
The Cosmopolis Literary Supplement

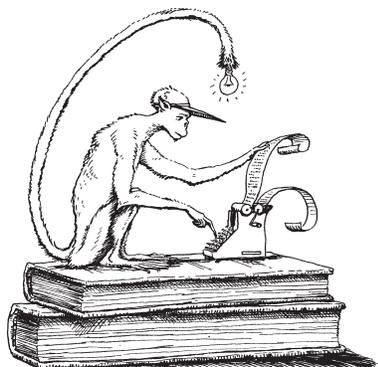
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Editorial

Gentle Readers,

In this issue: more of *Dragonchaser*, and the Precursory and first two chapters of *Finister*.

Regarding *Finister*:

A map of the planet Tethys—the world on which *Keaen*, *Finister*, and *Tergan* are set—is included, together with an expanded view of that portion of the continent, Finister, relevant to the events of the first few chapters. Later, when appropriate, there will be another map or maps.

Happy reading

Till Noever



Dragonchaser

by *Tim Stretton*

Chapter 10

Mirko made his way back to Banqueting Hall. For the first time he noticed that Larien had been sick on his sleeve, and he dabbed it absent-mindedly with a handkerchief Enoxifer had provided as part of the outfit. He knew he would never wear the garment again.

Entering the Hall, Mirko found that the Lady Inuela had been carried out, and the other ladies were also absent. Although the table had been cleared of food, Padizan's head remained on its salver for all to see. Nobody seemed particularly discomposed by it; Mirko noticed that Carnazan had left during his absence.

"Ascalon!" called Bartazan. "How is my niece?"

"She is somewhat distressed, my lord. She told me of her childhood affection for — for Padizan."

"What a sweet, open nature she has, Captain — something that men particularly find attractive. She uses her emotions rather than her reason. Padizan had been my retainer for many years, Captain. Imagine my shock, my horror, my revulsion, on finding that he had betrayed me for money. Anger, too of course, but that came later. I had trusted Padizan — trusted him with my slaves, but more importantly to uphold the honour of my House. What a laughing stock I should have been, with Padizan parading about the town in his carriage, enriched through the misguided trust of the Elector Bartazan. Never could this be allowed!"

Mirko shook his head. Killed to save Bartazan's face. Bartazan misinterpreted the gesture.

"I thought you would understand; the pride of the Garganet is famed. Come with me, now; Kanspiris can look after the guests, most of whom now wish to depart, with my lesson fresh in their minds."

Mirko followed Bartazan, not without a degree of trepidation. "The galley's performance today gratified me greatly," he said as they walked out into the open air. "As well as a stern enemy, I am a staunch friend. Do you possess a strider?"

"No, my lord."

"It is time we remedied that deficiency. I cannot have my galley-master riding up to Formello in the rattlejack. I have a mount which would suit your needs admirably. Come, the stables are near."

"I don't know what to say, my lord."

This was true enough; the last thing he wanted was an expensive gift from Bartazan after his behaviour tonight; but it was hardly possible to refuse.

"I will also give you some friendly advice; please take it in the spirit offered."

"I'm listening."

"Larien tells me she has invited you to the Peremp-tor's Grand Ball as her escort. Ordinarily I would not permit this; a galley-master is not fit companion for an Elector's niece. A similar piece of *lèse-majesté* led to young Gambar Inisse's difficulties."

Mirko said nothing.

"On this occasion I am prepared to make an exception. Firstly, you are not a Paladrian, so you do not bring with you an obviously debased social position. Secondly, your presence is likely to discommode Koo-pendral and Drallenkoop, a worthwhile end in itself. Finally, Larien has proved headstrong and wilful of late; by granting her this comparatively minor concession, I hope to conciliate her at no great inconvenience to myself. I hope you are sensible of the compliment I am paying you."

Mirko had detected no particular compliment, and merely inclined his head.

"Do not make the mistake of believing that I approve of your relationship. At the moment it causes me no real disturbance; but its continuance clearly would do so. The Lady Larien is my ward, and both her fortune and her marriage are within my gift. In due course I would expect to bestow them where they do me the most good; plainly that will not be on a Garganet officer, even one who is Master of the City's Fleet. Am I clear?"

"In all phases of your discourse, my lord."

Late that night Mirko found himself proceeding steadily down the road from Formello to Paladria; this time the strider was his own, but he took little satisfaction from the circumstance. His mind ran again and again over the image of Padizan's head stuffed with the coins he had not had time to enjoy; Padizan, the vulgar and venal slave-master who all those years ago had looked

forward to Larien skipping her lessons and tripping down to the stables; Padizan, Mirko's patsy.

The next morning Mirko was early at the Urmalest. Cascais was not yet in evidence, but he roused the slaves into good order and marched them down to the docks. The mood was subdued; whatever method the slaves used to garner their current affairs, it was rapid. Padizan had been neither an especially lenient slave-master nor a harsh one; his position was not one to generate affection among the slaves, and those who had spent time in his pens felt, in the main, indifference; but they sensed from the tension in Florio, Damiano, Walisse and Jenx that much remained under the surface.

Mirko did not make eye-contact with any of the slaves as he arrayed them to march. Once at the docks, he instructed them to clean *Sapphire Light's* sides thoroughly, and summoned his comrades in arms for a private conference.

"I don't know what you've heard about last night," he began.

"Padizan's dead—only hours after confessing publicly to a betrayal we all know he didn't make," said Florio sharply. "Doesn't that about cover it?"

"Yes. All I can say is that I don't know what happened or how. My—an associate of mine—observed that a close scrutiny of Padizan's story and the guards would be likely to make my involvement in Inisse's release manifest, with predictable consequences for me."

"So you arranged for Padizan to take the fall? That's brave and honourable."

"Florio, you forget yourself. Padizan's death was not intended by the people who chose to protect me—and in so doing, protected you too."

"How can you tell?" asked Florio scornfully. "You've only just told us you don't know what happened. You told 'someone' what you'd done; he said 'Don't worry, I'll sort it out,' and Padizan turns up dead twelve hours later. How convenient for everyone—well, nearly everyone."

"That's enough, Florio," said Damiano. "What was Mirko supposed to do? Tell Bartazan that he'd used four of his own slaves to spring Inisse? It's easy for you to criticise when you don't have the responsibility."

Jenx said: "Anyone would have given Padizan up in the circumstances."

"It wasn't quite like that," said Mirko. "Nobody 'gave Padizan up'. I am still trying to find out what happened.

Florio shrugged. "It's all too late for Padizan. Are we rowing today?"

"If Cascais ever shows up."

"I can helm," he said. "I was a helm in Garganet."

Mirko turned in surprise. "You never said."

"It's easier to row, in general; and since Cascais has the job for the season, it seemed a redundant accomplishment."

As they returned to *Sapphire Light*, Mirko was accosted by Drallenkoop.

"Hey, Ascalon! Do you fancy a rematch?"

"We aren't doing speedwork today," said Mirko politely.

Drallenkoop cawed. "Very wise; we'd give you ten lengths start and still beat you to the Hanspar."

"Believe as you will, Drallenkoop. There's only one race that counts, and you're starting to look worried to me."

Drallenkoop laughed. "You've done better than I expected so far; but the Margariad has three turns, two of them tight; and you have Cascais at the helm. 'Worry' is hardly an appropriate response."

Mirko inwardly acknowledged the justice of this observation. "The race is won on the water, Drallenkoop, not in your mouth."

Dragonchaser was swiftly away from the jetty, and moved with conspicuous crispness about her manoeuvres. *Sapphire Light*, perhaps suffering from yesterday's exertions, or depressed by the tension among the Quartermen, performed with slackness and error. Florio showed to reasonable advantage—certainly enough to commend his helmsmanship above Cascais'—but the rowers' technical exercises were vitiated by sloppiness. After forty-five minutes Mirko abandoned the session in disgust; perseverance would only ingrain bad habits.

The crew returned shamefaced to the docks, aware that any other overseer would have had them whipped for such a display. Mirko simply maintained a steely silence.

"Tomorrow, I expect better," he said, and set off briskly for his lodgings.

Mirko was grateful that evening for the strider—styled 'Boodle', according to its collar—which Bartazan had bestowed upon him. The cliffs overlooking The Sorcerers were even farther away than Formello, and Mirko

rode Boodle hard to make his rendezvous for seven bars. Dismounting, he led Boodle up the crest of the final rise.

He saw in the middle distance a slight figure in a dark cloak, evidently practising archery. Arrows flew at a rapid rate into the trunk of a tree some distance away, none missing the target. 'N' was a woman of many accomplishments. On hearing Mirko's approach, she stopped and laid down the bow, slightly out of breath.

"Ascalon," she said. "Thank you for coming."

Mirko noticed that again she looked tired, the wrinkles around her eyes a little more pronounced. He still wasn't sure whether he was angry with her or not.

"Your letter didn't give me a lot of choice," he said. "Besides, I'm keen to have some explanations."

"Come and sit on the grass," she said. "Look out to sea."

"I'm looking."

"What do you see?"

"Sea. Sky. Sunset. Rocks."

"'Rocks?' Those are The Sorcerers."

"So I understand."

"They are the three largest rocks in the Bay of Paladria; they have the most treacherous and unpredictable currents anywhere around Paladria. I know what I'm talking about; I've been round and through them on galleys before."

"The point of this geological discourse?"

"The Sorcerers form the third and final turn on the Margariad course, a fact you may or may not have researched. Most helms go around the outside of The Sorcerers, a smooth turn which sets the galley up well for the long run home; a more daring or desperate galley will go between two of The Sorcerers, a shorter distance, but a much tighter and more technical turn."

"I am nothing if not thorough. You're not telling me anything I don't know."

'N' brushed a breeze-blown hair back from her eyes. "No doubt you will have assessed the probability of Cascais negotiating a successful passage between The Sorcerers."

Mirko pursed his lips. "Since you ask, I have; I rate the probability sufficiently close to zero that I would not attempt it. *Sapphire Light* will go around the outside."

'N' smiled and nodded. "You are very wise, although I am by no means convinced that even that route is within Cascais' capacity. There are in fact only three current helms who could negotiate The Sorcerers the

fast way: Drallenkoop, who did so to win his first Margariad; Raidis of *Excelsior*, who has done so in practice; and your new friend Gambar Inisse, who took *Fanar's Glory* through to impress Ratzendila last season."

"Where is this going, 'N'?" asked Mirko, the name of Gambar Inisse putting an edge in his voice.

"It's simple. However creditably you performed in yesterday's trials, you cannot possibly beat *Dragonchaser* when it counts. With Cascais at the helm, you need to be so far ahead of her by The Sorcerers that you can take the long route and still come out ahead. Listen to me, Mirko, don't disappear into bravado: this is a race you cannot win."

"We'll see."

"Mirko, no! You really don't see where this is going."

"And you, of course, 'N' the never-wrong, see everything."

"Mirko, don't do this! Just listen, for once, and keep your Garganet pride under control."

"I'm listening."

"Yesterday you surprised everyone—and I mean everyone—by out-pacing *Dragonchaser*. You can be sure you surprised Drallenkoop, and his wily old father; deep down even Bartazan would have been surprised. I'll freely admit you surprised me. You remember all those vested interests we talked about last time: Medina, the tax-collectors, the office-holders; I've no doubt they were amazed too."

"Good."

"No! It's not good at all! Not for me, and certainly not for you!" 'N's cheeks had spots of red and her eyes were alight. "Since yesterday, people are seriously believing you can win the Margariad: that's lunacy. You can't, but what's important is that people think you can—and that includes plenty of people who really *really* don't want you to. That puts you in a lot of danger."

Mirko lay on his back and looked up into the sky. "Are you saying I should throw the race?"

"I'm not getting through. You can only throw it if you can win it to start with. My honest, personal advice to you is to get out while you still can; and if you must know, that goes against my interests. But it's the best thing for you to do. If you can't or won't do that, at least stop carrying yourself as if you can beat *Dragonchaser*. Next time you come up against her, come off second best."

Mirko laughed. "You should have seen us today. I doubt we'd have beaten a provisions barge. We were awful, and that was with no Cascais."

"Good," said 'N' softly. "I know you discount anything I say, but I genuinely do want to avoid anything happening to you. There's an—innocence—about you which I find engaging."

Mirko sighed. "That's not an assessment a former Garganet naval captain can take a great deal of comfort in. It's broadly on a par with being called 'sweet'."

'N' laughed; the wrinkles around her eyes were swallowed in laughter lines. "Don't mistake me; you're dynamic, omnicompetent, brave, the ideal of Garganet chivalry; you just also manage to maintain a fundamental pig-headed decency which generally ends badly in Paladria. It's a quality you share with Gambar Inisse. Drallenkoop used to have it, too."

"What new assignment is this leading to?"

"I'm talking to you without ulterior motive," she said with a smile, "if you can believe that. Didn't I help you with Padizan?"

Mirko sat up with a start. "Padizan! Are you proud of that?"

She touched his hand placatingly. "Padizan's death was unfortunate; but my involvement in it was peripheral."

"If your talk about personal regard for me is not just rhetoric, you'll tell me exactly what happened after we parted yesterday."

'N' nodded slowly. "I'll tell you as much as I can. It was plainly essential that Bartazan should be prevented from interviewing Padizan. The easiest way to effect that would have been immediate assassination. It wasn't just your conscience that revolted against that; I could not have had him killed in cold blood."

"I have very good intelligence on the characters of just about everyone inside Formello, and I knew that Padizan could be bribed. You need not be concerned by the methods by which I spirited Padizan away from Formello, nor the money and estate which I caused to be settled on him. It's enough to know that my friends arranged immediate affluence for Padizan on condition that he make the public confession which I'm sure you saw."

Mirko nodded.

"Padizan, now a man of means, became steadily more drunk throughout the day. Once he had concluded his confession he somehow eluded his minders. The next

anyone saw of him, his head was on a platter at Formello."

"Convenient for you."

"It would have been if he'd died at the outset; but once he'd made the confession, there was no harm in me or my friends standing by the bargain. Indeed, his presence around town would have proved embarrassing for Bartazan, and so highly welcome."

Mirko was quiet for a few seconds. He turned to look at 'N'.

"'N', do you realise I have that man's death on my conscience?"

'N' looked back gently. "I can understand it might seem that way; but you acted for the best, and only Bartazan and his henchmen are responsible for Padizan's death. Rescuing Inisse was a good act, regardless of the consequences, or whether it was politically inadvisable. You can't blame yourself."

"I didn't even do it for any creditable motive; I did it partly to impress you and partly to spite you; not a good basis to end a man's life."

'N' looked deep into Mirko's eyes. Her own were bottomless dark pools. "Well, you certainly impressed me; and you may well have spited me too. I can't help it that impressing me proved not to be worth the price."

She looked away in something approaching embarrassment.

"'N', what could be worth a man's life? Or hearing Larien tell you all about how Padizan was kind to her when she was a girl and remembering her puking next to you when she saw his head?"

'N' put her finger on his lips. "Enough. I feel guilty too, you know. I tried to sort everything out and it didn't work."

"I wasn't trying to make you feel . . ."

"I know. And Mirko . . ."

"Go on."

"Don't get too attached to Larien."

"You're the second person to tell me that today. You wouldn't enjoy hearing the name of the first."

"This isn't agent talk, Mirko. For your own peace of mind, just don't trust her too much."

Mirko squinted at her. "I seem to remember that you're the one who —"

"I know that, and I need you to be—or at to least to seem—close to her. It's an important part of the work you're doing. Just don't trust her—or think it means anything."

Mirko stood up sharply. “Can’t you ever stop manipulating people? You told me to get close to Larien: now you tell me not to. Well, it’s too late! I *am* close to her. You can’t just turn these things on and off! Bartazan told me she was out of my league, and threatened me with Gambar Inisse; that didn’t work. And neither will your dark hints about ‘don’t trust her.’”

‘N’ looked away; Mirko couldn’t tell if she was angry or upset.

“I didn’t have to tell you this,” she said, her voice throbbing with some poorly concealed emotion. “The easiest and best thing for me would just be to let you fall in love with her. And of course you would; she’s young, she’s beautiful, she’s charming—how could you resist her? I could just let it happen, and she’d break your heart and I wouldn’t care and none of it would matter and I’d just move on to wrecking other people’s lives and tell myself that it’s all for the best . . .”

“‘Let it happen’? Life doesn’t work like that, ‘N’. People don’t need your permission to have —”

“Oh, you don’t understand! You just don’t understand! I’m trying to *help* you!”

“You’re jealous! Jealous because Larien is young and beautiful and an Elector’s niece, and you’ve pushed us together. Is it really as simple as that? You’re trying to mix that with espionage and you can’t cope with it!”

‘N’ wheeled to face him, and slapped him hard across the face.

“Don’t you *ever* speak to me that way again, or presume to understand my motivations!” She threw down a pouch filled with coins. “There’s your *douceur*; in exactly two minutes I am going to shoot you if I can see you; and these bows have some range on them. I’d start riding now.”

Mirko said nothing and moved towards Boodle. He turned back and picked up the pouch. “I assume someone somewhere will miss Padizan,” he said, and tucked the pouch inside his coat. Leaping aboard Boodle he rode off without a backward glance.



Chapter 11

Mirko had no leisure to spare for reflection on either Larien or ‘N’ the next day. The morning was devoted to

a strenuous practice session with *Sapphire Light*, and he was pleased to note a marked improvement in both attitude and performance. He challenged *Excelsior* to a sprint as far as the Morvellos, careful to specify a course with no sharp turns. *Excelsior*, who had been rowing particularly well of late, came out a length and a half ahead, by no means a bad performance.

Mirko noticed that *Fanar’s Glory* was out on the water again, and as they rowed past on the way to dock, he saw that Gambar Inisse was at the helm. *Fanar’s Glory* was not one of the very best galleys; although Inisse was among the best helms, her crew was undermined by a sense of fatalism which prevented her from reaching the greatest heights of performance.

Inisse studiously ignored *Sapphire Light* as she came past—clearly the Azure was not a livery to evoke any cordial emotion; and he remained unaware of the part her crew had played in his release. The man he must associate with his liberty was now dead. The thought sparked off an idea in Mirko’s mind.

After taking a convivial lunch with Cascais and *Excelsior’s* officers Raidis and Haidis, Mirko went back to his lodgings to collect the pouch of coins ‘N’ had given him. He had learned that Padizan had lived with a spinster sister out on the farmland away to the east of the town, and he took the strider out in that direction.

Fording the River Ghesp at low tide—the bridge had been washed away again—he soon found himself in country largely unfamiliar. Farmsteads dotted the banks of the Ghesp until the foothills of the Namadar Mountains. Mirko passed dozens as he rode along the towpath, stopping occasionally to ask how far remained to the Padizan’s old cottage.

After a ride of an hour so up into the foothills Mirko came at last to Green Acres, the farm Padizan had shared with Nadien, his sister. Out at the front of the cottage, small and ramshackle, Mirko came across two slaves.

“I am looking for Mistress Nadien,” he said. “Is she at home?”

The taller of the slaves looked up. “Who is asking?”

“My name is—simply tell her a friend of her brother’s.”

The slave moved lazily into the house, and after a short delay Mistress Nadien herself appeared, her back bent from years of labour and her face tanned and lined from long exposure to the elements.

"I am Nadien," she said with greater confidence and dignity than Mirko had expected. "I don't believe you announced yourself."

Mirko sighed and dismounted Boodle. With a courteous but by no means obsequious—or so he hoped—bow, he said: "My name is Ascalon; I was formerly a Garganet naval officer, and I used to deal with your brother at Formello."

Nadien frowned. "This is not a good start. I take it you work for—Bartazan?"

"In a manner of speaking."

"Yes or no? It's not that difficult. Either you work for the man who killed my brother or you don't. Which is it to be?"

"I have no reason to deceive you; I am employed by Bartazan as a galley-master."

Nadien's face hardened. "I cannot imagine anything you have to say to me that I'd want to hear."

Mirko looked around the farmstead; the building did not appear in the best repair, and the slaves did not have the stamp of prime quality.

"Mistress Nadien," he said. "Padizan's death must have left you—not well circumstanced. I am sure this is not a situation he would have desired. Your brother had many friends at Formello, and some of them have wished to show their friendship in gold. It cannot bring Padizan back, but it may alleviate some of your suffering." He held out the pouch.

Nadien reached out and took it. "I believe this is known as conscience-money," she said. "I will not deny I need it, and as such I will accept it—but I do not believe your story. A galley-master is an important man to Bartazan, and I cannot believe you are here without his knowledge. This money comes from him, which is the only reason I take it. You sir, a jackanapes, a bought man, inspire nothing but my deepest revulsion and contempt. Go now, before I set Etten and Sallar on you."

The slaves did not look enthusiastic at the prospect of attacking an armed Mirko, but nonetheless he bowed and mounted Boodle.

"You may be right, Mistress, that this is conscience-money; but please be assured that it does not come from Bartazan. There are plenty of people who do not sleep easy at your brother's death."

Digging his heels into Boodle's flanks he rode back off down the towpath, feeling no better than he had before he'd come.

On returning to his lodgings, Mirko found two letters awaiting him. One appeared to be from 'N', and this he set aside; he did not recognise the script on the other, which he opened first.

My Dear Mirko,

Please accept my apologies for my intemperate conduct at Formello. I am sure you can understand that I was immeasurably shocked and distressed at my uncle's actions, and this left me unable to appreciate the kind attentions of the only friend I have left in Formello.

My brother Carnazan has left Formello today. Has he told you he is my uncle's heir and will be the next 'Bartazan of Bartazan'? This has never been of the smallest concern to him, and he has been contented to follow his own curious enthusiasms rather than seeking political advancement. This morning my uncle told him that no further funds would be forthcoming for the construction of a new prototype 'Bartazan House Blue', and he left immediately to conduct his researches away from Paladria. I do not know where he has gone or when he will return.

I am very lonely and frightened at Formello. My only society is my aunt, who is too cowed to provide any real conversation, and Cascais, who has become increasingly distraught of late.

I am very sorry that I have quarrelled with someone who means as much to me as you have come to mean. I understand why you must race *Sapphire Light* as hard as you can, and to show this I would be very honoured if you would take me aboard the galley next time she goes out.

Dear Mirko, can you forgive me?

Foolish and unhappy,

Larien.

Mirko was moved in spite of himself. How could 'N' say 'don't become too attached to her' when she could write a letter like that? And without Carnazan, her existence would be miserable indeed.

Next he turned to the letter from 'N', noting with surprise that it was not in cipher.

'G'

Please accept my apologies for my intemperate conduct on the Cliffs. I should not have spoken to you or acted the way I did. Particularly I am embarrassed to have lost my temper and struck you; I prize my self-control above all other virtues and I have injured myself at least as much in my own estimation as I must have done in yours.

I would be sorry to have forfeited the personal regard you have shown me—not least by your daring recent escape—through my immoderacy. Be assured that I value your abilities as an agent more as time goes on.

I hope you will bear this in mind as I reiterate the important observations I made on the Cliff:

1. You are in grave personal danger if it seems you have a serious chance of winning the Margariad.
2. Any emotional involvement you have with Larien can only end in dismay.

I make both of these points in a spirit of professionalism and not in any way through the baser motivations which you falsely attributed to me yesterday.

I will contact you in due course to learn of any further information you may have for me.

'N'

Mirko smiled as he lay the letter down. 'N' may have been rattled into omitting to cipher, but in every other respect the letter was characteristic of her behaviour: a sincere but limited apology concentrating more on her self-image than any offence to Mirko; and further emphasis on the points she had promoted so strongly before. At least, he thought, he knew where he was with 'N': would that he could say the same about Larien.



Chapter 12

The next morning Mirko detected a real tension about the Arba Docks: it was less than a week to The Sorcerers Regatta, the last major race before the Margariad itself. He marched at the head of the crew down the jetty towards *Sapphire Light's* mooring, noting the mood of the galleys he passed. *Fanar's Glory* appeared calm and disciplined, her overseer Wetzal commending her crew to greater zeal in scrubbing down her sides. *Morvellos Devil* was affixing a new orange mermaid pennant and her master Lammerkin was tense and alert as he supervised the positioning of his crew. Dandret seemed relaxed at the helm of *Kestrel* as she pulled away from her jetty; her chances of winning any of the races were minimal and this seemed reflected in her lack of tension.

The two galleys which Mirko seriously feared were *Excelsior* and *Dragonchaser*, who sandwiched *Sapphire Light*

at the end of the jetty. He noticed a bookmaker with a placard standing nearby:

BET ON THE SORCERERS REGATTA!

WHO WILL WIN?

10 VALUT WILL WIN YOU THE FOLLOWING SUMS,
ASSUMING ONLY YOU ARE CORRECT!

Dragonchaser 12 val.

Excelsior 40 val.

Morvellos Devil 50 val.

Sapphire Light 65 val.

Fanar's Glory 80 val.

Kestrel 125 val.

Other galleys on application.

Mirko felt that the odds reflected reputation rather than recent form. *Sapphire Light* had clearly outperformed *Morvellos Devil* over the past few sessions. The odds on *Dragonchaser* were by no means generous, but given her invincibility in races over the past three years this was hardly surprising.

Mirko gave a cheery greeting to Raidis and Haidis as he approached *Excelsior*, indicating the odds board with his head. Raidis laughed derisively. "Back us, Ascalon—we're going well and *Dragonchaser* will finish in our wake!"

"We'll see! *Sapphire Light* is running well too!"

Drallenkoop sauntered over. "Save your money, gentlemen. *Dragonchaser* has been putting in double practice, and we can sustain a high tempo for unparalleled time. I'm confident of victory."

"So is Federico, judging by those odds," said Raidis. "Do you even back yourself at such margins?"

"Why, of course," replied Drallenkoop, smoothing his hair back in the breeze. "If we win, it's easy money, so if I don't bet, I'm backing us to lose—and who's going to beat us? Raidis, your crew don't believe it—and neither do you. And Ascalon, you have neither the helm nor the belief for victory. Inisse lacks the coolness of judgement, and Helleness of *Morvellos Devil* is too old to helm with real boldness. No, earn yourself some valut: back *Dragonchaser*!"

With this he leapt aboard the galley, leaving neither Mirko nor Raidis materially vexed: such bravado was part of the game, and characteristic of Drallenkoop's confidence.

"Mirko! Wait there!" called a high voice as he prepared to board *Sapphire Light*. It was Larien, tripping lightly down the jetty, kitted out in a dockhand's garb of white blouse and black trousers gathered at the ankle. "Will you take me out this morning? I haven't been out on a galley this year."

"Climb aboard," he said, holding out his hand. "You can ride the observation platform, as long as you're quiet."

Larien made a comic moue. "Your enthusiasm is overwhelming."

"That's the deal: I'm still overseer in Fenneker's absence, and I can hardly invite one of the slaves to oversee."

"Why are we waiting, then?"

As he helped her up to the observation platform, he said: "I'm glad you seem happier today, Larien. What happened at Formello was a terrible shock."

"It's past now. I have many reasons to hate my uncle; this is just one more. And now he's driven Carnazan away too . . ."

"Relax and enjoy the sea. You'll find it surpassingly soothing."

"Thank you, Mirko—and thank you for forgiving me. I behaved abominably."

Mirko shrugged.

"Ascalon!" called Cascais. "Are we going?"

Mirko dropped down to the overseer's hollow. "Indeed we are. Jenx, beat Seven!"

The bay was crowded, with most of the contenders for next week's race going though their paces. Mirko worked *Sapphire Light* hard, experimenting with a number of tempos, running at Nine for as long as possible, and practising rapid changes from Seven through to Nine and back again. The results were very encouraging, and Mirko called a halt for rations with some satisfaction. Larien had seemed thrilled, occasionally calling aloud in appreciation.

After a break, Mirko decided to order some helm work. A few sharp turns around the Hanspar went relatively successfully; Cascais' evolutions lacked the crispness of natural aptitude, but the Rock was avoided without excessive diminution of speed.

"Jenx! Beat Seven! Cascais, make for The Sorcerers!"

This was an important conclusion to the day's exercise. The turn around The Sorcerers next week would probably decide the race, and while Cascais was per-

forming relatively well it seemed opportune to familiarise him a little more with the prevailing conditions.

The pull from the Hanspar to The Sorcerers was hard work into a strong current. The three rocks, Anazgro, Ryozaax and Basile-Orario, named after the three infamous and ill-fated wizards of East Gammeling, looked much larger and more forbidding close up, and Mirko decided it was unnecessary bravado to attempt to 'thread the needle', especially as he had no intention of doing so in the race. *Fanar's Glory* was also doing some practice work around the rocks, which made threading the needle even more foolhardy. Mirko compromised on an approach at full race pace going round the outside of the rocks.

"Jenx! Beat Nine! Cascais! Round the outside, if you please!"

Fanar's Glory had pulled up to within half a length, both reckless this close to The Sorcerers, and discourteous in a practice session.

"*Fanar's Glory*! Back off! Back off!" called Larien from the observation platform. Inisse sneered and made an obscene gesture from the helm. He mouthed something of which only 'Bartazan bitch' was audible.

"Maintain tempo! Maintain course!" called Mirko calmly. "Florio, Walisse! Keep the rhythm there, men! Cascais, outside, outside!"

Fanar's Glory was unable to gain terms with *Sapphire Light* and Cascais pulled the long swinging turn around the outside of Anazgro, the easiest of the Sorcerers, quickening appreciably as she came round into the current.

From the observation platform came the call: "She's threading the needle! *Fanar's Glory* is threading the needle!"

Larien was right, Mirko saw from the overseer's cockpit. Inisse had swung the helm hard to port, turning *Fanar's Glory* almost a hundred and eighty degrees. It was an amazing manoeuvre—and seeing it, Mirko knew that never in a lifetime could Cascais master it—and *Fanar's Glory* shot ahead as she hit the faster inter-rock current first. She emerged a length and a half ahead of *Sapphire Light* but then lost momentum as the current died—always the outcome for a galley which came through the eye of the needle. It was now incumbent on Inisse to move aside to avoid a collision, since *Fanar's Glory* was the slower boat; but instead she angled her bows across *Sapphire Light*. Mirko's crew, rowing Nine, had no chance to slow or avoid. She ploughed through

Fanar's Glory's oars, smashed full on into her hull, before grinding to a halt.

There was a scream from the observation platform; Larien, jolted by the sudden stop, was launched into the air and hit the water with a sickening splash. Without thinking, Mirko plunged into the water, diving deep under the surface. The impact of the sea knocked the breath from his lungs, and he surfaced, gasping.

Looking around, he saw Larien floundering. He didn't know whether she could swim, but the shock of the fall had clearly disoriented her. She beat ineffectually at the surface, her head bobbing below the surface with alarming regularity. Mirko saw that *Fanar's Glory* was effectively obstructing *Sapphire Light's* attempts to disengage and move across to pick them up; he could expect no immediate help from that quarter.

Mirko swam across to Larien with swift, even strokes; swimming was something all Garganet mariners did well. "Larien! Relax! I'll keep you afloat!"

Larien made to say something, but she sank back under the surface with her mouth open, emerging a second later with a great choking gasp. Mirko closed the gap between them and put an arm under her back, keeping her above the water with his own bodyweight. Once he had established a stable position it was relatively easy to maintain an equilibrium.

"Are you alright?"

"Yes," gasped Larien. "I—I could see we were going to hit but I couldn't brace myself. I thought I was going to drown."

"You'll be safe now — as long as *Sapphire Light* can disengage from that dog Inisse."

"I can swim, you know."

"You hide it well."

"I just panicked. Let me go, I'll stay afloat."

Mirko felt such a course would be more cognisant with her dignity if she really could swim, and gently disengaged to assess her competence. She appeared to tread water efficiently enough.

"Can you swim to *Sapphire Light*?" asked Mirko.

"I think so."

Larien was as good as her word, and soon they were in range of the rope thrown out by Damiano. Mirko secured it under Larien's arms and she was hauled aboard, with Mirko scrambling impatiently up the side.

Once on the deck, Larien embraced him with real feeling, throwing in a sensual kiss for good measure.

"You saved my life," she said, sinking her head on his shoulder.

"I thought you could swim," replied Mirko.

"So I can," she said. "But I would have drowned before I remembered it. Mirko, you are a wonderful man."

A remark, presumably lewd, from Jenx caused immense hilarity on the slave deck. Cascais uttered an ineffectual reproof but there was now no halting the string of ribaldries from the rowers. Mirko turned to face them.

"Do you take this assault on our honour so lightly? Do you forget the provocation from Inisse? Today there will be a reckoning."

Florio called out: "Do you intend to chastise Gambar Inisse?"

"Yes, Florio, I do. Our honour is at stake."

Florio shook his head. "The term 'irony' springs to mind."

"Enough, Florio. Attend to your station. Damiano, Walisse, with me."

Damiano and Walisse left their oars and moved astern. "*Fanar's Glory* appears unable to disengage our oars. Let us step across and offer our assistance."

"Aye, sir."

Leaping the narrow gap between the craft, they soon found themselves on the helm platform of *Fanar's Glory*. Inisse stood at his helm undaunted, his overseer and several slaves surrounding him.

"Sir," said Inisse in a strong voice, "you find yourselves on the sacred deck of *Fanar's Glory*, a vessel consecrated as a temple to the sea-god Fanar, the deity of Paladria. Kindly regulate your conduct accordingly."

Mirko dropped his hand to his sword-hilt.

"I rather thought I had come aboard a brigand's lair where the rules of the sea are set at naught. Since neither Damiano nor myself subscribe to Paladrian superstition in these devotional matters, we disregard your claims to sanctity. Account for your actions this instant, or face the consequences. A young woman nearly lost her life through your malice today."

Inisse laughed. "And what of my sufferings? Who is to avenge those? If the Bartazan trollop had drowned it would not wipe off one iota of the debt owed to me for the eight months I spent in Bartazan's pit. Do you know, when they rescued me, I could not even remember who I was?"

"And who did rescue you, Inisse? You can hardly dispense justice until you know the facts."

"You are Bartazan's men on Bartazan's galley—I think I can look elsewhere for my deliverers. If that concludes your business, you may leave immediately: we are required at the Temple of Fanar to conduct a Mystery."

Mirko stepped smartly forward and dealt Inisse a buffet around the ears. "You aggravate your offence by referring to the Lady Larien as a 'trollop'. Conduct your Mystery, by all means—and then bring yourself back to the jetty. You and I, sir, have business to transact."

Inisse bowed insolently. "In case you feel the provocation insufficiently direct, let me expand my characterisation of the Lady Larien to include the terms 'hussy', 'harlot', 'whore', 'jade', 'beastialist', 'fornicatrix', 'deviant', 'reprobate' and 'moral leper'. I believe the term 'cocksucker' is not used in polite society but nonetheless I consider it appropriate in this case. Good evening to you, Captain."

Mirko raised his arm, to a sneer from Inisse. Damiano and Walisse quickly pulled Mirko away and they returned to *Sapphire Light*. Mirko's face was thunderous.

"Cascais! Disengage from this buffoon's craft, steer for shore. Jenx, beat Seven."

Larien, who appeared to have heard Inisse's discourse, said: "You do not need to protect my honour, Mirko—and certainly not Bartazan's."

"Inisse's insults were an abomination. I would have felt obliged to defend the honour and reputation of any lady so maligned."

"His list was by and large unspecific, and reflected only the understandable bile of his temper. His provocations have been extreme. Those terms which referred to specific acts—with the possible exception of 'fornicatrix'—were demonstrably false, and those which did not were largely subjective value judgements."

"I am puzzled by your use of the term 'possible' in connection with fornication. Here, at least, it would seem feasible to deal in absolutes."

"The topic lacks any great relevance or interest—and certainly does not feature in the chivalrous mode which you appear to occupy today."

Mirko bowed in acknowledgement, welcoming Larien's return to her customary spirit. Clearly her immersion had inflicted no lasting damage.

As soon as *Sapphire Light* had moored, Mirko summoned a rattlejack for Larien and instructed Walisse to accompany her back to Formello. He was uncertain how Bartazan would react; while he evinced little regard for his niece, the insult to the honour of Bartazan House was clear and direct. Better indeed if he dealt with the matter himself.

As he waited for *Fanar's Glory* to reach the jetty, he could not help reflecting on the irony of the situation. It was solely due to his own impulses that Inisse was at liberty at all; yet Inisse, perfectly reasonably, hated with a vengeful passion everything to do with Bartazan House and seemingly would not rest until he ruined either it or himself. He was hardly in a position to draw the facts to Inisse's attention, and he certainly felt no personal animosity—but in his current humour, he represented a real danger not just to himself, but to *Sapphire Light* and Larien. The situation was difficult and complicated: the person best able to help him was 'N', he suspected. But 'N' always made sure she was the one to initiate contact, and he had no reliable way of arranging a meeting with her. He would have to track down one of the various intermediaries he occasionally used.

A short while later, *Fanar's Glory* lashed herself to her mooring. The officers and crew disembarked and set up a strange wailing chant as they marched off, presumably to undertake their Mystery. Mirko sent the crew back to the Urmalest under Cascais' command, with the exception of Florio and Damiano whom he retained as seconds. He spent the next hour or so honing the various duelling skills he had learned as a matter of course in Garganet; while his practice had been somewhat negligent of late, he doubted that Inisse, after eight months in an underground pit, would be any more proficient.

"How have you managed to get yourself in this position?" asked Florio as they stopped to drink. "You risk your life—and ours, of course—to rescue Inisse, and now he won't rest until he's killed you. Whichever of you ends up dead, it's an absurdity and a waste."

Mirko sighed as he sat back on a mooring bollard. "I hardly know how else it could have turned out. I can't tell Inisse who rescued him without endangering us all, and I can't allow him to insult the Lady Larien without chastisement."

Damiano said: "You could, in fact. You are an employee of the House of Bartazan—however eccen-

trically you discharge that employment—and any rebuke would be better be administered by Bartazan himself or Carnazan.”

“It’s my imaginings of the form Bartazan’s rebuke might take that makes me want to settle this myself; remember Padizan. And Carnazan is not here to intervene. Besides, Larien was under my protection as galley-master. A man must have some honour.”

Florio snorted. “Honour? Damiano and I know what you did in Garganet. It hardly seems appropriate to talk about honour in those circumstances.”

Mirko’s jaw clenched. “That was Garganet. I forfeited enough; it doesn’t mean I can’t try to act with dignity here.”

Damiano said: “We agreed that Garganet is behind us, Florio. We all need to stick together if any of us are going to get home. But Mirko, you should be careful with Larien: I don’t think Bartazan will be overjoyed if you debauch her.”

Mirko shrugged. “We act as we act; and take the consequences. I regulate my conduct by this precept.”



Chapter 13

The sun was low in the sky when Inisse returned to the jetty. Accompanying him were two Fanarites of sober habit and surly mien. Florio and Damiano lounged on the jetty planks, while Mirko leaned, dead still, against his bollard.

Inisse stepped towards him. “You had business with me, I understand?”

Mirko stood erect and stepped forward. “You insulted the Lady Larien today in terms I found strongly offensive. I am sure that on reflection you will wish to withdraw the remarks and tender an apology to the lady.”

Inisse rubbed at his beard. “My animosity against the House of Bartazan is strong and understandable. Naturally I comprehend the Lady Larien in my displeasure. My only regret is that the imminence of the Mystery prevented me from outlining my opinions at greater length.”

“Very well,” said Mirko. “I have given you the chance. ‘Death, blood, or yield’, sir.”

Inisse bowed. “The devotees of Fanar believe the dispensation of death is a matter for the Great One

alone, and not to be presumed upon by man. I choose ‘yield’.”

Mirko’s smile of relief was masked by his bow. He had had no desire to kill Inisse, nor indeed to die himself, although this possibility was more remote. This way he might at least be able to force Inisse to yield.

Inisse said: “Perhaps we might adjourn to the dockside where conditions are not so cramped as the here on the jetty. My seconds are the Pious Derellen and Aranisse.”

Mirko nodded to them. “Mine are the Gentle Florio and Damiano. Let us proceed with rapid effect.”

The dockside was empty, the only sound the lapping of the tide against the wharf and the occasional scrape of a galley hull. Inisse and Mirko drew their rapiers and circled cautiously. Mirko essayed a couple of feints which Inisse read and parried competently. Stepping up the tempo of his attack, Mirko managed to force Inisse back. A swift lunge caught Inisse’s shirt but failed to draw blood; instead Inisse was prompted to leap forward, prancing and stamping; a technique unorthodox but effective, and Mirko was forced to give ground. Encouraged by his success, he pushed further forward; Mirko, ducking under an over-ambitious lunge, caught Inisse’s cheek with a slight nick.

“You may yield, sir!” called Mirko. Inisse shook his head. Mirko had offered him an honourable exit, but he had turned it down. It seemed that Mirko might have to hurt him more seriously.

Inisse’s injury had raised his hackles, and he redoubled the aggression of his attack. His swordplay was characterised by flair, daring and more skill than Mirko had expected. Mirko continued to fight in the classic Garganet style: defensive, watchful, patient. Another opening presented itself and he jabbed forward to nick Inisse’s shoulder. Neither injury would inconvenience a determined opponent.

“Fight, man!” called Inisse. “My old grandmother fences with more spirit!”

Mirko said nothing, content to give ground until he could force an opening. Inisse’s physical condition could not be good; he could not possibly have recovered full fitness yet.

It proved to be his patience which was exhausted first, however: with a cry of “Fonar is great!” he launched a huge leap at Mirko who, surprised, stumbled backwards. With a cry of triumph, Inisse thrust at Mirko’s throat, a move signalled so far in advance that

he was able to roll aside, the blade missing him by an inch. With his left hand he grabbed Inisse's sword-arm and pulled the wrist back against his knee. He thought to hear a faint 'crack' and Inisse dropped the sword with a yelp. Mirko applied more pressure to the wrist and pulled Inisse to the ground, hauling himself erect in the same movement.

He stood with his sword at the prone Inisse's throat. "You've fought with skill and vigour, Inisse. Now yield."

Inisse spat up at Mirko. "Dog!"

"I don't want to kill you, Inisse. Yield or die."

"Yield!" hissed Inisse.

Damiano walked over and pulled Inisse to his feet by his good wrist. "Go now," he said. "We all saw your bravery today."

Inisse said nothing. In accordance with custom he bowed and offered his sword hilt to Mirko, who shook his head. "Forfeiture is for cowards," he said. "Take back your sword."

"Thank you," said Inisse expressionlessly. He turned on his heel and walked away with his seconds.

Damiano said: "Are you hurt, Mirko?"

Mirko shook his head. "He was more skilfull than I expected, but he didn't touch me. Close, though."

"Idiocy," said Florio through tight lips. "You rescue the man; then you let him nearly drown your paramour and come within an inch of cutting your throat. We should have let him rot: and you should have killed him today. He's not finished with you yet."

"The Lady Larien is not my paramour. And Bartazan detained him unjustly; we did right to free him."

Florio laughed mirthlessly. "And you seek to right every injustice? When you run a crew of slaves? Where is the justice in my situation? Or Damiano's? We are Garganet officers. All of the crew would adduce circumstances of their own."

"Do you think I like to see Garganets in the slave pens? The fact is you were captured by corsairs who sold you in the markets to Bartazan. By every rule of trade that's legal. I can't do anything for either of you."

Florio shrugged. "I never thought you could; I never even imagined you'd try. But don't be so keen to promote yourself as a universal champion of justice, Ascalon. It doesn't sit well with everyone."

"You don't have to like me, Florio; you don't have to agree with me. Just do what I tell you. As soon as I can do anything for either of you, I'll do so."

Damiano snorted. "Do you know, I think I preferred Padizan and Fenneker: at least I knew where I was with them."

"That's enough, both of you. I'm all that stands between you and Bartazan having the hide whipped off you."

"Obliged to your forbearance, I'm sure," said Florio with sardonic emphasis.

"Mirko—look," said Damiano in a level tone.

Turning, he saw some twenty figures in the white robes trimmed with green of the Fanarites advancing towards them. Four of the men carried a large net.

"Why do I think they aren't going fishing?" said Florio.

"We're trapped," said Damiano. "We can't get past them and we've the sea at our backs."

"And one sword between three of us," said Mirko. "This constitutes competitive odds."

Florio shook his head. "Damn Inisse! Every time you show him any mercy he tries to kill us."

Mirko pulled his sword. "You two distract them—I'll try and slash the net."

"Distract!" said Damiano. "With what, my arse?"

"Come on!" called Florio. "Garganet! Garganet!"

"Garganet!" cried Damiano as he joined Florio's charge.

Mirko advanced cautiously towards the net; well before he was in sword range its holders surged forwards; Mirko's arms were entangled long before he could hope to wield his sword. Kicking and struggling, he watched as first Damiano and then Florio were clubbed down with stout staves. In silence they were carried across to the net and dumped in alongside Mirko; a tangle of arms and legs which Mirko could not help but feel essentially undignified. Florio and Damiano, both stunned, seemed in no condition to offer an opinion.

Circumstances—in particular the net—prevented Mirko from decisive action. He had no option but to wait as he was jounced along through the back streets, until he saw, to no great surprise, the Temple of Fanar looming large.

Through the giant archway they were carried, into the main worship space, out past the back of the altar to the top of a concealed stairway. Down, down they were carried. Soon Mirko smelled a briny tang and heard the lapping of waves. It seemed the Fanarites

maintained an underground link to the sea, although the reason was not immediately obvious.

The Fanarites soon arrived at their destination; a dank, reeking cell with every inch of floor covered in seaweed. Mirko was encouraged that the seaweed did not extend up the walls; at least they would not be drowned by the next tide.

The Fanarites set the net down and unceremoniously rolled the Garganets out.

"What is this?" asked Mirko, more for form's sake than in any serious hope of an answer.

"Wait," said one of the Fanarites. "All will soon be revealed to you. Make your peace with whatever gods you worship."

Mirko derived no comfort this; indeed it seemed likely that the Fanarites intended to kill them. Florio had been right in saying he had shown Inisse too much mercy. Fortunately Florio, conscious but groggy, seemed ill-disposed to press the point.

Several hours passed. The daylight which leached into the cell faded, leaving only an eerie phosphorescence from the seaweed. Florio emerged from a long silence.

"So. What are their intentions, do you think?"

Mirko sighed. "Nothing good, I suspect. If you were my officers, I'd be suggesting we say the Battle Creed."

Damiano groaned and rubbed his head. "We aren't dead yet. 'I commend me to the endless night' seems unnecessarily pessimistic."

"They clearly intend to kill us," said Mirko. "My guess would be as some form of sacrifice."

"What a death," spat Florio. "Underground, a sacrifice and a slave. We'll take a few with us, at least."

The door creaked on its rusted hinges to admit a small amount of light and three figures. Two were guards with swords drawn; clinking from the corridor suggested there were more. The third figure was a woman, her purple robes trimmed with silver. By Mirko's assessment this made her a senior figure, possibly even a High Spiritor.

"My lady," he said. "Welcome to what is, however temporarily, my establishment. I am sorry we are unable to offer you hospitality."

"Are you the galley-master?" she asked, her voice calm and well-modulated. She did not appear a fanatic. Mirko suspected that their chances of leaving the Temple alive depended on creating some kind of rapport with her.

"Mirko Ascalon, formerly of the Garganet Navy, at your service. My associates, the Gentle Florio and Damiano."

"An imbalance exists," said the woman.

"Indeed it does," said Mirko. "We have told you our names; you have not returned the courtesy."

She clucked and said: "I am the Ecclesiant Ahtacrine; I conduct certain rites Below the Temple. The imbalance relates not to empty formalities, but to the treatment of the Adept Gambar Inisse, at the hands of the Elector Bartazan."

"Most reprehensible, I agree," said Mirko. "It may be if you were to draw the matter to his attention that he would issue an apology. I would happy to act as an intermediary if necessary."

Ahtacrine frowned. Her fair hair was piled high on her head, her robe cut to reveal an alabaster expanse of skin above her breast; she did not carry herself as a woman accustomed to debate or opposition. "Your idea is at best witless. Bartazan is not a man of humility or piety. It is necessary to find other ways of restoring equilibrium."

"Perhaps a token payment as fiduciary damages?"

"You fail to understand the gravity of the offence. It is not just Inisse who has been wronged by Bartazan but Fanar Himself. In such a context, talk is callow."

"I sense," interjected Florio, "that you already have a different idea."

"Indeed I do," said Ahtacrine. "Fanar demands the blood of those responsible for the slight."

"I rather thought he might," said Mirko wearily. "I find it unlikely that the Elector will consent to appear before you."

"The God will accept the repentance of proxies on this occasion," replied Ahtacrine. "In the circumstances the three of you will suffice."

"Out of interest," said Damiano, "how does Fanar communicate such subtle and precise information? I believe he lacks corporeal form."

"It is late—far far too late—in your earthly existence to begin to understand the doctrines of Fanar. What lies beyond this life, I can say no more than you. It may be that your perplexities are resolved at this point."

"Under the circumstances," said Damiano, "I am content to remain in ignorance."

"Enough!" said Ahtacrine haughtily. "Fanar will be appeased tomorrow. You need not concern yourself that

His wishes have been incorrectly interpreted; my information is exact and unequivocal. Your conduct displays an unseemly levity, and I will allow you until the morning to prepare yourselves for the events to come. I warn you, a sacrifice of this nature to Fanar is a serious and solemn rite: if you profane it by whatever means, it will be necessary to chastise you."

Damiano responded: "But if we're going to —"

"I have listened to enough," said Ahtacrine. "I sense you are unwilling to adopt an appropriate humility. This is regrettable, but the rite must proceed nonetheless. Good night to you."

Ahtacrine made a curious devotional gesture with her hands and left the cell, which was immediately locked behind her. Florio looked across at Mirko in the eerie light. "Well?"

"I commend me to the endless night . . ."

". . . and compose myself for rest eternal . . ."

". . . I will do my duty to the end . . ."

". . . and shirk no foe . . ."

". . . I uphold my honour before my life."

Florio shook his head. "That wasn't what I meant. You two might be ready to die, but I'm not. Sometime soon they're going to take us out of here. We can still free ourselves."

Mirko nodded. "You're right. The Fanarites are overfed and undertrained: the Ecclesiant may not be so good with a knife when her enemy can move. We have one more throw."

"What have we got to lose?" said Damiano.

"Let's try to get some sleep," said Mirko. "I'm planning still to be around tomorrow night."

Sleep proved a somewhat limited commodity; no sooner had Mirko drifted into a fitful doze than the lapping of the incoming tide wetted his feet and banished all further thoughts of rest. Florio was similarly discommoded and set up a great bellow: "Hoy there! What kind of treatment is this? Our quarters are somewhat damp!"

"Patience in there!" called a Fanarite from outside the cell. "You will be making ample acquaintance of water soon enough."

The key turned slowly in the lock, and a body of armed guards entered. Damiano and Florio immediately threw themselves against the Fanarites and were subdued with harsh and effective force. Mirko shook his head; this had not been an intelligent use of what might

well have been their last opportunity to effect an escape.

The guards led Mirko along the passageway, while Florio and Damiano were dragged with less ceremony. Up several flights of stairs they went, slippery with either seaweed or mould, and giving off a noisome odour. Presently they emerged into a large cavern, lit with lanterns of impressive scope.

One side of the chamber was packed with sober and expectant Fanarites; Mirko found it disconcerting to speculate on the likely cause of their anticipation. The far end of the chamber gave out on the sea, which flowed in through a grille to create a small central lake which formed the focal point of the space. Ripples on the surface of the water suggested something large lurked beneath.

Ahtacrine stepped from within an alcove to address the three Garganet. Today her purple robe was trimmed with sea-green, a brooch depicting a creature with fins, a sinuous body and villainously long pair of jaws at her breast.

"Welcome, gentlemen," she said. "I hope you have used your last night wisely and reached a degree of composure. Today you achieve the end of your earthly journey, assuage your crimes, and move purified into the company of Fanar."

Florio merely looked at her through the one eye not closed by swelling; Damiano kept his own counsel as he mopped at his bleeding nose; and Mirko did not feel disposed either for expostulation or theological debate.

"You see before you the Platform of Redemption," said Ahtacrine. "You will briefly find yourself affixed to the Platform while I make various small incisions; at this point you will be consigned to the Pool, where you will meet Fanar: an honour of which you should be fully conversant."

"I am scarcely worthy," murmured Damiano.

Ahtacrine turned her attention from Mirko. "Ah," she said, "the bold and defiant one. I think we will wait awhile; you may find the fates of your comrades — edifying. You," she continued, turning to Mirko, "are their leader?"

Mirko nodded. "You too," she said, "should witness the consequences of your follies before expiating them."

She turned to Florio. "So you will make the acquaintance of Fanar first."

Florio appeared somewhat groggy but still summoned the energy to spit. Ahtacrine merely gave a reproving in the look, which in the circumstances was of limited effect. Acolytes took Florio's arms and dragged him to the Platform of Redemption, where he was secured with gentle but effective restraint. Another acolyte walked to the side of the pool and threw in a foul-stinking mess of fish entrails. A giant pair of jaws broke the surface, clearly the model for Ahtacrine's brooch.

"Gods preserve us!" breathed Damiano. "They have a woe-fish."

Mirko said nothing. There was no doubt that they were about to be sacrificed to this immense and vicious sea-predator. Once they were in the pool, they were dead men.

Ahtacrine raised her knife high.

"Impious servant of Bartazan!" she declaimed. "You have committed terrible blasphemy and sacrilege against the Adept of Fanar. The god is just, and he decrees a just expiation. I make the incisions of repentance —" two moderate cuts were made on Florio's arms — "to alert Fanar to the arrival of a penitent."

Mirko doubted that the woe-fish whom the Fanarites appeared to take as an avatar of their god needed the clarification represented by the 'incisions of repentance': the entrails appeared to have wakened its appetite and it circled the pool with a beady eye on the platform—clearly not the first time it had represented the source of its dinner.

"And now, Profane One, meet your fate!" The platform tilted from some unseen mechanism. Florio started to slide towards the water.

"HALT IN THE NAME OF THE PEREMPTOR!" called a voice from the entrance to the cavern. "Desist immediately!"

Ahtacrine turned in dismay. Mirko's gaze followed, to see twenty or so armed Peremptor's Constables.

"What do you mean by this intrusion?" snapped Ahtacrine.

The Constable who had spoken stepped forward. "My name is Corrado; I am Lieutenant of the Peremptor's Constables, and my writ is law. Release these men immediately!"

Ahtacrine lifted her chin defiantly. "You have no jurisdiction over ecclesiastical affairs."

Corrado, an athletic figure with mocking grey eyes, made a deprecatory gesture. "The practice of human

sacrifice, as you are well aware, is illegal in every aspect. The Third Consistory of Fanar acknowledges that the god is equally well satisfied with the sacrifice of sheep and goats. There are those theologians—a realm into which I do not venture—who would even argue that you yourself commit a blasphemy by readying a human sacrifice."

Ahtacrine turned her back. "Enough. This is a jack-pate, a puling nonentity. Let the rite proceed."

Two acolytes stepped forward to release Florio's bonds to allow him to pitch forward into the pool; two Constables' arrows sang and the acolytes fell dead to the floor. The other acolytes stared in bewilderment, clearly with no appetite whatsoever for a fight. Mirko nodded in silent approval; Corrado understood the value of a display of force.

"This shall not be!" cried Ahtacrine in a passion. Seeing the Constables freeing Florio, she instead launched herself with her sacrificial knife at Mirko. "You are the main culprit, and you must die!"

Mirko ducked as Ahtacrine flew at him, her hair escaping from its bun. She landed heavily on the stone floor dampened by the woe-fish's leaping. Her foot slipped, and as if in slow motion she toppled backwards towards the pool, frantically flailing for balance.

"Help me!" she cried, holding out her arm to Mirko in supplication. Mirko had no desire to be dragged into the woe-fish's pool and stepped well back. With a final scream Ahtacrine fell backwards, briefly vanishing under the surface with a splash. She resurfaced and tried to swim for the side; the woe-fish was faster. The water foamed for a moment, turned red, and then the Ecclesiant Ahtacrine was no more.

After a silence Damiano turned to Mirko. "Curious that she was so ardent about the benefits of meeting Fanar, yet proved so reluctant to avail herself of them."

"Indeed," said Mirko. "A woman of naturally modest character; perhaps she suffered from low self-esteem and felt herself unworthy of the honour."

Damiano nodded. "That must have been the case, for a fact."

Corrado approached them. "Are you gentlemen unharmed?"

Mirko nodded. "My companions and I are largely unscathed, for which we thank you. How did you know we were here?"

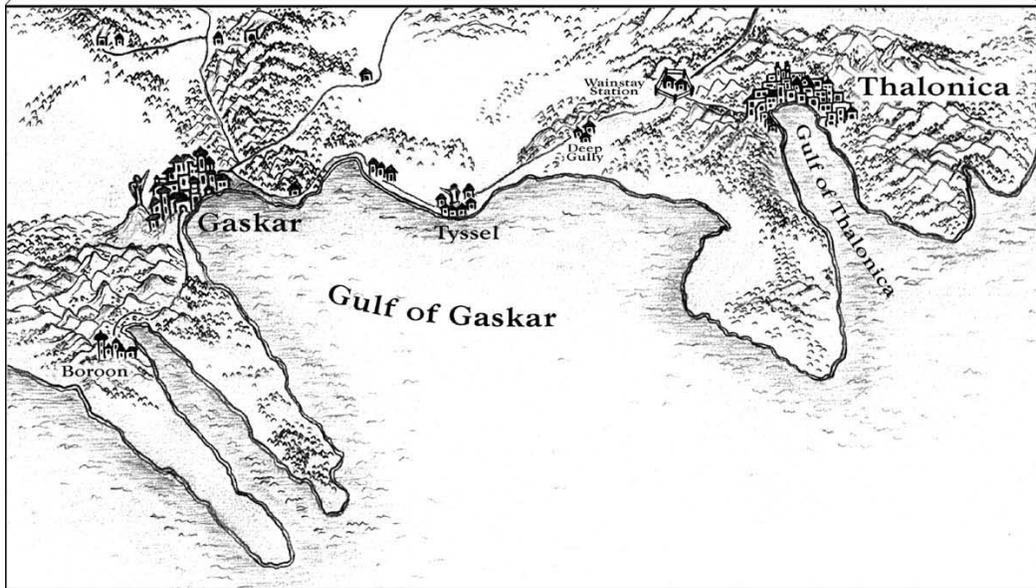
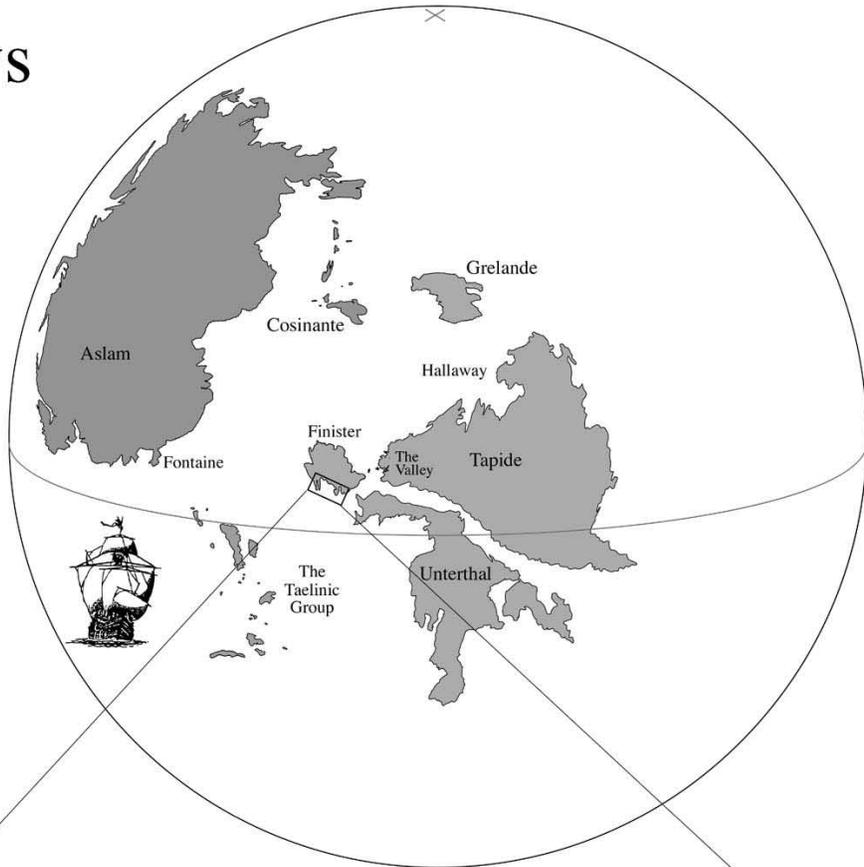
Corrando merely made an airy gesture. "Such rescues are the stock in trade of the Peremptor's Constables. I am only glad we arrived in time."

"No gladder than we are, I assure you," said Mirko with a smile. "You have our thanks."

Corrando merely bowed, and walked with them into the sudden bright glare of the new day.



Tethys



Southern Finister and the cities of Gaskar and Thalonica

Finister

by *Till Noever*

Precursory

I. TETHYS

About halfway between the globular cluster Omega Centauri and the main body of the galaxy floats a solitary Sol-class star: Caravella. In its temperate zone orbits a single planet, left there after a wandering neutron star tore its two companions out of the system and flung them into interstellar space.

Between Caravella and Omega Centauri lies a complicated absorptive nebula. Its aspect from Caravella, highlighted by the cluster from behind, bears an uncanny resemblance to a pair of faces in profile, looking in opposite directions: one leering like an evil witch from an ancient fairy tale; the other benign like a Buddha's.

The colonists named it *Janus*, after a two-faced deity of Terran mythology.

The planet they called Tethys, for reasons obvious at a glance: a water world, dominated by a deep planetary ocean, flecked with a scattering of continents clustered together in one hemisphere, together with a sprinkle of islands, some of which might qualify as continents, but most of which don't.

Aslam, the largest continent: a desert ridged with row upon row of roughly parallel mountain ranges, oriented north-south.

Tapide: a parched desert, with only two small oases, The Valley and Hallaway, where human habitation is practical. Both are separated from the bulk of the continent by arcs of forbiddingly tall ranges, providing natural barriers against the sands swept up by the storms raging across Tapide's interior.

Below Tapide lies Unterthal: once joined to Tapide, until a cataclysmic event split them apart. Unterthal is land of endless steppes and yet more jagged ranges.

Finister—continent or island?—lies to the west of Tapide, opposite the Valley, across the Limpic Ocean.

More islands lie scattered between the two major land masses: Grelande; Cosinante; the Taelinic Group; a

plethora of smaller dots and blotches. The depth of Tethys' ocean tells the story: once all of this was a single land mass, much of it now sunk beneath the waves.

The planetary ocean gives Tethys a moderate climate. No ice-caps exist. The highest and lowest temperatures are found in the centers of the large continents, whose land masses inject a note of meteorological dissonance and which are the major cause of errant storms and other occasional climatic excesses.

Tethys' nights are dominated by the globular cluster Omega Centauri, half-covered by Janus' looming silhouette. The glow from the cluster is so intense that it can even be discerned, albeit faintly, in broad daylight. The inhabitants of Tethys, most of them ignorant about the true nature of the huge structure in the sky, refer to it as the *Janus Cluster*.

A Tethys day is 27.436 standard hours, reckoned as thirty 'local' hours. A Tethys year lasts for 482.394 days. The axis is inclined at ten degrees to the orbital plane, making for seasons of moderate differentiation.

II. SETTLEMENT

The most recent wave of colonists—initially they thought they were the first, but the evidence convinced them otherwise—came to Tethys over eight hundred (Tethys) years before the time of this chronicle. They discovered a narrow range of tree and grass species, whose genetic makeup suggested that someone, at some time in the past, had discovered this world, and before leaving again dispersed a small assortment of seeds across the planet.

Intent or accident?

Who knows?

In the course of an unknown number of millennia, the planet had been populated with a narrow range of vegetable species. Grasses: hypher, fask, lemon grass, tussock. Shrubs: kilt, rambling rose, hebe. Most impressive of all were the two dominant kinds of trees. Their antecedents remained unclear. Their genetic material, though recognizably Terran, bore no discernible resemblance to that of any known species. These trees, tika and noquo, were found predominantly in The Valley and the peninsula known as 'Fontaine', hanging off the southern reaches of Aslam. In the Valley most of them concentrated in a broad swath of forest draped over the low hills of the Myrmidic Woods.

The colonists surveyed the planet and concluded that they had found their world. More than twenty thousand sleepers were aroused from their torpor and ferried down to selected areas on Tapide, Aslam, Finister, Cosinante, and Grelande. There they began to implement their grand plan. For three years they built the infrastructure of an imaginary civilization. They constructed cities and roads. In vats they grew domestic and wild animals, which they either set free or corralled for domestic use. They introduced new species of grass, shrub, tree, mosses, lichens, ferns. They labored hard to build what was in effect an enormous, very realistic and convincing, conceptually consistent, stage-set, against which was to play out their and their descendants' future.

When it was done they subjected themselves to an imprinting process which embedded false memories, to be awakened at the appropriate signal and supplant their real ones. A lottery was held to determine who would play which role in the grand scheme of things. The outcome, they knew, would not please those ending up at the bottom of the social scale, but, apart from a few grumbles, the matter went smoothly.

Everything was as it had been planned. The players readied themselves for their roles; positioned themselves for their new life. A signal was broadcast; the false memories were activated. A new and curious world began: set against a background of the technological ignorance of a medieval Earth; with adjustments here and there to remove those aspects considered undesirable, while retaining others considered essential to ensure the maintenance of what was considered the ideal *status quo*. Maybe it wasn't utopia, but in the opinion of the colonists—and this was what had motivated their enterprise—it was preferable to the prevailing state of affairs among the other worlds populated by interstellar men.

The stage setting on Tethys was varied and occasionally bizarre: deliberately so. Uniformity had not been the intention: only the discouragement of any urge to move toward higher technological stages.

Mechanisms had been put into place to ensure that undesirable developments, should they indeed occur, were foiled. A small group of select colonists, their memories erased like all the others', but supplanted with 'guardian patterns' which retained some inkling of the elements of 'real' history, watched over the developing societies. They fostered desirable elements and

ruthlessly suppressed those considered dangerous. The main population centers had each been assigned such a group. Over the centuries only one of these groups survived with its purpose intact: the 'magices' of the Isle of Skele, off the coast of Keaen, who were responsible for keeping events in the Valley on the pre-ordained course. After the demise of their colleagues they sent occasional emissaries to the other centers: agents empowered to keep civilization on the pre-ordained course by any means considered necessary and expedient. These forays met with varying success, and history began to deviate from the idealized patterns envisaged by the founders. The magices of Skele, realizing that there were limits to what they could accomplish, chose to focus their energies on the Valley, whose established political and social situation required more attention than had been anticipated. As the centuries passed, unforeseen contingencies of profound import perturbed the pre-ordained course of events. Curious mutations appeared in animals and humans alike. These occurred most frequently in those living in and near the Myrmidic Woods. Some of the creatures imported by humans and left to roam freely, assumed grotesque forms. A certain species of ape became the 'elec': a kind of shaggy primate predator. The elects living in the Myrmidic Woods grew to monstrous proportions, but were comparatively benign. Those of the plains became sleek killers, possessed of a frightful intelligence, who stalked their victims at night and were not adverse to attacking waystations or small villages—though they avoided the larger settlements. Other creatures, some of them similarly fearsome, abounded. These derived from a variety of mutated species, now capable of cross-breeding, and so giving rise yet more new species. Many of these were rarely glimpsed and became the stuff of nightmarish legend.

All the mutated animal species are nocturnal and shun the light of day. For reasons unknown, none can abide the close proximity of copper. As a result copper is the Valley's most valuable metal. Most houses—especially those in the country and on the periphery of even large settlements—have copper strips nailed along their walls and around their windows and doors. Elects and other creatures of the night will not venture through openings thus protected.

Humans mutated with less effect on their appearance and disposition. Indeed, the mutations were oddly sys-

tematic, producing, in the male, 'magices'—a name applied because of their association with the magices on Skele—and in females those known as 'circes'. A curious affinity exists between the creatures of the night and mutant humans: an awareness of a profound kinship. As a consequence not even the fiercest elec would harm a magice or a circe. They can roam freely where ordinary humans dare not go for fear for their lives.

III. KEAEN

The larger of the two kingdoms in the Valley, Keaen occupies the southern part, separated from the smaller Tergan by the Myrmidic Woods and the mighty Tor river. The capital of Keaen carries the same name, and the ruler bears the title 'The Keaen'. A complicated ancient document, The Covenant, regulates the interaction between the ruler and the common folk. Keaen is an association of provinces, each governed by a Baron, whose fealty lies with the House of Keaen. In return they receive favors, which in the past included the assignation of the Keaen's daughter, the Flower of Keaen, as a spouse to one of the Barons.

The Keaen would always have only one daughter and one son. The Covenant decreed that he had to bed 'vessels' from the common folk and among the issue select one boy and one girl to become his designated 'children'.

Apart from this populist gesture the system of government was autocratic and had little to commend it for the ordinary folk. The rulers invariably forgot their 'common' roots and became what their predecessors had been: haughty, self-centered tyrants. Thus was the *status quo* maintained.

The last of the rulers following this pattern was Hain the Keaen. But Hain was deposed and now an unknown future beckons.

IV. TERGAN

The kingdom to the north of Keaen eschews populist pretensions in favor of intrigue, murder, treachery, back-stabbing, incest.

Incest: in Keaen the ultimate taboo; in Tergan not even an issue. Indeed, if anything distinguishes Tergan from Keaen, it is the attitude toward incest. Otherwise the two nations are so much alike as to be one. People

move freely across the border. The languages are identical. Many families extended across the border.

Hostility between the nations was carefully fostered by the magices of Skele. Their goal: to strike the right balance between an enmity that would keep everybody, especially those in power, suitably distracted—and a similarity that would prevent the enmity to escalate into outright conflict—for such conflict invariably motivates a quest for technological advantage: an outcome considered undesirable and counter to the intentions of the founders.

The currently ruling dynasty in Tergan are the Juncos, led by Roi Hengiste. They are a decrepit family, inbred through too many generations—with the notable exception of the Princess Evadne, whose mother was the daughter of a Keaenean baron. The dynasty is in the process of tearing itself apart in a paroxysm of intrigues and assassinations.

V. MAGICES AND CIRCES

For centuries the magices of Skele kept their secrets to themselves. But their numbers diminished and their purpose became distorted by time. In order to bolster their power, all new magices were now recruited from the sparse pool of mutant male youths. The mutants' use of the Founders' technological relics occasionally produced some surprising and unforeseen results.

Circes, female mutants, have the talent of healing even the gravest injuries and the most terrible of diseases. They are barren, live for indefinite periods without signs of aging, and are capable of self-healing under all but the gravest of conditions. They can bestow the gift of longevity upon a lover—assuming they find the 'One': an extreme improbability. The 'One' is assigned by fate, not design. As such he may simply not exist.

While male mutants habitually end up under the umbrella of Skele's magices, circes are left to their own devices, detested and outcast. They live under disguises, always wary, always transient. Some, driven by urges too powerful to ignore, take temporary husbands, only to be forced to leave them again as exposure threatens. The husbands seldom know who their wives really are until they're gone—usually when it becomes obvious that they can bear no offspring. As a result of popular paranoia, ordinary barren women are often falsely suspected of being circes.

VI. ARMIST AND TAHLIA OF KEAEN

Armist and Tahlia are the putative children of Hain the Keaen, fathered with ‘vessels’ from the pool of ‘ordinary’ Keaeneans, according to the precepts of the Covenant. In truth Hain was barren. In both instances the ‘vessels’ had taken lovers shortly before Hain bedded them. The Keaen used this to conceal his infertility, of which he, himself, was well aware. Armist and Tahlia were taken from their respective mothers when only weeks old, and brought to Castle Keaen to be raised as Hain’s chosen offspring: Armist to be Hain’s successor; Tahlia to be given to one of the barons allied to the House of Keaen.

Armist and Tahlia, intensely enamored of each other, absconded from their fate. Armist was captured by Tergans while Tahlia was forced to return to Keaen, where she suffered a sham-wedding to the Baron Tegel, whom she later killed when he tried to rape her.

Armist and Tahlia escaped their respective gaolers and were eventually reunited. When they found out that they were not siblings they became lovers openly. They led a revolt against Hain, who was deposed and eventually died at Tahlia’s hands. Armist and Tahlia now rule Keaen. The Covenant has become defunct.

Armist is a mutant, who suffers sporadic fugues during which time around him appears to stand still, while he functions normally, able to manipulate the frozen world around him. He has used this talent on several critical occasions, but has yet to come to terms with it.

VII. PANDRAK

Father of Armist. Once magice-at-court for Hain the Keaen. He was born Kervran, and fathered Armist with Mayia of Cedrea, just before the magices of Skele took him away to be trained. Pandrak never forgave his masters for taking him and thus causing, albeit indirectly, Mayia’s death through the agency of Hain the Keaen—whom she defied when he bedded her and again when they came to take the baby Armist away. Pandrak betrayed the magices and the Covenant for the sake of his son and his revenge, and so helped to bring about Hain’s downfall.

VIII. CAITLAN OF TINAGEL AND AILIN OF TEELA

Caitlan is the former weaponsmaster at the court of Hain the Keaen. He came to the position by saving Hain’s life as a young man, when Weltig, a former Tergan assassin and now a confidante of the Tergan king, tried to kill Hain. Caitlan taught Armist and Tahlia martial skills and attempted to help them after they fled Castle Keaen.

While trying to find Armist and Tahlia, Caitlan met Ailin, a circe, then living in Cedrea, who became his lover, found to her incredulous joy that Caitlan was her ‘One’, and bestowed on him the ‘circe’s gift’.



Book One

— 1 —

“I do *not* relish the prospect of having threads woven through my skull—even if they are golden! I do *not* care to have twenty children—none of whom I’ll be allowed to ever call mine! And I certainly do *not* want to wind up looking like some painted freak from Teste’s carnival. My skin is not meant to become a testimony to the vanity and the ridiculous superstition of some Thalonican Wearer, with the mind of a wist-bug, and a beard the length of a mooring rope.”

Nerys stamped her foot on the wooden floor, eliciting a satisfying ‘thunk’ from the boards. The impact caused a sharp pain to shoot from her heel and up her right leg. She grimaced—but, ultimately, she welcomed it. It was insignificant compared to the pain they were inflicting on her now. The least she could do was to make her disgust and displeasure known to all. Not that it would do her any good—but if she didn’t let it out she would surely become deranged; if not now, then very soon, when life as she knew it would end forever.

Teufel, her youngest brother—and, she reminded herself, one of the seven reasons why she was in this predicament!—regarded her with quizzical incomprehension. His baby-blue eyes offered nothing but a complete lack of appreciation of her position.

“What do you mean?” he asked, perplexed. “This is as it is. You know this. Just as I must do my stint in the mine-office, so you must do your duty and bear Corran

the boy-children he wants you to bear.” Again he shook his head, confused about Nerys’ surprising reluctance. “How can you think this way? Your Index*: 629! The highest in Gaskar! Think of it! How can you even *begin* to question . . .”

Nerys glared at him. “*My* Index? It’s got nothing to do with *me*! Don’t you understand that? *Nothing*! It’s a stupid *number*! I don’t even come into this. It is the seven of *you* that are doing this to me! *You* make the number. You and your brothers—and our uncles, and our grandparents, and . . . oh, damn you!”

She was so angry now. Angry that he didn’t understand. Teufel—who should have. The boy she’d always cuddled and comforted when mother was in one of her moods. The gurgling baby that she, herself barely three years older, had taken for endless walks along Gaskar’s expansive parks, when nobody but the nursemaids—all of them drudges who didn’t really care a whit about the boy, but just did what they were ordered—could be bothered with him. The one human being who, even if he didn’t understand, might at least *try* to be on her side!

Or was he? If so, he hid it well.

But, deep down, she knew that he was hiding nothing.

So there was nobody—nobody who could possibly understand; or help—if there was such a thing as ‘help’ for someone like her.

“Think,” Teufel said, his face animated, “of the servants you will have to cater to your every whim. Think! You may become one of the most revered women in Thalonica.”

A glow of pride suffused his words. Nerys gaped at him, unable to believe what she was hearing. Pride in *what*? Her future status as a breeder? How could he? He was a *Gaskarian*! How could he get such stimulation out of Thalonican superstitions? Or—and the thought gave her pause and made her shudder—did he genuinely feel that this was a good thing for her?

* Referring to the ‘Hywel Index’: named after its creator, Ifan Hywel, a Gaskarian Wearer and sage. An open-ended indicator of the probability that a woman will bear a favorable ratio of men-children. The index is computed by the formula: $50 \times$ (ratio of male to female offspring in the woman’s generation) $+ 25 \times$ (the corresponding ratio in the woman’s mother’s family) $+ 12 \times$ (the corresponding ratio in the woman’s father’s family) $+ 12 \times$ (the total ratio of male to female offspring in both sets of grandparents’ families). Nerys’ index computes as $50 \times 7 + 25 \times 6 + 12 \times 4.5 + 12 \times 6.3 = 629$.

She looked at Teufel and it was like looking at a stranger.

“Corran is renown for his impeccable taste,” he assured her. “He will use the most exquisite decorators. I hear that he has a grade five in his permanent employ! You’ll be beautiful!”

Nerys took a deep breath to calm herself.

“What am I now?” she asked. “Ugly?”

“Of course not,” he amended hastily.

“But you think that my appearance could be improved upon!”

Even Teufel, callow youth that he was, noticed the danger signs. She could see him trying to find a way to talk himself out of the mess he’d gotten into. What bothered her was that it was not because he understood the preposterousness of his opinions. He just wanted to get out the room now; preferably without being torn apart in mid-air by her tongue before making his escape.

The world blurred before her eyes when she realized the complete and utter hopelessness of her situation.

“Go away,” she hissed. “Just *go away*!”

“Ner . . .” Now he was sorry for her again. She hated that. She *always* hated it when people were feeling sorry for her.

“*Go away*!”

“Ner, you just don’t understand. This is as it should be. How could it be otherwise? How could you . . .”

She took a quick step forward. “How could I *what*? Want my *life*?”

He regarded her with a certainty that might have been mistaken for the wisdom of man far in excess of Teufel’s sixteen years. But she knew better now. It wasn’t wisdom. It was just what he *knew*; what they’d taught him; what he’d accepted unquestioningly. Opinion and custom congealed into certainty; the knowledge that something which was wrong was right.

How could she presume to know better? Merely because she was on the receiving end of the wrongs?

“You have your life,” Teufel said, his voice ringing with that infuriating old-man’s condescension and wisdom. “Is it not preferable to the alternative? Or not having been born at all? Besides, you at least will have something to live for.”

“Meaning?” she snapped.

He shook his head. “Look at me,” he said . . .

. . . and what she was going to say died in her throat. Because, with a suddenness that came like a physical blow, she realized that, what she had perceived as condescension and arrogance, was really . . . what? Resignation?

"You may not have the life you would have chosen," he said quietly, "but it will still be a better one than I'll ever know."

Now, suddenly, he was the sixteen year-old again—and she was ashamed at ever having seen him as anything else but a desperate child with no future. Security? Yes. A future? Hardly. Before him lay a fate as inevitable as her own.

And Teufel knew it. And he genuinely believed—maybe had to believe—that her future was going to be better than his own. That was his hope. Because he loved her—or maybe because he believed that he did.

And she had no right to take that illusion from him.

She reached out and hugged him: the only brother she had ever been allowed to hug. The elder ones all frowned on such activity. Always had. Though she would bring her father significant commercial advantage, she had always been an embarrassment to them.

Except Teufel—whom she pressed to her now as if that could make everything go away. For the most fleeting of moments it was as if they were young children again, and she was the only one who'd ever truly cared for him. As she did now, when he cried in her arms. And then they cried together, and for the moment it was a release, and the tension ebbed out of her, and her fate became a thing in the far distant future; even though that future would start in a just a few dreadful days.

Later, her tears spent for a while, Nerys walked the streets of Gaskar: her city of a thousand white blocky edifices, draped in willful patterns over the gently sloping port-hills of Toula Bay. Her home. It was a bright day, and Caravella rode high in the sky. In the sharply-drawn shade of the buildings, Gaskarians went about their daily business. The avenues were clogged with vehicles and human bodies. It being Habaday, the markets in the Decagon were in full swing: a teeming mass of stalls and people, pervaded by a cacophony of sound and accompanied by a frontal assault on olfactory sensibilities.

Nerys had ascended Pladys Hill along the meandering alley that was Quiver Track; to arrive at the sweeping arc of Yon Circle. Above her, high atop Pladys Hill,

the statue of Yeolus, founder of Gaskar; a giant monument, so ancient that nobody quite knew who had constructed it. The material from which it had been fashioned was harder than the hardest steel, and it stood untarnished by the winds and rain and sandstorms that sometimes blew in across the Wyllic mountains. Yeolus stood there, braving it all, his arm raised to point somewhere into the distance at who-knew-what.

Nerys stopped at her favorite lookout point on Yon Circle. She leaned on the stone balustrade facing the south and Toula Bay. Squinting against Caravella's glare she looked out over the city and the harbor beyond; the forest of ship-masts at the wharves, their outlines wavering and shifting in the glitter of Caravella's reflections on the torpid waters.

The view intensified her unease and melancholy. One of those ships would take her away, never to return. She gave an involuntary, irritated twitch and redirected her attention to the people in the streets below her: too far away to resolve their individual characteristics; yet close enough to know them for the people of *her* city.

What would it be like it Thalonica?

She gave her head an annoyed shake, sending her dark curls flying. It didn't matter. In the life that was to be hers she would never know the freedom to find out what might be known. Unlike here, where she was at liberty to sneak out from under the noses of her father's bodyguards—and had always done so, despite everybody's attempts to stop her. Where she could roam the streets of the city, cloaked in the disguise of an insignificant drudge, paid attention to by nobody.

She took a deep breath; drew in the scents wafting up from below and across the water. The scents of freedom. Inhaling them into her memory; to be carried with her wherever she went. Just as she must drink in the sights, and etch their likeness into her mind, to return here when she needed to—at least in her memories.

Nerys closed her eyes and turned her face into Caravella's light and the breeze from the south; felt them playing over her skin. For a moment she was alone; the world a distant thing that might or might not have been real—and yet it was more real than it had ever been.

A crunch of the pavement behind her disrupted her reveries.

She glanced around—only to face a threesome of stragglers, drudges all, who had come to a halt a few

paces away from her. Mostly her own age, she guessed. Maybe a bit younger. An unsavory lot; even by drudge standards.

Nerys raked a haughty stare across the group and turned back to look at the bay; acutely aware of the youths' presence, and feeling their regard like a physical prod in her spine. If they would only leave her alone. It wasn't that she was worried! After all, it was broad daylight, and Yon Circle was a very public place. Not as busy as usual—it being Habaday and everybody and sundry milling around at the markets—but busy enough to keep the dirty louts behind her at bay.

"Feeble? Troy? I don't think she likes us," a reedy voice, in the transition from boy to man, said behind her.

"It looks that way," another one agreed.

"She's a hoity-toity one," a third noted reproachfully. His voice was almost like a squeak. Nerys guessed him to be the youngest of the trio.

"Never even giving us a chance," the first speaker said.

"What with us being such nice folk and all," the second one supplemented.

A mutter of agreement.

By the sound of their voices and the crunch of stealthy footsteps Nerys deduced that the trio was fanning out to form a half-circle centered on her present position. The pressure in her back was turning into an itch—and an unpleasant one at that. Though the need was almost overwhelming, she didn't dare to turn her head to sneak a peek at what they were doing, or to see if other passerby might be noticing the developing situation.

"I think people who think bad of other people are bad themselves," the reedy voice continued. He was still right at the back of her.

"Umpkin, don't you always say that bad people need to be taught to be good?" the squeaker said.

"I do, Feeble. I do," the one called Umpkin admitted.

There was a shuffling sound from three pairs of feet. Nerys finally gave up her pretense of indifference. She reached into the folds of her tunic. Her right hand closed on the comforting shape of a small device, barely large enough to fit in the palm of her hand. She extracted it from the garment and, turning around, pointed it at the trio, who were by now standing less than two steps away from her.

She leveled the device at them, used her thumb to pull back the two small levers which cocked the internal springs, and then rested it on the left of the two release buttons.

At the sight of the gadget in her hand the three louts paused, their eyes growing round with surprise. But the effect was short-lived. Umpkin soon lost his astonished expression. It was replaced by a leer of expectation.

"Well, isn't that a surprise?" he jeered. "So, who are you, to have a fancy little widget like that?" He leaned closer and squinted at her. A broad grin spread over his face. He winked at Feeble and Troy.

"What have we here?" he grinned. "A merchant slut in disguise?"

Nerys looked around desperately, hoping to find some sympathetic passerby, whose attention she might attract. By some perverse circumstance, however, there seemed to be literally nobody. For the first time since the situation deteriorated from one of charmed beauty to one of nuisance, Nerys had an inkling that she might actually be in a danger that she had never conceived of as anything more than a remote possibility; something that happened to other folks—drudges usually—but never to one of her own status. Especially not in the bright light of such a beautiful day.

Umpkin, despite the sluggish processes in his brain, must have divined some of what was going on in her head. His grin broadened and held out his hand.

"Come now, pretty little merchant slut, and give me your toy. I don't think you have the stomach to use it. You'll just end up hurting yourself. And then, where would our fun be—when you'll be screaming and yelling with the itches and the pains?" Again he winked at his companions.

Feeble grinned, exposing a set of corroded teeth. He ran a small pink tongue over his split lower lip.

"We've never had a merchant slut," he squeaked, groping for his nether regions with one hand and adjusting something there. The mere thought of what it was he was adjusting—and why!—made Nerys shudder with a curious mixture of disgust, revulsion, and, she suddenly realized, fear.

Umpkin took another small step forward, his hand now almost able to grasp the flecheur in her fist. Another step and he would be upon her; and that would be the end of that.

Nerys came to a decision. She sized up the three and decided that Umpkin and Troy were the strongest of the lot. These she must eliminate, if she was to get out of this with her hide intact.

She raised the flecheur a trifle and pushed the left release button. There was a sharp 'click'; a spring released its energy; a bolt snapped forward, impacted on and ejected a thin needle through the left barrel and into Umpkin's face. The projectile hit his left cheek. He screamed in anger and lunged for her, but she stepped aside and his arms closed on thin air; his momentum almost carrying him across the balustrade. Then, as she and the other two louts watched in horrified fascination, he clawed at his face, leaving bloody marks with his filthy, jagged fingernails, and began jumping around like one possessed. Presently he started screaming and wailing. Then he collapsed on the ground, where he rolled and twitched, and tore off his clothes, exposing a scrawny body, which he proceeded to scratch with maniacal vigor, leaving welts all over himself.

Nerys looked up to see Troy bearing down on her. She snapped off the second needle, which penetrated through Troy's thin, threadbare tunic and buried itself somewhere in his chest. He stopped as if he'd run into a wall, stared at her, opened his mouth to say something—but it was only a croak, before the effect of the poisoned projectile hit him, and he joined Umpkin on the ground in a frenzy of twitches, screams, and moans, tearing at his garments and clawing at his skin.

Nerys looked at Feeble. Feeble looked at Nerys. The pink tongue was squashed between his lips, which were locked in a broad grin as he realized that this was the end of her defensive arsenal.

Nerys didn't care to wait to see what he was going to do. She turned and ran. Down, back along Quiver Track. Weaving through the canyons formed by the white facades of the buildings. Running without a thought but to get away. Running until she could run no more, and until she was surrounded by the milling masses in the Decagon. As a rule she hated crowds, but now things were different.

Nerys leaned against a wall, breathing heavily, her chest aching with the unaccustomed strain. A stray thought jolted her. Panic-stricken she looked around. Maybe Feeble *had* been able to follow her after all! She ducked into a narrow alley beside a food-stall displaying a variety of cakes, dried fruit, and a tall cylindrical

copper container with a tap at its bottom, suspended above a small oil flame by a rigid tripod with three hooks which connected to short chains welded to its upper rim. From the cylinder emanated the rich, spicy-sweet scent of Kint Plum tea. Her mouth started to water, but she did not dare to venture forth yet; and instead peered at the passersby with a critical disposition. For the first time it occurred to her that . . .

She shied back from the thought, which came unbidden, and she wished that she could have banished it back into the dark corner of her mind whence it had come to bother her. But now it was out there and it refused to be coerced into oblivion again. And with the thought, the stream of people around her suddenly became less of a guarantee of safety. Instead she realized that not only was she stuck in the densest possible collection of people in Gaskar, but that most of them . . .

Would they? Look at her in the same manner as the three louts up on Yon Circle? As a—what had those odious creatures called her?—'merchant slut'?

She looked at the people streaming past her and, for the second time today it was as if she was looking at the world around her through the eyes of a total stranger. Like she was some visitor from a far away land, suddenly stranded in Gaskar and seeing everything as if it were new and fresh—and ineffably strange and distant. And from this point of view it came to her that those in the crowd were all *drudges*. Not a high-class merchant was in sight. Even the stall-keepers were mostly drudges; traditionally exempt for Habaday from the Prohibition, and taking the best advantage of it. And those who weren't drudges were from the lowest layers of the merchant guilds.

She raised her gaze—and up there, some hundred paces above her, she saw the edge of the very place she'd just escaped from. Over the white rim of the balustrade, the figure of Yeolus rearing above him into the sky, leaned a figure. Too small and too distant to be sure, but she knew that it was Feeble; and he was looking for her. She swallowed and glanced down at her cramped right fist, still clutching the, now ineffective, flecheur. She shoved it into a pocket in her tunic and took a deep breath. A shudder ran through her as she realized that, whereas before she'd always felt . . .

Nerys bit her lower lip to restrain an exclamation of dismay. She found herself staring into the face of something she'd always known—but never really com-

prehended: the stark and undeniable truth of her total and utter isolation. The thought added itself to the other unpleasant realizations of the last few moments and refused to crawl back into its grubby hiding place. How safe, she asked herself, was she really? Would anybody in this endless, anonymous tide of mindless drudges come to her aid if Umpkin, Troy, and Feeble chose to accost her here and now, in this very place? If they knew that she was a 'merchant slut'—and not one of them? Why would she even expect them to?

Home! She had to get home. Behind the comparative safety of the walls of Tasselwood Mansion. Now!

With a pounding heart, Nerys took another cautious look around, saw Feeble still hanging over the balustrade high above her—and decided that now was as good a time to leave as there ever would be.

She emerged from her hiding place, found a current of bodies traveling in the direction of her choice, immersed herself in it, and allowed herself to be swept away. Presently, she was out of the Decagon, hurrying down a side-street leading up Dale Mound, at the top of which was Vister Haven, that part of Gaskar where only the upper echelons of the merchant guilds had their residences; among them Tasselwood Mansion. As she forged up the incline the crowds thinned rapidly. Then the densely packed houses of Gaskar gave way to the stately parklands of Vister Haven. Nerys stopped and peered around. Having assured herself that nobody was paying her undue attention, she nimbly ducked through her very own crack in a fence overgrown with Mistral bushes, and thus entered her father's granate orchard.

She stopped and heaved a sigh of relief and sadness. Relief at being safe. Sadness, because the magic was broken. The precious memories that were to be hers had been defiled. The image of the sweeping panorama which she'd tried to burn into her memory up on Yon Circle would now forever be tainted by the memory of Umpkin, Troy, and Feeble; by their disgusting presence and their even more despicable intentions; by their screams, and obscene twitchings, and self-mutilations, as they became affected by the poison covering the flecheur's needles. And the former idyll of the Decagon market had become place where she'd never feel safe from this day on, and where she could never be again without knowing, that, to some at least—and you could never know *who!*—she was a 'merchant slut'.

Nerys turned away and slowly dragged her limbs back in the direction of her home.

Taking the usual way through the scullery and the servants' access ways, she managed to get to her room without being discovered by anybody of importance—though, of course, every drudge in the house knew what she was doing. But it didn't matter what they knew. They'd never tell. Not anybody but other drudges. And who cared what *they* knew! As long as nobody in her family found out, all was well. Or her father's bodyguards. They might suspect, of course! In fact they almost certainly *knew*. But the guards had good reason not to be too loose-tongued about their inability to keep a mere woman under observation.

Her luck ran out, however, when her mother barged into her room as Nerys was trying to change from the drudge clothes into something more respectable.

"Where have you been?" she exclaimed accusingly. "How can you *do* this?"

Nerys turned around slowly and considered this stranger.

"Do what?" she inquired.

"It has to stop!" her mother remonstrated. "Now!—You are promised to Duke Corran! So—no more excursions! Don't you know what would happen if you . . ." She hesitated, dazed by the enormity of the thought that was on her mind. "If something befell you," she concluded lamely.

"'Befell'?" Nerys repeated innocently as she slipped into a house-tunic; a clinging dark-green garment without ornamentation and artifice—but one which she thought not only comfortable, but also resonating with some unknown aspect of her personality.

"Can't you wear something more . . . womanly?" her mother complained. "What is Duke Corran to think of such an un-feminine child-bearer?"

"I don't think he cares," Nerys snapped testily. "All he requires is a womb to bear boy-children—so that he can rake up more points on his way into Pastor's paradise . . . or whatever he calls this stupid deity of his."

Her mother, a woman who once had been pretty, and even striking, but who now was, at best, matronly, went white as the houses of Gaskar as she gaped at her daughter.

"How can you say that? How can you even *think* it? What about your studies in Thalonican customs? Were they all for naught? Have you learned nothing at all?"

Don't you know that with such thoughts you could endanger everything your father has worked for? Duke Corran would never forgive such an affront to his faith. No matter how many boy-children you happen to bear. He will not decorate you! He will not honor you! He may even decide . . ." Her hand went to her mouth in a gesture of ineffable horror.

Nerys was about to tell her mother just how much she cared about Duke Corran's likely reactions to her trespasses—but then bit down on her incipient remarks. It would not do. The only possible result was another few hours in the company of Master Joanson. Nerys decided that she was in no disposition for yet more indoctrination in the intricacies of Thalonican superstitions, rituals, and fragile sensibilities. She knew them all so well that they followed her into her nightmares. She'd rather swallow all the things her mother wanted to say, than have her last days at home wasted with more doctrinal absurdities.

She smiled at her mother, though it felt more like a grimace. "I know what I have to do."

Though I may not do it.

Her mother may or may not have noted the implied equivocation; but if she did, she chose to ignore it and to be mollified—because she wanted to be, and because she dreaded the alternatives. She came over and pecked Nerys on the cheek. "Good girl. I know you'll do us proud. Remember how much depends on you." She sighed. "Such a responsibility for one so young. But this is the way of things, and this is the way it must be."

Nerys had another rejoinder ready, but swallowed it. Why was she surrounded by people who seemed to be unable or unwilling to understand that nothing ever really was 'as it must be'?

Nerys' mother sighed again, and gingerly embraced her daughter. "I must go and attend to the preparations for your dinner. Ludwila is getting old, and she gets things wrong. Very soon we may have to replace her with someone younger and more alert." She departed from the room, shaking her head in exasperation at the vicissitudes of her existence—such as those inflicted by the irksome fact that her chief cook was getting old and a bit tattered around the edges.

Nerys wished that her own problems were of a similarly trivial nature. She grimaced with annoyance at the thought of the dinner planned in her 'honor'. Another evening wasted. She'd be expected, of course, to look her best. A hundred pairs of eyes would be

watching her, wondering if she was going to be what her father had intended. Some would wish that she failed—to the ultimate advantage of their own families. Others would be glad to see her go—and would probably have difficulty concealing their satisfaction at her departure. Those were the ones whose sons had, at one time or other—and usually on the behest of their parents—attempted to woo her. She had summarily rejected every one of them, much to the chagrin of her parents, who had hoped to derive significant advantage from a marriage between their only daughter and another merchant house.

Nerys reflected ruefully that her stubborn refusal to welcome any of these suitors was responsible for her current predicament. In hindsight, it might have been better to accept the suit of, say, Regis, of the House of Poi. At least it would have kept her in Gaskar, and subject to the laws of this place; laws which, though they condoned that she be traded to Thalonica for mercantile equivalences, paradoxically also would have protected her against any excesses committed by a Gaskarian husband. Her refusal of all suitors had therefore, again in hindsight, been foolish—but then, she'd never truly considered the possibility of her current situation becoming a reality. Just like getting raped by a bunch of drudge louts was a misfortune reserved for others: drudges usually. And yet, it had been so close. Another lesson learned. This last one, not too late—a minor streak of good fortune in an otherwise unpromising chain of events.

Nerys threw herself on her bed and stared at the ornately painted ceiling of her room: episodes from the history of Gaskar, represented by meticulously drawn figures in poses of frozen activity; along a spiral path that wound itself from a diffuse source of yellow light at the center, representing the origin of time, to the edges where ceiling met walls.

'Her' room. Soon to be . . . whose? Who would lie here and stare up at the figures she knew so well? Would they keep it as it was; in memory of her maybe? It would be nice to think so, but after today she was resolved that she would finally and unequivocally reject anything but the truth. Illusions, comforting though they had been, had no more place in her life. If she was to survive the future—and survive it she would!—she would have to forego the comforts of her cherished illusions. No more daydreaming; no more of the romantic dallying that had made her hope that one day some-

one might come along whom she could really like; or maybe even love. Someone who, if need be, would lay down his life for her. Not that she'd ever want him to actually do it, of course! After all, if he did, then he would be lost to her forever: thus the very idea was inherently impractical. But he must be prepared for it at least. For her, and for her only. Such must be his devotion!

Those kinds of dreams had cost her grievously; causing her to reject all those who provided less than the perfection she yearned for. And so, with arrogance and futile romantic illusions, she had destroyed her own future.

Nerys jumped up from her bed and took a deep breath. No more! Nobody could be relied upon to do for her what she could not do for herself. A bitter lesson if there ever was one—but she had, she told herself, finally learned it.

The dinner was almost as dreary as she had envisaged it. If anything it exceeded her worst expectation. The conversation was desultory at best, and ineffably trivial at worst. Only her mother appeared to have a good time. Never having to look at these people again might indeed be a disguised blessing. That she would exchange them for even freakier Thalonicans was a notion which she temporarily pushed into the background of her mind. One thing at a time.

The evening passed. The following day was her third last in Gaskar. She would have packed if she'd been allowed to, but her break with Gaskar was to be complete. Only what she wore on her person was to be permitted on to the ship that would take her away; and when she arrived in Thalonica even those things would be taken from her. Before she was allowed to disembark, Corran's own servants would come aboard. They would coif her hair in the style of a Thalonican duke's breeder-woman. Probably tint it blue, as was the wont of things. They would take her wardrobe and replace it with the—admittedly glamorous—garments suitable for one of her position. Only when this was done would she be allowed off the ship and into Thalonica—so that nobody there ever knew her as anything different but Corran's latest breeder.

The prospect of three more days with nothing to do but to *wait* left Nerys at loose ends. She would not bring herself to leave the estate again—and even if she had wanted to, it was doubtful that she could have. Her

father, leery of such a contingency, had assigned half a dozen guards to her—and possibly additional, more clandestine, observers of her movements. There was no way she would ever be able to wander the streets of Gaskar by herself again—even if she had wanted to; which she didn't.

Bored with herself and everything else, yet sensing that she was wasting her last few days of comparative freedom, she spent the time wandering the parklands and orchards of Vister Haven. For hours she sat at the foot of her favorite Tassel Tree, pondering the apparent futility of her existence: how it would now forever remain incomplete; how, one day, she would die, and leave behind her nothing but an array of children, none of whom would ever be allowed to call her 'mother', and with none of whom she would have any contact until they were adolescents—and so indoctrinated in the ways of the Wearers that they would have no *interest* in seeing her as anything but a womb on legs.

On the second day her father summoned her to the grandiose room from which he ruled his mercantile empire.

She responded sluggishly. Her tardy appearance before his desk caused him to begin the audience with a reprimand.

"Duke Corran will not appreciate such laxity. You will learn to change your ways, or suffer his disapproval."

"Duke Corran will have to learn to live with disappointment," she snapped.

Her father, a thin man of middle age, with a sparse crown of maroon-dyed hair, a long nose, and two pairs of deep lines running from the side of his nose to the corners of his mouth, considered her with frank disapproval.

"I have heard of your reluctance to submit to your duty, but it never occurred to me that you would be so irresponsible."

"What have I done?"

"Done? Nothing. Nothing at all. Not yet. Indeed, your life has been distinguished by your refusal to 'do' anything: such as obliging your family by marrying into a suitable house. But this you have chosen not to do. As such, your existence so far has been singularly useless to us. Considering the effort and time that has gone into your upbringing, it appears therefore that a severe imbalance of obligations still remains. All of which

you will discharge by obliging Corran—and thereby myself! Do you understand this?”

Nerys nodded. “It seems like a simple enough concept.”

“Good. Then maybe you can satisfy a certain curiosity of mine—and tell me why you continue to exhibit what appears, even to a casual observer, to be a surprising recalcitrance.”

“You would not understand.”

“Maybe not, but how would you know unless you told me?”

Nerys sighed. “I just want to be able to live a normal life.” The way it came out it sounded lame, even to her own ears.

“‘Normal?’” her father echoed. “What is ‘normality?’”

“Not this,” Nerys snapped.

He nodded sagely. “The arrogance of youth,” he said. “I remember it well.” He smiled thinly. “Did you know that when I was young I wanted to be a sailor? Explore strange lands? Sail around this world of ours, and visit the far ports? Keaen. Sacrael. Fontaine. Brys. Hallaway.” He shook his head at the recollection of his youthful folly. “I was going to go off, muster on with one of the clippers from Fontaine; ignoring my duty here; leaving everything behind, maybe never to return—which I could not have anyway, as I would have become an outcast.”

Nerys was becoming interested despite herself. “What happened? Why didn’t you go?”

“Because one day I understood.”

“Understood what?”

“That my life was not my own. That nobody’s life is their own. Everybody exists within a framework of obligations, needs, and tradition. Whether they get there by birth or chance—which amounts to the same thing, I suppose—does not matter. They exist. They are where they are. If they wish to continue existing they must abide by the rules and strictures imposed upon them by their position. If they do not they will perish. It is as simple as that.”

He considered his one and only daughter with somber attention. “This is even more true for females. For *you*.”

“But . . .”

“There is no ‘but.’” His voice turned crisper and more didactic. The brief interlude, where he had almost become human, had passed. “You choose. Con-

form and survive—or stray and die.” He twitched his head. “What is it to be? Tell me now, because if it is to be the latter, I need to know—for sending you to Thalonica and have you do anything but act in my best interests is unthinkable.”

“What would happen if I said I didn’t want to go?”

Her father shrugged. “You would not have to. But you would not continue to enjoy the privileges of being a merchant’s daughter either. You would be expelled from my house. What you’d do from then on . . .” He shrugged again. “I wouldn’t want to know. It is your life. It is your choice.”

She would be a drudge. One of the teeming masses in the Decagon market. A ready target for every Umpkin and Feeble, who happened to take a fancy to violating a woman. She’d be without a home; without a family; without anybody who cared a whit whether she lived or died.

Would her father really do this? She glanced at him and saw the truth.

“I will do what I have to,” she said, defeated.

Her father nodded, unsurprised. “You will bear Corran children. You will honor his beliefs and customs. You will obey him until the day you die.”

“Or until the day *he* dies,” she said darkly.

Her father eyed her sharply. “Until that day you *will* do whatever is necessary to further the cause of our house by adhering to the contract I signed.”

She nodded.

“*Say* that you will do this.”

She nodded again; heavily. “I will do what I have to do.” Hoping that he would not notice the equivocation.

“Good.” He nodded, apparently satisfied. “The *Aquiel* is scheduled to arrive tomorrow at first light. You will embark in the afternoon, by which time your cabin will be ready. You will be on your way before nightfall. Corran expects you on Habaday. Let us hope that the winds are on our side, so that he’s not disappointed.”

He made a gesture indicating that the audience was at an end. Nerys rose from her chair and, after a last look at her father, whose attention had already returned to the documents on his desk, left the room.

Fliz ducked behind a corner and flattened himself against the wall. He took two deep breaths and detached himself again. He sauntered back into the

street, his hands in the pockets of his trousers, looking for all the world like someone at complete ease with himself and everything else. From the corner of his eyes he saw that the stranger had stopped at a cobbler's stall and was conversing with Marin, the apprentice, who had interrupted the work of repairing a sandal and was gesticulating and pointing.

Had the stranger asked for directions? Who or what was he looking for this time? Fliz had followed him for the better part of an hour, hoping for a good opportunity to get close enough to riffle the man's pockets. During that time the stranger had criss-crossed Thalonica from one end to the other, visited the harbor to inquire about shipping traffic, and entered the offices of two caravan operators.

At first he had looked like an easy target. Fliz, having identified him as an outsider—and therefore a legitimate target of his attentions—had approached him in the usual manner in which he practiced his art. He fell into the gait which served to make him effectively invisible to most people, sidled closer, and prepared to divest him of whatever he might carry in his pockets and pouches.

In the last instant, however, something had stopped him. He did not know what it was, and he did not care. When knowledge came to him in this way he knew better than to doubt its veracity. Instead he had just brushed against the stranger and then gone on his way—and around the next corner, where he'd waited until the stranger had proceeded down Lufty Circle and was almost out of sight. Then he followed him. Very, very cautiously, because, as he had passed the stranger, he realized that the man had actually been *aware* of his existence—which he should not have been! Nobody ever was, when Fliz was out to get them. It was what made him the best thief in all of Thalonica; especially since nobody but he was aware of his curious talent. An awareness he did not care to disseminate.

But the stranger had not been duped. Fliz wondered if he had been aware of Fliz's intentions all along. Or if he just had a . . . talent; like his own. Counteracting it maybe. Fliz suspected the latter. The stranger had given no indication that he'd been aware of anything out of the ordinary.

Fliz hid behind the bodies of two hagglers at another stall and eyed the stranger. A tall man, solidly built, without being overweight. Under the loose tunic,

Fliz thought, he detected the ripple of hard, well-trained muscles. Not someone to be trifled with.

The stranger continued on his way. Fliz waited until he was out of sight and approached the cobbler's stall. Marin looked up and smiled; a smile Fliz returned only reluctantly, and because he needed Marin's cooperation.

He made a gesture. "Who was that?"

Marin shrugged. "He didn't tell me. I wished he had," he said in a soft voice that was too much like that of a woman.

"What did he want to know?"

Marin raised a questioning eyebrow.

"I'm working," Fliz told him.

Marin smiled. "Always working. . ."

"I'd really like to know where he's going."

Marin sighed. "Keye's place."

Another caravaner. A definite pattern was emerging.

"Thank you." Fliz hastened after the stranger.

"Thank me some other time!" Marin called after him.

Fliz shuddered. He had no intention of thanking Marin in the manner the cobbler would have preferred.

Fliz cut through two alleyways, hoping to overtake the stranger. He was not disappointed. As he emerged from his last shortcut he saw the tall figure come around a corner. He would have to pass by him. Keye's offices were in a dilapidated, three-storey edifice just behind Fliz.

Fliz sized up the flow of people, the configuration of the street—and made a decision. The situation would never be quite as favorable as it was now—and, after all, he was a thief and he had to earn a living. He'd been following this stranger for an inordinately long time. If he ever was to have his chance at him, now was the time.

He started walking toward the man, slouching into his special gait. The people flowing past him knew he was there because they avoided him. Still, in some inexplicable way they appeared to be unaware of his existence.

Fliz veered aside, in order not to run straight into the stranger. When he was about level, he selected the instrument of distraction, a hapless passerby, walking in the same direction as the stranger, and about half a pace ahead and to his right. He gave him a gentle shove. His bewildered victim collided with the stranger. He recovered and murmured an apology. For a moment the stranger's attention was focused on the

dupe. Fliz took a quick, fluid step. His right hand slipped deeply into the stranger's tunic, like an oil-fish into his hole; right to where people's so-called 'secure' pockets were commonly located. A laughable concept. Very little was 'secure' when someone like Fliz had it in for you.

Fliz's fingers touched the hard, oblong shape of an object he could not identify. His fingers spread out, locked around the item. The hand withdrew from the pocket. At that moment the stranger turned around—and looked right into Fliz's face. Flinty eyes, set deeply in a pointed face, widened in surprise. Then: anger. A tiny hesitation; sufficient for Fliz. He ducked between two men and out of the reach of the stranger's hand. The man uttered a curse. Fliz ran. Behind him a commotion as the stranger pushed people aside in his eagerness to reach Fliz—who ducked through the flow of bodies with the practice of years and thousands of successful escapes. For an instant he looked back, to see the stranger struggling through the bodies in the street. In his hand he held a small cylindrical instrument which he kept trying to point at Fliz. Fliz redoubled his efforts at escape; driven by an exhilaration such as he had not known for a long time.

The noises accompanying the stranger's pursuit grew fainter. Fliz ducked into a doorway, found the latch yielding, turned it, and slipped into the building, closing the door behind him. Outside, the sounds of pursuit grew. Fliz willed himself into complete anonymity, a mental equivalent to his special gait. Ceasing the emanations of his being. Drawing a near-magical sheath over his mind and waiting until the storm had passed.

He sensed the stranger stop nearby. Fliz slid even deeper into his cocoon of self-imposed isolation. A few moments passed. Fliz willed himself not to become anxious. People often knew where you were even if they couldn't see you. Fear, anxiety, and panic often screamed out silently and gave one away. Fliz breathed slower and deeper, and sank even further into himself.

Presently a subtle pressure lifted off him, and he knew that the stranger had moved on. Fliz waited for several more breaths. He cautiously opened the door and peered out. Seeing nothing untoward, he let himself back out into the street. In his pocket he felt the weight of the item he'd sequestered from the stranger. He itched to see what it was. But this was not a good place. Fliz turned south and headed home.

Back in his room at the *Oldeman*, a decrepit hostel in the lower harbor quarters, Fliz considered the item he'd stolen from the stranger. He turned it around and inspected it from all angles, without being any the wiser. He had never seen anything like it in his life. Couldn't even begin to fathom what it was. It was about the size of his palm; made of a dull, gray material which resisted the ministrations of his knife, exhibiting not so much as a scratch as he poked and prodded at it. Fliz thought that it might be a kind of container; but if that's what it was, how did one open it? The edges were rounded and showed no seams. One side of the object had a number of tiny perforations arranged in a regular array, and a small, reflective rectangular patch, almost like very smooth quartz, which was firmly embedded in the surface. Below it, a row of five small rounds buttons with multi-colored symbols. Fliz pressed the buttons in turn, hoping that this might release some internal locking mechanism; but while the buttons yielded minutely to the press of his fingers, this had no noticeable effect.

Fliz stared at the object and slowly set it down on his bed. What had he gotten himself into? Who was this stranger who carried around with him mysterious items such as this? Fliz recalled the device the stranger had leveled at him in the street. What was that? From a distance it had looked not unlike the flecheur he'd removed from a Gaskarian visitor over a year ago, and which he still kept on his person, hidden away in a secret pouch attached to his calf. One never knew when such a device might come in useful. More useful than the few faros he might have received from Lagos for selling him the item. The stranger's instrument: it might have been a flecheur, or something like it; but Fliz doubted it. He glanced at the device on the bed and shifted uneasily. Maybe he should dispose of this thing. Throw it into the harbor.

On second thought, this seemed like a precipitous action. Whatever it was, it could not be that dangerous. Fliz picked the device up again and turned it over in his hand. He considered the five buttons with the curious symbols. He knew how to read and write—having taught himself, when nobody else had been prepared to do so—but this was a mystery beyond his ken. The symbols were nothing he'd seen before; certainly not Tergan or Keaenean; or Fontaine, for that matter. All of

these were very much alike and Fliz would have identified them easily.

He brought the device closer to his face. His fingers gingerly glided over the buttons. What if they had to be touched in a particular sequence? Or maybe if he touched more than one at the same time . . .

Intriguing. Fliz decided that he wasn't going to throw this thing away. It would yield its secrets in due time. Fliz loved puzzles, and this one looked like a challenge such as he had not had for a long time, if ever.

The memory of the stranger's face was oddly disturbing. It had been ordinary enough, but the eyes, anger in them, had hit him like a physical blow. He had a feeling—no, he *knew!*—that the stranger was not going to relent so easily. At this very moment he would be scouring Thalonica for the audacious thief who had divested him of what was surely an object of great significance. Of course, this was not unusual, but Fliz had an inkling that in this case maybe things were a little different. Those eyes had bored into his skull, and he knew that, just as the stranger's face was etched into his memory, so his face was into the stranger's. In the brief, intense moment of their interaction they had formed a bond of antagonism—and something more subtle as well.

But in Thalonica more than a hundred thousand people provided ample scope to hide. The stranger would have his work cut out for him; and in the end he would give up. Or so Fliz hoped. He didn't fancy the prospect of having to look over his shoulder for the rest of his days!

Fliz got up. Looking around the room he wondered where to hide this thing. He decided against it. Leaving purloined goods of obvious value in one's own home was the height of folly. Fliz had made it a routine to turn over such things to Lagos as soon as practicable. But what was he to do with this bit of mystery? Fliz came to a decision. He sequestered the device in a pouch inside his tunic—one secure against all but the most determined attempts to take it from him. Then he took one last look around and left to check up on his mother and sister.

Fliz had been born the son of Janosh, a lower-caste Wearer, who had fallen on hard times when his wife, Felicia—an open-faced and pleasant woman with a Hywel Index of 343, whom he'd imported from Tyssel,

a small town at the southern coast—bore him four girls and only one boy. As a result of the birth of the fourth girl—Fliz's only remaining sister—the father was expelled from the Wearers' Guild. The birth of the last child had left Felicia with severe internal injuries, and the quacks declared that she would bear no more children. With a girl-to-man-child ratio of four and too penurious to purchase another wife, the Guild disowned Janosh. He was a disgrace. They acted without mercy, declaring him and his whole family to be 'Willets'.

As a result all their lives took a drastic turn for the worse. His father, stripped of his Wearer rights, his beard cut off, his collection of 'silks' confiscated—and thus forever deprived of any chance to achieve an eventual union with Pastor—killed himself within days of the expulsion; leaving Felicia and his offspring to fend for themselves. They were expelled from her husband's house by a certain Cantinflas, whom Janosh owed a great deal of money, and to whom he had given the deeds to house and grounds as a security. Felicia, after a brief bout of hysterics and hair-tearing, pulled herself together and somehow managed to keep them all alive; at great cost to herself. Fliz's older sisters helped her, but there was only so much they could do.

The despair in due course drove Fliz's eldest sister, a large, round-faced girl of a kind, but melancholy, temperament, to kill herself by slashing open her wrists. Felicia plodded on despite this additional tragedy, working herself to the brink of exhaustion as a cook and cleaner at the *Pink Palace*, one of the many harbor-side brothels. There, because of matron Oweena's kindness, she and her surviving children were allowed a single room in the basement; a place they called 'home' from then on. The second eldest sister attempted to help by becoming an employee of the same establishment—only to be murdered at the tender age of fifteen by a Tergan sailor. The third, also in the business of entertaining sailors, died three years later while soliciting custom at a ship berthed the docks. She slipped and fell into the water, where she was crushed as a surge pushed the ship against the side of the wharf.

With only his mother and one sister, Audile, left alive, Fliz, by that time a slender youth and apprentice thief, resolved that no more tragedies should befall the remaining members of his family. He was fiercely protective of Felicia and Audile. The latter had not committed herself to prostitution and instead helped her

mother in the brothel. She was a plain, sweet girl, and inevitably there were attempts on her by the visitors. One man, a sailor from Fontaine, did not heed the warnings issued to him by the brothel's matron, took Audile aside, and raped her in the alleyway behind the brothel. He met with such vicious retaliation by Fliz that he eventually died of his wounds. His trousers with the blood-encrusted crotch were displayed in a nook of the *Pink Palace's* lobby, as a grim reminder to the clientele that there were *some* rules. Fliz's actions, though they might have reflected badly on the establishment, instead made him into the darling of the *Pink Palace's* whores. He became their talisman and friend. In due course this affection for the growing youth inevitably lead to a more concrete expression of their appreciation; and, though Fliz, as a male Willet, was strictly prohibited from engaging in sexual congress—or be it with males—what happened behind the closed doors of the *Pink Palace* was a different matter. Had the whores not been as discreet as they were, the results for Fliz would have been dire. But their loyalty to each other, Oweena, Felicia, Audile, and Fliz, was fierce.

As he grew into manhood, Fliz was forced to leave the premises of the *Pink Palace*, for fear of coming under the scrutiny of the local astunologia. Already he had been phenomenally lucky. Two other Willet thieves, about his own age, had been badmouthed by malevolent competitors. The astunos picked them up and insured that they were neutered. Fliz avoided a similar fate through a fortuitous confluence of events, when he saved the life and limb of a certain Ploack, a sergeant in the astunologia. The man had just finished a vigorous session of sexual exercises with two *Pink Palace* employees. He sneaked out the back door, hoping to keep his activities hidden; especially from his spouse, who was known as a harridan. As he felt his way along the wall of the darkened alley, a bunch of four thugs beset him. He fought bravely, but the session with the whores—who had delivered value for his hard-earned cash—had left him with sluggish reactions. Fortunately, Fliz, on his way home after a successful day on the prowl, happened upon the scene, and together the two gave the thugs a hiding they would never forget. Thereafter, for reasons of gratitude, as much as concern for Fliz's discretion, Ploack became his champion in the ranks of the astunos. When he was promoted to lieutenant he maintained this association; though, of course, he could not be seen to consort with a mere Willet anymore.

Especially not a thief! Still, the two shared an occasional drink in the back rooms of the *Pink Palace*, after Ploack had his fill of the Palace's activities. Occasionally, Fliz provided Ploack with information, which the astuno invariably found useful and helpful to his career. In this manner, both of them were well satisfied with their association.

Fliz was a very successful thief, by reason of a lively intelligence and a most unusual set of talents, which he discovered only slowly as the years went on. He had been arrested twice, but in each instance, through the agency of Ploack, managed to evade being thrown in gaol. Twice, in a larcenous career spanning almost fifteen years, was next to 'never', and a testimony to his skill and versatility. On the occasion of his second arrest, Ploack suggested to him, not unreasonably, that he might confine his activities to visitors; which were aplenty, and many of whom *expected* to be robbed. After all, this was the way of port cities. Why not fulfil their expectations, keep the locals happy by keeping his hands off *them*, and so be allowed to ply his trade without much interference from the astunos? Fliz saw the wisdom of the suggestion and thenceforth focused his attention on visitors, whom he found to be a rich mine of wealth. Few pursued matters beyond vocal complaints; and even that was rare. The episode today was therefore completely outside the range of Fliz's previous experience. He decided that he had no intention of repeating it again soon. Even though, as he had to admit, there had been an element of exhilaration such as he couldn't recall having felt for many years.

Rutger stood in an attitude of stillness and concentration, apparently oblivious of the people moving around him. But he filtered them out and listened just for the one: the audacious thief who had made off with his locator, and thus left him effectively stranded here.

There! Was it he? It was hard to tell in the babble of impressions flowing past his mind. The thief, whoever he was, either had an unusually quiet mind, or else could lower his emanations until he became, for all purposes, undetectable. It was a troublesome notion. Ordinary people, like a petty thief in a city far away from the influence of the Myrmidic Woods, should not be able to do such things; it required 'talent' and the discipline of magice training. Still, Rutger found himself compelled to at least consider the possibility that he was dealing with more than just an ordinary pick-

pocket. In which case he'd better think very hard—because the locator was essential to his mission. Of course, nobody knew *where* it led, or even what lay at the end of the path—but there could be no doubt that it was something immensely significant. Maybe the magices' last hope. If he found what he hoped to find, then maybe the calamity that had befallen his peers on the Isle could be reversed. It all depended on him; and no petty thief, no matter how clever, was going to get in the way of it. And this one was a cunning specimen! When he had looked him in the face, Rutger remembered having seen him before; earlier that day. Rutger re-played the event. Trained as he was to overlook nothing, it came back to him with clarity. The man had brushed against him and gone on his way. Rutger had had a fleeting inkling of something impending. Then: nothing. A stray notion which did not materialize into anything substantial. The kind of thing a magice was subject to: fleeting notions of what might be; though sometimes it never was. Strands of possibility, touching his mind like gossamer, only to be blown away again by the wind, never to return. Except that, in this instance . . .

Rutger 'listened' for another few moments, then admitted to himself that he'd lost his quarry. A new plan was needed. Rutger stood, bethought himself, and began to retrace his steps. The thief must have been following him like a shadow. Rutger shook his head. It wasn't possible. He should have noticed such sustained attention! On the other hand, if the man was . . . different . . .

Who knew? Maybe even here—though there'd never been any suggestion that it might—Tethys had been transforming at least some of its inhabitants. Maybe there were other influences than the Myrmidic Woods? A novel and unsettling thought, but he could not dismiss it out of hand if he was to retrieve the locator!

An—untrained!—thief who could hide from a magice! What else might he do? The notion made Rutger pause in his stride. Then he hurried on. He would retrace his every step. Somewhere along the line, the thief had decided that it would be useful not to follow him anymore, but appeared to have *anticipated* his, Rutger's, movements. How could this be? Unless one postulated talents hitherto not even *thought* of! Rutger dismissed the notion. Mundane explanations were the most likely, and these he would find.

He suppressed his anger. Delays! Nothing but delays! It seemed that everything was conspiring against him! When he'd left the Isle he had hoped to reach his goal in no more than two weeks. The need for secrecy and a series of nautical mishaps, holdups in ports, and an ineffective captain, had severely disrupted those plans. Twenty days and he was still in Thalonica! And now *this*!

He turned a corner, to enter the street where he had made an earlier inquiry with the young cobbler.

Indeed . . .

Felicia greeted her son with affection. Life and tragedy had worn her down; aged her beyond her years; left her face lined and tired, her posture stooped slightly forward, her walk sluggish and slow. Still, one could not help but note a stubborn persistence of the beauty she had once had. She hugged Fliz and asked him how he was. Fliz, who had learned that mothers should be told only the minimum necessary, dissimulated. Not that it mattered, of course. Fliz's experience had also taught him that his mother knew things she had no right to know. Things that were and things that would be. On more than one occasion she had warned him: Don't do this; avoid that; try not to go there. Motherly admonitions, which coming from anyone else might have been considered motherly nagging. Except that Felicia's warnings were often quite specific, and related to matters she should have known nothing about; particularly if such matters lay in the future. After ignoring her advice a few times, and suffering mishaps as a consequence, Fliz had learned to listen—and to listen carefully; because sometimes even Felicia did not seem to know what she was talking about, the words coming out of her apparently unbidden, as if forced out by some other agency, for whom Felicia was a mere mouthpiece.

His mother hugged him. "You shouldn't have done that," she said when she stood back. Her face clouded over. Her eyes narrowed as if she was trying to trace an elusive idea.

"Done what?" Fliz asked.

"I don't know," his mother said darkly, "but I know you've done something!"

Fliz laughed. "It was close," he admitted. "But I got away with it."

Felicia muttered something and turned away to attend to a pot on the stove.

"Mother?"

Felicia turned around. "You got away for now," she said. She shook her head. "Please," she said softly, "can you not do something else?"

Fliz went over to her and put his arms around her stooped figure. "I don't know *how* to do anything else," he said. "You know that."

Felicia pulled away and looked up into his face. "Yes, you do. And you will."

Fliz nodded agreeably. It was of no use to contradict her. He was certain that this time Felicia's pronouncements weren't prompted by her uncanny insight into the working of the universe, but by wishful motherly thinking. She wanted the best for him. Safety. A good life. All the things he'd never have. The things that she'd had for a time, but which were taken from her when she gave birth to too many girl-children. As if it had been her fault!

Maybe he shouldn't brush off her predictions quite as readily as he usually did. Sometimes she just *knew*—like *he* sometimes knew; like *he* could sometimes look at someone and tell exactly what their future would hold. Or so he thought. He had never had the opportunity to actually check if his visions had come true.

Felicia sighed and turned away again. Fliz had the uncomfortable feeling that she knew that he was just humoring her. It was difficult to tell whether this upset her, or whether she was prepared for his response and merely wanted to end the discussion.

Fliz smiled affectionately.

Mothers . . .

He excused himself and departed to find Audile, whose duties included general housekeeping, cooking, and some ledger work for the matron. He went upstairs, to Oweena's office. As he climbed the stairs he was stopped by Y'liaan, a pretty, blonde girl in the final stages of her transition into womanhood; and one who had never made any secret out of her attraction to, a considerably older, Fliz.

She batted her eyes at him. "I'm off-duty tonight," she suggested artlessly.

Fliz bent down and kissed her forehead. "I'm not, unfortunately."

She gave him a sideways look. "Maybe you could postpone it."

"I would love to."

She brightened. "So, then . . ."

Fliz sighed. Y'liaan's offer was tempting. Very much so.

Y'liaan took the pause as an encouraging sign. "I'll see you at my place?" she suggested.

He smiled at her. Fliz liked Y'liaan. She was a nice girl. A bit sad maybe; weighed down with the certainty of a life without hope for ever being more than what she was today. He would have liked to make it different, but he was after all only a thief; and a Willet, who could never have a family. All of which meant that his little romances had to remain fleeting, for fear of actual attachments. They also had to remain excessively clandestine. Fliz considered Y'liaan and wondered if she could be trusted. After all, if she ever decided to get angry with him, maybe jealous, maybe overly possessive without reciprocity from his side . . . There were things even Ploack might find himself unable to deal with.

But such thoughts, though valid and befitting a cautious man, were unworthy of him. The whores at *Pink Palace* were his *friends*—and never had any of them given him any cause to doubt it.

If you don't trust your friends, how can you expect them to trust you?

Fliz kissed the girl again; more lingeringly this time. He had not been with a woman for some time, and the contact aroused him more than he found comfortable. He pulled back and excused himself. Y'liaan laughed at his fastidiousness and bounced down the stairs, blowing him a kiss before she disappeared from sight. Fliz grinned sheepishly. He waited until his arousal was not obvious anymore, and proceeded along the corridor to see his sister.

Rutger stopped before the stall. The young cobbler looked up; his face twisted into a smile of recognition; hope maybe, thought Rutger, who divined the young man's predilections. He allowed the full force of his personality to impact on the cobbler, drawing him into a temporary mesh of dependency. It was easy. The mind was weak and put up no resistance. Rutger, satisfied that he was in control, projected a subtle promise of fulfillment of the cobbler's sexual fantasies. The face before him assumed a beatific, near-ecstatic expression.

"When I was here before," Rutger asked softly, "after I left . . . did anybody ask you about me?"

Marin, totally enthralled in Rutger's spell, his critical faculties laid to waste, saw nothing unusual in the question. His mind was focused on other things, and the matter under question appeared insignificant and trivial.

He nodded. "Fliz came along. I told him that I'd directed you to Keye's office."

"Who is Fliz?"

"A thief." Marin grinned foolishly. "Everybody knows that."

"Where does Fliz live?" Rutger asked softly, keeping up the pressure on Marin's mind.

"In the *Oldeman*, of course!"

"The *Oldeman*?"

"Everybody knows that," Marin said, perplexed despite his befuddlement.

"Of course," Rutger agreed. "I merely forgot. Just like I forgot where the *Oldeman* is!"

"In Unwin Way. It's been there forever!"

"Of course," Rutger said soothingly.

"Of course," Marin agreed, his eyes glazed over.

Rutger decided to depart. He would ask some passerby for Unwin Way. Better to let this weakling get back to reality. It appeared that he was only too willing to be led astray. People like that sometimes never came back from the places where a more powerful mind had sent them. They turned into imbeciles; drooling idiots, unable to perform even the most rudimentary tasks. Not that Rutger cared, of course. At another time he would have wrung this young man dry and left him behind an empty husk. But he felt people watching—and there were only so many minds he could control at one time. If he was to remain anonymous, now was the time to withdraw. Releasing his hold on the cobbler, he muttered a politeness for the benefit of the listeners and casually walked away. By the time he was gone, everybody involved had already forgotten all about him.

Rutger found the *Oldeman* in Unwin Way, a winding alley in an old, squalid quarter of the town, near the wharves, where the air reeked of dead sea-creatures, rotten weeds, and the sharp smell of the paint on the ships. The *Oldeman* was a three-storey hotel. The paint had flaked off its dilapidated, slightly leaning facade a long time ago, exposing a weathered wall of crumbling mortar, supported by a wooden framework. The shutters on most of the windows had long ago fallen into decay, and those that remained would follow soon after.

So, thought Rutger, here lives Fliz, the thief who would rob a magice. Who *had* robbed a magice, if the truth be told.

He backed around a corner and studied the *Oldeman*. It appeared deserted. Maybe it was. Maybe Fliz was the only person inhabiting it.

But, no. Someone emerged from the front entrance. An old man, bowed and leaning on a crude cane. He looked around this way and that and presently shuffled off, the cane scraping and making little 'click-clack' sounds on the pavement. Rutger emerged from his observation point and, assuming the Gait of Stealth, crossed the alley. He slipped in the door and paused in what once had been a reception area. Now it was a store-room, filled to the ceiling with junk. Boxes, pieces of discarded furniture, cooking utensils, broken tools. Rutger went to the stairs and, heedful of their rickety condition, ascended them to the second floor. He saw three doors in various states of disrepair. He went to the first one and stood before it. Nobody home. Rutger tried the latch. The door opened. He peered into a dingy den, devoid of furniture, reeking of sweat, stale intoxicants, and other objectionable substances.

Rutger pulled back and closed the door. The thief who'd robbed him would not live in such conditions. His clothes had been poor, but clean and well maintained; his hair washed and combed; he did not stink, and his eyes had been clear and alert.

Rutger moved to the next door, paused again to listen for human emanations, then tried this latch. It twisted but the door did not budge. Rutger inspected the frame and found no other latches or bolts. He bent down and located a key-hole a short distance below the latch. He bent down and inspected it. The locking mechanism, he noted, was probably of greater monetary value than this entire building. Rutger straightened. This was the place.

He considered his options. Picking locks was not among his talents, and neither did he have the tools. He could force the door and thereby leave a clear indication to the thief that someone was on his trail. On the other hand, the lock suggested that Fliz might use his room for the storage of the prizes of his larceny; in which case the locator might just be somewhere behind that door.

Rutger came to a decision. He extracted a small tube from an inside pocket and held it against the lock. He pressed the three buttons near its end in a complicated sequence. He pressed a fourth button closer to the tip. There was a brief hiss. Where the lock was, a curl of smoke arose. The wood around it blackened with the

heat. Rutger release the button and pocketed the device. He gave the door a sharp push. After a brief resistance it flew open. Rutger inspected the room beyond.

He was in the right place. The room was an oasis of tidiness in the squalor of its setting. A single bed in one corner; on the other side a tiny stove, which had not been used for a long time, but appeared to serve as a . . . desk?

Here. In a thief's den? Beside the stove stood a chair. Against the wall leaned a small rack with . . . books? Rutger stopped still. Books? What kind of a man was this? A petty thief who collected books?

Rutger went over to the rack and inspected the books. An eclectic mix, without apparent system or order. Volumes on such subjects as navigation and plant-lore. It was highly improbable that the thief had purchased them. There were only two places in Thalonica where books could be procured, and these were frequented exclusively by Wearers.

Rutger froze. He pulled out a book and held it with shaking hands. It was a copy of a philosophical text, written almost a century ago by Trill Hagar, a Fontaine nobleman, who believed that men could not possibly have originated on Tethys; a speculation so close to the truth, and so dangerous, that Hagar had met with a premature death, and his work had been destroyed in the conflagration that consumed his house, and killed him and his family.

How had this volume, which should not even exist, made its way across the ocean and into the hands of a Thalonican thief? Rutger turned the pages. The book gave the impression of having been handled many times. Rutger considered the elaborate script on the yellowing pages. He wondered if the thief knew how to read. An unsettling thought. This book was a dangerous abomination; its very existence just another sign that the magices, despite all their efforts, had not been able to fulfil their intended task. All the more important that he succeeded with his mission—which might well be their last hope to set things right.

Rutger shoved the book into his tunic. He continued to search the room but found nothing to interest him. Especially not his locator. Which implied that Fliz still had it—and that he had to find him. And when he had the locator back he would have to kill the thief; because nobody who knew about Hagar's work should

be allowed to live. Not even a petty, probably illiterate, thief.

The thought gave Rutger pause. He did not want to kill unless there was no alternative. What if the man *was* illiterate? Rutger returned to the rack and retrieved another volume: a taxonomy of Finisterian flora. He opened it up and leafed through it. This book was *printed*; using a recently-invented technique, which had suddenly appeared in too many places at once to allow the magices to choke off this new, dangerous social development. The illustrations were done from woodcuts. The pages were printed on one side only. The vacant sides exhibited occasional scribbled annotations, elaborating on, and occasionally providing corrections for, the original contents. The comments were done in ink; in a tentative script, which betrayed a lack of practice, but also exhibited certain distinct characteristics. By this and other indications, including the discovery of a quill and an inkwell on another shelf, Rutger knew that Fliz could not only read but also write. Which meant that he had to die.

In the door, Rutger paused. He extracted the tube from his pocket and applied his fingers to the buttons. A lance of fire shot forth from one end. It seared across the rack with the books and set them alight. Rutger turned away and left the *Oldeman* to find Fliz. Nobody saw him leave.

Fliz paused at the door of Y'liaan's house; a small dwelling in the outskirts of Thalonica. Heins, Y'liaan's father, was neither Wearer nor Willet—capable of entering either category, and yet probably stuck where he was. He had a daughter and a son, and that placed his HI into the 'neutral' category. People like Heins often decided not to have any more children. Fortunes could go either way, and the risk of becoming a Willet was greater than the probability of advancing to Wearer status; especially if one married a woman from Thalonica. People of Heins' social rung—he was a laborer in the ship yards—usually could not afford to import a woman from far away; and so had to contend themselves with whatever spouse luck—or a lack thereof—happened to toss their way. Heins' fate hung in the balance. Fliz knew him slightly and guessed that the man would not risk descent into Willet-dom.

Fliz considered the small house. It was getting dark and the lights of oil-lamps shone from the kitchen. Y'liaan's room lay out the back. She shared it with her

older brother, who was probably out with his friends. Fliz took a breath and, assuming the concealing gait, made his way to the back of the house, where he softly knocked on the closed shutter of Y'liaan's window. The shutter was opened and Y'liaan's pale face appeared.

"I'll be out in a moment," she said and closed the shutter again.

Fliz returned to the front of the house where he was presently joined by Y'liaan. The two went off arm in arm. In this part of town Fliz wasn't worried about being seen thus. His own haunts were far away from here. Besides, the descending darkness provided a convenient anonymity.

They walked along the alleys, until they emerged at the sea where Endless Beach stretched for further than the eye could see. They stepped out onto the sand and started walking, away from the city. Darkness fell and Janus rose above the horizon, to cast a pale light upon the white sand. They had to walk quite a distance until they arrived at their favorite spot. They entered the thicket lining the beach and crawled until they came to their love nest. They tumbled to the ground. Y'liaan giggled and slipped her hand under his tunic. He slipped off her simple shift and she positioned herself on top of him. He pulled her down, and presently they lost themselves in passion.

Rutger stood across the alley from the *Pink Palace*, contemplating his next move. He could not be certain that Fliz was inside. Indeed, he could sense nothing at all. The mental noise accompanying the activities in the brothel's rooms effectively masked out everything else. He would have to investigate. Planning was impossible; there were just too many possibilities to map out.

Rutger bestirred himself and started toward the *Pink Palace*. It would be difficult even to make himself unseen. The raw animal noises from the minds of the men—sailors, most of them—heaving away upon the bodies of the, mostly unenthusiastic, whores also served to decrease his own effectiveness. He approached the front door. A couple of sailors, reeking of ship and whore, emerged as he tried to enter. They pushed him aside roughly. Rutger constrained his reactions with difficulty. How dare these louts assault him?

He entered the lobby, a small room, decorated, fittingly, in pink, and illuminated by two rows of dozens of candles placed in holders along the walls. In the far corner, in a nook, Rutger thought he saw the garments

of a man affixed to a wall. A middle-aged matron approached him. Her face look garish in the flickering light. Her small mouth was painted an intense red. The shading under her narrowly set eyes was far too intense.

"My dear sir," she began, the mouth creasing into a grotesque cavity, rimmed by the circle of red lips.

He focused his attention on her, and her alone. His mind pressed on hers, overwhelming it within an instant. He kept it focused, lest the mental noise in this place allowed her to slip from his grasp.

"Fliz," he said.

"He is not here," she said dully.

"Where is he?"

"I do not know."

"Who might know?"

The briefest of hesitations. Rutger pushed harder.

"Felicia," the matron told him.

"Where is she?"

"In the kitchen."

"Where is the kitchen?" The problem with this degree of mental control was that the subjects seldom volunteered information. They simply weren't capable of it.

The woman made as if to turn but his eyes held her. She pointed. "Through there."

"Good."

Rutger imposed on her mind a total vacancy that should last for long enough to allow him to do what needed to be done. The woman shuffled to the closest chair and slumped into it. Rutger crossed the lobby and entered a corridor beyond it. The smells wafting to him told him the rest. He took a few more steps and arrived at a door, which he opened.

An old, used-up woman bent over a chopping board, cutting up onions with a long, sharp knife. She looked up as he entered. Her face froze. The knife stopped moving. She stared at him from shocked, bright-blue eyes. Rutger, who had thought to take control over the situation as soon as he entered the kitchen, knew with preternatural clarity that he had no control at all. It was as if she looked right through him; as if she *knew* him. Knew everything there was to know—in that very instant when she looked up and into his eyes.

Rutger himself remained immobile for a fatal moment. He had never experienced anything like this before. Because with the knowledge in those eyes something else roared into a sudden, unexpected flame:

a fury such as he had never faced before; a mental onslaught that made him stagger back against the wall.

The woman moved. Too fast. Impossibly fast for one of her age; her decrepitude. She wielded the knife like a sword as she slid around the table and was upon him before he had time to react. The knife bore down on him and slashed him in the side. The woman screeched something, the voice projecting an implacable hatred that seared across his soul. Somehow he understood the words.

“You shall not have my son!”

The knife drew back. She slashed a second time. Rutger finally shook himself out of his paralysis. He dodged aside and grabbed her wrists. She wrenched them out of his hand with a force that stunned him. Rutger leaped back. With the knife raised above her head she lunged after him. Rutger ducked around the table. The woman followed, her screeches growing even more intense. The sight of her bearing down on him with the inevitability of death made him snap. He backed off, trying to keep the table between them. At the same time he withdrew a small, hand-held weapon from an inside pocket of his tunic. The woman took a grotesquely agile leap and scrambled across the table. She lunged at him again. Rutger stepped back, aimed and pushed a button. A jagged lance of lightning jumped from the mouth of weapon to the woman. It was attracted by the knife, and from there surged along her arm and enveloped her body like a live cocoon of death. She twitched uncontrollably; screamed again; a last gurgling imprecation. Then she fell, slipped, and stumbled. She slid off the table. Her head hit the stone floor with a sickening crunch. Rutger released the trigger. The crackling lightning ceased.

Behind him a sound. He whirled around to face a young woman. Her eyes were riveted on the corpse of Fliz’s mother. She opened her mouth and emitted a horrid wail that climbed up the scale and grated on his senses. Rutger, without conscious thought, pressed the trigger again; just to silence that terrible scream. Lightning enveloped the young woman. Her scream became a gurgle and died. She collapsed on the floor, beside the old woman. She jerked a couple of times, then lay still.

More noises. Running footsteps. Rutger did not await further developments. He bolted for the door on the far end of the kitchen. As he opened it, he heard a angry cry behind him. He did not turn around because he

didn’t want them to see his face, but opened the door and fled through the corridor beyond, until he reached the back door and the alleyway behind the *Pink Palace*. Then, fighting down a panic such as he’d never known before, he forced himself to discipline and assumed the Gait of Stealth; getting himself away from this insane place and to safety.

