drag the case out over several years. We don't get our fee until the case is closed."

"She still can't prove that she is Taslana Zael if she isn't. All she's achieved is temporarily to deny us our rebuttal."

"Don't be so sure! If she forces us into a Chrysopolitan civil suit, she will be in a strong position if there are no other credible claimants. She looks identical to Taslana, and our contention that it was done by expensive cosmetic surgery, in the absence of corroborative evidence, will be worthless. And something tells me that she would play well in a court-room."

"In front of a male judge, assuredly!" said Voorhies. "but if she can't convince us that she's Taslana Zael, she will not be able to convince anyone who knew the real Taslana."

"Such as? Her immediate family are dead or unfit to testify, she would have had almost no intimates in such a stratified society as Zael's World, and no-one has known her as Taslana for seven years. Finding someone to state categorically — and credibly — 'this woman is not Taslana Zael' may not be easy."

Voorhies had no answer, and Lamarck too was silent until the auto-tram arrived at the Tower of Commerce. Back in the office, they briefed Rolando.

"I think," said Lamarck, "that I'd better go and see Laura Glyde as soon as possible. It may be that they have a conspiracy that will hang together if they are pre-

pared to chance it. Conclusion: I have to crack its only visible component, Laura Glyde."

Rolando nodded. Lamarck thought he looked tired and strained. "Your analysis is correct, Geir. For now, Kate should stay in the background, chase up any other leads, try to make some kind of sense of the TLZ passenger manifests. Your role is to get as much information as you can from Laura Glyde. Try to win her confidence. Since her own scheme seems to involve getting on close terms with you, her own conduct ought to provide you with unwitting help. We hold all the cards, Geir. You have complete freedom to negotiate with her. If it's necessary, offer her reduced charges or even immunity, if she can give us the information to land the other conspirators."

"I will see her today," said Lamarck, turning to the com-link screen. "Computer, engage com-link with Grand Duchess Anastasia Hotel, Miss Laura Glyde."

After a short pause the screen came to life, with the face of Laura Glyde in its centre. "Good afternoon, Miss Glyde. I wondered if it would be convenient to ask you a few further questions?"

* * *

Tergan

* * *

Chapter 2

"I cannot accept this," Armist declared with finality.

"It is necessary, Sire" Laetis insisted.

"Don't call me that!"

Laetis long face twisted into a grimace of distaste. "Sire . . . Armist . . ." He shook his head. "It is not . . . appropriate! How can you not understand this? The familiarity of a name . . . it is adequate for . . . friends, close acquaintances. Subordinates, the people, they require . . . distance. They *want* it. A ruler who steps down too far to their level, he loses their respect. When the moment of decision arrives . . . when the rules requires the unquestioning obedience . . . then they must see him as a ruler, not just one of them."

Laetis glanced at Tahlia, who stood, watching the interchange from her position near the fireplace. "Please, Lady Tahlia, explain this to him."

Tahlia shook her head. "How can I — when I agree with him?"

Armist allowed himself a sour grin. "For a populist leader, Laetis, you exhibit some uncomfortably aristocratic tendencies."

"Not 'aristocratic,'" Laetis said firmly. "These are issues of leadership — which implies a certain distance between the leader and those led. The Pacers always understood that, and I made sure there was never a doubt about it, no matter how familiar I became with them. One of them, and yet different. This is the way of government, Sire . . . Armist."

"Maybe," Armist said. "At any rate, we have lost the thrust of our original discussion, which related to the security at the conference."

"The barons must be regarded with suspicion. Their intentions are those of self-interest . . ."

"Can you blame them?" Armist interrupted. "Are ours any different?"

"That's beside the point," Laetis retorted, all deference laid aside for an instant.

"The 'point' being what?"

"That I am responsible for your life and welfare," Laetis told Armist. "As such I must insist on the presence of at least two men at your side at all times — even

at the most intimate of meetings."

Armist laughed. "What do you think? They'll pull out a dagger and try to kill me?"

"The Tegels might. And if Myl.," and here he cast another glance at Tahlia, "if Tahlia is there, they might well attempt to take hers life as well. After all, it is *she* who killed the former baron and thus brought shame upon them — and their hatred upon you."

"And yet they have consented to appear at the Conference of the Covenant."

"I question their motives, which I suspect to be less than benign."

Armist shrugged. "You may be right. Watch them carefully."

"They are not the only ones," Laetis insisted.

"Who else wants my death?" Armist replied, his tone leaving no doubt that he thought Laetis overzealous.

"Tyfal of Cedrea. He was the former Keaen's crony — if Hain could have been said to have 'cronies'. My information is that Tyfal has expressed his profound dislike for you and everything you stand for."

"And the Pacers, I presume," said Armist, "Especially since they are dismantling his comfortable arrangement for the procurement of cheap labor."

"There is that," Laetis admitted. "The dreags are not as meek and submissive as they used to be."

"No wonder Tyfal is displeased," Tahlia said.

"I think 'displeasure' is hardly an adequate term to describe Tyfal's disposition."

"He will have to adapt," Tahlia said crisply.

Laetis pursed his lips. "That or he will attempt to change what he perceives as an intolerable status quo."

Armist opened his mouth to say something, but Laetis wasn't done yet. "The point I'm trying to make is that the new situation in Keaen is not, in general, to the benefit of the barons. They have lost significant status. The Covenant is in tatters. There is no more Flower of Keaen to tie their houses to the House of Keaen. The whole concept of the bond between the Keaen and his people has fallen apart. If the Keaen does not use the 'vessels' provided by the people anymore, then how are the two joined — if joined they are?"

"By having their ruler be one of them," Armist countered. "As Tahlia and we are — neither having been fathered by Hain."

Laetis uttered a short laugh. "That may have had some significance when these facts were announced at your bonding. But I assure you, the matter already that has been forgotten. In the consciousness of the public you

have already assumed the persona of your office. Even your populist desires and such token gestures as abolishing titles have made little difference to that. You reside at the castle. You have the power. You dispose over the soldiers. You walk the battlements of the castle and look down upon the city. These are the things that matter; the things which determine how you are seen. The people don't care a rotten Kint plum about whether you are to be called 'Armist' or 'Sire'. You are what you do, and what you do is what you are. Indeed, to insist on people using your first name injects a note of apparent falsehood and contradiction which only serves to distance you even more." He smiled crookedly when he saw Armist's face. "I know this in unpleasant, but these are the consequences of the assumption and the wielding of power."

"Statecraft," Armist muttered.

"Sire?"

Armist glared at him. Laetis refused to cringe.

"Statecraft," Armist repeated. "One day Hain declared that it was time for me to learn statecraft. I guess this is partially what he meant."

"Just so," Laetis agreed.

There was a knock on the big door.

"What is it?" Armist called.

A guard opened the door. "The magice-at-court," he announced.

Armist grinned despite himself. He wasn't the only one burdened with an archaic office he'd rather not have.

Pandrak appeared in the door and stepped into the room. He took one look at the three and drew his own conclusions. "The preparations are problematic, yes?"

"If only your son could see the need for certain steps," Laetis complained.

Pandrak stepped forward and stopped near Laetis, looking up at the thin man, who was a good head taller than himself.

"Security again?" he asked.

"The Keaven's life," Laetis said bleakly.

"The barons are guests," Pandrak pointed out.

"They may or may not behave accordingly."

"This, unfortunately, is true," Pandrak admitted.

"Have you decided on the Pacer's representatives at the talks?" Armist asked Laetis.

"Screef and Mirne, methinks."

"Indeed."

Laetis nodded. "Screef has become a wiser man for his suffering at the hands of Harrap. He is alert, shrewd,

and definitely loyal. Mirne is a woman. Her and Screef . . . well, they understand each other. There will be no jostling for superiority in this arrangement — and so they will be able to focus on the issues at hand. Besides, the presence of a second woman will enhance," he bowed to Tahlia, "your position."

"Do I need it?" Tahlia asked, a trifle acerbic. Morning sickness and the other contingencies associated with her pregnancy had left her with less patience than was usual. Though she and Armist were looking forward to the birth of their child, carrying it was not an unmitigated joy.

Armist looked at Tahlia. "Hardly," he smiled. "However, any additional advantage can only be welcome."

Tahlia muttered something unintelligible, but found no reason to carry the matter further.

"In this at least then we are agreed," Armist said to Laetis. "With regards to the other matters we will have to compromise."

Laetis' lips twisted into a half-smile. "I know your mettle, Armist of Keaven. Your 'compromises' have stings. Be aware that, while I will comply with your wishes, I will also do my duty."

"That," said Armist, "is probably as it should be."

Laetis had departed. Armist and Pandrak had joined Tahlia at the cold fireplace, where stood a half-circle of comfortable arm chairs.

Armist summoned for refreshments which presently were brought in by a footman on a polished tika-wood tray. They helped themselves to cordial or verbena tea, depending on their disposition. Tahlia nibbled on a sweetmeat. For a time they sat in companionable silence. Armist regarded Tahlia with unconcealed fondness. She glanced up and saw his regard. A smile stole over her features. Armist blew her a kiss and looked at his father.

"This isn't going to be pleasant, is it?"

"The conference?" Pandrak enquired. "No, it is not. The Covenant pleased nobody completely, but at least it had tradition on its side. You've pulled it to pieces, and now want to put something new in its place. That kind of thing has always been a cause for discord. The barons, of course, will also try to use the opportunity to get as many benefits for themselves out of these new arrangements as possible."

"And the Tegels will do what they can to disrupt any agreements," Tahlia said darkly. "I remember Kistof

from my so-called wedding to Tegel. He was just as slimy as his brother.”

“Kistof *is* ‘Tegel’ now,” Pandrak reminded her.

“Stepping into his brother’s shoes without any problems, I wager,” she said siccantly.

“All that’s neither here nor there,” Armist interjected. “The Tegels are lost to us. The best we can hope for is that they’re not here to assassinate us. We have to concentrate on the others. If agreement can be reached, the Tegels will be isolated.”

“Exactly,” Pandrak replied darkly. “And what do you think they’ll do next?”

“I’d like to think that they’ll come to their senses: that pragmatism prevails.”

“Or they make an alliance with the Juncos,” Pandrak said.

Armist looked at his father with narrowed eyes. “They wouldn’t dare.”

“Would they not? And wouldn’t Hengiste jump at the opportunity!”

“Would Hengiste dare? Tergan’s army is only half the size of ours.”

“Whatever ‘army’ we have,” Pandrak reminded him. “Most of it supplied by the barons. If Kistof wants to secede and Tyfal decides not to help, our so called ‘army’ shrinks significantly. Hengiste’s ambitions will begin to look much more realistic.”

“Meaning that we need Tyfal on our side.”

“Definitely.”

“And how are we going to accomplish that — given that he I’m not exactly his favorite liege?”

“An excellent question.”

— —

On the following day, two days before the conference proper was scheduled to commence, two of the expected five parties arrived at Keaen. From Kint, by river boat, arrived Baron Lydd, in the company of his considerably younger wife Heloisa. A full day’s journey down the Diayne had proven nauseating for her. She detested boats and all the discomforts that went with them and would have much preferred travel by land, but since this journey could have taken four days or more, her husband had insisted, not unreasonably he thought, that one day’s of discomfort aboard a boat was preferably by far to several days ordeal by road. The fact that he liked boat travel probably contributed to this judgment, but in his discussions with his wife he had strenuously denied any

such connection.

The boat berthed at the Keaen docks, somewhat away from the common ruck of ships. Armist and Tahlia were there to welcome Lydd, who was considered a staunch supporter of the House of Keaen; and who had, quite without prompting, sent a message of congratulation to Armist only two days after Hain had been deposed.

The party boarded a small procession of coaches for the Lydds and their entourage. Tahlia, after some persuasion by Armist, had consented to ride in a coach with Lady Heloisa and Kortesa: a lady of lesser Kint nobility, who provided Heloisa with companionship. As a result, Tahlia had to suffer through an extended lament by Heloisa, detailing at some length the trials of a voyage over water, for which, she was certain, man had never been intended.

“Intended?” Tahlia enquired. “By whom?”

Heloisa paused and regarded Tahlia with a mix of puzzlement and mild annoyance.

“What do you mean?”

Tahlia shook her head. “Don’t pay heed to me,” he said quickly. “The conference . . . it’s such a lot of work. One hardly knows where one’s head is.”

Heloisa glanced at Tahlia’s waistline. “I hear congratulations are in order. I’m so happy for you.”

“Thank you.”

Lady Kortesa, who had been silent up to now, added her own best wishes. The conversation divagated into issues related to the bearing of children; topics on which Lady Heloisa had a range of definite and well-meant opinions, which she felt compelled to share.

Tahlia heaved a secret sigh of relief when they pulled into the bulk of Castle Keaen and other matters attracted her visitors’ attention.

The guests were hardly ensconced in their quarters when a footman hurried up to Armist and announced the imminent arrival at the port of the ferry from Fingael, carrying the part of Baron Keel of Laska. Armist and Tahlia excused themselves from their guests, handed them into the capable hands of Taler, Castle Keaen’s new majordomo: a small, but immensely dignified, man in middle age, who ran the large household of the castle with an iron fist and had no mercy for those who transgressed his carefully delineated rules.

Back in a shared coach Armist and Tahlia at least found a moment of quietude.

“Is it going to be like that for the rest of this affair?” Tahlia wondered. “Having to suffer through Heloisa’s laments — or, even worse, her well-meant advice.”

Armist hugged her as the coach bounced along over cobbled streets. Tahlia sighed. "I think that one day I would like to be something other than who I am — and you who you are. And if that day were tomorrow, it would be none too soon!"

"You really feel that way? I thought we had . . ."

Tahlia pulled back a little and looked at him.

"I know what we decided. And I'm not going back on it. But one day . . ."

"We will," he said.

"Is that a promise?"

"That's a promise."

"Good."

She snuggled closer to him. "I felt it move, you know?"

"You did?"

"I wonder if it's going to be a girl or a boy."

"In wonder, too. But I know that if it's a girl, she's going to be just as beautiful as her mother."

Tahlia kissed him on the cheek. "You *know* this will get you anywhere!"

Armist chuckled. "Maybe later in the day that would be nice."

"Is that the way the wind blows?"

"Well . . ."

This line of conversation unfortunately went no further, since they arrived at the port; just in time to be present for Keel's disembarkation.

Tahlia decided that Keel's wife Ciara, a woman older than Tahlia, but younger than Armist, and decades younger than her trim and even athletic husband, was not only beautiful, but also considerably less of a chore than Heloisa. Her no-nonsense handshake stood in marked contrast to the flaccid touch of the Baroness of Kint. Her husband likewise exhibited an air of enterprise and energy, possibly at the expense of the decadent refinement of the Kint party. His twirled moustache and goatee lent him a touch of rakishness and daredevil. His ready laugh had a forthright quality. Tahlia thought that she preferred the visitors from the mining city; an opinion which, she found out later, Armist shared.

But this was the time for diplomacy. Preferences had to be carefully concealed under a cover of bland politeness. Tahlia resolved to comply with this requirement to the utmost of her ability. Nevertheless, on the trip back to the castle, which took part without the company of a third party, she found herself in pleasant conversation indeed.

When she commented on the absence of a female

'companion' for Ciara, the woman laughed. A tinkly, happy laugh.

"A 'companion'?" she chuckled. "What for? My husband's my companion."

She noted Tahlia's enquiring gaze. "Oh, you mean, he's so much older than I, right? How can he be anything but a husband? How can I exist with those of my own age?"

Tahlia denied thinking along such lines, but noted that life in Laska must surely become lonely at times. Its sole reason for existence were the mines, and its isolation amid the foothills of the Southern Ranges was proverbial.

Again, Ciara, laughed. "It is lonely, but it's also quite beautiful. If you can forget about the mines, which are a trifle grim and dirty — but the mountains are green and free, and in the winter there's snow on the peaks. Keel and I do a lot of riding about the countryside and the woods."

She hesitated; blushed a trifle. Then she looked up at Tahlia, very frankly. "It seems my husband and I cannot have children." She glanced at Tahlia's waist. "We've tried since we were espoused, but it just isn't working. But we've got other things. He's very gentle and . . . very passionate. And living out there has its advantages, you know? All he has to do is some administering and the rest is time we can spend together. Not a bad life."

Tahlia laid a hand on the other woman's. "I'm happy for you."

Indeed, she thought, there were many ways to contentment. It was only later, during an idle moment, that another thought came to her. Ciara: beautiful and barren. Or maybe it was her husband? Who knew?

Still, something about the baroness reminded her of Nyla, the circe who lived alone with her husband, a simple farmer called Barch, not far from Cedrea. Circes were barren. Many an ordinary woman had been suspected of being a circe merely because she had difficulty conceiving. This might well be the case here. Indeed, it probably was.

Still, Tahlia's intuition told her differently. Something about Ciara reminded her of Nyla — and Ailin.

Would a circe dare to wed a baron? It was a prominent position with little scope for concealment. Unless Keel knew, of course; unless he'd known from the very beginning. And why not? Maybe Ciara had been one of the lucky ones. Like Ailin had been, who found Caitlan.

Armist entered the room. Tahlia communicated her suspicions.

Armist chuckled. "Why not, indeed? Ciara was a com-

moner. Born in Tergan, if I remember correctly.” He paused, thoughtfully. “If Keel knows . . . maybe he, like Caitlan, is her One? Maybe she, too, finally found him.” He kissed Tahlia. “Still, I think we should leave them to it. If you’re right we’ll surely know one day. Let them pick their own time to declare themselves.”

“Ailin would know Ciara.”

“Probably — but Ailin’s not here.”

“I miss them.”

“So do I. How I would like Caitlan here for this meeting!”

“I hope they’re safe.”

Evening came. A small dinner party had been arranged for those already present. Armist and Tahlia had issued instruction for strict informality. This was not a political meeting.

The Laska party complied with the request and appeared in garments they might have used at their own home. Casual, loose blue pantaloons and an equally loose green pullover for Keel, and a simple one-piece dress for Ciara, which showed off her figure without being ostentatious about it.

Tahlia wore a loose green smock, which she found most comfortable, now that the baby was beginning to stretch her belly. Armist appeared in his usual garb, which resembled Keel’s, with maybe a slightly more trim cut, and in Armist’s favorite colors, which tended toward brown and green.

By contrast, the Kints arrived in attires of considerably more formality. The baron wore freshly-pressed knee-long breeches with white socks, a frilly shirt, a stylish jacket, featuring buttons that couldn’t possibly ever be closed over his bulging stomach. Heloisa presented herself in a pink and red gown Tahlia would have considered more appropriate for a formal ball, and which certainly made sitting at the table more awkward than it had to be. Tahlia and Ciara exchanged brief looks of incomprehension across the table. Armist caught the look and leaned closer to Tahlia. “Methinks this is going to be a trifle awkward.”

“Isn’t it ever,” she agreed.

The evening passed. Armist and Tahlia practiced their diplomatic skills. When it was finally done and everybody had retired to their assigned suites, they heaved a sigh of relief. They, too, retired to their quarters. Tahlia flopped down on their bed.

“How am I going to live through this?” she complained.

He lay down beside her, resting on his side, his head

propped up by one hand. “You don’t have to be there for every occasion.”

“Try to stop me.”

He reached out and stroked her belly. “It may be better . . .”

“I’ll be sensible. I promise. But we are in this together!”

“That we are.”

“Then stop telling me . . .”

Armist bent down and kissed her.

They didn’t do much talking after that.

—

The following day brought most of the remaining conference participants; all arriving in the afternoon, and late at that, and all arriving at close intervals from each other.

First came Baron Kiefer, from Port Ster, who controlled the defenses in the western region. He arrived alone, having no spouse as yet. Kiefer had been hoping for a good match and was one of the candidates for Tahlia’s betrothal and ill concealed a continuing rancor toward Armist, whom he probably regarded as a former rival, who had, in the end, won the prize they’d both vied for. Armist suspected that Kiefer actually delayed his betrothal to other suitable candidates in the hope that he would be the one to be chosen by Hain for Tahlia. The union would have given him a definite boost in the constant wrangling for position between the three barons whose territories bordered Tergan. What position Kiefer would assume under the new circumstances was an open question.

Baron Tyfal, from Cedrea, and his spouse, Tiela, arrived next. To Armist’s surprise he exhibited no sign of aversion to the man who had deposed Hain, and whose actions had resulted in not inconsiderable inconvenience to himself.

Finally, with night drawing close, there arrived the Tegel’s state vessel, carrying Kistof, now Baron Tegel, with his spouse Jaslyn and cousin Tiffer, accompanied by an ‘honor guard’ of more than twenty men, dressed in dark-gray-and-yellow uniforms of the Caelar militia. Armist and Tahlia made it a point of going down to the harbor to greet them; a gesture which was returned with minimal civility. The Tegel party, however, stopped just short of declining Castle Kean’s hospitality; though Kistof ventured a few oblique remarks that might have been interpreted as casting aspersions

on the reliability of the hosts.

Tahlia thought that Kistof reminded her too much of the former baron, who had died when she punctured him with one of his own swords. This particular episode, which had taken place some time ago aboard the same ship now moored at the wharf, had entered folklore in two distinctly different ways.

In the first, promulgated by the Tegels, Tahlia, faithless hussy that she was, lusting after Armist and shirking her duty, had decided to dispose of the former baron as a matter of convenience and murdered him in his sleep after failing in her prior attempts to poison him.

In the second, which reflected the true circumstances, Tahlia, forced into marrying Tegel, had undergone a sham ceremony, which did not actually make her his spouse. Finally the baron, livid after discovering that Tahlia had fed him a substance which occasioned severe bowl cramps and inhibitions of his sexual impulses, had confronted her with his discovery and then tried to rape her. In the subsequent melee Tegel had ended up on the losing side of Tahlia's lethal training at the hands of Caitlan of Tinagel.

Admittedly, the episode had little to commend it; not even in the second version. There had been deceit and subterfuge; even a little non-lethal poisoning. It wasn't something Tahlia was excessively proud of. Still, matters had been dictated by necessity, and Tegel's final attempt to force himself upon her — no matter how much he thought himself entitled to do so — had left her with no other alternative.

This view was definitely not shared by the Tegels who disembarked from a coach inside Castle Keaen. Not the men anyway. Kistof was cold and dry and ignored her as if she didn't exist. He managed a degree of minimal politeness toward Armist and everybody else, but even that appeared to require a major effort. Tiffer, whom Tahlia considered creepy and who probably would have liked to have done to her what his uncle had failed to, regarded her with loathsome interest. His lingering gazes on her belly made her feel soiled.

Armist became cognizant of the situation and contrived to split the male Tegels away from Jaslyn, whom Tahlia took into her care. The woman was barely older than herself, and Tahlia, despite her distraction by the Tegels' palpable hatred for her, managed to gather enough good-will toward the somewhat wan, though subtly attractive, Jaslyn to bridge the gap occasioned by the current climate of enmity.

Jaslyn, once separated from her spouse, almost instantly became a different person, assuring Tahlia that she shared none of the dislike visited upon her by Kistof and his cousin alike.

"This is good to hear," Tahlia assured her, and hooked an arm under Jaslyn's. "Come and meet the other wives."

Jaslyn held back. "I'd . . . I'd rather not," she said.

"But why? They're all very nice."

"Yes, of course." Jaslyn sounded unconvinced.

"You know them, of course," Tahlia said.

"N-not really."

"Have you not met them before?"

"Only . . . Lady Tiela . . ." Tahlia sensed a reservation.

"Is she here?" Jaslyn said lowly.

"Why, yes, of course."

"I . . ." Jaslyn took a deep breath and stopped in their progress along the passage. The two guards behind them — assigned by Laetis ostensibly as an honor guard, though in truth they were a security detail — stopped as well. Jaslyn glanced at them; back at Tahlia.

Tahlia motioned to the guards. "Give us privacy."

They shuffled back a reluctant few steps.

Jaslyn leaned close to Tahlia. "I do not wish to . . . see her," she said lowly. "Or . . . him."

"Who? Lady Tiela? Baron Tyfal? Why?"

"Please."

Tahlia sighed. "Whatever reason you have to wish to avoid them: it will be difficult. Indeed, you must know it to be impossible!"

Jaslyn gave Tahlia a desperate look.

"Tell me," Tahlia said kindly. "Maybe I can help."

"Don't you know?"

Tahlia suddenly understood. How could she have forgotten?

"Why don't you want to speak to your parents?"

Jaslyn shook her head. "Parents?" she said bitterly. "What kind of parents barter their daughter to someone like . . ."

Her lips quivered. Tahlia had a notion that Jaslyn was close to losing control over her emotions.

At the same time she realized this she felt a wave of shame wash over her. How could she not have remembered it? It had been almost three years ago that Jaslyn of Cedrea was joined to Kistof. Three years of life in the House of Tegel!

How could she be so insensitive?

Tahlia put her arm around Jaslyn.

"Come with me."

"But . . . surely . . . you are required to . . ."

Tahlia motioned to one of the guards. "Tell Armist that I am indisposed, and ask him to come to our quarters when he has the time."

The guards hesitated. "Mylady, we have been ordered . . ."

"Your orders have changed," she declared.

The guard bowed and turned away. Tahlia called him back. "Tell Armist it is nothing serious; that I'm just being . . . sensible — and that the Lady Jaslyn is keeping me company."

—

Armist, having received the message, excused Tahlia's absence at the, more formal, dinner served up on this occasion for all of the actual attendees. When he relayed the message that Jaslyn also asked to be excused the reaction was surprising. Baron Kistof refused to join the company until his spouse was present. He made it a point to express his mistrust of Armist's declaration, claiming that it originated from the Lady Tahlia, whose veracity must be questioned as a matter of principle.

"Indeed," he added, "I now wonder why my spouse was separated from us earlier."

Armist realized that Kistof had used the occasion to issue a challenge that he might otherwise have postponed until later. The baron's implied meaning was, by any standard, a direct insult, which he, Armist, would have to deal with, or else risk losing face and authority with the others. Kistof knew this only too well.

Baron Lydd did too, and, leaping in to quell the rapidly rising tension, pointed out, not unreasonably, that Tahlia's indisposition was a natural consequence of her current condition and that Jaslyn no doubt felt a certain sympathy which translated into a desire to keep her company. Kistof, barely keeping a civil facade, asked Lydd if this implied that Lydd allied himself with the House of Keaen and against Tegel. Lydd, taken aback at the consequences of his peace-making efforts, stated that he made no such declaration.

Tegel turned to Armist, who had watched the exchange with interest and foreboding.

"I demand that my spouse be produced immediately."

Armist shrugged. "If this is what she wishes . . ."

"Of course this is 'what she wishes!'" Kistof grated. "I take offense at your suggestion that it might not be."

"Who is suggesting it?" Keel posed the question.

Kistof turned around slowly to consider Keel with a

level stare, which the Laska baron tolerated with the faintest of smiles.

Tyfal, Baron of Cedrea, jumped into the fray now. "My daughter," (and here Armist started when the revelation hit him) "has always been of a compassionate disposition. I am certain she wishes only the best for the Lady Tahlia."

"Of course she does!" Kistof hissed. "What are you implying?"

Armist saw Tyfal's wife glance sideways at her husband with a strange expression. She opened her mouth as if to speak, but apparently decided against it.

"Why, you . . ." Tyfal gave Kistof a haughty stare. "This is, after all, our child."

"My spouse," Kistof declared. "And therefore not your concern." He turned to glower at Armist. "I demand her presence. — Now!"

Armist considered Kistof and his own options. The whole affair was, of course, too ludicrous for words; but Kistof had elevated a trivial matter to a level where it became a deciding factor in the further continuation of the conference. Inwardly Armist sighed. They hadn't even had their first formal meal together, and already the Tegel issue had come to a head.

Whatever. It would have gotten to this point anyway. Kistof would have found another excuse to challenge Armist and assert his grievances. It might as well be over and done with right now.

Diplomacy.

But how?

"You are," Armist said carefully, "entitled to have your demands respected; especially as they concern your spouse. However, you are also a guest in my house — as is the Lady Jaslyn! The conventions of hospitality therefore would seem to apply — would you not agree?"

"I'm not here to argue the fine points of hospitality," Kistof snapped, his attention now finally fully on Armist. "I demand that my spouse be presented here and now."

"Why is this such an issue with you?" Armist demanded. "What is wrong with the Lady Jaslyn attending to Tahlia? Surely she will appear once she is ready. Do you not think that she deserves being extended the courtesy of making these decisions of her own free will?"

Kistof took a deep breath, containing his ire with difficulty. "Your questions are impertinent and irrelevant. Produce Jaslyn now or suffer the consequences."

Armist raised his eyebrows. He looked around the

other people in the room. His gaze came to rest on Baron Tyfal and his spouse, who were watching the whole affair with a expressions of . . .

Guilt . . .

Guilt?

There was a dimension to this issue that he didn't quite understand. Or maybe he did . . .

He returned his attention to Kistof, who was watching him keenly — with an expression not unlike that of a predator.

Armist nodded slowly. Kistof was lost to him.

Another of Caitlan's saying came unbidden: *When loss is certain, make the most of it.*

Indeed . . .

Armist inclined his head at the people watching him. "I will go and see how Tahlia is faring. While there I will," this was directed at Kistof, "relate your wishes to the Lady Jaslyn."

"That's not what I demanded!" Kistof grated.

Armist allowed himself a thin smile. "It will have to do." With one last glance at Tyfal and his spouse he left.

"I will not tolerate this!" Kistof's voice came from behind him.

Armist hesitated. He turned and took one long look at the baron. "And you're going to do *what?*"

"I . . ." The words stuck in Kistof's throat.

Armist turned and, without another word, left the room. He proceeded to Tahlia's quarters in haste, only to find her consoling a weeping Jaslyn.

At his entrance Kistof's spouse turned away. Tahlia looked at him across the room and made a significant gesture.

Armist shook his head. "Lady Jaslyn," he said. "I regret the intrusion, but we have to . . . talk."

"Armist . . ." Tahlia pleaded. She left Jaslyn seated where she was and rushed over to Armist. "Do you know what's been going on . . ."

He put a finger on her mouth. "Sshh. Do not worry. And, yes, I have an idea of what's been 'going on'. Kistof has just turned a perfectly sociable gathering into a battleground. I also suddenly remembered who Jaslyn's parents are."

"They bartered her to this . . . monster?"

Armist sighed. "They did. But what you may not know is that they are both feeling *very* guilty about it." He gave Tahlia a brief hug and put his arm around her shoulders as they approached Jaslyn, who still sat, facing away from them.

"Lady Jaslyn," he said, "please listen to what I have to say . . ."

It was some considerable time later that Armist returned to the hall where the party was gathered. In his company were Tahlia and Jaslyn.

The mood in the room was desultory at best and tense with antagonism at worst. Kistof and Tiffer stood off to one side, with the remainder separated from him by as much space as the room allowed with dignity.

At Armist's entrance Kistof looked up. He saw Jaslyn. A triumphant smile spread across his face. He took two steps toward them — only to be intercepted by Armist, who interposed himself between Kistof and the women.

"What is this?" Kistof blustered.

"You are making unwarranted assumptions," Armist told him curtly.

"What . . . how dare you?"

"Be quiet!" Armist said curtly. "Diplomacy be damned! I have had enough!"

"You . . ."

"Shut up!" Armist grated. "No matter what you think or wish, I am still Armist of the House of Keaen, and when I speak you will *listen*. Is that clear?"

Kistof looked as if he was going to choke.

"The Lady Jaslyn," Armist continued in a voice of reason, "would like to tell you something — in front of all of present here, so that there will be ample witnesses of excellent repute to confirm that she did indeed state this."

"I have . . ."

"Nothing to say as yet." Armist cut Kistof off. "As Armist of Keaen, the host of this meeting, and thus empowered by tradition to make such decisions, I declare that the Lady Jaslyn will now speak and say what she has to say."

Kistof took a half-step forward.

"Guards!" Armist called.

Five of them entered the hall and stood to attention behind Armist.

"If Baron Kistof makes another move before the Lady Jaslyn has made her declaration you will restrain him."

The guards positioned themselves in a half-circle around the near apoplectic Kistof.

"Now," Armist said to Jaslyn, who stood, holding onto Tahlia's arm, "declare yourself"

Jaslyn stared at her husband.

"Don't you dare . . ." Kistof began.

"Guards," Armist snapped. "If the Baron Kistof opens his mouth again for anything but taking breath, you *will* gag him."

Kistof fell silent.

"I beg your forgiveness for allowing the interruption," Armist said to Jaslyn. "Please . . ."

Jaslyn swallowed hard. She was still staring at Kistof, but something in her expression had changed. The dread that had been there slowly metamorphosed into something else.

"I declare . . ." she began haltingly.

She paused.

"I declare," she repeated, her voice firming as she spoke, "that I herewith divorce myself from you, Baron Kistof. I declare that I renounce all claims on your property, your services, or the property or services of any of your house or related houses. I declare that I equally reject any further claims on your behalf for my services as a spouse."

Armist watched Tyfal and the Lady Tiela and concluded that his instincts had been right.

So, this is statecraft. In the event, it appeared that this time it actually benefited someone other than a corrupt ruler.

"Having heard the declaration of the Lady Jaslyn," he said, "I now ask the magice-at-court to do what he has to do to dissolve the bond between the Baron Kistof and the Lady Jaslyn."

Pandrak, with an approving wink at Armist, but keeping his face grave, stepped forward. "The procedure is simple," he said. "I herewith declare the bond between the Baron Kistof and the Lady Jaslyn null and void. The matter will be formalized by the scribe, to be signed by the Lady Jaslyn, yourself, and the magice-at-court. However, as of now the bond between Kistof and Jaslyn is dissolved irrevocably."

Armist looked at his father. "That's all?"

Pandrak nodded. "Indeed."

Armist looked at Kistof. "Then you are free to leave."

Kistof had listened to the proceedings with a stony face. His eyes now turned in Armist's direction, and all of a sudden Armist *understood* — and he felt a terrible sadness when he thought of the fate that had befallen an helpless girl on the verge of maturity, when she had been bartered away for political advantage to a monster. If it had been in his power, and if he had been thus disposed, Kistof would now be dead.

But he stepped back, bowed urbanely, and motioned to the guards. "See the baron out of the castle gates." He pointed at Tiffer. "And take this perversion with you as well."

There was silence until the Tegels had departed the room. The sound of the closing door punctuated the event.

The silence persisted for another moment. Presently Jaslyn uttered a dry sob of ineffable relief and fiercely hugged Tahlia.

"And so," came Baron Keel's voice, "at least some justice is seen to be done." He went over to Armist and shook his hand. "This is not the time and the place for a formal declaration. But know this: this is the first time that I have seen humanity inside these walls. I will do whatever I can to make sure it is not driven out." He bowed to Tahlia. "Lady Tahlia, I am your servant"

Tahlia, looking at him over Jaslyn's shoulders, shook her head. "This is not the way it is done anymore."

Baron Keel nodded. "Be that as it may, but it changes nothing."

From Lydd came a rumble of agreement. He, too, stepped forward. Though he was not as effusive as Keel, there could not be any doubt that his sentiments were basically the same. He, too, pledged his allegiance there and then.

Baron Kiefer shook Armist's hands. "I discern an honest man," he said dryly. "Though we have to discuss much, I am inclined to join Kiefer and Lydd in their declaration."

"I thank you," Armist said.

Baron Tyfal had kept in the background. His and the Lady Tiela's eyes were fixed on their daughter, who was watching the proceedings from Tahlia's side, making no move to approach her parents.

Armist clapped his hands. "The occasion has been less decorous or pleasant than I wished it had been — but, alas, this is the way of things, and I think that maybe it has also turned out better than I had any right to expect it to. I trust you are all in need of sustenance after these draining hours. So, though belated, maybe we should attend to what we've been postponing for far too long."

"Not quite!" It was Tyfal, who uttered this. Stepping forward he stood before Armist and glowered at him.

"Armist of Keaen," he grumbled. "I came here thinking of you as a usurper, a murderer, and a traitor. Instead I find you a man. You have done what we did not have the wisdom or the courage to do ourselves. Because of this, someone dear to us has suffered grievously. For righting what our folly has wronged we thank you." He took a deep breath and regarded Armist for another couple of heartbeats. "My loyalty is yours," he said simply, turned, and walked back to stand with his spouse.

Armist bowed in their direction. "I thank you all for your kind words. And now let us put politics aside and dine and celebrate the return of the Lady Jaslyn into a circle of friends."

He offered Tahlia his arm. Kiefer immediately stepped forward and gallantly did the same for the Lady Jaslyn. She took it timidly and, without as yet daring to look at him from eyes still red from crying, allowed herself to be lead in the small procession. Kiefer didn't seem to mind.

The party entered another hall, where the table had been set for a dinner that had been far too long in the waiting.

— —

Armist was under no illusion that the various declarations of loyalty, issued in the emotional setting of their first meeting, were the last word spoken on the issue. The barons were politicians and would awaken on the next day with their heads cleared of the effects of drink and ready to start some serious negotiating. While their declarations were probably valid they were only a foundation. The details of what was to be the new basis of the coherence of Keaven would be difficult to arrange. Still, Armist could not help but be grateful to the contingency of the Lady Jaslyn's unexpected courage, when she accepted the protection of the House of Keaven and divorced herself from Kistof.

On a more personal level Armist had to admit that he simply admired Jaslyn for her audacity. Three years in the hands of Kistof — three years of what Tahlia described as 'bondage and degradation' — somehow had not broken the girl's spirit. Even a miscarriage, occasioned by a particularly brutal episode of physical abuse, had not destroyed Jaslyn's will to resist. The miscarriage almost killed her. She bled profusely and was on the verge of death for some time. Kistof attended to his paramours while servants and an incompetent quack worked whatever pathetically little they could on Jaslyn. Somehow she survived — only to become her husband's play-thing again. Pregnancy never recurred. Jaslyn stated that she considered herself sterile. A small mercy, given the circumstances. To bear the child of Kistof was a thought she did not dare contemplate.

By the time Jaslyn arrived at Castle Keaven she may have been close to breaking, but circumstances had prevented this eventuality. Tahlia took the young woman under her wing. Armist extended the protection and

hospitality of the castle for as long as Jaslyn wished it. Jaslyn, still somewhat dazed by the sudden turn in her fortune, declared her undying gratitude.

"You are very welcome," Armist told her. In secret he hoped that Jaslyn's presence would aid Tahlia, who since the departure of Ailin with Caitlan had had no female company she could relate to — and though, of course, Jaslyn could not be allowed to know certain secrets, Armist nevertheless hoped that Tahlia might find some solace in having a woman with whom she could share the kinds of things that men never really understood.

Jaslyn's parents, the Baron Tyfal and his spouse, made no mention of the matter. They probably feared that their part in their daughter's humiliation and degradation was not something that she could ever forgive. They may have been correct. Jaslyn steadfastly refused to communicate with either of them, no matter what the circumstance. Tahlia reported that even on those occasions where the ladies came together in company — a setting Tahlia abhorred — Jaslyn avoided any form of verbal or eye contact with the Lady Tiela and immediately withdrew from any discussions in which her mother was a party.

The role of the ladies during the negotiations to come had also been a matter of some discussion. It was a given that Tahlia was a participant. Armist made this clear from the outset and was unmoved by the barons' evident reluctance to submit themselves to such novel ways of negotiating. Keel of Laska was the only one who welcomed the arrangement without hesitation; and Ciara, his spouse, expressed her interest in taking advantage of the situation. This was in marked contrast to the Ladies Tiela and Heloisa, who clearly considered it either improper or simply inconceivable that they should attend meetings traditionally reserved for their husbands.

His nation, Armist thought wryly, was indeed being shaken up at the highest levels. Adjustments were required, and not everybody was prepared to make them. The main issue, however, remained the Covenant itself; a mysterious document, both in origin and intention. Now another mystery had been added: that of its current whereabouts. The Covenant traditionally was in the care of the magice-at-court, the de-facto guardian of its precepts. It was kept, together with a number of other adjuncts in a specially designed safe-keep in the magice's study. Everybody knew this, of course, but it bothered no one that this should be so. The safe-keep was accessible to a magice only and therefore 'safe' indeed.

But when Pandrak had fallen into disgrace because of his personal involvement with Armist, he had been forced to flee Castle Keaen, and in his haste had not taken the obvious step of absconding with the Covenant in his pocket. Praetor Morgen had come over from the Isle and taken possession of the document, which was written on a parchment made from an unknown kind of apparently indestructible material and kept rolled up in a smooth metallic cylinder. When Armist had contributed to the defeat of Morgen, however, the Praetor had not been in possession of the cylinder anymore — and nobody had since been able to locate it.

The matter was the subject of some discussion, but in the end Armist and the barons agreed — and this was a major first agreement and milestone — that the Covenant itself was not the issue. It was not to be modified, but the aim of the conference, though it was called the Conference of the Covenant, would be to replace it with a completely new document, that would define the future of Keaen and the rights and duties of those inhabiting it.

Though why bother? Why not just write up some simple agreement between the Barons and the House of Keaen, and have the matter over and done with?

The question was raised by Lydd of Kint. The Pacer representatives, Mirne and Screef, provided an immediate answer: because the Covenant not just regulated the relationship between the Barons and the Keaen, but between the people and the Keaen as well. It was a declaration as much a legislative statement. Whatever supplanted it would have to fulfill a similar purpose.

Armist watched with amusement as Mirne rose and made the Pacer's position abundantly clear. She expressed herself tersely and succinctly; in marked contrast to the previous speaker, Lydd of Kint, whose propoundings were somewhat rambling.

Mirne, Armist thought, had matured since the overthrow of Hain. Something fundamental about her had changed. Armist's gaze wandered to Screef, the Pacer who had undergone horrendous torture at the hands of the former Keaen's henchmen, and who, with Ailin's ministrations, had recovered his physical health. With Mirne's support his mind had healed as well. Armist smiled to himself. It was quite evident that Laetis had understated the degree of 'understanding' between them.

Mirne concluded her statement and resumed her seat. This was a meeting where positions were delineated for the purpose of later negotiation. Armist stood and asked for another speaker. Tyfal rose.

"I have things to say."

"We recognize the Baron Tyfal," Armist said formally.

Tyfal had little to say, but what there was, was clear enough. He had liked the Covenant and thought it a mature and sensible document. The reasons for its abolition were simple: times had changed. He expressed his fatalism at the changes and his support for a document that would be at least as complete as the Covenant had been.

Armist watched him sit down heavily after finishing his statement and wondered what had prompted Tyfal, who was the oldest man at the table, to express such progressive views. He also noticed that Tyfal appeared terribly fatigued; but it was a fatigue of the mind, not of the body.

Jaslyn?

Armist glanced at Tahlia who gave a tiny shrug. The matter would have to wait.

The meeting dissolved for refreshments.

Tahlia touched Armist's shoulder. "I'm going to attend to the ladies," she said, and went off.

Armist took Mirne and Screef aside and expressed his admiration at her performance. She was pleased, but guarded.

"Laetis has given us clear guidelines," she stated.

Screef, a wiry individual of about thirty, who stood half a head lower than Mirne, but whose presence more than made up for his stature, agreed. "We will represent the Pacers and the people of Keaen to the best of our ability."

Armist smiled. "You don't have to say that. I know it well enough. Indeed, I will support many of your initiatives. Some, though, I will not agree to. Keaen is not ready for government by committee, and will not be for a long time. It may be one day, but I will oppose any motions which include such suggestions."

Mirne grinned. "We expect nothing less."

"Then let the negotiations begin."

* * *

Prince Jacquard

* * *

I

*Jacquard, prince du marché
Avec son chapeau noir, et son noeud papillon
Sillone les bouchers
A la recherche du jambon finement tranché.*

Prince Jacquard sillonnait le marché par un bel après-midi d'été, lorsqu'il rencontra son compère Grimmault le sage, en pleine phase de méditation. Prince Jacquard, toujours vêtu de noir, avait alors acheté trois gousses d'ail cosmique, met rare et hors de prix. Il savait que compère Grimmault en était très friand, c'est pourquoi, interrompant la méditation, il lui proposa de venir dîner au château.

Grimmault, petit homme maigre et avare, ne refusa jamais une invitation, et surtout pas celle de Prince Jacquard le bienfaiteur, ami des coqs Martiens télépathes.

Ils prirent tous deux le carrosse volant de Jacquard, tout doré et aux accoudoirs incrustés de pierres précieuses, car Prince Jacquard était, comme tout le monde le savait d'ailleurs, un grand mégalomane . . .

—Alors, compère Grimmault, as-tu des nouvelles du marché, en ce bel après-midi? demanda Jacquard.

—Je n'en ai point, Prince. Du moins, aucune susceptible d'intéresser Votre Grandeur, répondit compère Grimmault, tout en buvant une coupe de vin. Il est vrai que ces derniers temps, le marché est très paisible.

—Mais tout cela est très intéressant! Aucune nouvelle, c'est bizarre, donc intéressant . . . Mais j'aperçois Le Château et ses vignes qui l'entourent. Je vois les fontaines de marbre et de bronze, je vois les dorures des fenêtres, je vois le donjon, avec, à son sommet, l'emblème des Jacquards. Tout ceci est splendide, car tout ceci est à moi!

—C'est on ne peut plus magnifique Prince . . .

Le carrosse se posa doucement sur le carrosseport privé des Jacquards. Prince Jacquard fit revêtir compère Grimmault d'une cape noire, de sabots de marbre et d'une combinaison orange. Ils pénétrèrent dans la vaste salle à manger, et Jacquard fit préparer l'ail cosmique.

Ils n'étaient que quarante-cinq à table, car les autres invités avaient été avalés par une limace Plutonienne, ce qui était fort peu aimable de leur part. Quand Prince Jacquard et compère Grimmault entrèrent, tous les invités applaudirent.

—Merci, mes chers amis, dit Jacquard. J'ai invité au passage notre vieil ami compère Grimmault, car nous mangeons de l'ail cosmique, ce soir . . .

Soudain, Archibaldeau le Taquineur entra dans la salle, le visage en sang. Ses vêtements semblaient avoir été brûlés par quelque jet de flammes bleues. Il vint près de Prince Jacquard et de compère Grimmault, qui commençaient juste à déguster l'ail cosmique. Jacquard lui dit:

—Ah! Archibaldeau le Taquineur! Plonge ta tête dans cette source de jouvence, et dis-nous ce qui t'es arrivé. Cela nous changera de tes taquineries.

—Je n'ai pas le temps, Prince Jacquard! Je dois juste vous dire qu'en ce moment même, le marché connaît de grands bouleversements! Grouilleau le volailler, qui a connaissance de tes exploits passés, te charge de calmer la situation. Si tu réussis, ô grand Jacquard, tu auras droit à un coffre de diamants galactiques! dit le taquineur, essoufflé.

—Un coffre de diamants, et galactiques?! Mais cela est fort intéressant, et je connais les régisseurs du marché! Je m'en vais dès à présent vers cette nouvelle aventure!

—Oui, mais ce n'est pas un trouble comme les autres! Un dragon attaque les commerçants! Et je ne sais pas si tu as déjà affronté de telles créatures de l'enfer . . .

—En effet! Serviteur! (un serviteur vint aux côtés de Jacquard) Vas me chercher un livre sur les puissants dragons de notre planète! demanda Jacquard.

—Bien, Prince.

—Alors mon beau Archibaldeau, vas te soigner immédiatement. Prends des armes et des armures, et tu viendras combattre le monstre!

Le serviteur arriva, un énorme livre dans les mains. A présent, les convives entouraient Jacquard et compère Grimmault, ainsi qu'Archibaldeau le Taquineur, qui venait de baigner son visage dans la source de Jouvence du château. Grimmault pris le livre et lut la page concernant le combat contre une "créature ailée et écailleuse, ou Dragon":

—"Les dragons furent créés par notre bon compère Esilli, il y a plusieurs millénaires. Ils résultent du fait que, au lieu de mettre trois cuillères à café de Globules vénéneux dans une bassine d'eau, afin de faire pousser des roses, le compère Esilli en mit quatre, ce qui donna

un Dragon. Il étudia cet animal toute sa vie, et nous dit que pour l'abattre, il fallait lui verser le bouillon de l'ail cosmique sur les organes génitaux visibles, ce qui le carboniserait immédiatement . . . ” Voilà ce que nous devons faire, dit Grimmault, et toute l'assemblée se mit à rire. Cela tombe bien, car il nous reste du bon bouillon!

II

*Le bon Prince Jacquard
Sans peurs et sans reproches
S'en va combattre le dragon
Pas comme compère Pétouche.*

A peine avaient-ils les armures qu'ils partirent, Prince Jacquard, compère Grimmault, et Archibaldeau le Taquinneur, vers le marché où le jour même, Jacquard invita Grimmault à déguster les gousses d'ail cosmique. L'ail cosmique était réputé pour ses effets apaisants, et ses fleurs qui, une fois infusées, constituaient une excellente boisson aux vertues laxatives. Comme dit précédemment, ce met était absolument hors de prix, mais "hors de prix", cela n'existait pas pour Prince Jacquard le bienfaiteur.

Le carrosse se posa en douceur juste derrière le monstre qui dévorait délicatement un petit commerçant. Prince Jacquard bondit hors du véhicule et cria au dragon:

–Hôla, monstre! Je te somme de relacher immédiatement ce pauvre commerçant, ou bien tes parties intimes connaîtront la saveur du bouillon d'ail cosmique!

–Calme, Prince Jacquard! Lui répondit le dragon. Il relacha le commerçant qui avait les jambes dévorées. La chute aggrava sa douleur (!).

Le dragon se mit en position de combat, ainsi que nos trois compères. La lutte allait commencer . . .

III

*Quand Prince Jacquard se bat
L'ennemi sans force
Se sauve comme un rat
Devant le bienfaiteur féroce*

Les yeux rouges du dragon fixaient nos trois compères qui n'étaient pas très à l'aise, sauf Prince Jacquard, bien sûr. Ce dernier s'élança, et coupa un morceau de chair de la cuisse du dragon. Le reptile, en colère, cracha le feu bleu, particularité de notre dragon.

Pendant que le monstre essayait de s'acharner sur le courageux Prince Jacquard, compère Grimmault envoya le sac de bouillon contre les organes génitaux visibles de la bête. Ce dernier poussa un terrible rugissement, puis arrêta de combattre et dit:

–Vous avez gagné, Prince Jacquard. Aussi, puis-je devenir votre fidèle serviteur, car c'est notre principe?

–Tu le peux, dit Prince Jacquard, maintenant nu et quelque peu ridicule, mais Prince Jacquard était de ces hommes qui, même dénudés, gardaient leur puissante dignité. Viens au château, alors . . .

–Prince Jacquard, appela compère Grimmault, êtes-vous sûr que cela n'est pas sans dangers, vous savez bien que . . .

–Sache que les dragons ne mentent jamais, coupa le dragon.

–Bien, bien . . .

Ils partirent dans le carrosse de Jacquard, suivis par le dragon, qui fut baptisé Dragon le Brûlant. Arrivés au château, nos compères racontèrent aux convives, inquiets depuis le départ de leur hôte, le combat, puis les paroles du dragon qui s'était avoué vaincu. Ensuite, tous allèrent le voir, pour faire connaissance et sympathiser avec le Brûlant. Sur toute la planète on connut la nouvelle, et Prince Jacquard grimpa de cent-vingt points dans les sondages, chose très importante. Après ce glorieux épisode, Jacquard devint encore un peu plus mégalomane, mais ça, les gens en avaient l'habitude!

Le Prince du marché fit construire une tour pour le Brûlant, avec les commodités, le bassin d'eau chaude, le chauffage, bien sûr, et une immense chambre. Il faut aussi préciser que le Brûlant était un animal intelligent qui pouvait parler, ce qui en étonna plus d'un. Il dut tout de même verser une indemnité au commerçant qui avait les jambes broyées.

Et puis, un beau jour, Dragon le Brûlant disparut. Dix ans après son départ, on donna à la tour des dimensions humaines, mais dès les travaux achevés, ce petit plaisantin qu'était le Brûlant revint. Il fallut redonner à la tour des tailles de dragons. Et depuis, Dragon le Brûlant a épousé une Dragonne, ils vécurent longtemps et eurent beaucoup de dragons, mais cela est une autre histoire, revenons-en à Prince Jacquard (!! car il y a un rime . . .)

Notre bon prince Jacquard le bienfaiteur, ami des coqs Martiens télépathes, avait fait l'achat de plusieurs centaines de livres chez un brocanteur sorcier qui avait décidé de se reconvertir dans le commerce des épées magiques (épées qui lancent des flammes, de l'eau, de la

glace, des coqs Martiens télépathes, etc . . .). Jacquard passa donc toutes ses soirées d'hiver et d'été à étudier ces livres, lorsqu'il trouva quelque chose de ma foi fort intéressant :

–Compère Archibaldeau le Taquineur! Compère Grimmault! Venez admirer ma trouvaille . . . appela-t-il. (Précisons que les deux compères avaient élu domicile chez Prince Jacquard)

–Qu'y-a-t-il? demandèrent Grimmault et Archibaldeau.

–Je viens de trouver quelque chose de formidable . . .

–Une nouvelle recette d'ail cosmique? demanda stupidement le Taquineur.

–Mais non! Il s'agit d'une incantation destinée à faire apparaître le Méga Coq Martien Télépathe. C'est fantastique, n'est-ce pas chers compères?

–Mais tout d'abord, qu'est-ce que le Méga Coq Martien Télépathe? demanda compère Grimmault.

–C'est un coq. C'est un martien. Il est télépathe. Et SURTOUT, il est MEGA, leur expliqua Prince Jacquard, grandiose. Je dois le voir. Ansi, je serais plein de sagesse éternelle. Je deviendrais un héros interplanétaire! Les gens ne parleront plus que de Prince Jacquard, le sage. Alors?

–Et bien allons-y. Mais aller où? demanda Archibaldeau.

–Sur Pluton, bien sûr! Sur le pôle le plus extrême de Pluton, le pôle de l'ours assoiffé. Il nous faudra organiser une expédition, à bord d'un véhicule spécial que j'ai imaginé. Toi, compère Grimmault, retourne au marché, et clame cette nouvelle! Je tiens à ce que tout le monde le sache, et je veux au moins un million de personnes qui admireront notre départ! Donc toi, Grimmault, clame la nouvelle, et toi, Archibaldeau, trouve-moi un million de personnes!

IV

*Super Jacquard en costard noir,
Se pavannait en plein été
Lorsque en ayant marre
Il partit affronter Pluton la Glacée.*

Le véhicule de Jacquard fut baptisé Le Super Jacquard 3000. Il pouvait atteindre une vitesse de cinq mille kilomètres à l'heure, il était le plus rapide des carrosses. Et puis le jour du départ arriva. Archibaldeau le Taquineur avait fait du bon travail, car un million de personnes et pas plus, étaient présents sur la place où aurait lieu le départ. Nos trois compères arrivèrent sur le dos de Dragon le Brûlant, et toute la foule les applaudit.

Ils pénétrèrent dans le Super Jacquard 3000, dont les moteurs chauffaient, et Prince Jacquard le fit démarrer. L'onde produite par le démarrage tua toute la foule, sauf Dragon le Brûlant, qui applaudissait. Prince Jacquard dit :

–Ca, ce n'est pas de chance pour eux. Enfin, que voulez-vous mes chers compères, il faut bien mourir un jour, mais le plus tard pour moi sera le mieux. Nous voici dans l'espace interplanétaire. J'ai toujours aimé ce décor. Toutes ces étoiles qui brillent, tous ces mondes inexplorés, dont les habitants feraient sans doute de parfaits sujets pour moi, Prince Jacquard . . . C'est formidable, n'est-ce pas, compère Grimmault?

–Formidable, Prince Jacquard, formidable . . . Et ils s'en furent, vers Pluton la Glacée, planète qui n'attendait plus qu'eux.

Extrait du journal de Prince Jacquard.

Le premier jour :

Je pars en héros, sous les applaudissements et les cris de joie (ou d'horreur?) de la foule. De longues traînées dorées et puissantes sortent des moteurs de mon carrosse. Je suis impatient d'arriver sur Pluton la Glacée, afin de devenir le maître des télépathes. Inutile de préciser que compères Grimmault et Archibaldeau le sont aussi, sauf que eux ne seront jamais télépathes. Ils profiteront simplement du voyage, et porteront les bagages. Je me contente pour l'instant de piloter et d'écrire ce journal, tandis que mes compères restent assis sans dire quoi que ce soit, leurs visages, d'habitude bien roses, sont maintenant pâles.

Au déjeuner, nous avons dégusté une succulent purée de courgettes et de potirons, ainsi qu'une petite friture de larves cosmiques. Dommage que l'on ne puisse trouver de l'excellent ail cosmique sur Pluton. Il n'y a que de la ciboulette cosmique, et peut-être quelques bouquets de bananes bleues cryogenisées. Les Plutoniens ne sont pas fins gourmets, ils sont pour la plupart squelettiques. Peut-être que je leur prélève trop d'impôts, mais à force de faire de la contrebande de roupettes (testicules de coqs (Martiens Télépathes) en gelée, disponibles à l'aire des volcans d'Auvergne, 80 francs le bocal de 500 grammes), ils l'ont bien mérité.

C'est le soir (?), dans l'espace. Archibaldeau s'est évanouï, le sans-gêne, et Grimmault et moi avons une forte intéressante discussion au sujet des marchés, dont je suis le maître. Quand nous fûmes fatigués, nous allâmes nous coucher, fin de la journée.

Deuxième jour

Je vois déjà Pluton la Glacée, nous arrivons. Je réveille compère Archibaldeau, et Grimmault fait entrer le carrosse dans l'atmosphère de glace de la planète. Nous enfilons tous les trois nos scaphandres bleus, et sortons. Le carrosse s'est posé en haut de la plus haute montagne du pôle nord Plutonien, soit l'endroit planétaire le plus froid du système solaire. Nous descendons une pente abrupte pour aller disposer en cercle les différentes amulettes nécessaires à l'invocation. Un vent monstrueux rend la descente difficile. En haut de nous, il y a des limules volantes qui se battent, et d'autres qui discutent. Une fois l'installation achevée, nous remontons en haut, et là, il y a le Mega Coq Martien Télépathe, qui nous attend.

Dès qu'il nous voit, il devient tout rouge, et pousse des petits cris de coq. Je le sens qui lit dans mes pensées. Puis nous voyons son arrière-train devenir rond, très rond, il est encore plus rouge, à chaque seconde qui passe. Et puis il pond un oeuf noir, et disparaît.

Retour aux choses normales:
exit le journal.

-Mais . . . mais . . . je . . . je . . . QUOI!!!!?! cria Prince Jacquard, rouge de colère.

-Hé! Hé! Hé! Quelle belle ponte! dit stupidement Archibaldeau.

-Tais-toi, manant! J'en ais plus qu'assez de tes perpétuelles stupidités! cria encore plus fort Prince Jacquard, encore plus rouge de colère. En punition, tu seras exécuté! Mais avant, charge ce bel oeuf de je-ne-sais-quoi dans le Jacquard 3000!

-Bien, Jacquard . . . répondit Archibaldeau, sans respect pour Prince Jacquard. Ce dernier, profondément choqué, brisa le verre du scaphandre du Taquineur, qui mourut. Puis ils repartirent dans la joie et la bonne humeur, satisfaits, quand même. Ils auront vu Pluton la Glacée.

En conclusion de Prince Jacquard:

Depuis, le Prince du marché n'a cessé d'agrandir son empire, et son palais. Il ne sait pas qu'il lui reste encore de nombreuses aventures à vivre, peu avantageuses pour son honneur, mais cela est une autre histoire . . .

Et compère Grimmault dans tout ça?

Compère Grimmault est resté avec Prince Jacquard, et la nuit, il devient un terrible trafiquant de roupettes, roule en Harley Davidson verte et orange, tout de cuir vêtu, à travers le merveilleux pays du marché . . .

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