
The Cosmopolis Literary Supplement

NO. 6, FEBRUARY-MARCH, 2001

PUBLISHED WITH COSMOPOLIS NO. 14

— CONTENTS —

Tergan

Chapter 5
by Till Noever
Page 2

* * *

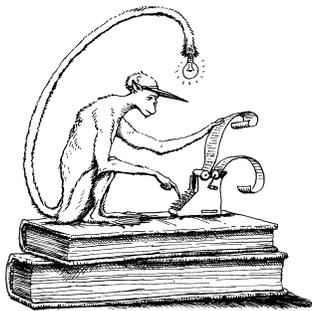
The Zael Inheritance

Chapters 10 & 11
by Tim Stretton
Page 24

* * *

Prince Jaquard Episode II

by Raphaël Mesa
Page 32



Pandrak has ridden to Sacral. What will he discover at 'The Stag'? Will he find the circe in time to save his son, poisoned by the assassin's dart? Meanwhile Apprehensor Voorhies has succeeded in separating Lamark from Laura Glyde. Are her motivations well founded? Is Lamark indeed infatuated with Miss Glyde, and is that alleged infatuation in fact impinging on the investigation, or is Voorhies herself motivated by jealousy? *Tergan*, and *The Zael Inheritance*, continue, and we have a new story concerning Prince Jaquard.

No word from Zack Fance. We are becoming concerned enough almost to forget the Asimov-sized advance paid to him for work as yet unseen. If anyone can alert us to his current whereabouts, CLS would be very much obliged (in a non-financial way).

(This number of the CLS is a new version, reformatted to match the other issues.)

— The Editors

Copyrights are owned by the respective authors. All rights reserved. The Cosmopolis Literary Supplement is published in cooperation with *Cosmopolis*, and edited by Joel Anderson and Paul Rhoads. 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

Tergan
Chapter 5

Pandrak rode into Sacrael on a dappled gelding which he had exchanged for a worn out mare in D'Alva. He also had exhausted his energies. His magic disciplines had kept the pain and tiredness at bay, but he knew that sooner or later he would have to rest. His body was not adapted to horseback existence for such extended periods of time as he had subjected it to in recent days.

Darkness was almost complete; the streets were lit by a sparse distribution of flickering lights. Shadows hastened along the streets. At a few scattered stalls of what might have been a busy daytime market, persistent traders vied for the last customers of the day.

Pandrak found a stable and surrendered the horse, in exchange for a voucher which represented a token of exchange for an equivalent mount. The owner was literate. Pandrak therefore insisted on wording that specified the qualities of the horse in some detail. The owner muttered something about excessive precision, which he considered to be inappropriate in describing a horse. Pandrak offered to be less specific in exchange for a smaller stabling fee. The owner declined and complied with Pandrak's specification. Pandrak paid in Keanean doons, which the man accepted without objections.

"I'm looking for an establishment called The Stag," Pandrak said, just before leaving.

"Ha! You're in luck. Two blocks, then turn right, and there it is." He squinted shortsightedly. "Why The Stag?"

Pandrak shrugged. "A recommendation from a friend. He spoke of it in very complimentary terms."

The stable owner nodded sagely. "Yes, indeed. She keeps it clean—in more ways than one."

"That's good to hear," Pandrak affirmed. He shouldered his little bundle and left the stable. Following the man's directions he soon found The Stag, a tidy small two-storied wood-and-mortar structure whose whitewashed walls contrasted sharply with the shabby

looking buildings around it. Through the window Pandrak saw a taproom filled with people. A popular place. Behind the bar two blonde girls with cleavages deep enough to make the garment nigh-superfluous. A huge young man, bald as an egg. His sleeveless leather jerkin revealed massive arms, as thick as Pandrak's upper legs, rippling with muscle.

Here, Pandrak thought, was at least one reason why the crowd was so well behaved. A fellow like that was an excellent incentive for good behavior.

He considered the women. Neither one was 'Zygie'. From their appearance he judged that they were sisters, probably even twins; quite young, just past clearing the final hurdle into womanhood. Enjoying being where they were and attracting the attentions of even those males who should have known better.

Pandrak stepped through the one and only door, over which hung a creaky wooden sign in the approximate shape of one of the Myrmidic Woods' less dangerous beasts. He found himself in a small hallway with two doors leading off to his left and straight ahead at the end of the hall. Above the latter door was posted a small wooden sign reading 'Rooms'.

Pandrak decided against attending to his acute thirst at the bar and went through the door at the end. He found himself in a small lobby. A semi circular desk at one side looked like a reception of sorts. Pandrak approached it and found a small bell, which he picked up and rang.

Quick footsteps. From behind a curtain appeared a woman. She paused and smiled at the newcomer.

Pandrak stared.

She gave him a quizzical look. "Can I help you?" Her eyes, dark in the dim light of several candles along the wall, focused on his face. The smile on her face was slowly disappearing. Pandrak pulled himself out of his momentary trance.

Amazing . . .

He smiled at her. "I beg your forgiveness. I am tired. After a long day on the road one's reactions sometimes are . . . odd."

She came closer and stepped behind the counter. He noted that she was smiling again.

"You need a bed for the night?"

Pandrak nodded. "That and more."

He could have bitten off his tongue as soon as he'd said it. What was the matter with him?

The woman—'Zygie' for certain!—chose to give him the benefit of the doubt.

"You are hungry? Thirsty?"

"Very much so," he agreed, relieved.

"That also we can help you with."

"Thank you." Pandrak hesitated.

"Anything else?"

Pandrak sighed. It would be just as complicated now as later.

"I'm looking for someone," he said.

The woman contrived an expression of polite interest.

"A certain 'Zygie'."

The enchanting face closed up tight. Her voice came clipped. "Who wants to know?"

"A circe called Ailin gave me the name. She told me that in an hour of need 'Zygie' might be able to help."

Zygie's eyes, which had become flinty and dark, softened as he spoke Ailin's name. But the face retained its tight, guarded expression.

"A circe?" she said, making it sound as if he'd pronounced something too unbelievable to even consider seriously.

"Yes. Right now she is somewhere in Finister with her lover, a certain Caitlan, former weaponsmaster of the deposed—and now quite dead—ruler of Keaen."

Her eyes never left his face. "And who are you to contrive a tale like this?"

"I am . . . Pandrak. Former magice-at-court to said deceased ruler, friend of Ailin and Caitlan, father of Armist of Keaen—and right now a desperate man whose son is dying and who needs help that he cannot give."

At the word 'magice' Zygie had taken an involuntary step backwards. At the end of the sentence however she had moved back into her former position, and was now leaning closer, looking at Pandrak intensely. Her face had untensed somewhat, but Pandrak saw that he had to do something more to convince her.

"Caitlan was here to free Armist, but you found out that he was mistaken to think he was here."

Zygie took a deep breath.

"How is my friend?" she wanted to know.

Pandrak smiled. "They are very close indeed," he said, knowing what she wanted to hear. "They don't talk about it much—but they are inseparable. There is more here than even I understand."

A tiny wistful smile spread across Zygie's face. "So she has found him," she whispered. "I knew it the moment I saw them together."

Pandrak waited silently and watched her. She shook her head.

"Forgive me," she said. "You must be terribly tired."

"True," he admitted. "I'm not a horseman."

"How far have you come?"

"From Cedrea."

"Without pause?"

He nodded. The reality of his ride was finally sinking in. With it came a tiredness that didn't even let him smile anymore.

She noticed it. Her face, only a few moments ago suspicious and guarded, became compassionate.

"Come." She came around the counter and took his bundle from him. When he protested she gave him a look that shut him up. Despite his fatigue Pandrak found himself smiling. Zygie regarded him with a mock frown. "Sleep is what you need. We'll get you to bed. I'll bring you something to eat and drink."

"Thank you, mother," he said.

She shot him another look. Her slightly upturned nose twitched with ill-concealed amusement.

She led the way up a narrow flight of stairs and into a small room with a tiny window, a bed and a chair. She placed his bundle on the chair, turned down the covers, fussed with them some more, then turned to him.

"When I get back you're going to be in there, you hear?"

Pandrak just nodded.

"Thank you again."

She paused at the door. "What kind of help do you need?"

The question brought him back to instant wakefulness.

"My son—Armist. He was poisoned. Klogl."

Zygie nodded thoughtfully. "There is no remedy."

"Except the touch of a circe," Pandrak said.

Zygie studied him quietly.

"Will you help me?" It just came out. He hadn't wanted to say it like that; to appear so totally helpless and desperate.

"Ailin sent you," she said softly. "How could I not?" She motioned with her right hand. "Go to bed, magice and rest—until I say you're fit to walk among the

waking again.” The almost impish grin on her face belied the stern words. She turned away and closed the door behind her. Pandrak sat on the bed and started after her. Then he remembered what she’d said and hastened to comply. It wouldn’t do for her to find him either in non-compliance with her perfectly well-intentioned wishes, or else in the process of getting himself undressed when she returned.

He tried to keep awake until she did, but the light cast by the single candle in the room was just too cosy, and presently he surrendered to his exhaustion.

—

Fridswid, who had staked out The Stag with dogged persistence, couldn’t believe his eyes. Pandrak? Here? Or was it somebody else who just looked like the former magice-at-court. After all, he’d only seen him once, performing the Ritual of Revelation in the Decagon; more than twenty years ago. A mistake in identity was a definite possibility.

But, no! This was Pandrak, as real as could be. Even in the darkness, his face illuminated only by the light from the window of The Stag’s taproom . . . a definite presence, a certain bearing, a confidence arising from the exercise of power, and seemingly not a year older than when Fridswid had last seen him.

Pandrak!

Peering into the windows of The Stag, the owner of which . . .

Certain connections suggested themselves. Suspicions—especially about Zygie—were confirmed.

Pandrak!

This time Silas must know!

—

Zygie returned to the room carrying a tray containing bread, cheese, and sausage, as well as a decanter of water and another, smaller one, of wine. Enough to feed several people, and Lateena had wondered who were the guests that required their meals to be brought up to their rooms, and to have the mistress herself do it. Important they were: this much was certain.

Zygie knocked gently. He had kept his tiredness under control, but she’d sensed it immediately. Unless

she was mistaken he would be sound asleep by now.

There was no reply. Zygie slowly opened the door—only to see the magice tucked under the sheets, already snoring with a soft buzz. She smiled to herself and turned to go. Something stopped her. She looked back at the bed, puzzled at something she didn’t quite understand. After a moment she deposited the tablet with the victuals on the floor outside the door and came back into the room. She stepped closer to the bed and contemplated Pandrak’s face, now relaxed in slumber.

Remarkable . . .

—

Pandrak awoke and immediately felt disoriented. The ceiling, dark wooden slats, was low above him. The bed felt unusual. Daylight, filtered through curtains, covering a small window near the head end of the bed. The air smelled . . . different.

He jerked upright, and jerked again. Beside the bed, on a chair, sat a woman, looking at him intently. At the sight of her everything came back with a sudden rush. Pandrak sank back.

“How long have I slept?” he said to the ceiling.

“Not long enough,” I venture to guess she said dryly.

He decided that he liked her voice. Melodious yet strong; attesting to a personality both feminine and determined.

He put his hands behind his head and looked at her. “What are you doing here?”

She grinned. “Watching you. What else?”

“Do I need to be watched?”

“I don’t know. That’s why I sat here.”

“And what’s the verdict?”

“You can be relied upon. This is my conclusion.”

“Based on what facts?”

She stood up. “Those that matter.” She moved to the door. “Down the hallway you’ll find a latrine and an aquecamera with a bath that should be hot enough for your purposes. We’re very well equipped here.” She winked at him. “I just hope you can pay for it all.”

“I don’t know that I’ll ever be able to repay you,” he said to her retreating back.

She stuck her head through the half closed door. “You will,” she assured him, before closing the door behind her.

Quite some time later, feeling reasonably clean and human again, Pandrak sat in the now mostly empty tap-room of the Stag, eating a hearty breakfast of hot bread, cheese, and fried eggs. Opposite him sat Zygie, watching him with interest as he ate.

"I need to prepare some things before we leave."

She detected his worry. "I can ride as well as you, magice. We'll be in Keaen in good time to save your son. I promise."

"Forgive an anxious father," he said.

She smiled. "Forgiven.—And now you'll have to excuse me. I have some things to attend to. The sooner I get them done the sooner we can leave—all going well, hopefully later in the afternoon."

"Thank you."

"How about a deal?" she said.

"A deal?"

"Yes. Thank me when this is all over, and then thank me big, rather than doing it tediously and in bits and pieces every second breath."

Pandrak smiled ruefully. "I'm not usually like this."

Zygie grinned. "I didn't think so. I must admit, you're not at all like what I imagined a magice to be like."

"I never was a typical example of the breed," he admitted.

"Good." She waved and left.

Pandrak finished his breakfast and sat for a moment. He almost felt himself relax. Right now, he could almost believe that Armist had a genuine hope of survival. He thought about his son. How was he—right now? Conscious and lucid? Delirious and near-demented?

Pandrak forced himself to calm. He was doing everything he could—and now he must hope that it would be enough.

—

"The association must cease." Roi Hengiste's voice carried the ring of authority; the instruction was definite and unequivocal. He paused in his pacing and started down at her.

"Even the Duke of Brys—a mere visitor to our shores—saw fit to allude to the issue."

"What business . . ." she started.

Hengiste made a small motion with his hand, cutting her off.

"None, of course! But does it matter? No! What signifies is that he is aware of it. And he disapproves. In Brys such liaisons are considered extremely inappropriate. As they are *here!* Only, in Brys those who practice trans-caste congress are beheaded—a custom which I've considered instituting here as well."

"And the Duke of Brys dictates what the King of Tergan thinks and does?" she retorted venomously.

Hengiste glowered at her. "He does what is necessary to ensure the security of the state. Brys is an odd place: they would withhold from us what we wish to purchase for the mere reason that they consider us morally decrepit. An irrational stance, to be sure, but one which is real, and therefore must be taken into our considerations."

"I noted that the Duke was not above leering at Evadne," she said.

"That is not an offense. On the contrary. Evadne, apart from her obvious attractions is of royal blood. It would be considered not only acceptable, but indeed highly desirable that he should have a liaison of this kind during his stay. To be truthful, I am vexed with the minx for playing the duke along all through the reception, without allowing him consummation later that night." He made a face as if he'd tasted something sour. "Not only that! I hear that she actually *has* formed a liaison—with an unknown party."

"Gizel leaps to mind," Tamar said.

"You're so stupid!" Hengiste told her. "Evadne would not even consider him."

"How dare you call me stupid?" she hissed, jumping out of her chair.

Hengiste regarded her with mixture of open contempt and perplexity at her outburst.

"I 'dare' nothing. Remember who I am—and who *you* are! An insignificant aging maid, who has no power, and whom nobody wants—except a Councillor, who probably also detests her—preferring boys as he does!—and only clings to her because he hopes in vain to use her to promote himself to higher levels of power. Which, I should like to advise you, is not going to happen."

Tamar stared at Hengiste found that she almost couldn't breathe with the wave of loathing that swept over her. Nobody—nobody!—had ever dared to talk to her like this—and if there had been others present even Hengiste would not have been so bold! He had

discarded all adherence to even the most basic etiquette. He was not fit to be the king.

The object of her detestation smiled sardonically. "What is it, Tamar? Can you not stand to hear the truth? Are you really so feeble-minded that you could possibly believe anything else but what I've told you? Delfis is an oaf. An ambitious oaf, as I will admit. Rich even. His assets exceed those of most other Councillors taken together. But he's an idiot anyway. Just look at him! Does he really believe that you're his permit of passage into the realms of true power? How utterly delusional and stupid he must be!"

Hengiste shook his head. "As of now your association is canceled. I revoke my consent to his assignment as your personal Councillor."

"You can't . . ."

"Yes I can. I know the consent is considered ceremonial and nominal. But the fact is that it is required." He scowled. "Which reminds me, do you know what's possessed Evadne to assign Sander of Orgond to herself? I didn't even know she was aware of his existence!"

That was news to Tamar as well. But she'd be damned if she either admitted as much, or even gave her opinion of this matter to Hengiste.

"I hope you die," she said viciously. "And I hope it's soon."

Hengiste smiled condescendingly. Tamar looked into his face; tried to stare him down. The indifferent contemptuous expression never left his face.

"We all die," he said with the tone of one speaking to a child or halfwit.

Tamar gathered up her skirt and swept out of the room. Hengiste looked after her, a calculating expression on his face. He heard the door to the anteroom open and close, nodded to himself, and turned away.

More pressing matters than his pathetic sister weighed on his mind. Weltig was well on the way to Keaen. If his plan worked, Armist of Keaen would be on the irreversible path to death very soon.

A pleasant thought. If—and there was the snag—if it worked out. He trusted Weltig more than he trusted anyone. They had known each other for many years—even been playmates for a time. Weltig had saved Hengiste's life not only once but twice. But he also had recorded some notable fiascos—and Hengiste hoped that this project wasn't going to be one of them. They

could not afford to fail this time. History was providing them with an opportunity such as had never existed before.

Hengiste had come to certain decisions regarding other fortuitous aspects of this moment in history. It was time to take the necessary steps to implement them.

He jerked on the bell-pull behind his working desk. A guard appeared and stood at attention.

"Get me Toffel!"

The guard saluted, pivoted on his heels, and left. Not long afterwards the Councillor materialized. He bowed perfunctorily.

"Sire."

Hengiste, sitting behind his desk, toying with a small chain from which dangled a round polished crystal in a setting of gold, indicated for Toffel to sit down.

"The House of Tegel," he said. "We will use them."

Toffel nodded. "An excellent plan, sire."

"What, do you think, will it take to bring them to our side?"

Toffel shrugged. "What attracts anyone into cooperation of this kind? The prospect of power, greater glory, riches."

"You do not mention loyalty," Hengiste remarked.

Toffel's mouth twitched. "No, sir, I didn't. What shall we offer them?"

Hengiste allowed himself a brief chuckle. "Nothing. Let them ask. The usual negotiation procedures will apply from then on."

"An excellent suggestion."

"But we do not have much time. I have decided on a gesture which should greatly facilitate our interaction."

"Sire?"

"I will travel to Sansker. Invite Baron Kistof for a parlay . . . enemies becoming allies . . ."

"A king going to meet a baron? Is it not . . ."

"It is a gesture of serious intent. Kistof, unless he's a complete fool, will understand that. He, too, will have to venture forth. The distance may be smaller, but he ventures into what is still hostile territory."

"I understand that, but . . ."

"But nothing. I have considered this matter at length, and my mind is made up. I want you to initiate the processes necessary to induce Kistof to come to Sansker at a time of my choosing."

Hengiste was gratified to see that Toffel forced himself to suppress all further evidence of disagreement. The Councillor rose and bowed. "I will do as ordered," he said, perhaps a little too stiffly.

Hengiste chuckled. "Come, Toffel, do not be glum. Things are in flux. Unusual steps have to be taken. We need the Tegels to defeat Armist of Keaen and to become the rulers of all the Valley. Keep this goal in focus and you will find that a great many things become worth trying."

He gave Toffel a dismissive wave. "Do this, and do it quickly. The sooner we have the Tegels in our camp, the sooner the deed will be done."

As soon as Toffel had gone Hengiste sent for Weltig and communicated his intentions to his old associate.

Weltig saw the wisdom of the plan, but expressed his reservations about the planned trip.

"Your safety, sire. Please consider that."

Hengiste allowed himself a grim smile. "My safety," he noted acridly, "is under threat every day in this murderous hive! My wife and children are gone. Murdered by agencies at whose identity we can only speculate at! How many of my brothers still live? How many of my nephews and nieces? Where is Ghert: slender, lively, and full of mischief? Or bewitching Alyn? Pensive Franka? The daredevil Jac?

"Murdered all. And what is left? My likely successor—if he survives his enemies, of which he has aplenty; poor twisted Evadne, so evilly used by those she should have been able to trust; Gizel, who, I most fervently hope, will never be in a position to ruin Tergan; Tamar, the hag. What a sad parade of leftovers.

"And you worry about my safety? I survive here, do I not? What perils can await me out there that I wouldn't have to face here?"

Hengiste looked at Weltig significantly. "Tell me I'm safer here than out in the open."

Weltig shook his head in defeat. Hengiste chuckled siccantly. "Do not concern yourself. It is you who I want at my side when we make this trip. Toffel will have to come along, of course; but it is you I rely on to guarantee my personal safety."

"Thank you, sir." Weltig bowed his head. He straightened. "Sire, there is another matter I need to bring to your attention."

"It sounds important."

"It is, sire. My information has it that Pandrak, former magice-at-court of Hain the Keaen, who is also the father of Armist of Keaen, has been seen in this city."

Hengiste looked up sharply. "When?"

"Last night."

"Who saw him?"

"One of Silas' men; former servant to Councillor Sander."

Hengiste's interest was aroused even more. "Sander? How come that name is rising to prominence?"

"It is?" Weltig hadn't known that.

"Indeed. Sander of Orgond has just been engaged by my niece as her personal Councillor."

"I see," Weltig muttered thoughtfully.

"What exactly did this former servant see?" Hengiste returned to the original topic.

"He saw Pandrak at an inn last night. The former magice entered and apparently obtained board there." Weltig frowned. "As a matter of a rather odd coincidence it is the same inn where I spotted Caitlan of Tinagel when he last . . . visited."

"An interesting happenstance," Hengiste agreed. "What actions has Silas taken? And why has he not informed me? And how did *you* find out about this?"

Weltig allowed himself a thin smile. "Silas formed a contingent of six men, whose task it will be to take care of the magice; to ensure that he does not leave Tergan alive. One of this group, a certain Jagger, happens to be loyal to me—though Silas is unaware of this."

Hengiste inspected Weltig through narrowed eyes. His voice was not unkind. "I see that you keep Silas under close observation."

Weltig shrugged. "Who guards the guardians? Someone has to."

"Hmmpf. Well, no matter. The fact is, Pandrak's presence here is troublesome. I must admit I approve wholeheartedly of the basic thrust of Silas' intentions."

"So do I, sire," Weltig agreed.

"But I should have been told!"

"Indeed."

"Make sure that this matter is seen to a satisfactory completion."

"Sire?"

"Keep an eye on what this 'contingent' of Silas' is

doing. Help them if they need it. Ensure that the magice—who is a dangerous man, and never forget that!—is disposed of for good.” Hengiste smiled wolfishly. “Whatever he wants here, whether it is intelligence or maybe assassination—he has given himself into our hands. With Armist out of the way and the magice as well. . . we just have acquired an unexpected additional advantage.”

—

Tamar left Hengiste, her viscera crawling with hatred for her eldest brother. His contempt for her was like a living presence that ate away at the very fabric of her being. The presumption of his authority. . . which did *not* extend to whom she chose to bed; no matter what he thought.

Unbidden, Hengiste’s remarks about Delfis came back to her. She knew them to be at least partially true. Everybody knew that Delfis had a weakness for nubile boys. So what? Everybody had their peculiarities. All she was interested in was that Delfis was there to keep her company when she wanted it. Besides, he knew only too well that his interests and hers were intertwined. He said as much many times.

There were practical reasons why she should continue to ally herself with him. Delfis was wealthy. She was a woman, and therefore forced to exist by the unsatisfactory living allowance allocated to her by tradition. Unlike Gervase and even Gizel, she could not afford to hire assassins to do her work. Delfis, however, could—and was willing to do so. Of course, she would thereby become beholden to him, but if she gained the throne. . .

The thought had entered her mind unbidden.

The throne. . .

It was an idea once unfamiliar and frightening; completely unprecedented in tradition. Then Delfis had broached it. A teasing suggestion. . . which had grown into a semi-permanent presence in the back of her mind, to leap forward every now and then, taking center stage, before retreating again to wait for the next opportunity to show itself.

And here it was. Again. . .

Tamar gained the landing of the third floor—and almost ran headlong into Evadne and Councillor Sander; both engaged in deep conversation.

At Tamar’s appearance Evadne immediately fell silent. She gave her aunt a cursory nod and made as if to proceed down the stairs. The Councillor, keeping his eyes averted, his face studiously indifferent, followed her.

Tamar recalled Hengiste’s remarks.

“Wait!” she commanded.

Evadne paused, as if surprised, and turned around.

“Yes?”

The Councillor retreated to a moderately discreet distance.

“I wish to speak to you,” Tamar declared.

“I am here,” Evadne said lowly. “You are here. Your wish is about to be fulfilled. What do you want to talk about?”

Tamar addressed the Councillor. “Leave us,” she commanded.

He gave the slightest of bows, almost insolent in its ease and indifference, and began to walk away.

“Stay!” Evadne snapped.

Councillor Sander stopped and bowed again. “As you wish, Mylady.”

Tamar looked at Evadne. “I told him to leave!” she said haughtily.

“I heard you,” Evadne replied indifferently. To the Councillor she said, “you stay, Sander. Do not leave my side until I order you to do so.”

“Of course, Mylady.” Tamar thought to detect the faintest hint of amusement in his address.

Amusement? How dare he? Especially since it was clear that the amusement was at *her* expense.

Tamar eyed Evadne with open disfavor. “I am informed that you are planning to engage this. . . individual? Did you not think that someone as inexperienced as yourself should seek counsel before taking such an action?”

Evadne’s eyes danced with mischief. “Counsel? But of course! It is what I did. I took the advice of a free Councillor about engaging him. He counseled me and now I *have* engaged him. It seems like a perfectly sensible sequence of events.”

“It is inappropriate?”

Evadne wrinkled her forehead. “Inappropriate? Uncle Hengiste himself has counter-signed the contract.”

“Pah! Hengiste does not appreciate the ramifications.”

“I suppose you’ve told him this yourself?” Evadne asked sweetly.

"In fact, I have," Tamar lied.

Evadne turned to her — *her!* — Councillor. "Please make a note of it. I must verify that my uncle is indeed in approval of the arrangement."

"Of course, Mylady."

To Tamar Evadne said, "I thank you for bringing this matter to my attention. Now, was there anything else?"

Tamar opened her mouth to say something, but closed it again. Her gaze raked over Evadne and the Councillor. Rather young, she thought. Inexperienced and cocky. Certain to give ill advice. It might actually be beneficial to have him where he was. A callow youngster advising an arrogant, inexperienced maiden.

A tiny voice in her head reminded her that the same 'inexperienced' maiden had, on the previous night, taken over the Duke of Brys and placed herself into the center of social life at the banquet—while she herself, and experienced and mature woman, had to loiter on the periphery, together with all the other insignificant dull-wits.

Ha! Evadne charms were evanescent, soon to disappear—if she survived long enough. But then again, who would waste their hard-earned wealth on hiring assassins to dispose of some silly little frump like her niece? Tamar didn't realize that she was scowling as she attempted to determine whether this should maybe considered a good thing.

"If you'll excuse me," Evadne's voice penetrated to her consciousness, "I really have to go."

Tamar sniffed and swept away. Silly little tit! What did she care anyway? Every word to Evadne was a word wasted.

Then Tamar stopped as if she'd run into a solid wall.

She ran over the encounter with Evadne again—and not just Evadne, but the Councillor.

Sander.

Sander of Orgond. Son of Polkirk of Orgond, who had died under mysterious circumstances at sea . . . when? . . . maybe fifteen years ago? . . . thus opening the way for his son to step into the hereditary Councillor's role.

Tamar remembered Polkirk, if for no other reason but that he had once had chanced, in what should have been a deserted corridor, upon an early sexual, mostly experimental, encounter between herself and the now-deceased Prince Armiut. Not only that, but he'd had the temerity to stay and seeing to it that it ceased

there and then; an action for which Tamar, who had initiated the encounter, had never forgiven him.

Sander looked very much like his father. The same air of thinly veiled arrogance, as if, by some incomprehensible standard, he actually were her better—when in truth it was the other way around.

The son of Polkirk, indeed. What had prompted Evadne to engage him? What could he possibly offer? For sure he was younger and more attractive than the rest of them together. A bit gaunt perhaps, but who knew what that loose uniform hid?

Evadne?

No—she wouldn't. Evadne was a cold fish. Everybody knew that. An accomplished flirt: this could not be denied. But her womanhood was as dried up as the Talinic Plains.

Tamar entered her quarters and summoned Delfis to impart to him the unpleasant news. That and something more.

"I have arrived at a decision," she declared.

"Mylady?"

"The matter we spoke of recently . . . You have my full approval to take any steps necessary to implement its realization."

Delfis, who had kept a disappointingly indifferent mien when she told him that the king wanted their dalliance to be curtailed, now became positively animated. "Thank you, Mylady," he said. "I will initiate the necessary actions immediately. Rumor has it that Hengiste is wanting to go to Sansker to meet Kistof of Tegel. This will be as good an opportunity as any."

Tamar leaned back in the plush arm-chair and studied him from under languid eyelids. "Just as you say. Before you . . . organize things though . . . there are a few other matters of more immediate concern . . ."

"Mylady?"

"When I told you that Hengiste disapproved of our . . . association . . . I didn't say that I agreed to terminate it." She ran her tongue over her upper lip. "Indeed, it is at moments like this that I feel even more determined to keep it going with full zeal."

Delfis, though she did not detect any excessive enthusiasm, at least understood full well what she was telling him. He stepped closer and took her hand. She allowed herself to be pulled out of the chair and conducted to the bed, where, despite his revulsion, he

proceeded to address himself to her personal needs with his usual vigor.

—

Filidec, the royal documentarist-in-chief took pains to conceal his astonishment at seeing Evadne, a royal of the highest circles, appear in the scribarium—to attend to a mundane affair such as the collection of a Councillor’s contract.

“Mylady.” He bowed deeply.

“Yes, yes,” she said dismissively. “Have you completed the document?”

“I have, Mylady,” he replied, with a quick side-glance at Sander. He hurried to fetch it from a rack of pigeonholes and handed it to her. Evadne unrolled it, scanned it, and handed it to Sander, who repeated the procedure, nodding when he was done.

“The procedure is finalized, Mylady,” he said to Evadne.

“Just as well,” she said haughtily. “We may now proceed to the business at hand?”

“Indeed,” Sander agreed.

Filidec watched the exchange with an interest which he took pains to conceal.

Evadne swept out of the scribarium. Sander, with a wry look at Filidec, followed her.

Once they had proceeded down the passage, out of possible earshot, she allowed herself a quick smile.

“It appears, that you are correct in all respects. A shrewd strategy indeed. You are—I am convinced of it now—a very dangerous man.”

Sander made a gesture of denial. “I merely apply basic distractive tactics. Let them see us in public and they will not pay much attention to what we do in private. Let them believe that you’re doing this as a means to assert status, and they will not suspect that your martial arts have proceeded to the stage where I am confident that any attacker will have a very difficult time indeed.”

“You really think so?”

“I do, Mylady. Less than a week and already you have passed stage two of the *keit* disciplines.”

“You flatter me.” But she could not conceal a quick smile of pleasure. They gained the ground floor and proceeded toward the exit to the courtyard.

“Flattery is appropriate in the right time and place,”

he noted. “This is neither.”

“I don’t feel like I really know anything.”

“Do your arms still ache when you practice *kato*? Do you even think when you parry a *teesh* in line two? And when you threw me yesterday . . .”

“When you *allowed* yourself to be thrown!” she interjected.

“Immaterial,” he said firmly. “You executed the move with grace and skill.”

“It appears,” she said musingly, “that most of your predictions are coming true.”

“There is no secret to that, Mylady. Human beings, to a significant extent, can be manipulated by careful application of the appropriate stimuli, suggestions, implications, contextual modifications. This what we have done.”

“*You* have,” she pointed out. “As I said: you are a dangerous man. I’m glad to have you on my side; whatever your motives, or those of your masters, may be.”

There was an implicit question here which he chose to ignore. “It occurs to me,” he said, by way of distraction as well as because it was true, “that it might be useful to simulate at least some unwellness. Mentions of spells of dizziness perhaps, bouts of nausea, episodes of weakness and torpor. A subtle change in demeanor possibly. Less assertiveness, as if it required too much energy to exercise it.

“These hints that not all is well should support the assumption on the part of those who need to assume these things, that Arguitte’s work is proceeding according to their plan.”

“Must I?” Evadne was not enthused about the prospect.

“If their plan is seen to work they will not feel compelled to contrive another,” he noted.

“You’re right,” she admitted. Her lips twitched in a rueful smile. “Sometimes I don’t like it when you’re right. But I’m working hard at not getting too vexed about it.”

Sander chuckled. Evadne joined in.

An interruption occurred. A guard came hurrying across the courtyard and stopped in front of them. He snapped to attention in front of Evadne. Sander recognized him as the man whose child he’s saved.

“Mylady.”

“Yes?”

“I beg your forgiveness, but . . . I have a message . . . for . . .” he looked at Sander.

"For me?" Sander asked him.

The guard looked uncertainly at Evadne, who shrugged negligently. "Give the Councillor your message."

The guard, relieved at the unexpectedly gentle treatment, relaxed minutely and turned to Sander.

"A woman calling herself Zygie appeared at the gate. She had no pass, so she was not allowed inside. But she was . . . forceful . . . insistent. She spoke of urgency and that you must see her at once."

Evadne gave the guard a puzzled look. "And you just did as she bid you?" she asked.

The guard nodded reluctantly. "I was coming off duty, Mylady. It . . . it did not interfere with the schedule. And the lady . . . well she seemed . . . distraught. And when she mentioned the Councillor's name . . ."

"Thank you, Keran" Sander told him. "I appreciate the favor."

"It was nothing," the guard said. Another quick glance at Evadne.

"You may go," she said with a slightly distracted mien.

The guard departed.

Evadne looked at Sander. "It was nothing?" He went out of his way to do you a favor and 'it was nothing'?"

"I know him . . . reasonably well," Sander admitted pensively.

"I see. — Who's 'Zygie'?" The question was put with a deliberately casual air, but it didn't take *sabér* for him know that there was nothing casual about it.

Sander sighed. "A friend—who would not ask me from my duties unless it was truly urgent."

"Are you telling me you're wanting to attend to this call."

"Mylady, I must."

"I need you here!"

Sander looked into her dark-brown eyes, meeting the challenge there without flinching.

"I must," he said gently.

They stared at each other for another moment. Evadne averted her gaze, to look in the direction of the gate.

"You may go," she said.

"Thank you, Mylady. I shall return as soon as I can."

"Good."

—

After forcing himself to attend to Tamar, all the while pretending that it was not her but some fresh-cheeked boy (an illusion difficult to maintain), Delfis finally excused himself and left the castle to attend to the matter of re-adjusting the power structure at the royal court to suit his needs.

Delfis was the oldest son from a wealthy family of D'Alva merchants. As such he had inherited the title of Councillor, as well as the whole of their business. His siblings, an older sister and two younger sisters and brother, inherited nothing, as was tradition, and had to go off to fend for themselves. The brother had mustered on to a ship that never returned from its journey; the older sister, who was attractive and blatantly fecund, had married into the family of a Keanean shipwright from Port Ster; the other two ended up in marriages of insignificance, their disposal accomplished by the small but sufficient dowry guaranteed to them by the same tradition that made Delfis inherit everything else. Delfis had considered means to avoid paying the dowries, but it would not have been politic to appear self-serving with regards to such small matters. As it was, he contrived to adjust the estimates of the value of the business to a level far below the real figure, so that the dowries, which were reckoned in proportion to this value, were adjusted downwards accordingly.

The *Bay Trading Corpus*, over which Delfis presided with an iron fist, had its base in D'Alva, with a major warehouse and office at the small port of that town, where the company's four vessels berthed and exchanged cargo: two three masted clippers ranging as far as Thalonica or Gaskar and occasionally Brys, a coastal schooner shuttling between the Valley's coastal towns and cities, and a small cog servicing Tergan ports alone, handling goods that were too cumbersome or voluminous to be carried by road.

Another, smaller, warehouse belonging to *Bay Trading Corpus* stood in the port of Sacrael. Delfis had augmented it with an office, from where he, ably assisted by a triumvirate of subordinates, supervised operations of the fleet. He went to this office now. Once inside he dispatched three messenger boys to various places and awaited the forthcoming responses.

The first did not take long. A man appeared and presented himself to the burly guard at the entry gate

to the warehouse.

"I am here to see Delfis."

"And who are you?" The guard squinted suspiciously. He was somewhat shortsighted and had to lean closer to see the stranger's face in focus. What he saw convinced him to comply with alacrity. He'd had dealings with certain elements of the city, and this man, though not personally known to him, filled a description that instilled awe. Especially the scar traversing the entire jaw; a livid purple arc of imperfectly healed wound.

Presently Penner, a blackguard and murderer of some repute, was admitted to Delfis' presence.

The Councillor communicated his requirements: a team of competent assassins to go out and waylay a personage of some note at some time in the near future.

Yes, there would be guards. Ten, maybe twenty. Yes, they would be competent.

Penner remarked on the consequences of this for the cost of the enterprise. Delfis' entrails squirmed at the figure Penner suggested. Extensive negotiations ensued, focusing on analyses of risk and benefits. Penner, knowing his position to be strong, got the figure he'd wanted to begin with. Delfis wondered if it was really worth risking a substantial part of his wealth for the goal at hand. Maybe he should consign himself to being just who he was. Why strive for power when he could live out his life in the comfort afforded to him now?

The answer was simple: because he had the chance. Because the men in his family had always taken risks. From such undertaking had grown the *Bay Trading Corpus* of the present day. Further significant expansion required a different kind of leverage—which he would have once he was the personal Councillor of Tamar, ruler of Tergan.

Delfis sighed and agreed to the price. Penner declared himself satisfied and departed. In the evening of the same day, in a gambling den which was Penner's main source of regular income, the scar-faced killer met with four of his closest cronies, all of whom also happened to be relatives; some close some further removed.

Franz: Penner's brother, an excellent bowman, and a partner in the gambling establishment.

Koor, Koreeth, and Slik: second cousins from var-

ious sides of the family. All of them well-versed in the use of a variety of weapons, from crossbow to dirk.

The four debated the issue for a while. Franz returned to a subject he'd raised earlier.

"I still think it's the king."

"Delfis isn't the man to tackle Hengiste."

"He's not. We are!"

"It doesn't matter who it is," muttered Slik. "We're done for either way.."

Penner frowned. "'Done for?' What kind of talk is that?"

Slik made a resigned gesture. "I don't mean that we're going to fail—because we're not. They could have fifty guards and we'd still do it." He shook his head. "No, what I mean is that we're becoming the victims of our own success!"

"He's right." Koor, the smallest member of the group spoke up. "Once Hengiste is gone, or Gervase, or both, our days of rich picking are over. No more big contracts. A few rival killings between businesses; maybe even a contract or two in Keaen . . . if we're lucky. The royal court has no heirs at all. By the time they've rearranged the pieces in their game and done some serious reproducing . . . by that time we'll be old and gray or dead and gone."

"Think of the competition, too," Koreeth remarked. "A lot of people looking for work. We may have to whittle down the field a bit," Koreeth remarked.

"Definitely," Slik agreed and, with his usual pessimistic outlook added, "if for no other reason but that the others will be thinking exactly as we do."

They all fell silent as they considered the grim future ahead.

—

At about the same time Delfis prepared to part with yet more hard-earned cash to another assassin. This one came alone—and with great stealth; bypassing the guard and appearing in Delfis' office through the second storey window—much to Delfis' consternation and shock. For a moment the Councillor thought that he, himself had suddenly become the target of a contract. An uncomfortable notion indeed!

The man answered to the name of 'Attick'—though Delfis had been told that this was merely the latest in a series of nomic fabrications, and that the man had

quite possibly forgotten the name his parents had given him at birth. Attick's victims had, in the past, included three members of the Junco dynasty: Ghert, Franka, and Alyn—all children, whom he dispatched in a variety of different, but always efficacious ways.

With a man of such reputation argument about payment appeared unwise. Still, old habits died hard, and Delfis made at least a token attempt at negotiation.

To Delfis' relief, Attick, far from being angered, as he might have been, to the contrary appeared faintly amused.

"I understand," he said. "You wouldn't believe how common it is for clients to take what they might see as an 'economical' approach. However," he added, with what to Delfis appeared like excessive pedantry, "there is a proverb in my . . . profession. And it is this: *There are no bargains*. That of course is true in every field of life. The level of investment prejudices the likely result. Stinginess will create mediocre or non-existent successes. Amplitude, on the other hand, while it is not a guarantee of equivalent returns, at least lays the groundwork for the very possibility of the degree of success hoped for."

Delfis started to say something, but Attick held up a restraining hand. Delfis bit back his reply.

"Consider," Attick told him, "the consequences of the ill-considered choice of an inadequate individual—that is to say one who might have the skills, but in this instance not the required resources—for the disposition of the heir presumptive. Unless one presupposes stupidity on the part of the contractor—which is also definite possibility, but I'm willing to give Councillor Toffel the benefit of the doubt—one must conclude that he, too, was trying to apply parsimony in an inappropriate context."

Attick smiled at Delfis' flabbergasted expression. "You are surprised that I know the identity of the contractor—something I'm sure he, too, would be very dismayed to know?" He pointed a finger at Delfis. "This is why you hire *me*—and not some unknown quantity from the other side of the Limpic Ocean! He was reasonably competent—at least this is my intelligence. However, 'reasonable competence' in our business is rarely adequate."

Delfis, bereft of objections by the persuasive power of Attick's arguments, parted with a significant advance for services to be rendered; the balance to be

paid when Gervase had been dealt with.

When Attick had gone—the same way he'd come—Delfis leaned back and pondered the day's work. At great expense to himself he had arranged to have the two highest members of the ruling dynasty disposed of; thus almost completing the current spree of royal assassinations. The only ones left would be Tamar, Gizel, and Evadne. Gizel might have to go as well, of course. If he decided to stand in the way of his aunt he would! But Gizel was a weakling, and until it was clear that he was going to make trouble there was no point in wasting perfectly good money on dealing with him. Evadne didn't count of course. She was just a woman. Her aunt would sweep to the throne unchallenged. And in her wake he, Delfis, would follow.

—

After a series of intricate maneuvers to shake of Silas' spies—which must surely by now be watching his every move—Sander ducked into narrow, deserted alley and pulled off his black-and-gray Councillor's gown. Underneath he wore the ordinary tunic he favored for moving around the city. He tucked the garment under his arm, assured himself that nobody had observed him, and stepped into the street again. He arrived at The Stag to find Zygie in the taproom issuing instructions to the hulk, Galahad. When she saw him her face lit up.

"Thank you, Sander," she said. She turned to Galahad. "I'll be back in a few moments."

She took Sander outside and stopped in the hallway. "Will you help me?"

Sander felt a pang of guilt. With everything that had been going on he had totally forgotten the matter of his perfidious former servant.

"I promise, I'll take care of him. It's just that . . ."

Zygie shook her head. "It's not that. He hasn't bothered me again. But I need to . . . go away. For a while. I don't know how long. And Galahad . . . well, his organizational talents begin and end at dealing with taproom brawls. No, I need someone to take care of The Stag."

He considered her seriously. "Are you coming back?"

"Yes! Definitely."

"Nothing's 'definite,'" he said gently.

"I'll be back."

"I will look after The Stag," he said. "Mind you, it'll have to run itself mostly, but if you need someone to take responsibility . . ."

"Thank you." She hugged him.

"And now I want to know where you're going."

Zygie stiffened. "Please . . ."

The urgings of *sabér* were strong. He took her face between his hands. "I need to know," he said. "Trust me—I do!"

"You're . . . you're a Councillor," she said lowly.

"I'm also your friend."

"I know," she sighed. "It's just that . . . those two things may not be . . . compatible."

Did he really need to know?

Yes.

"I am your friend," he repeated, his hands falling away from her. "And I need to know. For your sake. For the sake . . ." He hesitated. *Sabér* supplied the crucial detail, ". . . of the man who came to take you away."

Her eyes widened. "How did . . ."

She stared at him for another endless moment.

"Don't fail me, Sander," she whispered.

She led the way into the lobby and up the stairs. Zygie knocked at a door and opened it. The man standing at the window turned to face them. He took in Sander at a glance, assessed him, judged his merits, intentions, reliability, all in one moment of intense scrutiny. Sander sensed a latent power, kept in careful check.

"He *is* a friend," Zygie began.

The man nodded. "I know," he said. To Sander: "She is fortunate to have you."

Sander stepped forward and proffered his hand. "I'm Sander."

The stranger took it in a firm grip. "Pandrak."

Pandrak! Sander glanced at Zygie. "You have an interesting circle of acquaintances."

Zygie, looking visibly relieved at the development of the situation, smiled at the magic. "We weren't really acquainted. Not until last night." The expression in her face, a certain unexpected timbre in her voice, gave Sander pause.

Interesting.

"Councillor Sander," Pandrak said, thereby revealing that Zygie had chosen to reveal this much at least, "I hope this meeting will not create undue problems for you."

Sander chuckled. "Problems? I laugh at problems. If

I didn't, I would have gone crazy a long time ago."

Pandrak grinned. "Still, you are Tergan. I am Keaenean."

"Unless you plan to assassinate my protégé, that need not concern us."

"Murder or political intrigue is not on my mind."

"I didn't think so. So—why are you here?"

Pandrak told him.

"Then you must hurry," Sander agreed. "The parameters governing klogl's action are highly variable. I don't mean to alarm you even more, but time is indeed of the essence."

"The horses are ready," Zygie interjected. "I'll take you down to Galahad and officially introduce you. He will cooperate fully."

Sander chuckled. "I hope so. I'd hate to get into an argument with him."

Pandrak picked up a small bundle and followed them down the stairs.

"I'll meet you at Logan's Stable," Zygie told him.

She conducted the introduction to Galahad with economy and in obvious haste.

"Just go," Sander told her. Zygie hesitated, then fled the taproom.

Galahad grinned at Sander and extended a massive hand. Sander shook it. It felt like his arms were being worked free of their sockets.

"I'll be back tonight," he promised Galahad and left.

He turned right, toward the castle. Who knew what was transpiring there!

Then *sabér* hit him like a punch thrown by the fist of Galahad. Sander doubled over as a wave of nausea swept over him.

Evadne!

He caught his breath; started running.

And then he stopped again . . .

Wrong!

But what?

Then he understood.

Not Evadne!

Zygie. The magic . . .

Sander cursed and turned back. He ran, ignoring the puzzled stares of the people thronging D'Alva Way. He found a stable, only three blocks south from The Stag. The owner was not at hand, the hostler in attendance a slow-witted numbskull who wanted to negotiate terms. Sander had no time for wasting words. The

hostler wound up unconscious from a carefully aimed blow at a sensitive bundle of nerves. Sander threw a saddle on a skittish, but fast-looking, horse and presently raced out along D'Alva Way, with the just-returning owner screeching imprecations after him.

--

"Who are they?" Zygie looked behind her, where a group of four riders were drawing closer. Their inexorable approach had an ominous air; their horses obviously were good, since they continued to catch up on them.

Pandrak forebore to point out the obvious. Maybe she had been wrong about her friend! Maybe the Councillor had fooled him, Pandrak, as well!

Could he have been so wrong? Here, it appeared, was proof that he might have been.

Pandrak considered their options, which were woefully limited. There was indeed only one.

"Go!" he shouted at Zygie. He up his horse and wheeled it around to face the pursuers. He fumbled in his pocket and came out with his one and only weapon: the lightning rod Armist had taken from Praetor Morgen. Pandrak pressed the activation buttons in the required sequence. The riders were almost upon him. Pandrak aimed and pressed the firing stud. Lighting crackled through the air. Horses reared in sudden fright. Pandrak's target and his horse were enveloped in an aura of jerking, dancing discharges. The horse gave an eerie whinny and collapsed on top of its rider.

The other riders fought for control of their mounts. Pandrak aimed again. Another one down. But now the other two had regained control. They scattered into opposite directions and converged on Pandrak in a pincer movement.

An instant of indecision. Too long. They were on top of him. The lightning projector flew from his hands and somewhere into the dust. Something hard impacted on his skull. Darkness descended.

--

Weltig pulled up his charging horse and drew even with the melee. The magice was down. Looking along the South Road he saw that the woman had halted at a safe distance, watching them.

Silas' two remaining men waved at Weltig.

"What are you doing here?"

Weltig laughed. "Checking up on you."

Lister and Jagger, the only two survivors from an ambush gone wrong and now in the employ of Silas, laughed with him.

Lister got off his horse and knelt by the magice. "He's alive."

Weltig made a jerky motion with one finger across his neck. Lister pulled out a knife and prepared to cut Pandrak's throat.

The woman screamed, spurred on her horse, and charged at them. The attention of all three was riveted on the sight of her. Lister momentarily forgot Weltig's directive as he stared in amazement. Weltig, glancing at the magice, saw him stirring. He shouted an order. Lister looked down, saw Pandrak move feebly. He glanced at the woman again.

"Damn you!" Weltig shouted at Lister. "Kill him!"

Lister stared at Weltig. The expression on his face changed. He opened his mouth.

Then Weltig heard it. The noise of her approach had masked the other sound, from . . . right behind him.

Weltig jerked the horse around; his hand moved to draw his sword. From the settling cloud of fine dust came another rider in headlong charge. Despite the garb Weltig recognized him immediately. Sander of Orgond? What was *he* doing here? Two questions—causing a fatal hesitation. Sander raised his hand. In it he held a small object. Weltig felt a web of sharp stings on his face and neck. His right eye went dim. Numbness spread from his face to envelop his whole being.

Then there was nothing.

--

Sander ignored Weltig, who sat like a statue, already more dead than alive. He aimed the needle projector at the man kneeling beside Pandrak.

No! He might hit the magice . . .

Sander swiveled the projector to point at the other man and depressed the trigger again. The man dropped his sword; his hand jerked to his face—but never made it there as he died where he stood.

The man beside Pandrak jumped up and lifted his arm to hurl the knife. From his left charged Zygie.

The horse took a leap over Pandrak's prone figure, knocked the man sprawling, and then crushed his chest with the hind hooves. Zygie pulled up the horse; jumped off; stumbled to where Pandrak lay. She knelt down beside him and cradled his head in her hands. Despite the grim circumstances Sander felt himself smiling. He dismounted and calmed his nervous mount. He went over to where Zygie was helping Pandrak into an upright position. She looked up at him gratefully.

Pandrak winced and struggled to get himself upright.

"Wait," she told him firmly. She placed a hand on his cheek. A moment passed. She moved the hand to his arms, his torso, his legs, moving it in a slow stroking motion. Pandrak's face lost some of its tension. He regarded her with something approaching awe.

"There," she said brightly, "you can get up now."

Pandrak nodded slowly and turned to face her. A brief hesitation; they looked at each other with a curious kind of recognition. Sander, embarrassed at witnessing something he understood to be exquisitely private, averted his gaze. He considered the fallen men. What was Weltig doing here? Whatever it was, it was over for him. Hengiste had just lost his closest confidante. The king would not be pleased.

Sander's gaze came to rest on a small, cylindrical object, just beside one of the bodies. Pulling the horse after him he stepped over to where it lay and picked it up. He looked back at Pandrak, who now stood, his attention on Sander.

Sander held up the object. "Yours?"

Pandrak nodded. "Be careful with it."

He stepped closer and held out his hand.

"You shouldn't lose something like this," Sander told him. "It is evidence."

Pandrak's eyes bored into Sander's. "Evidence? What kind of evidence?" he grated.

Sander reached into his pocket and displayed the needle projector. "The same kind as this."

Pandrak stared at the projector; at Sander. "Who *are* you?"

Sander smiled thinly. "The next time we meet we'll talk. And meet we shall." He handed Pandrak his weapon. "Now you'd better hurry." He motioned at the mess on the road. "I'll attend to this."

He winked at Zygie. "Take your time coming back."

She glanced at Pandrak and pulled a face at Sander.

The two went to their horses and presently continued their interrupted journey.

Sander looked at the bodies. Why waste his time? He had to get back to . . .

Evadne!

Sander considered Caravella's position in the sky. How long had he been gone from the castle?

Without further delay he mounted his horse and rode back to Sacrael. He arrived at the stable and pacified the irate stable owner with a gold coin. He retrieved his Councillor's garb from behind the reception counter in the lobby of The Stag and pulled it over his head just before he arrived at the castle gates. A short while later he was on level four and knocked on Evadne's door. Five raps in a syncopated sequence.

Evadne responded with alacrity. The door opened. The relief on her face at seeing him was almost palpable. When she became aware of it, her features settled into an indifferent mask.

She stepped back and he came inside, closing the door behind him.

Evadne eyed him critically. "Finished your business? It was urgent, I hope." She peered closer. "It appears that you have covered some distance since you left."

He'd forgotten about the dust of the ride.

"It has been an interesting afternoon," he agreed.

"Arguitte has disappeared."

Sander's blood ran cold.

"When did you notice this?"

"She was to serve my afternoon repast. She never came. I thought it better not to inquire. "

Evadne, Sander thought, evinced an unexpected disquiet at her abigail's disappearance. He wasn't too sure what that signified, but somehow it seemed to matter.

"They've killed her, haven't they? And you haven't been able to stop them!" Her tone was accusatory, with maybe a touch of hysteria.

"Mylady . . ."

"Instead you've been out there attending to the needs of some . . . woman . . ."

"Enough!" he grated.

Evadne jerked. "How dare you . . ."

"That 'woman' is my friend," he said icily, ignoring her haughty stare. "You may not be familiar with the concept—indeed I suspect nobody in your obnoxious, self-destroying family is—but the fact is that she is the *only* friend I have in this city; maybe in this world.

A person whom I trust implicitly and completely.”

“I’m not interested . . .”

“Silence,” he thundered, “I’m not finished!”

“You . . .”

He raised an admonishing finger. “Not that ‘trust’ means anything to you either. Like ‘friendship’ the concept requires a foundation of experience, which you simply do not have. But,” he continued in a gentler tone, “these concepts represent valid elements of human relationships. They also carry with them obligations, which must be adhered-to, if the concept is to be more than just an intellectual construct.”

“I . . .”

He shook his head. “Hear me out.” He sighed, his voice softening. “I know what Gervase and Narvin did to you. I knew it long before you told me. But, like you do not know ‘friendship’ and ‘trust’, so I cannot know brutality, rape, and degradation as applied to my own person—because they have never been an element of my experience. My ideas of Gervase’s and Narvin’s perversions are formed by an intellectual conception of the processes involved—and by my experience of *you* and what these experiences have done to you. It is not enough, I know, but I am trying to come as close to understanding as is possible, given that we are separate individuals.”

Evadne had sat down at one end of the chaise-longue and looked at him numbly. He came across the room and sat down at the other end.

“Now reverse the situation,” he said to her. “Consider Sander of Orgond. A mere Councillor, as he is to you. Yet, behold, he is a man who has had the experience of trust and friendship—even the profound affection of his parents. Observe *his* reaction to the stimulus of a friend requesting urgent assistance. What does he do? He drops everything he’s doing and complies. He neglects even his duty in order to follow the call of friendship.”

“I’m ‘duty’ then,” Evadne said bitterly.

“You’re that,” he admitted, “and more. More than you know. But it is a basic fact of life that I cannot be two places at once—and so I had to make a decision on how best to comply with the conflicting requirements imposed on me.” He leaned closer to her. “And do you know what? If I hadn’t made the choice I did make . . . my friend would probably be dead—and as a result of her death someone else would have died as well—and

if that some were to die the fate of the people in the Valley would be very grim indeed.

“So, you see, my apparently whimsical and—to you questionable—decision to come to the aid of a friend in need was not only the proper thing to do for the friend, but may also turn out to be of momentous consequence—and for the better of us all.”

Evadne sighed. “Everything may be as you say. Still, it does not make me feel any better to know that I’m an object of ‘duty’. It is either that, or being the object of a *neglect* of duty.”

Sander spoke with passion. “One day,” he said, his voice thick with detestation, “if nobody else does it first, I will deal with your cousin.”

Evadne gave him a long, bewildered look. “*You* would avenge what they did to *me*?”

Sander shook his head. “‘Avenge’? No. But the world is better off without the likes of Gervase and Narvin. Even less should such individuals be in positions where their behavior is seen by others, who in turn feel compelled to follow their example. Fortunately, Narvin was taken by disease. Let us hope that Gervase will follow soon—though I have a notion that it’ll have to be at the hand of an assassin.”

“Such decisions, such judgments,” Evadne mused wonderingly. “Who are you, Sander of Orgond?”

Sander grinned. “Someone else asked me that earlier today.”

“What was your response?”

“I told him that there was no time to waste right now talking about these matters.”

“Does your friend know?”

“She suspects some things—but she does not have the information necessary to complete the picture.”

“And you speak of ‘trust’? When not even your friend knows who you are? And how can you say you trust *her*?”

“If she asked, I would tell her. But it is a part of her trust in me that she doesn’t. However, I shall tell her when the time comes.”

“And when will that be?”

Sander smiled. “Soon.”

Evadne straightened. “These are things I do not understand. As you say so rightly, I do not have the experience of friendship—and since there is nobody I can trust, I certainly cannot lay claim to understanding that mystery either.”

Sander rose. "I must see what I can find out about Arguitte." He went to the door and withdrew the latch, then turned and looked at Evadne. "The truth is, I misrepresented your situation. You may not know it, but friendship is already a part of your experience. To discern it is not easy perhaps, but I advise you to keep on trying."

With those words he left the room, leaving Evadne to stare at the closed door.

When Sander left Evadne he went to make certain inquiries with those members of the servantry and guard-corps with whom he had established a rapport of sorts, and who would not be adverse to answering his questions. The picture that emerged was disturbing but, here at Castle Sacrael, not surprising. It appeared that Arguitte, earlier in the afternoon, had been accosted—probably while returning from the kitchen with her mistress' afternoon repast—by two individuals of unknown identity. She had been seen in their company on level one, heading 'down', meaning in the general direction of the dungeon level. That she had not happily did not require reporting.

Sander's heart sank. It could be taken as fact that Arguitte had been escorted by two of Silas' bullies to what was at the very least an interrogation. The only question now was whether she would emerge from the lower levels alive. Sander guessed that the answer was 'no'. And there was nothing he could do about it. The awareness of his impotence was galling. Arguitte had made an incredibly courageous decision between right and wrong. By deciding as she had done, she had effectively placed her life in Evadne's—and therefore Sander's—hands. This life was now forfeit, and Sander was not about to do anything about it. This was the truth, and it didn't get any more palatable just because he rationalized himself into believing that he had no choice.

But what *could* he do? Any action from his side on behalf of Arguitte would only reinforce Silas' suspicion—which must already be a near certainty—that the abigail, by some means, had contrived to spare her mistress the ignominy of death by gradual poisoning. Besides, the action would attract additional attention his own self.

But could he really sacrifice the abigail to such rationalizations? He had just given Evadne a lecture on

ethical principles and obligations. The truth was that Arguitte, by her actions, had placed him under an obligation of her own. And if Sander's father had taught his son anything it was that expediency never justified moral decrepitude; that rationalizations and excuses were the closest of kin, and that they must always be carefully kept apart.

But could he place himself in jeopardy again? What if this time his luck ran out? Evadne would then be alone—and alone she *would* die. Sooner rather than later.

Why me?

Why indeed?

Sander stepped into an alcove and extracted the needle-projector; examined the loading indicator. Soon he would have to go home and replenish the half-depleted magazine from the recharger, which was hidden in a secret compartment under the rug in his study. But for now it was sufficient.

Sander reviewed his half-formed plan and decided that it was pathetically vague and probably doomed to fail. Still, he had nothing better to offer himself. He squared his shoulders and proceeded down an accessway to the door which opened onto the long, dank stairs that led to the carcery level. As always, two guards stood at attention. Though dressed in dirty green-and-gray uniforms of the ordinary guard, their demeanor, a subtle arrogance, complemented by an extra air of brutality, indicated that these men were different. They had to be. They were the first bulwark guarding the place whence only the jailers were allowed to return.

Sander's Councillor's robe didn't impress them in the least. They regarded him with ill-concealed contempt.

"I need to speak to Silas," he told them.

"Silas is engaged otherwise," one of them informed him.

Sander nodded. "I see." He allowed himself a thin smile. "And I'm gratified that I am speaking with such an important individual as yourself—one who is so closely allied with Silas that he is aware of his schedule to such an intimate degree. I'd appreciate it if you could just give me your designation. That way I may tell Sander, upon our next meeting, just who it was that turned me away on this occasion."

A trace of uncertainty crept into the guard's

demeanor. He glanced at his companion; back at Sander.

"Well?" Sander prompted.

"I do not need to tell you anything," the guard said roughly.

"That is true," Sander admitted. He peered closer at the guard. "It isn't necessary anyway. I never forget a face. Hey, that must've been a nasty fight indeed. I'd hate to lose half my ear like that!" He smiled at the guard again. The man stared back at him defiantly. Sander shrugged. "I'm sure Silas will recognize the description immediately," he said negligently and turned away. "You'll be hearing about it, no doubt."

He started to walk back the way he'd come.

"Hey!" barked the guard.

Sander paused and turned his head.

"Your mode of address is deficient," he noted and continued to walk away.

"Councillor!"

Sander paused again. "My patience is limited. What do you want?"

"Maybe Silas *does* have the time to see you."

"You really think so?"

"His . . . schedule of engagements . . . I may have been mistaken in my assessment. It may well be that he has time to see you now."

Another guard, summoned from below, accompanied Sander along the curved staircase down into the dungeon level. It was a descent into darkness, in more ways than one. Oil-lamps set into holders at regular intervals provided sooty illumination. The stone steps were worn from uncounted years of usage. The dark stains of spilled blood. Blotches of what might have been dried-up human vomit or other excretions. A nauseating stench wafted up from below.

The guard threw occasional mocking side-glances at Sander, looking for the inevitable signs of revulsion exhibited by novice visitors. Sander, with great self-control, took care that no such signs were visible.

They arrived at the bottom. To the left a passage, dimly illuminated by a desultory oil-lamp. From there echoed sounds that made Sander's insides squirm with pity, anger, and frustration at his impotence.

The guard turned right. Another one fell in behind Sander. The passage led into a comparatively bright chamber, illuminated by daylight entering through an

array of ducts leading to the surface. These also carried away most of the reek of torture, making this place almost habitable.

The guard rapped on a door and entered. He emerged again to motion Sander inside.

Silas, a remarkably unremarkable man, wore a plain gray tunic, which covered an undistinguished figure and facial features made it almost impossible to believe that here was one of the most feared men in Tergan.

He stood behind his desk regarding his visitor.

"Ahh, Councillor Sander. Welcome to my realm." He motioned to a chair. "Won't you sit?"

Sander saw no reason not to. Silas likewise resumed his seat.

"May I congratulate you on your assignation?"

Sander nodded. "Thank you."

"So, what prompts a Councillor into these grim demesnes?"

"A puzzling disappearance. I thought you might be able to assist. The extent of your knowledge after all is legend."

Silas acknowledged the flattery with a wintry smile.

"The reputation is exaggerated, I'm sure. Still, it is useful to have people believe it. Especially since there is a significant grain of truth here." He paused. "Who has disappeared?"

"The Lady Evadne's abigail. A certain Arguitte."

"Arguitte?" Silas feigned astonishment. "How odd!"

"Odd?"

"Your query anticipated my intention to notify the Lady Evadne that we found her abigail several hours ago. In the most unfortunate of circumstances, I'm sorry to say. It appears that she was beset by some evil-doer, treated very badly, and subsequently killed. The body was disfigured in a most objectionable manner—though maybe it would be kinder to conceal this detail from the Lady Evadne."

"Indeed." Sander's viscera crawled with the unrealizable desire to kill Silas here and now. He forced himself to project equanimity and indifference.

"That is very sad news indeed. The lady was quite fond of Arguitte."

"It is regrettable. Especially since, as I hear, she has not been feeling very well as of recent."

"A minor indisposition, I'm sure."

"Yes. I'm certain that's right. The lady has always been of a robust constitution." Silas eyed Sander spec-

ulatively. "If I may be so bold as to inquire . . . but what prompted you to seek her service?"

Sander shrugged. "I have been unattached for a long time. The range of available members of the royal family is rapidly depleting. I thought I'd take advantage of the Lady Evadne's need for a personal Councillor."

"She had not made it widely known that she felt to be in need of one such."

"The matter arose rather precipitously, following several unfortunate events."

"Such as?"

Sander smiled. "I'm sure you know."

Silas leaned back, looking thoughtful. "I do indeed. Still I am surprised that she chose . . ."

". . . someone so young?—inexperienced?—unconnected?—provincial?" Sander completed.

Silas shrugged. "Your choice of words, Councillor."

Sander allowed himself a acerbic smile. "Has it occurred to you that the Lady Evadne may simply not *like* the corpulent, degenerate, corrupt, and pathetic creatures that pose as 'Councillors' at the court of Tergan?"

Silas' eyebrows shot up. "You speak rather frankly of personages of some significance."

"Indeed. Still, there's little doubt that their thoughts of me—and each other—are likewise of a highly derogatory nature. I merely say what I think. Does it make a difference? I doubt it. You'd suspect it anyway."

Silas pondered Sander for an instant. "You're not what I expected."

Sander rose from his chair. "Appearances deceive," he said, "and glib assumptions are at the root of many fatal errors. You, more than anyone, should know that." He nodded at Silas. "I'll communicate the grim news to the Lady Evadne."

"Of course, she'll want to engage a new abigail," Silas noted.

"No doubt she does," Sander agreed.

"I have at my disposal a list of several suitable candidates, all vetted for security and suitability."

"I'm sure you have. They will, of course, be considered."

"Excellent.—And now, Councillor, I bid you farewell."

"And I you, spymaster."

Sander left Silas' empire below-grounds, and

returned to the world above. Only when the door to the stairs had closed behind him did he allow himself a deep breath of relief. He nodded at the guards and turned to leave. A man came hurrying down the passage, looking dusty and tired. He gave Sander a brief glance, hesitated, and continued on. Sander noted that the guards allowed him to pass without a challenge.

Out of sight of the guards Sander reached into his pocket and flicked the safety of the needle-projector into the off-position. Even with this lethal companion he had felt profoundly insecure and claustrophobic down there.

—

Silas leaned back in his chair and stared at the closed door. Sander's visit had been . . . curious. What had he come down here for? The ostensible reason—to inquire about the abigail—made no sense. No Councillor, not even an odd one like Sander, would bother about a trivial matter like this. And Evadne . . . certainly not her. She was a royal through and through: as arrogant and aloof and icy as they came. Which was the way it was supposed to be, of course.

So, why had Sander visited him? To get a personal whiff of the king's spymaster?

Silas decided that he didn't like Councillor Sander at all. The man was . . . wrong. He was the kind where you found no points of leverage at all. Not like the other ones. They all had some weakness. A perversion here, double dealings there, and occasionally even treasonous proclivities. Purely self-motivated of course; like that fool Delfis, who wanted Tamar on the throne, and would probably be willing to assassinate the king to accomplish it.

A sharp knock on the door.

"Come in!"

Roos, one of his lieutenants, stormed into the office, his riding garb dusty and disheveled.

"What happened to you?" Silas snapped.

Roos' tale was not edifying. The magice and the woman were gone. Five corpses lay on the South Road. The four men he'd sent—and Weltig.

Weltig? What was he doing there? How had he known?

The matter was trivial, however, compared to the

issue of the magice. Had *he* killed those men? Where was he now? Would there be time to catch him before he entered Keaen? By now they could be well along the Marsh Road.

A dangerous man, the magice. He would not be surprised again.

Silas looked up. "Go and clean yourself up. We have work to do."

Roos hesitated.

"Anything else?" Silas asked him.

"When I arrived at the top of the stairs," Roos said, "there was a man. It seemed like he'd just . . . left here."

"Sander," Silas said. "Evadne's latest acquisition."

"A Councillor?"

"You didn't know of him?" Silas said dryly. "How disappointing. You really should pay closer attention to such matters."

"I saw him today," Roos said.

"I know. You just told me."

"No—before. On horseback. Coming from the general direction of the South Road."

Silas sat very still. "Are you certain?"

"He wasn't wearing the robes, and he didn't look like a Councillor at all. But it was him! I'd stake my life on it."

"I see . . ."

Sander?

Silas motioned at the door. "Go now. I'll look into this."

Roos left. Silas sat deep in thought.

Sander.

Silas' thoughts returned to Weltig; now cold and dead on a dusty road. What more could he ask for? Of course, Hengiste would not be pleased at the demise of his confidante. The special relationship between Weltig and the king had long been a thorn in Silas' side. Maybe he should be grateful to Pandrak! Hengiste would have no choice but to rely on Silas—which had the pleasant side-effect that it made him less dependent on the favors of Gervase, who was a cad and a degenerate, and could not be trusted to keep his word beyond the point of convenience. Hengiste, old fool that he was in so many ways, at least had a modicum of sense-of-honor.

Silas cast his mind ahead. Hengiste and Toffel were about to set off for Sansker in a few days. Preparations

had to be made. A troop of Silas' elite guards would accompany the king on his way, keeping him safe from harm and the molestations of the common folk.

The Keaenean magice was gone. But so was Weltig! Silas sat back, grinning to himself. It was an ill wind indeed . . .

—

Evadne received the dire news with dismay.

"She tried to help me! Now she's dead . . ."

Sander had no comfort to offer; but, observing Evadne, it occurred to him that, for whatever reason, something about her was . . . changing. Even a few days ago she wouldn't have spent a second thought on an insignificant abigail. But Arguitte had done something that made her into more than 'just' an abigail. Enough to raise Evadne's awareness of her into that she might ordinarily accord only to persons of her own circle.

"What about her . . . family?" Evadne wanted to know.

Sander admitted that he knew nothing about Arguitte's family circumstances.

"We have to do something," Evadne said. "I just feel so . . ."

"I know," he told her. "I feel the same."

Guilt. Shame. The feeling that more should have been done; that what was not done constituted a judgment on one's imperfections.

—

Gizel was dissatisfied with his life. He'd always had been, of course, but as of late the dissatisfaction had reached new heights. He was twenty-six, possessed no significant resources beyond his royal allowance, was still only the second in line for the throne, and, as he admitted to himself, really had no hope of ever advancing to first place—unless someone did him a really big favor and assassinated Gervase. This, however, was not likely, as a recent failed attempt indicated. Gervase led a charmed life, and Gizel had no idea what to do about ending it.

All of this left him with dismal prospects. Add to that the humiliation of Evadne—glorious, icy, incomparable, beautiful, unreachable Evadne—taking a

lover . . . Not-so-unreachable or icy—or so it seemed. Spurning him; who had loved her since . . . since for as long as he could remember. Despite the fact that Gervase and his father had defiled her, she was the most excruciatingly desirable creature he'd ever known and could ever know. To think of her surrendering her body to another. Kissing him with passionate abandon. Her sighs and little moans as they . . .

Gizel forced himself to calm. In truth, he wanted to be ill, his belly a churning mass of nausea and loathing of the man who had dared to . . .

But who? Who could have conquered the incomparable one?

The selection was limited. The Duke of Brys, one of the few on whom she had flagrantly bestowed her charms, could be ruled out. Gervase she hated. Hengiste was too old. Tamar was a woman and disgusting. Evadne, even if she'd had such proclivities, would be more discerning.

The list was exhausted. Keaenean aristocrats hadn't even been close to the court for years. Myria, Evadne's mother had been the last Keaenean to set foot into Castle Sacrael.

Vexation! Who else was there? Who else would have been able to . . .

A stray thought. A face. A memory of Evadne talking to . . .

Gizel's blood ran cold as he suddenly knew the truth. More memories. Just yesterday, after she'd dismissed him with an excuse of ill-health—and only moments later had smiled at something her Councillor said.

Her Councillor. What was his name?

Sander.

Indeed . . .

Behind him a sound. Gizel started to turn. A sharp pain in his side. A face near his. Indifferent. Waiting.

Waiting for what?

The pain dulled as a terrible lassitude swept over him. His breath came in gasps. Strange lights swirled before his eyes.

Evadne. Wondrous Evadne . . .

In the darkness that fell over his sight her image stood, outlined in a bright halo, a creature from legend, from a realm beyond this world . . .

. . . and—just this once—her smile was for him, and sincere and open and full of love . . .

—

Logout, the assassin hired by Toffel to dispose of Gizel, heaved on the dirk. The sharp tip tore Gizel's heart into shreds. The prince slumped against the wall; his eyes rolled up until only the whites showed; blood bubbled over his lips. Satisfied with his work the killer jerked out the dagger and released the body, which slid to the floor, leaning against the wall like a tired beggar sound asleep. Logout left him there and went off to collect the remainder of his fee.

—

They took a brief rest in Daerfil. While the hostler transferred the saddles from their exhausted mounts to a pair of fresh ones Zygie and Pandrak went for a brief walk along the promenade. They stopped to admire the view across the Limpic Ocean. Caravella had sunk behind ominous towers of cloud above the horizon. The halcyon days the Valley had enjoyed were about to come to an end.

Pandrak arched his back and reached behind him to massage his muscles.

"Let me do that," she said and stood behind him. He felt her touch, light as a feather. Her fingers moved here and there with deft sureness, and from them flowed a soothing warmth that pervaded his muscles and his whole being. Something completely different from his own methods of controlling the aches and pains resulting from pushing himself to the limits.

A healer indeed.—And much more than that.

Pandrak turned around. Back there, after the fight: a moment of a different kind of magic. And here it was again.

Zygie regarded him with a mix of expectancy and reluctance—and something else . . . which he didn't quite understand, but something in him knew anyway.

Magic indeed! Something more profound than his disciplines and mind tricks. Despite the urgency of their mission and his fear for Armist's life . . .

Pandrak admitted to himself that he was confused. Zygie, too, was not her usual brisk self.

A moment on the brink of possibility.

The moment passed.

"What exactly is happening here?" she said, her eyes questioning.

"Exactitude eludes me," he admitted. "But the vague outlines of the future look . . . interesting."

Did *he* just say that?

She stood close; almost too close. "Let us save your son, *magice*," she said; and there was a smile in her voice. "Then we will see if your 'vague outlines' are to my liking."

They returned to the stable. The hostler awaited them, their new horses at the ready.

"Darkness is upon us," he reminded them. "The Marsh will be crawling with creatures of the night."

Pandrak gave him a silver doon. "Then we'll just have to hurry."

"There is nowhere to go!" the hostler exclaimed. "Swampy Post is hours away!"

Pandrak patted him on the shoulder. "Thank you for your concern, friend. But now we must be off."

Zygie was already in the saddle. Pandrak followed suit and, with a wave to the hostler, the two headed south—leaving the hostler to stare after them with a mix of puzzlement and exasperation at their idiocy.

—

In his study in Castle Sacrael sat Roi Hengiste. Alone. He had dismissed everybody and decreed that, until he summoned them, nothing and nobody was to disturb him.

If he looked left, he could see out the narrow window and onto the sprawling creature that was his capital. With darkness falling Sacrael was an irregular maze of lights, bright and dim. Beyond lay the Bay of Woe, already sunk into gloom. The clouds pushed in from the ocean.

Woe indeed—for today he had lost his staunchest ally: a man whom he'd trusted not because they shared a common interest, but because, for reasons beyond his ken, Weltig had chosen to be loyal to the point of even risking his life several times to ensure that his king's was safe. One of the few—and he was gone—and Hengiste knew that now he was indeed alone. More alone even than when Esmeraude, his wife, and his children, Hafid, Odelie, and Rahun, had been murdered one by one—by agencies and initiators that could only be guessed at. Indeed, some of them might well have themselves fallen victims to the lethal conspiracies pervading the dynasty fathered by Koën the Gallant.

'Gallant'? Ha!

Koën would turn in his grave if he could see what his children and their children had done to themselves.

Maybe we don't deserve to live.

Gloomy thoughts of a lonely old man.

Why did he bother? Why persist with his efforts to bring the whole of the Valley under Tergan rule? Why not let the Keaeneans live as they pleased, tear themselves apart with their intranecine struggles?

Just like us.

What had happened out there on the road? Silas, after intense questioning from his king, still had no satisfactory explanation. It appeared that the *magice* had been a lethal adversary indeed.

Hengiste allowed himself a narrow-lipped smile. Lethal, maybe. But there was nothing that would save his son—and thus, in an convoluted way, a kind of balance had been struck. The life of Armist of Keaen for that of Weltig. An unequal exchange, or so it might seem, but who knew? What value had the life of a man? Weltig had been a good friend and ally. That counted for something.

Hengiste sighed and leaned back in his chair. He was feeling old and tired. Maybe too much so to make that journey to Sansker. All to bring down Keaen and make it Tergan.

For what?

Would anybody thank him for it?—Of course not!

Would he live to see the Valley united?—One dared hope.

* * *

The Zael Inheritance

Chapter 10

Lamarck arrived tardily in the office the next morning. It had been late before he reached his bed and he sensed that the coming day was not one to be faced on three hours' sleep. The sight of Voorhies did not act to change his opinion. Her sleep too, had been truncated, and this rarely improved either her humour or her appearance.

"Morning, Kate," he said as he sat down.

"Only just," she responded. "I begin to understand Rolando's strictures on punctuality."

"He hasn't converted you?" asked Lamarck. "I seem to remember we were working late last night."

"'Working' you call it? You swan off to Casimondo's with Laura Glyde and hold her hand when she shoots an unarmed man in the street. I fail to see a definition of 'work' which has such latitude."

"You know it wasn't like that—" began Lamarck, but at this moment Rolando appeared.

"My office. Both of you. Now."

Lamarck made a resigned face at Voorhies—who ignored it—and they made their way to Rolando's office. The coming interview offered little prospect of cheer. The crisp antiseptic surroundings did not promise any resolution to their growing disagreements.

"Which of you is going to start the explanations?" asked Rolando as they sat down. "I have had Prime Apprehensor Narosyn in here this morning talking about smarses leaning on him to get charges dropped, I hear of shootings in the street, I come out of my office for an explanation and I find the two of you squabbling in public. What is happening here?"

Voorhies ostentatiously looked at Lamarck.

"Prime Apprehensor Narosyn's report would appear somewhat tendentious, sir," said Lamarck. "Apprehensor Voorhies and I spent yesterday attempting to crack Laura Glyde in accordance with our previously agreed strategy. We have had a recent debate over the procedures best employed to effect that end. That debate," continued Lamarck with a glance at Voorhies, "continues."

"What happened on the waterfront?" growled Rolando, impatient with Lamarck's slipperiness.

Lamarck sighed. "Voorhies and I decided that a more aggressive approach to Laura Glyde's story might pay dividends. We interviewed her at her hotel and succeeded only in antagonising her. We disagreed over the reasons for that. At that point we closed our formal investigations for the day."

"In that case I would be interested in hearing what took place in your 'informal' investigations," said Rolando.

"Laura Glyde called me at home and said that she had important information for me. I went to see her with some reservations. Once at the Anastasia, she told me that she was being followed, and in my judgement was genuinely unsettled. I evolved a plan to determine the truth of her story and apprehend anyone conducting an illicit surveillance."

"I verified that she was followed to Casimondo's, and armed with this information I made what I suppose can be seen as an attempt to offer her immunity in return for information. She found this unacceptable and left the bar strongly vexed. By the time I got down to street level she was being followed by the tail, Roban Maevart by name."

"At this stage I decided it might be productive to question Maevart. My attempt to apprehend him put him to flight. Laura thought he was chasing her; she called on him to stop: he did not, and she dropped him with one shot from an instancarc gun which can only have been concealed up her skirt. He fell twenty feet from the waterfront and broke his neck on the walkway below. It was an understandable act and, in my analysis, carried out in self-defence only."

Rolando nodded. "A crisp account. Can you add anything to it, Kate?"

Voorhies thought a moment. She did not look at Lamarck and her cheeks had an ominous pallor. "Permission to speak candidly, sir?"

"Always, Apprehensor, always."

"Geir's account is accurate as far as it goes. However, what it omits is the extent to which he is becoming ensnared by Laura Glyde. I believe his capacity for objective judgement in this area is now impaired if not absent—"

"Kate! What are you saying?" cried Lamarck.

"Let her finish," said Rolando briskly, and indicated

to Voorhies to continue.

"One reason that our morning interrogation was unsuccessful was Geir's very obvious opposition to it. He just stood there while I questioned her, and by saying nothing he was tacitly supporting her. Had he intervened as he should, the pressure on Laura Glyde would have been greatly increased.

"Furthermore, he showed a significant error of judgement in agreeing to meet her alone in the evening without notifying anyone. He has been compromised by the subsequent events as a result but, far from acknowledging his mistake, he attempted to defend Laura Glyde at the scene and to suborn Narosyn."

Looking at Lamarck, she said, "In summary, sir, I believe that Geir can no longer distinguish the best way of dealing with Laura Glyde, and should be removed from the contract."

"Kate! You treacherous dog! How can you do this!" shouted Lamarck, leaping from his seat.

Rolando held up his hand for silence. "Sit down, Geir. These are strong opinions, Kate, and courageously expressed. Do you really believe that things are so bad?"

"I do, sir. Geir, answer this honestly: do you believe Laura Glyde is Taslana Zael?"

Controlling himself with an effort, Lamarck said, "It's not as simple as that. You—"

"It *is* that simple, Geir! It's the whole point! We have conclusive evidence that she is manipulating us: and she has you utterly in her thrall."

"I am not disputing the validity of that evidence," said Lamarck. "But where we disagree is the best way to use the information we have."

"Charge her with manslaughter! Charge her with attempted larceny! Charge her with identity fraud! Charge her with illegal possession of a firearm!" cried Voorhies. "She will soon co-operate then."

Rolando was silent in thought for a minute or so. Lamarck and Voorhies did not look at each other while they awaited his decision.

"Kate, there is something in what you say. Clearly you do not have confidence in Geir's judgement as far as Laura Glyde is concerned; I admit to sympathy with you here. However, it is important that we achieve a satisfactory outcome on this contract, and Geir has much to contribute.

"Here is how we will proceed. For now, Laura Glyde

will remain at liberty, pending the results of Narosyn's investigation, which none of us will try to influence. Geir, you are not to communicate with Laura Glyde either alone or with others. Any further interviewing of Laura Glyde will be undertaken by Kate or officers nominated by her.

"I am not minded to remove Geir from the investigation altogether. Laura Glyde remains only one aspect of it, and there is more than enough to occupy his attention without bringing him into contact with Miss Glyde.

"You have your instructions. Follow them."

Lamarck sprang from his seat and quit the room. Voorhies, equally silent, left the office more slowly. She arrived at her desk to find Lamarck staring into his com-screen.

"Geir," she said quietly.

Lamarck turned in his seat to face her, his mouth a thin harsh line. He said nothing.

"I need to explain," she said. "Please believe that I am your friend; I am trying to help you."

"I don't want to talk to you, Kate," said Lamarck. "There will be a time when you account to me for what you have done today: that moment is not now."

Voorhies sat down sadly. "For now, just accept that I'm sorry."

Lamarck shrugged. "It scarcely matters. Events happen as they happen. Explanation hardly alters that. I suggest that you put yourself on hand when Narosyn interviews Laura this afternoon; he will try snoop tricks if one of us isn't there. I will go and see how Nina is faring with the DNA sample."

"You're right. There is much to do. Perhaps we can talk this evening. . . ." said Kate.

"Perhaps," said Lamarck, striding from the room as he spoke.

Some thirty minutes later Lamarck stepped into the Forensic Analysis Laboratory at Genix.

"Hello, Nina!" he said with genuine pleasure. It was refreshing to encounter someone unconnected with the case.

Dr Haecht picked up the warmth of Lamarck's tone. "Geir! I thought we might be seeing you again. No Kate today?"

"We must do without her. The pressures of investigation occupy her time."

"Give her my regards," said Nina, her clear blue eyes twinkling.

"I will next time I speak to her," said Lamarck, concealing his desire that the moment should be several decades away. "What have you got for me?"

"I cannot tell you very much more than last time. I have spoken to Big Mama, and she largely concurs with my earlier opinions. The DNA of the subject has been obscured, almost certainly as a result of a deliberate, and novel, masking process. Neither of us know what has been done, so we cannot say with certainty that we can unpick it."

Lamarck frowned. "There are several issues here: how was this technique evolved? Could it have been done outside of Genix? Are there any parallels to your knowledge?"

"It is plainly an exceptionally subtle and refined method; it is not a process that clever students could have evolved as a prank in their lab. Work of this kind requires practical skill of a high order, and detailed knowledge of cutting-edge genetic practices. Not only could it not, in my judgement, have taken place outside of the Genix umbrella; it could scarcely have done so within it."

"Unless the mask is a natural phenomenon, someone created it. That is surely Genix craft."

Nina nodded. "If it was done anywhere, it was done at Genix. You asked me to be discreet, and I haven't made any enquiries. Do you know where the manipulation might have taken place?"

Lamarck shook his head. "It could have been, almost literally, anywhere. We are not going to be able to narrow this down geographically."

"If we're trying to establish where the technology to mask DNA in this way might be developed, then we should look at the Experimental Research Divisions: as you know, not every world has one."

"Nina, this doesn't seem to me to be part of Genix's normal research programme. When Genix begin to develop a process, they first ask a simple question: what is the commercial application? I cannot see that developing a DNA mask is a paying investment."

Nina thought for a moment. "True as far as it goes; but not all research achieves its stipulated goals, or via the original route. This process might easily have been a spin-off from some other research project."

"You understand genetics, Nina; ponder this: what legitimate, and commercial, research project might be carried out that might produce such a side-effect?"

"I would need to think about it. Until I know how the technique has operated, it's difficult to say."

"All the more important, then, that you crack the screen. I know you are reluctant to commit yourself, but, between ourselves, do you think you can do it?"

"Honestly? No. But—Big Mama does; and she's usually right."

"Is she here?" asked Lamarck.

"No. She's on a long lunch today," said Nina with a smile, indicating the clock, which read 11:20.

"I thought glaxes were bad," said Lamarck.

"The idea of a long lunch has some appeal," said Nina, with a sideways and meaningful glance at Lamarck.

For a moment Lamarck was silent. This morning he could not remember the basis of his previous objections to Nina. She had a freshness about her that Lamarck contrasted favourably with Voorhies's recent Charity de Groot moralism. The idea of lunch at somewhere other than Casimondo's with her had undeniable lustre.

"I will be lucky to have lunch at all," he said. "There are many investigations to attend to today." He was not entirely sure why he was turning her down.

Nina inclined her head gracefully. "Such is the life of the glax," she said with a rueful smile. "I will call you if I make any breakthrough."

"Do so," said Lamarck with crisp vigour. "Goodbye, Nina."

"Goodbye, Geir," she said.

Lamarck took the auto-tram unwillingly back to the Tower of Commerce. He had no desire to see Voorhies, Rolando or Narosyn; he remembered that Laura would also report to the Tower at some stage, and he didn't much want to see her either. He reviewed the progress of the enquiry so far to see if there were any other lines he could pursue.

The research that Voorhies had carried out on the TLZ database had been productive in a negative way: it had suggested that there may have been a conspiracy within TLZ to help Taslana disappear, and that conspiracy might still operate to cover its tracks now. In an organisation as tortuous as TLZ, that need not imply great seniority; factionalism and secrecy were common enough on Zael's World. He had never expected much from TLZ, and he had found little to change his opinion.

Where did Laura Glyde fit? That she was part of a conspiracy, and a sophisticated one, was beyond dis-

pute. Genix technology had been deployed to help conceal the subterfuge. Lamarck was by no means convinced that Genix's input had been the work of a rogue employee; it occurred that Genix might relish the idea of a major shareholding in another Historic Monopoly. There was no evidence for this, he admitted, but it might be worth mentioning to Kate . . . if only he was talking to her.

His mind went back to the subject it had avoided throughout the morning: why had Kate acted as she had. There were rules of etiquette, not to say friendship, that precluded her from denouncing him to Rolando in the way that she had. He had worked with ambitious officers before, both as snoop and smarse, and he would not have been surprised at this conduct in many of them. Kate was different, though: they had been friends from the start. Kate was moral—too moral, in fact—and the idea of her traducing him simply to advance her own position was simply laughable. Lamarck was not a man to trust lightly; but where he trusted, his faith was absolute.

The only other conclusion was that Kate had believed what she had said. She genuinely felt that his judgement was seriously at fault where Laura Glyde was concerned. Kate had displayed an instinctive antipathy to Laura; he admitted that she was the kind of woman more likely to appeal to men than her own sex. Lamarck conceded that Kate was not given to flights of irrationality; she was indeed remarkably stolid. She believed that Laura was venomous, not from simple pique, but because the evidence supported it.

Kate's position was not unreasonable here. She had seen the com-tap and, like Lamarck, read it the only way it could be read: conclusive evidence of guilt which, had it not been obtained illegally, would have been instrumental in securing a conviction. Laura had subsequently refused to account for her conduct in the previous seven years, and had acted in a manner consistent with her com-tap boast to manipulate Lamarck. And yet . . .

Lamarck's investigative career had taught him the value of intuition. One ultimately had to have recourse to evidence, if only because a successful prosecution depended on it. Nonetheless, the subconscious was the major part of the mind, and to ignore its prompting was to cast away free and frequently sound advice. Lamarck's intuition, or subconscious, had some repre-

sentations to make on the subject of Laura Glyde. The substance of these representations was that Laura Glyde was fundamentally sound. There could be no dispute that she was mixed up in some serious criminal activity; yet Lamarck's hunch was that her actual culpability in the matter was limited. If he had to express it in a sentence, he felt that Laura was lying but not dishonest, paradoxical as that sounded.

Lamarck was candid enough to admit that he found Laura strongly—and increasingly—attractive; and clear-sighted enough to admit that this could be a factor in his attempting to exonerate her in spite of the evidence. There was little he could actively adduce in her favour. She had, on the original com-tap, shown a reluctance for the role she had been assigned—but she had agreed to undertake it nonetheless. Stylishness, *chic*, and poise, bewitching and alluring as they were, did not in themselves constitute any warranty as to the character of their mistress.

Was it possible, then, that Kate had been right? Was he really not only incapable of extracting any meaningful information from her, but in danger of succumbing to her wiles and compromising himself and Pangalactic? Lamarck snapped himself upright in the auto-tram seat: no! Whatever Kate said, he was Geir Lamarck, and no woman's puppet. So he found her attractive—there was nothing unusual in that; who was to say that Laura's seeming attraction to him was simulated? Every time they had met, she had seemed a little closer to confiding in him. It was Kate, with her prim moralism, who was endangering Pangalactic's status, not himself! She had blundered in and spoiled their best chance of unravelling the conspiracy. And raddled tired Rolando had backed her.

Having thought through the issues in this measured and comprehensive manner, he leaped from the auto-tram and bounded into the Tower of Commerce. Ascending in the airlift he set his jaw; he had no need to cower before Kate Voorhies. Events would prove who had been right. He entered the office ready to make these points to Voorhies through the vigour of his demeanour; but Voorhies was at her lunch and his elevated department was squandered on the secretaries.

Chapter 11

The afternoon dragged as Lamarck carried out various routine investigative tasks, none of which brought him any closer to generating a solid lead. Voorhies did not reappear, and when Lamarck finally inquired her whereabouts of Susifer, he learned that she was interviewing Laura Glyde with Narosyn. Although he was eager to hear the outcome of proceedings, he had less enthusiasm for the conversation with either Voorhies or Narosyn necessary to elicit the information. At a relatively early hour, having achieved as much as he could reasonably expect, he quit the Tower of Commerce and returned to his apartment. The day had proved some way short of optimum in almost every respect. Even Susifer had seemed impatient with his preoccupation.

Returning home, Lamarck slumped idly in front of his sensopic. He was a career glax, and he found himself at something of a loss now that he had been cast out of his major case. Most of his friends on Chrysoptolis were glaxes, and he didn't much want to talk to them at the moment; the smaller number who weren't glaxes would be still less satisfactory. His favoured recreation in such circumstances was a game of handball, but today he felt enervated and the idea of scampering around the court carried little appeal. That meant an evening by himself with the sensopic. There were 750 channels to choose from, which ought to satisfy most palates, but somehow there didn't seem to be anything to sustain his interest.

He toyed with the idea of giving Nina Haecht a call. She had seemed fresh and charming this morning, and he wondered why he had instinctively rejected her overtures about lunch. The choice was an evening with Nina, if she wasn't engaged, or more empty manipulations of the emotional intensity control on the sensopic. On the other hand, he had only extricated himself from his earlier relationship with Nina after a struggle, and he did not want to encourage a further assault on her part.

At this moment the attention-peal sounded at his door. Lamarck started: Laura!

He opened the door.

"Hello, it's me," stated Voorhies superfluously as she entered the apartment and sat down.

"So it appears," said Lamarck with no perceptible warmth. "I thought I had seen enough of you for one day."

"Geir, don't be like that. I want to talk to you."

"No doubt; however, it requires a minimum of two to conduct a conversation," responded Lamarck.

"I thought you might be interested in knowing how our interview with Laura Glyde went this afternoon."

"In that, you err; you may have forgotten that your intervention with the Puissant Apprehensor this morning made Laura Glyde something of a forbidden zone for me."

"I'm sorry about this morning, Geir," she said. "I want this case closed for both of us, not just me. I was doing what I had to to protect the contract—and to protect you. Geir, you must believe that."

Only a slight compression of her fingers betrayed her unease at this part of the conversation. "What else could I have done? I really believe that Laura Glyde is compromising you; of course you don't think that, and it's my job as your friend and colleague to pull you out of that."

She looked imploringly at Lamarck with her dark eyes. Her alabaster cheeks were warmed by a reddish glow. Lamarck was thoughtful for a moment. Then he nodded.

"I don't disbelieve you, Kate: I just wish you had discussed it with me before you spoke to Rolando," he said quietly.

"I tried," she said. "On the waterfront last night. You wouldn't listen."

Lamarck shrugged. "Maybe."

Voorhies said earnestly: "Geir, I have seen you falling under her spell. If we had carried on with our original plan you would have been sucked in. You have to see that."

"What is 'sucked in'? The intention was always that I build up a rapport with her. When that started to work you jumped back."

"You were supposed to simulate a rapport: the trust was intended to be all on her side. I never expected you to start defending her—and worse, empathising with her," said Voorhies.

"How could I earn her trust without empathy?" asked Lamarck. "I admit that there was an element of

genuine feeling on my side; I liked her and it seemed counterproductive to hide that.”

“I don’t know if ‘like’ is quite the right word,” said Voorhies. “You were bewitched by her in a way that a man can be, exposed to a clever, subtle woman. If last night goes to a manslaughter charge she will have your testimony defending her — and she knows it.”

“You overstate the nature of her power. I admit that she is an attractive woman; but to think that I could not see past that is a mistake. At all times I have acted with the aim of persuading her to abandon her subterfuge; and I was succeeding.”

“And at all times she was acting with the intention of enlisting your support for her claim: who is to say which strategy was the nearer to success? My suspicion is that it wasn’t yours.”

“Now we will never know,” said Lamarck, losing patience with the debate. “If you’ve come to explain, then you’ve done so. I believe you’ve acted sincerely at the same time as believing you’ve judged incorrectly. Is there anything else?”

“Yes!” cried Voorhies, suddenly almost tearful. “Are we still friends? I’ve never had to do anything like this before.”

“Oh, Kate,” said Lamarck softly, impulsively ruffling her hair, “that’s not what this is about. Neither of us has handled this very well. Best we forget it.”

Voorhies leaned against Lamarck’s shoulder. “I’m sorry,” she said quietly. “I am only thinking of you.”

“Don’t worry,” said Lamarck, standing up tiredly. “Tell me about the interview.”

“I’ll do better than that,” said Voorhies, punching in her access code to Lamarck’s com-link. “We can watch it.”

Lamarck sat down as Voorhies accessed the Pangalactic record at the appropriate point. Unlike the sensopic, this was in only two dimensions and there was no emotional intensity control. Despite this, the scene before them had a power undreamed of by the sensopic makers.

Laura Glyde was sitting, legs crossed, on a comfortable sofa opposite Narosyn and Voorhies in the small suite. In another corner of the room was a further member of Narosyn’s snoop corps.

“You gave us a statement at the scene last night,” began Narosyn, placid, calm, reassuring. An unobtrusively effective interrogator, his skill was surreptitiously pick-pocketing information from

incautious witnesses. “You’ve had some time to compose yourself since: is there anything you want to add or change?” he asked, his tone reasonable and his manner affable.

“The facts are straightforward, and I outlined them last night,” said Laura Glyde with equal poise. Today she wore a grey high-necked long-sleeved dress which complemented and accentuated the blueness of her eyes. “Since repetition appears to be the essence of your procedures, I will go over them again.”

Narosyn inclined his head ironically while Voorhies pursed her lips.

“Prime Apprehensor Lamarck had devised a scheme to ascertain whether I was being followed. A man was identified at Casimondo’s as being my shadow. Çeir had decided to detain and question the man. While he was planning how best to achieve that, he offered me immunity from prosecution in connection with another enquiry he was pursuing. Since this presupposed my culpability in this original investigation, I left the bar. Çeir’s behaviour had upset me.”

“You do not strike me as a volatile person, Miss Glyde. Indeed, poise would appear to be one of your defining characteristics,” said Voorhies.

“What you see as poise, Apprehensor, is simply the outward expression of my innocence of whatever you believe me guilty of. My everyday demeanour is calm and unexcitable because I am what I say I am: a woman claiming her inheritance. When that veracity is challenged — as Çeir did last night — I am as ‘volatile’ as anyone else.”

“Carry on, Miss Glyde,” said Narosyn, with a sharp glance at Voorhies. “The question of your inheritance is only indirectly relevant to this enquiry.”

“As you wish,” said Laura Glyde. “I left Casimondo’s in some distress: I only wanted to get away from Çeir —”

“ — Prime Apprehensor Lamarck to you,” interjected Voorhies.

“ — and I was not entirely conscious of what I was doing. The first thing I became conscious of was the tail following me. He was some way behind and I increased my pace. The man speeded up in turn and then began to run towards me. It was dark and there seemed to be no-one else about. I had an instancarc gun — I know that’s an offence and I confess it — and I drew it and shouted to the man to stop. He didn’t, and after another warning was ignored I shot him. There was a gap in the waterfront railing leading down to the water and he fell through it. When Çeir got down there the man was dead.”

“Unusually for a case of this gravity,” said Narosyn, “there seems to be little dispute over the events themselves. The matter hinges on your state of mind. What were you thinking when you shot him?”

“I thought he was going to attack me,” said Laura Glyde levelly.

"I had no option but to shoot him."

"Did you intend to kill him?" asked Voorhies.

"Of course not. I was using an instanarc gun."

"Under Chrysopolitan law that is little mitigation," said Narosyn. "By carrying the gun you implicitly accept the consequences of using it; many people are allergic to the narc and deaths are not unheard of. That's why glaxes carry pulse-guns — it makes it easier to accept that when you shoot someone, they die. If you're basing your defence on the fact that you used only an instanarc gun, you'd better engage a good attorney. It would not constitute any defence at all against manslaughter, and only the flimsiest against murder."

Laura said nothing.

"Your story has a certain superficial plausibility," continued Narosyn. "However: Maevart, the man you shot, was unarmed. He was chasing you down a public street having, by your own testimony, trailed you for several days. Had he intended you harm there were far better opportunities; and of course you had met Prime Apprehensor Lamarck at Casimondo's and you might reasonably have expected him to protect you. Taken together, those factors seriously undermine your claim that you believed you were acting in self-defence."

"As you say, Prime Apprehensor, this case will be determined by state of mind. I have consulted an attorney this morning, and her view is that a Chrysopolitan jury would be most unlikely to judge with sufficient certainty to convict me that I set out to kill the man. I doubt that you could induce the Judicial to agree to bring a murder charge."

Narosyn rubbed his chin. "You would appear to have engaged a competent attorney. As one adult to another, I admit that it would be very difficult to prove that you intended to kill Maevart. To convict on manslaughter requires rather less: if the Judicial can convince a jury that you intended to injure Maevart, and that you were not justified in using force to protect your person, a guilty verdict can be returned."

Laura Glyde kept her own counsel. She did not look at the glaxes.

"There is a simple response to this," continued Narosyn. "Plead guilty to manslaughter. Under Chrysopolitan law penalties are significantly less if a defendant pleads guilty."

"If I were guilty there might be something in what you propose. As I am not the suggestion lacks merit. There is only one witness to the events: Geir Lamarck. I am confident that his testimony as to the shooting itself and my state of mind would exonerate me," said Laura Glyde coolly.

"I would not be so sanguine," said Voorhies with a bleak smile. "Gun crime is rare on Chrysopolis, and abhorred. You carried a

weapon, illegally, and proved you knew how to use it. A jury of Chrysopolitan citizens will not be quick to interpret the facts in your favour."

"I do not wish to face a trial, even on so liberal a world as Chrysopolis. If it is necessary, however, I will refute the charges. Would you like to see Geir Lamarck subpoenaed as a witness in my defence? The reputation of the Pangalactic office would not be enhanced by so bathetic a prospect."

"Allow Pangalactic to be the guardian of its own reputation, Miss Glyde," said Narosyn wryly. "You may be occupied in the preservation of your own."

"I have no intention of entering a sordid plea auction with you, Prime Apprehensor," said Laura Glyde. "If you intend to charge me with any offence, from murder to aggravated jaywalking, then do so; if not, the remainder of the day is my own."

"Thank you for your co-operation, Miss Glyde," said Narosyn. "Please do not leave the planet without notifying Pangalactic. You are, for now, free to leave."

"I am grateful, Prime Apprehensor, although I would like to speak with Apprehensor Voorhies. You may leave or remain as you wish."

Voorhies made a gesture that suggested that she was happy to deal with Laura Glyde alone, and the snoops departed.

"Well? How can I help you?" asked Voorhies without friendliness.

"It seems an opportune moment to enquire as to the progress on releasing my inheritance," said Laura Glyde evenly.

Voorhies raised an eyebrow in an exaggerated manner. "I beg your pardon?"

"Geir said that the bio-tests were a simple matter and verification of my identity would be a routine process."

"I cannot speak for Prime Apprehensor Lamarck: on my own behalf I would say that the bio-tests are a well-established and comparatively straightforward procedure under normal circumstances. However, the normal by its very essence contains the idea of abnormality. What is a simple process in one situation may become a skein of complexities in another."

"I interpret that as an admission that you have not processed my claim."

"You are not the only claimant, Miss Glyde, although it may be that you are the most felonious," said Voorhies.

"I am Taslana Zael, Apprehensor. I am the only person who can make that statement without attempting larceny."

"The onus of proof is on you, Miss Glyde. If you want to sit back and wait for the DNA test, so be it."

"One further question, Apprehensor: where is Prime Apprehensor Lamarck?"

"As I have outlined, there are other strands to this contract than your debatable claim. He is pursuing alternative — and indeed more promising — leads. In your position I would not expect to see him again, unless it is in court."

Laura Glyde smiled her familiar crooked smile. "I wouldn't be so sure, Apprehensor Voorhies, I wouldn't be so sure at all. Good afternoon to you."

With that she sauntered from the interview suite, leaving Voorhies scowling in her wake.

Voorhies wordlessly quelled the com-link and looked at Lamarck, who whistled in appreciation or wonderment. "Well!" he said, "Miss Laura Glyde defines the term 'sang-froid'".

Shaking her head, Voorhies said: "It is not the first word I think of."

"The afternoon's proceedings suggest that she will not be cowed with threats of manslaughter charges. She knows she is on safe ground: even if the Judiciar brings charges, no jury will convict her."

"I am not so sure," said Voorhies, then, after a hesitation, "much would depend on your testimony."

"My opinion is unchanged, Kate. She acted legitimately under the circumstances, and if subpoenaed I would say so: as Laura Glyde evidently realises."

Voorhies frowned. "Why can you not see through her?" she asked in exasperation.

"I do not dispute that she is trying to deceive us: but if the manslaughter charge is the instrument we choose to execute justice on her, we make a grave error, since she is not guilty of it. There must be easier crimes to bring home."

"It is a matter for the snoops, as you know," said Voorhies. "If Narosyn thinks he can get a conviction for manslaughter he will bring it before the Judiciar: the terms of our Enforcement Contract require no less."

"He will ruin the whole case," said Lamarck in frustration. "Laura Glyde is our best lead. I don't blame Narosyn: he is investigating the incident with probity and vigour: but Corinth should not be allowing it."

Voorhies smiled. "Relax, Geir. Remember, Laura Glyde is not Taslana Zael. We can fulfil our contract by unearthing the real Taslana; there is nothing to prove that Laura Glyde can help us with that. And we do still have claimants coming in."

* * *

Prince Jacquard
Episode II

I

(Rappelons que ce petit chapitre se déroule à notre époque, cinquante ans après le moment où je tape ces lignes, c'est à dire en 2051, sur notre bonne vieille terre, bleue et sérieuse, pas dans le monde idiot de Prince Jacquard. Quoique.)

La nouvelle tomba sans prévenir: tout l'univers était contenu dans une bulle. Une bulle sur laquelle on pouvait voir des océans, des continents, d'étranges poissons. C'est ce qu'avait découvert Sigmund Sigmand, berlinois de trente-deux ans, alors qu'il comptait aller explorer la première planète extra-solaire. Bien sûr, ce fut la panique à bord de la petite fusée car la "bulle" n'apparut aux yeux des hommes que lorsqu'ils n'en furent qu'à quelques dizaines de kilomètres. Ils firent immédiatement demi-tour, après avoir pris quelques clichés, pour revenir sur terre.

La population était affolée, notamment à cause de certaines personnes qui disaient que la bulle rétrécissait, pour détruire notre système solaire. Bien sûr, cela était faux. Jusqu'au jour où l'on se rendit compte que c'était vrai. On estima qu'il restait encore deux ans avant la destruction de notre planète bleue.

Evidemment, on envoya une expédition baptisée "Mission Bulle", dirigée par Sigmund Sigmand, sur les rivages du plus gros des continents de la bulle, nommé "Nouveau Sigmund Sigmand". La petite fusée décolla à environ cinq heures du matin, et se posa sur Nouveau Sigmund Sigmand (ou NSS) à huit heures du soir.

Aussitôt arrivés, les membres de l'expédition bâtirent un camp fortifié, et montèrent les divers appareils d'exploration terrienne et sous-marine. Les diverses expéditions sur terre ne donnèrent aucun résultat. Il n'y avait rien à la surface de la bulle. Par contre, dans les océans... Au fond des océans... Enfin non. Au fond (qui n'en était pas un), il y avait en fait une deuxième surface... Au dessus le ciel était bleu, il faisait très froid, et une étrange odeur de... disons "marché", se faisait sentir. Ils virent passer au-dessus d'eux un étrange avion vert tiré par des oiseaux.

Après avoir prévenu les scientifiques restés de l'autre côté de l'océan, Sigmund Sigmand dirigea le petit sous-marin vers la côte, que l'on apercevait au loin... . .

*

PREMIERE PARTIE

Avant toute chose, retraçons les origines du plus grand des Princes:

Prince Jacquard naquit en l'an de grâce 32561. Il grandit dans une famille aisée, et à l'âge de dix ans, alla étudier dans le puissant microcosme qu'était le marché. Une fois arrivé à l'âge de dix-huit années, il s'auto-proclama "Prince". Mais un Prince sans royaume, ce n'est pas un Prince. Aussi, Prince Jacquard se mit à parcourir le monde et l'univers, à la recherche d'un puissant disciple, qu'il trouva en la personne de Compère Grimmault le Sage. Ce dernier lui enseigna les diverses méthodes pour posséder un royaume et bien le diriger, et après une astucieuse bataille, Prince Jacquard devint le maître du marché. Dès lors, il s'entoura de nombreux disciples, et accomplit moult exploits et merveilles, dont le plus célèbre est sans doute d'avoir terrassé un dragon. Il devint le plus grand héros de tous les temps... . .

I

*Jacquard, prince du marché,
Est allé sur Pluton,
Donc, en conclusion,
Ce n'est pas un vieux croûton.*

Il faisait très beau, en cet après-midi d'été, lorsque Prince Jacquard rencontra Maurizio, son ami originaire de la Sicile Martienne. Ces deux compères se connaissaient depuis bien des décennies, aussi avaient-ils beaucoup d'affection l'un pour l'autre. Maurizio était un grand homme. Tout simplement. Un grand comme il n'en existe nulle part ailleurs. Il tenait un des restaurants les plus réputés du marché, car il savait cuisiner à merveille les Champignons Stellaires. Une petite pincée de sel et trois gouttes de bouillon d'ail cosmique, tout en simplicité, donc.

— Comment vas-tu, sacré Maurizio le Restaurateur?

demanda Jacquard. Cela faisait longtemps que l'on ne s'était pas rencontrés? D'ailleurs, je comptais t'envoyer Grimmault, pour qu'il t'amène au château. Mais ce ne sera pas la peine de le déranger . . .

— Oui, oui. Il faut le laisser tranquille, dit Maurizio, car après l'indigestion qu'il a eue, à cause de l'omelette que l'on avait faite avec l'oeuf du Mega Coq Martien Télépathe, il n'a pas été très en forme. Sinon . . .

"Diling? Diling?" faisaient les cloches d'Aristote le Libraire Itinérant, tandis qu'il arrivait sur son carrosse-bibliothèque. Aristote était spécialisé dans les livres qui contenaient les vieilles légendes des planètes hostiles et éloignées, et il possédait un vaste choix de manuscrits, allant du plus petit conte de deux paragraphes, à l'ouvrage de plusieurs milliers de pages. Il s'approcha de Prince Jacquard et de Maurizio, et leur dit:

— Bonjour, messieurs? Comment allez-vous, Prince Jacquard? Bien, je suppose. Et toi, Maurizio, les affaires doivent fonctionner . . .

— Tout va pour le mieux, répondit Maurizio.

— Tant mieux, dit Aristote. J'ai hier rencontré compère Grégoire le Destroyer, qui m'a fourni ce précieux manuscrit . . .

Aristote sortit un très vieux cahier bleu de sa besace mauve. Sur la couverture était représenté le marché. En titre étaient inscrits "Jacky le Traiteur, histoire d'un traiteur du siècle dernier".

— De quand date ce livre? demanda Prince Jacquard.

— Compère Grégoire le Destroyer m'a dit qu'il date de cinquante ans, répondit Aristote le Libraire.

— Cela veut donc dire que c'est l'histoire de Jacky le Traiteur, du siècle dernier plus cinquante ans? demanda Maurizio.

— C'est cela, répondit Aristote. Vous savez, je l'ai lu, et c'est une mine de savoir. C'est formidable, fantastique, magique, romantique, antique, ésotérique, fanatique, horrifique, anti-tiques. Pour vous, Prince Jacquard et vous, Compère Maurizio, il ne coûtera qu'un modeste coffre de diamants épicés . . . C'est une très bonne affaire, et si vous ne l'achetez pas maintenant, je suis sûr que vous ne retrouverez jamais ce précieux manuscrit fantastique, magique, romantique, ésotér . . .

— Vendu? coupa Prince Jacquard. Maurizio, combien possèdes-tu de diamants épicés en ton coffre?

— J'ai bien un modeste coffre de ces diamants mais c'était pour . . .

Prince Jacquard, souverain du marché, lui arracha le

coffre pendu à son cou, le donna à compère Aristote le Libraire. Ce dernier leur remit le manuscrit, et chacun s'en alla de son côté, Prince Jacquard avec le livre, Aristote avec son carrosse, sa besace et son coffre, puis Maurizio, sans rien.

Sur le chemin du retour, Prince Jacquard fut prit d'une furieuse envie de déguster une mouette au groseilles vénusiennes avec un zeste de . . . de quoi, au juste? Il ne savait plus. C'était un plat typique des traiteurs, il y a cent-cinquante ans . . . Traiteurs . . . Un siècle plus cinquante années . . . Traiteur . . . Jacky le Traiteur . . . Manuscrit . . . Grégoire le Destroyer . . . Non, ce dernier n'avait rien à faire ici. Jacquard ouvrit le manuscrit, en quête d'un éventuel sommaire, qu'il trouva. Il y lut "Recette de la mouette façon Jacky le Traiteur (groseilles vénusiennes, zeste de poudre d'antenne de coq martien télépathe, et un tout petit peu de mouette)". Parfait? Du coq martien . . . télépathe.

Non, Prince Jacquard était l'ami des coqs martiens *télépathes*. Il pouvait très bien manger du coq martien, mais pas du *télépathe*. Or les coqs martiens n'étaient pas *télépathes*, ils avaient juste un quotient intellectuel supérieur à tous, mais ne possédaient pas d'antennes, n'étants pas . . . *télépathes*.

Peut-être les coqs "*coqs*" en avaient-ils, mais l'espèce était éteinte. Une seule personne aurait pu aider Prince Jacky, non Jacquard. Et puis non, pas une personne, mais *deux*, songea-t-il. Il y avait Archibaldeau le Taquineur, mais Jacquard l'avait tué récemment. Il en restait une. Une seule. Compère Jules-Armand de la Supérette, caissier et chef suprême de rayon.

Prince Jacquard devait partir à sa recherche.

Dans l'hostile univers de la supérette.

Ce sera long, ce sera dur.

Mais c'est Prince Jacquard,

souverain du marché,

ami des coqs,

enfin bon, passons . . .

I

ARRIVEE CHEZ JACQUARD:

LA RECEPTION

Avant toute chose, Prince Jacquard se devait d'organiser une réception. Il passa donc plusieurs heures à

réunir tous les invités, qu'il retrouva au quatre coins du monde du marché. En voici un petit extrait: Adam-Marcel le Cordonnier Suprême, Jack-Johnny le . . . quoi déjà? . . . enfin . . . Il y avait aussi Ildegarde-Ingrid-Schauschenheimer comtesse du comté de Klausweinacht, un petit territoire situé au pôle sud de la planète, région que Prince Jacquard détestait. Malheureusement le carrosse de cette dernière s'écrasa dans la cour intérieur du château de notre prince, et Ildegarde-Ingrid-Schauschenheimer se tua lors de l'accident. Etaient présents, naturellement compère Grimmault le Sage, Maurizio, Archibaldeau le Taquineur, que l'on avait miraculeusement ressuscité pour l'occasion, compère Grégoire le Destroyer, compère Valentin le Pique-Assiette Suprême, et compère Jih'pehg le "?"

Tout ce beau monde arriva au palais aux alentours de vingt heures. Maurizio passa toute la soirée aux fourneaux, car il voulait à tout prix réaliser une tarte à la pâte à tarte, pour la faire déguster à Jacquard, mais au dernier moment, le prince fut pris d'une soudaine envie de lasagnes sans pâtes et sans viande, et refusa la tarte de Maurizio. Ce dernier absorba une grande dose de produits "*qui-suppriment-le-moral-à-zéro-hallucinogènes*"™, ce qui le plongea pendant plusieurs jours dans un état second.

Les festivités se terminèrent à minuit, chacun rentra chez soi, sauf Jih'pehg, Grimmault, Maurizio et Archibaldeau que notre bon souverain du marché invita à rester pour une petite discussion au sujet de Jules-Armand. Malheureusement, ils furent obligés de renvoyer Jih'pehg, ce dernier étant ivre. Mais écoutons cette conversation:

— Mais, ô Prince Jacquard, pourquoi je vois un éléphant rose derrière vous? demanda Maurizio.

— Je ne sais pas, répondit Jacquard. Tu vois, Maurizio, tu n'aurais pas dû prendre tous ces hallucinogènes. Et puis en plus, j'ai maintenant envie de déguster ta fameuse tarte à la pâte à tarte . . .

— Mais je l'ai brûlé?

— Alors tu devrais nous en faire une autre . . .

— Mais je . . . bon . . . soupira Maurizio, et il retourna aux cuisines.

— Pendant que compère Maurizio est aux fourneaux, j'aimerais vous parler d'une personne que vous connaissez tous, j'ai nommé Jules-Armand de la Supérette, dit Prince Jacquard, tout en se grattant l'oreille.

— Je connais? cria Maurizio qui avait passé la tête par la fenêtre de la cuisine.

— Moi aussi, je connais, dit Archibaldeau.

— Moi aussi, dit Grimmault.

— Et moi . . . hic? . . . Aussi, dit Jih'pehg, qui avait réussi à revenir. Il fut d'ailleurs chassé à coups de massue.

— Donc, continua Prince Jacquard, moi et Maurizio avons hier rencontré Aristote, et je lui ai acheté ceci, dit-il en sortant le manuscrit d'un tiroir. C'est un roman qui raconte la vie de Jacky le Traiteur, qui vivait il y a cent-cinquante ans. En revenant au palais, je fus pris d'une envie de manger de la mouette Sirioisysne, mais j'avais oublié un ingrédient. Je le trouvais dans le livre, et il s'agissait de la poudre d'antennes de coq martien télépathe. Vous me connaissez, je ne puis manger de cela. Une seule personne pouvait me dire que faire: Jules-Armand. Et toi, Archibaldeau.

— Mais lorsqu'on m'a ressuscité, raconta Archibaldeau, on m'a aussi lobotomisé, pour que j'oublie, on m'a dit, un sinistre événement, et . . .

— Il suffit, coupa Jacquard. Demain, nous organiserons une expédition. Je vous veux tous chez moi au lever du soleil pour discuter des préparatifs.

— Mais nous sommes demain, dit Grimmault. Il fait déjà jour?

— Et bien que la réunion commence? dit Jacquard, enthousiaste.

II

LES REUNIONS LE PLANEUR EN PALMIERS ET LES ROUGES-GORGES

— Des palmiers? cria Maurizio, qui était revenu pendant la cuisson de sa tarte.

— Mais pour quoi faire? demanda Grimmault.

— Je dis qu'on aurait peut-être besoin d'emmener quelques palmiers avec nous. On ne sait jamais, ça peut toujours nous être utile . . .

— On verra plus tard pour ce qui est des palmiers. Concentrons-nous d'abord sur les problèmes que l'on risque de rencontrer, lorsque nous arriverons sur la planète de Jules-Armand, dit Jacquard.

— Je pense qu'il faudra se méfier des hippopotames volants. Surtout ceux qui possèdent des cornes. Je

crois qu'on les appelle "rhinocéros". Il y a aussi les mauvaises odeurs. Et puis on risque de se perdre dans le dédale de ruelles qui composent la planète Supérette. Il nous faudra donc un plan bien précis, dit Archibaldeau le Taquineur.

— On ne trouve de plans qu'au pôle sud du marché, là où vivait Ildegarde-Ingrid-Schauschenheimer. Mais à cette période de l'année, il est très difficile d'y accéder. Dragon le Brûlant pourrait-il nous y conduire? demanda Grimmault.

— Je pense que non, répondit Jacquard.

— Je pense que si, rétorqua Grimmault.

— Moi je pense que quelques beaux palmiers . . . esseyez Maurizio.

— Tais-toi donc, toi. Les hallucinogènes ne t'ont pas fait du bien . . . Attends une minute . . . Explique, pour tes palmiers, demanda Grimmault.

— Un véhicule en palmiers, ce doit être léger . . . On peut peut-être construire un avion suffisamment léger pour pouvoir voler dans les airs du pôle sud. Bien sûr . . .

— Maurizio, tu es un génie? Valet, cria Prince Jacquard, vas nous chercher des palmiers, et demande à Dragon le Brûlant de nous construire un planeur avec?

— Bien, ô Prince.

Et le valet alla réveiller notre bon compère Dragon le Brûlant. En une dizaine d'heures, il fabriqua le plus beau planeur de tous les temps. Jacquard lui donna une couve de pétrole en remerciement, et le surlendemain, ils eurent une nouvelle réunion:

— Et si on employait des bernard-l'ermite? demanda Maurizio.

— Pourquoi? demanda Prince Jacquard, qui écoutait maintenant, comme tout le monde d'ailleurs, les discours de Maurizio avec un vif intérêt.

— Pour qu'ils tractent le planeur dans les airs . . . répondit ce dernier.

— Mais les Bernard-l'ermite ne possèdent pas d'ailes. Tu es toujours sous l'effet des hallucinogènes? demanda Archibaldeau.

— Alors peut-être qu'avec des rouges-gorges . . .

— Mais tu es un génie, mon bon Maurizio, coupa Jacquard.

Et le lendemain même, ils partirent dans leur planeur en palmier, tracté par des centaines de rouges-gorges. Après plusieurs jours de voyages, après de nombreuses tempêtes, après de nombreux conflits, ils

arrivèrent en vue du pôle-sud du marché, et aperçurent les tours des dessinateurs de cartes . . .

Ils se posèrent avec difficulté.

III

LE POLE SUD DU MARCHÉ

Le pôle-sud du marché était une région froide, où il ne faisait pas chaud, donc. A peine le planeur touchait-il le sol qu'il se changea en glace. Heureusement, une troupe de charcutiers qui passaient par là purent sortir nos compères de l'avion, et on incinéra tous les défunts rouges-gorges qui polluaient l'atmosphère. L'air était tellement froid en ce lieu que la vapeur que l'on expirait se changeait immédiatement en bloc de glace volant. Cela expliquait sans doute le port obligatoire du casque isolant en cuir de chevreuil Prospère.

Prince Jacquard et sa troupe furent menés au marché des cartes, le seul endroit au pôle où ils pourraient trouver le plan de Supérette, la planète au milliard de supérettes immobiles, et à la centaine de milliards de supérettes volantes. Un commerçant attira cependant l'attention de Prince Jacquard: Aristote le libraire? Lorsque ce dernier le vit, il se dirigea immédiatement vers le bon souverain du marché.

— Quelle agréable surprise? Prince Jacquard en personne au pôle-sud? Je vois que votre grandeur recherche une carte . . . Laquelle, si je puis me permettre? demanda le Libraire.

— Celle de Supérette, répondit Prince Jacquard. La possèdes-tu, Aristote?

— Je possède toutes les cartes? Et il se trouve qu'hier même, j'ai rencontré compère Alpha le Centaure. Et il m'a donné cela . . .

Il sortit de sa besace gelée une carte toute aussi gelée. Ne pouvant pas l'ouvrir, Aristote alluma son briquet, pour faire fondre la glace. Il déploya ensuite le papier, qui une fois totalement déplié, gela encore, mais cette fois, ce n'était pas gênant. En grosses lettres était écrit: "Carte De Supérette, la planète aux milliards de supérettes de toutes sortes".

Prince Jacquard s'en empara, et demanda à Aristote le Libraire:

— Combien pour ce plan?

— Je vais te le dire, répondit notre bon compère le

Libraire ambulant. Je te fais une réduction, pour toi, ô Prince Jacquard. Sais-tu que ce document date de plus de mille ans? C'est une pièce unique, qui vaut une fortune. Et puis non, en fait, elle n'a pas de prix. Mais pour notre bon souverain, elle ne coûtera que la modeste somme de quatre coffres de rubis à la rétine de dromadaires solaires. J'espère que mon bon Prince se rend compte de l'offre que je lui propose . . .

— Grimmault, combien possèdes-tu? demanda Prince Jacquard.

— Quatre coffres de rubis à la rétine de dromadaires . . . cosmiques, et non pas solaires. Désolé, dit-il, et il s'écarta, du groupe, parce qu'avec Aristote le Libraire, on ne sait jamais.

— Ce n'est pas grave, mon bon compère Grimmault le Sage. Et toi, Archibaldeau le Taquineur, qu'est-ce que tu as? demanda le souverain du marché.

— Deux coffres de brocolis. Désolé, ô Prince . . . et il s'écarta à son tour.

— Ce n'est pas grave non-plus. Il reste Maurizio. Combien possèdes-tu, toi?

— Quatre coffres de rubis à la rétine de dromadaires solaires. Mais ce n'était pas pour vous, c'était pour . . .

— Vendu? coupa Prince Jacquard.

Il s'empara des coffres de Maurizio, les donna à Aristote le Libraire, et s'en alla avec la carte. Nos quatre compères regagnèrent le planeur de palmiers. En chemin, alors qu'ils passaient devant l'étalage d'un vendeur de cartes, près du rivage, Archibaldeau cria à Prince Jacquard, qui était déjà loin devant:

— Prince Jacquard? ce commerçant vend la même carte que celle que tu as achetée à Aristote! Et elle ne coûte qu'un franc?

C'est alors qu'ils les virent.

Ces trois hommes qui sortirent d'une étrange coquille de métal jaune, qui était elle-même sortie des flots glacés.

DEUXIEME PARTIE

I

D'ETRANGES HOMMES

Les trois hommes portaient un casque de verre, une combinaison grise, et des bottes noires. L'un d'eux (il

avait l'air très idiot) s'avança vers Jacquard, et dit:

— Au nom de . . . Nous venons en paix.

— Mais qui êtes-vous? demanda Prince Jacquard.

— Euh . . . Nous venons d'une planète qui s'appellent Terre. On la surnomme aussi Planète Bleue. Et il se trouve que notre univers est contenu à l'intérieur de votre planète, qui semble rétrécir et . . .

— Vous dites que vous arrivez de l'intérieur de notre planète? demanda Grimmault.

— C'est cela même . . .

— Tout le monde sait que l'intérieur du Marché est creux. Quant à votre rétrécissement, il faut bien que la planète respire un peu, non?

— Mais . . .

— Il suffit, coupa Prince Jacquard. Lequel de vous trois est le plus savant?

— C'est moi, répondit l'homme.

— Très bien, fit Prince Jacquard. Grimmault, nous n'avons pas de place au palais pour les deux autres. Fais ce que tu peux.

— Très bien, répondit Grimmault. Rapide et sans douleur?

— Comme tu le sens, dit Prince Jacquard.

— Alors, voyons voir un peu ce que nous avons là . . .

Grimmault fouilla un court instant dans sa besace, et en sortit une épée longue. Il dit aux deux autres hommes:

— Messieurs, je vous défie?

Ils sortirent chacun un lance-flammes de poche, et firent flamme vers Grimmault. Malheureusement, les flammes se changèrent en glace, et Grimmault leur trancha rapidement, et surtout proprement (Grimmault était, il faut le rappeler, champion de l'univers de "l'Épée Nette", sans sang) la tête. Il demanda à l'homme le plus savant des trois:

— Mais au fait, quel est votre nom?

— Sigmund Sigmand, mais je . . . C'est incompréhensible. Mon univers qui va être détruit, cette planète, qui respire, vous qui parlez la même langue que moi, vivez dans un marché géant, ce vieux c . . . (censuré) qui tue mes deux hommes . . .

— Et vous n'avez pas encore admiré mes réceptions, monsieur Sigmund Sigmand. Mais sachez que je devais partir sur la planète Supérette, à la recherche de Jules-Armand . . . Et Grimmault le Sage n'est pas un vieux c . . . (censuré).

— Mais, qu'est-ce que c'est que ce délire je . . .
Sigmund s'évanouit.

— Il n'a pas beaucoup de nerfs, cet étrange individu, dit Prince Jacquard. Il ne savait même pas qu'il vivait dans le poumon de la planète. Il est très bête. Nous n'avons donc pas besoin de lui. Jetez-le dans les flots.

Grimmault et Archibaldeau le jetèrent dans les eaux glacées du pôle. Puis ils s'en allèrent vers le planeur de palmier, et, après avoir acheté quelques centaines de rouge-gorge, s'envolèrent vers le palais de notre bon Prince Jacquard le bienfaiteur, ami des Coqs Martiens Télépathes . . .

Maurizio avait, pendant toute le voyage, essayé de compter les éléphants verts (en fait des rhinocéros roses) qui gambadaient joyeusement devant lui. Ces hallucinations étaient sans doute dues aux pastilles "*qui-suppriment-le-moral-à-zéro-hallucinogènes*"TM.

*

Et si nous retournions à l'intérieur de la planète, voir ce que la Terre devient . . .

C'est le chaos total. Dans deux jours, il n'y aura plus de Terre. La bulle est à présent à une dizaine de kilomètres de l'Everest. Une chose amusante survint cependant.

On vit le corps de Sigmund Sigmund crever un des océans de la bulle, pour venir s'écraser au sommet de la tour Eiffel. Voilà.

Deux jours après, il n'y avait donc plus rien. La planète du marché inspira. A l'intérieur, c'était le vide total. Chose étrange, puisque la planète inspire de l'air . . . enfin bref.

II

LE DEPART VERS LA PLANETE
DE JULES-ARMAND
L'INTEGRALE (ENFIN PRESQUE)
DU MANUSCRIT DE
JACKY, LE TRAITEUR D'UNE AUTRE EPOQUE

Le départ eut lieu quatre jours après le retour du pôle-sud. Faisaient partie de l'expédition Grimmault le Sage, Archibaldeau le Taquineur, Maurizio, et bien

sûr, Prince Jacquard. (Rappelons que l'on avait récupéré la fusée-carrosse qui avait servi au voyage vers Pluton la Glacée, car cela ne servait absolument à rien d'en construire une nouvelle). Rappelons aussi que l'anecdote de Sigmund Sigmund était oubliée.

Là encore, compère Grimmault fut chargé de recueillir plusieurs millions de personnes pour le départ de la fusée-carrosse. Malheureusement, les gens se souvenaient du précédent décollage vers Pluton, qui n'avait fait aucun survivant à part, comme le disait si bien Fritz le Poissonnier "Ce lézard géant qui a mutilé compère Georges le Boucher", où comme l'appelaient Jacquard et ses amis, Dragon le Brûlant. Ce dernier assura qu'il avait inventé un nouveau dispositif de sécurité empêchant la propagation des vibrations et des ondes négatives des moteurs. La population était donc rassurée, et ce fut quatre millions neuf-cents-douze personnes qui assistèrent au décollage. Ce que toutes ces personnes ignoraient, c'était que Dragon le Brûlant s'était trompé d'une virgule dans ses calculs, ce qui, au lieu d'empêcher la propagation des ondes, la rendit encore plus puissante sur une beaucoup plus grande distance. Encore une fois, pas de survivants, à part "ce lézard géant qui a mutilé compère Georges le Boucher".

Une dizaine de minutes passèrent, puis le carrosse traversa l'atmosphère, et se dirigea difficilement vers Supérette. Prince Jacquard décida après deux jours de voyage de réunir tout le monde dans le salon, afin de lire le manuscrit de Jacky le Traiteur. Une fois de plus, ce fut Grimmault qui se chargea de le conter:

— Bon, c'est quand vous voulez, Prince Jacquard. Très bien, alors si tout le monde est prêt, je vais pouvoir commencer . . .

— Un ornithorynque . . . coupa Maurizio.

— Pourquoi? demanda Archibaldeau.

— Euh . . . Non. Continuez, Grimmault.

— Alors c'est parti:

Jacky le Traiteur, histoire d'un traiteur du siècle
dernier
ou
L'école de la mayonnaise

"Bien peu de personnes savent ce que le créateur a fait, avant toute chose. Il a créé la mayonnaise, puis le jardin d'Eden. Mais ce n'est qu'un détail qui ne nous intéresse pas. Concentrons-nous

plutôt sur Jacky le traiteur d'un siècle passé. . .

Le nom de famille de Jacky n'était pas "le Traiteur", mais "Duidillais". Il naquit le mois de freaze, jour de bis moyennant la taxe sur les boutons de manchette. Lorsqu'il grandit, son père lui apprit la recette que seuls les traiteurs connaissaient: celle de la mayonnaise, donc.

Il se montra très adroit lors de la fabrication de la macédoine mayonnaise extra plus, et on lui donna le titre de "Mega-Macédoineur-Mayonnaiseur Suprême". Il était heureux. Cela ne dura que quinze ans.

En effet, le jour même de son anniversaire, la guerre éclata entre les bouchers, les charcutiers et nos amis les traiteurs. Ce fut le drame.

Brian-Jules, le frère de Jacky, fut assassiné par un charcutier cannibale boulimique anorexique, mais ce dernier fut assassiné par un boucher végétarien cannibale, qui fut assassiné par un traiteur végétarien amnésique, qui fut assassiné par. . . Jacky le Traiteur.

Notre héros créa une recette que lui avait inspiré son frère, la mouette aux groseilles. . . Oh? mon Dieu? cria soudain Grimmault.

En effet, le carrosse fonçait droit vers un astéroïde rose, sur lequel gambadaient joyeusement sept dromadaires en mauvais plastique vert.

Prince Jacquard courut jusqu'au poste de pilotage, s'empara des leviers de direction, et évita de justesse l'énorme masse de roche. Après cette petite manoeuvre, il se remit en mode "croisière".

Lorsqu'il revint dans le salon, il trouva Grimmault complètement affolé. En effet, il venait de perdre le manuscrit. Prince Jacquard lui dit:

— Mais. . . Idiot. Enfin. Ce n'est pas la fin du monde, mais c'est dommage. Et puis non. Je trouvais le début franchement ennuyeux. Et toi, mon bon Maurizio?

— Vous aviez mis tout mon argent là-dedans. . .

— C'est faux.

— C'est vrai.

— C'est faux.

— Bon, d'accord, Prince Jacquard. . .

— Taisez-vous, coupa Archibaldeau le Taquineur. Nous arrivons.

En effet, ils arrivaient en vue de la Planète Supérette. . .

La planète Supérette était recouverte de. . . supérettes. Mais pas n'importe quelles supérettes. C'était en fait de véritables palais, où l'on aimait se promener.

Tous les immeubles étaient en marbre, sauf dans une zone. La zone New-Market, la première ville fondée par les premiers colons, qui n'a cessé de s'agrandir. Seul les constructions de cette zone étaient en taule ordinaire, et plus personne n'y vivait. C'était aussi le seul endroit où vivaient encore des. . . choses étranges et féroces. C'est là que l'on a vu pour la dernière fois Jules-Armand, qui, dit-on, s'est transformé en coq martien. . .

D'ailleurs, lorsqu'ils débarquèrent dans la zone New-Market, nos compères tuèrent et mangèrent un coq martien, car il n'avaient pas pris de repas depuis au moins une bonne centaine de jours. Mais peu importe. Ils allèrent dans une librairie-supérette, écoutèrent Michel Ferchaud:

C'est à dire:

Le bon Dieu est généreux

De nous déverser gratuitement

Ce liquide merveilleux

Qui rentre dans tous mes vêtements

Ou bien encore:

Les gens n'ont pas de mémoire

Quand ça les arrange

C'est un fait notoire

*Y'n'faut pas que ça les dérange**

Puis dans une des chansons du gars de l'Ile-Bouchard, Jacquard trouva que les fromages au fromages pouvaient remplacer les antennes de coqs. Il oublia donc Jules-Armand, et retourna au carrosse avec ses compères.

Ils retournèrent au marché, et ce qu'ils virent les émerveilla. . .

A SUIVRE

III

PLANETE SUPERETTE

*L'auteur tient à remercier Michel Ferchaud
(production: Musica Guild; Chinon)