

---

---

# The Cosmopolis Literary Supplement

---

---

No. 23 • August 2003 ~ Published with Cosmopolis No. 41

---

## Contents

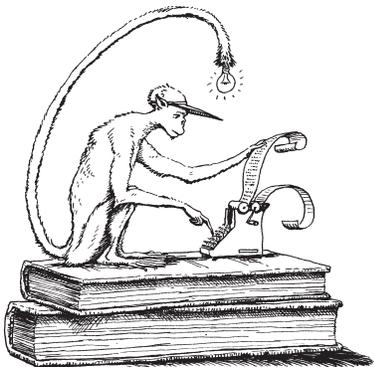
Baubles  
*by Max Ventura*  
Page 2



Dragonchaser  
Chapters 14–17  
*by Tim Stretton*  
Page 8



Finister  
Chapters 3–4  
*by Till Noever*  
Page 23



## Editorial

Gentle Readers,

Welcome to CLS 23. To break the monotony of predictability, this issue contains an unexpected contribution from a newcomer, who provides us with a historical vignette on the lives of the Ska.

As for the rest of this issue, it's steady-as-she-goes.

Does anybody actually ever read the CLS? I haven't had a single letter for about a year. Is there anybody out there at all? Are we publishing this for the void?

Questions, questions.

Happy reading

Till Noever



# Baubles

by Max Ventura

Bauble pertaining to Helyo, Duke Luhalcx, 127th Patriarch of Clan Sank, Earl of Ausrue and Fosrue, Prime Admiral of Resources (retired).

First week of the Wine Season;

Capital District, Skaghane.

*Note: In order to appreciate this bauble, readers should be acquainted with the trilogy of Lyonesse.*

On a crisp early autumn morning, the aging Duke Luhalcx took furtively to the kitchens door of his stately mansion, and, avoiding notice from the scullions, was quickly out toward the pasture fields well before his martinet of a majordomo could notice his absence at the breakfast table. The Duke was carrying his walking cane, and for the first five minutes he moved purposefully at a steady gait to escape awkward explanations.

Once the last barn of the Dome Ausrue compound was behind him, and he was completely away from sight, he slowed consistently his pace and almost immediately felt a pang in the spleen. He sighed, and limped on, relying heavily on his trusted alder cane.

The low hill he was about to climb covered from his line of view the harbor of Mo, the Skaghane capital town located at the north tip of the large island, in the location where the first Ska immigrants found landing several centuries earlier.

Panting considerably, the elderly Duke, his long, shaggy, white hair in loose strands around his widely receding hairline, a freckled scalp and evident wrinkles of his thin skin, scrambled to the very top of the hillside from where he could finally engrasp at a single glance the whole of the harbor. He stood up satisfied, appraising the traffic of incoming barges from the islets and the bulkier cogs from the Foreshore, carrying back and forth mostly logs, ores from the North Ulfland rented mines, the excellent preserved fish cured by Ska seashore villagers, and any other exchange goods that the Ska didn't see fit to manufacture *in loco*.

The Duke inhaled deeply the fresh air of the morning, carrying dank and slightly rotting smells from the vicinity of the port, while the sun was slowly coming into view behind him, still keeping the harbor in partial shade by the bulk of the hills. He also smiled at the thought of his majordomo who probably now was hysterically ravaging the manor in search of the cantankerous oldster who once again had thwarted his surveillance.

The Duke Luhalcx, now in his seventy-eighth year of age, was still a tall and gaunt figure, with a strong tendency to hunch his back, a visage with sharp, terse features rendered even sharper by the austerity of his vestments and the stark contrast of his skin against the black cloak. Leaning on his cane, he almost regained the kingly stature he once had, before hard times came, before everything he had always lived for was reduced considerably by events of life.

He moved his gaze slowly from the west, where the awakening town itself lay underneath a rocky peak, all along the span of the harbor, to the east, whence the cogs from the Foreshore came slowly in. Squinting his no longer sharp eyes in the distance, through the early morning haze, he had the impression of identifying the shores of Hybras, where he hadn't set foot in something like a third of a century, since the retreat of Ska forces from Ulfland.

Hybras . . . he thought. The island where his life crumbled.

Hybras of the Troice King, the one he personally confronted more than . . . what? thirty years ago? something like that . . . the Troice king: the one who was able to thwart their efforts, the one who almost destroyed even the whole of his own family.\*

\* King Aillas had finally and formally joined all of the former kingdoms comprising the Elder Isles twenty-nine years earlier. His planned capital town Alcyone having become financially unfeasible, the court once and for all moved to Avallon in Dahaut. The palace Ffalu Ffail became the seat of his rule for three years only, when the young King, taken aback by a vicious septic infection, and having but faintly recovered, gladly relinquished his throne to his son Dhrun, in a ceremony that also marked the wedding of the Prince with Princess Madouc, estranged heiress of Lyonesse. Aillas retired to a simple country life with his wife Glyneth and their children Serle and Ospero. During his tenure in Avallon, he had ordained Grandukes and Governors for each of the former kingdoms, in this fashion: Sir Tristano, his own cousin, as Governor of Troicinet; an Ulf baron, Lord Ezmer of Haul Keep, a respected and moderated individual, as Governor of South Ulfland and what remained of the Vale Evander; Rohan of Xounges, former Seneschal

His thoughts quickly shifted to his firstborn son, Alvicx, who had lost his life among the ruins of their Ulfland home, Castle Sank, and his mother, the Lady Chraio, who was now twenty years gone too, by means of a fever. His daughter Tatzel had somehow managed to salvage herself from the ruins of their Ulf castle, only to become a hardened, bitter virago who, for want of better occupation threw herself headlong into the shipping business, taking the reins of her husband's three-vessel company and making it a really proficient enterprise.\*\*



Duke Luhalcx was old and tired. His nerves had sustained great stress and many a hardship in his long life and he had witnessed changes greater than ever before for his people.

Realizing he had been slumping and hunching his back again, he pulled himself erect for a second and, moving away from the top of the hill, descended a few steps towards a young pear tree that was basking in the early orange sunlight.

He selected a few of the closer fruits, then sat down with his back to the tree, pulled a small, rusty carving knife from a fold of his cloak, and proceeded industriously to peel the fruits.

While he ate, he counted the reasons why he could be severely scolded by his daughter at that very moment, were she to find him in that guise:

of King Gax, became Governor of North Ulfland. A Celt prince, far cousin to the defunct King Dartweg but far more urbane and mild of disposition, took up post as Duke of Fer Aquila and Wisrod, under the rule of Claractus, new Duke of Dahaut, a strong-willed but trustworthy old warrior who had sustained tremendous maiming during the war with Lyonesse and walked on a single leg, looked with a single eye and ate with a single hand, but always listened with both ears. Grandukes Kestrel and Milo retained their former Kingdoms of Pomperol and Blaloc, with Milo dying of gout shortly thereafter, his rule passing onto his son Prince Brezante. The Lyonesse post was affixed to Garstang of Twanbow Hall, another maimed old warrior who King Aillas had known in harder times in the past. Dascinet and Scola had been administered by Troice officials until Severin, single son to the former Dasce King Yvar Excelsus, returned from exile in Cantabria with news of his father's death and a plea to King Aillas to let him retrieve the properties of his family, the mementos, the regalia and what few valuables had remained in their former residence of Arquensio, in order to alleviate his family indigence. Aillas graciously not only allowed him that, but also invested him back with the title of Governor of Dascinet, whereupon the teary-eyed young prince pledged his loyalty to the King and thankfully moved back what remained of his ancient family to Dascinet.

*A) he was sitting on the grass; that was neither dignified for a Duke of Sank nor it was convenient for those who had to wipe clean his robes after him. And why did he not go pasture the cows since he was at it?*

*B) he was out of his quarters at a very inconvenient time of the day when everybody was surely searching for him and worrying about his wellbeing. Poor hard-working Eupulvium, his majordomo, would be particularly annoyed to find that out!*

*C) he was eating away from the proper breakfast table and the fruit had not been properly washed and prepared and, in any case, was he allowed to eat fruit with the acidity problem he lamented? no he was not!*

*D) and where exactly did he keep that knife hidden?*

Oh well, thought the Duke, times have changed. Let me be up and away now, before they become agitated. He put away the knife and wiped his hands in a kerchief.

He tried to pull himself up from the ground, but he only managed such feat after a few tries.

\*\* Only until thirty years previously, most of the Ska economy had been sustained by the Skaling workforce, who, for the most part, had opted for freedom once the pacts between the Ska King and the Ulf King were set into motion. Some thirty to forty percent of the Skaling though, having nowhere to go, or else, having nowhere better to go, had elected to remain employed by the Ska at a salary. The Ska economy for ages had been based mainly on fishing, mining, metal forgeries and log sawmills. Most of the positions at every level of the labour force, and also at every level of the cadre ladder, had been covered by Skalings, both thrallled and liberated, or by Skas of lesser status (commoners). The sudden disappearance of about 60% of the work force (although at first a much worse percentage had been feared) squashed the heavy industries of mining, logging and forging to a level barely sufficient for the basic needs of mainland Skaghane, with all thoughts of sustaining some kind of expansion now unfeasible. The only economy that remained virtually unscarred was the fishing industry, traditionally operated by Ska villagers. At this point most of the work force (either former Skalings, Ska of lesser caste and some of the medium and higher castes) had to move down the ladder a few steps, and the days of toiling began for a race that had known much more heroic times. Most of the noblemen and noblewomen in these harder times had seriously to put aside the niceties of court posture, roll up their sleeves and take up some post at crucial business enterprises, such as shipping and fishing fleets, farming, mining and logging, and begin some profitable export and import traffic with the nearby cultures.

The Ska ruler, King Sarquin, had his own hard times too once back in Skaghane. Supported by the older warlords who had witnessed the Ulf war, he confronted the boiling spirits of the younger princelings and those who accused him of cowardice, thereby reinforcing his position and deftly changing the regulations of Ska government to induce a more complex system of power distribution, in order to fragment it, towards a more localized administration. Sarquin had ruled 24 years in all, and was superseded upon his death by a triumvirate of Dukes representing the main Ska townships. Luhalcx's own brother, Duke Ankhalcx, had served in such a post for three regulatory years.

He brushed off the excess dirt and grassblades from his cloak then set slowly off downhill in the direction of Dome Ausrue, where he could now see some smoke from one of the chimneys, a signal that the palace was waking up and his absence might already have been noticed.

Careful to remain well behind the cover provided by the nearest barn, the one where hides and pelts were kept, so as to avoid being spotted from the manor windows, he circled the nearest copse of pear trees and moved behind the barn to approach the courtyard behind the manse from the widest berth: he hoped in this way to reach the front veranda without being noticed, sit himself on a bench there, and pretend he had only risen from bed a trifle too early, electing then to wait outside for his breakfast.

Yes, he thought smiling one of his foxy grins, if they believe that today I will do it again tomorrow morning, and maybe they'll let me . . .

A quaver in his sight! The breath he was taking felt terribly short, and for a second he grasped for air. Then the whole left side of his head started buzzing and prickling with a warm sensation, and a great maroon shadow came upon his left eye: the Duke spun half a turn around while letting himself drop on the meadow with a groan, barely realising his knees had let go. Sprawled he laid, his left calf underneath the other leg at an inconvenient angle; his cloak had caught his heel and had been awkwardly pulled, so that now the clasp holding it at the neck was hard by the Duke's underjaw and painful. That pain kept him alert. A part of his mind wanted to sleep right there and right then, another part wanted to get rid of that pain so he recovered his senses enough to notice that his left eye vision was a reddish blur, and that his left ear was numb and deaf. The Duke tried to find his left hand but did not succeed. He then tried to feel his right hand and he did, but could not understand where it was. He eventually localized it behind his back but was unable to remove it. He uttered some groans and thus doing he felt that most of his mouth and face were paralyzed toward the left side. He felt a pang of fear in his bowels and tried to gather enough breath for a cry, but only managed to squirt some saliva and a faint, low-pitched wail that fatigued him very much, and made his head spin backward into nothingness.

*He was walking along a country road lined with trees, holding his horse by the reins and keeping an eye upon young Alvicx who was fumbling with his newly-won pony, when he heard bellows behind him, and he turned his head, and everything started to spin around and round and round. . .*

His limp body was groped from underneath and rolled over, his hand now liberated, his cloak free from pull, and he faintly heard muffled bellows: ". . . ha! Mme . . . ha!" but he could not grasp the meaning. He felt arms around him trying to lift him, but he was not a small man and he knew that whoever was trying such feat would need all his strength.

Eventually whomever was trying to lift him had succeeded, and he was clumsily carried at a certain distance, his head undulating to each heavy step, his vision blurred, his limbs abandoned to the sides, brushing the grass.

He heard more bellows, felt more hands, was groped again, pulled, turned, all the while being totally limp except for his internal mind, that kept working within the confines of his skull, with only faint contacts from abroad.

After what seemed an eternal span of time he was dropped on a yielding surface, the soft sensation making him feel like falling down into oblivion again, which he gratefully did.



"Father."

"Father?"

"Dad, open your eyes!"

He opened his right eye and his daughter was there, pale as a fish, her black hair disarranged, her husband right behind her with a pinched face. Behind that, he could only see the faint darkness of evening. He realized he was in a bed.

"Father, how are you? How do you feel?" Tatzel said, in a suave tone he had not heard from her in years.

The Duke gathered some energy and whispered something that could not be understood. Tatzel's husband, Lord Erqual, fourth step-nephew to the late King Sarquin, came forward to intercept those words, but Tatzel pushed him unceremoniously back: "Stand back, Guyo, my father can't breath if you throng him!" Lord Erqual grumbled something and paced away clasping his hands behind his back.

"Father?" Tatzel called his attention back: "Do you know where you are?"

The Duke managed to move his eyes around a bit, and he saw some other faces around the bed. Some maids, some men way back in the darkness, and he nodded.

"You know this is your bedroom, don't you?" she said again. He nodded.

Somebody approached from the left. He had to move his head, which felt heavy.

"Dear Duke, you really had us all in anguish today!" that was Eupulvium, his majordomo, russet curls and all, his rehearsed smile hiding his uneasiness. Tatzel must already have scolded him well and good.

"Father, who am I? Tell me my name," Tatzel called him back.

The Duke opened his mouth but not much came out, and the whisper had to be interpreted as "Tatzu", her nickname. She relaxed a bit, and colour seemed to flush back into her face. She sighed, and lifted up a bit from the bedside.

One by one several of his maids, footmen, and people of his household came to greet him. Last was Stephanos, a Greek seaman from a vessel captured more than forty years before off the coast of Galicia. He had been the house cobbler since then.

Eupulvium the majordomo came forward and patted Stephanos over his back: "Good Stephanos here found you behind the barn, and carried you all alone all the way to the house! You have had some kind of a seizure, or so the cerusic tells us!"

The Duke Luhalcx managed another whisper: "Thank you," he seemed to say.

The bulk of the people gathered into the Duke's bedroom moved away little by little, the commotion finished for the moment. The maids and footmen were back about their business, Eupulvium was also gone setting matters straight around the house, the Lady Tatzel was in the back of the room conversing softly with her husband. The torches had been fired, and in the shadows the Duke saw Stephanos, his felt cap between his hands, humbly waiting. Tatzel came back toward the bed and, coming closer, said: "Father? I will have to go back to Mo with Lord Erqual for the night. I will come back tomorrow morning as early as possible. This evening we have two ships coming in from Albione and Lord Erqual has to be at the docks in one hour." she

waved at her husband to hold on. "It's dinner time now. Do you want to taste something?"

The Duke lifted his right hand's forefinger and signaled her 'no'. Tatzel nevertheless said "I will have a bowl of soup and a cup of tea brought here. You must eat something. I will see to it." She got up and left the room.

A maid approached to straighten his pillow and fur blanket, and brought a candlelamp close to his bedside. She said: "Your Highness, we all hope you will soon be well. Good Stephanos here won't leave, he wishes to wait on you tonight." The maid then left the chamber.

Stephanos was standing in the shadows, and the Duke squinted his eyes to reckon him. He made an infinite effort to lift his right hand and wave him nearer.

Stephanos was quick at approaching the bedside. He was an almost elderly man, about ten years younger than the Duke himself, with a long grey beard and curly grey hair, who smelled of tannin and leather. He bent and spoke in a gingerly voice to the Duke: "I have prepared a new pair of buskins for you. How soon do you think you'll wear them?"

The Duke smiled faintly, his left eye half closed, his long strands of dirty-white hair displayed on the pillow in a disorderly fashion, but his smile moved only the right side of his mouth. He waved his finger to Stephanos who moved a bit closer and took the stool on which the lantern rested for a seat. "...ve ...t-h mahh soh," the Duke whispered. Stephanos shook his head and moved even closer: "What?"

"Ghhh...ive to mah sonnn..." whispered the Duke.

"Give them to your son?" asked Stephanos, dumbfounded. The Duke's only son had died so many years ago. He was about to reply but thought better of it. He nodded instead, and looked away.

The maid came back with a tray, which she left with him after a few words. Stephanos arranged a kerchief over the Duke's chest and tried to lift him a bit up against the head of the bed, the Duke's body limp and heavy, his hair smelling of grease and dust and old age.

While Stephanos was trying to feed the Duke some warm soup with a wooden spoon, he spoke to him of all those years they'd know each other. Stephanos was taken as a slave into Dome Ausrue at the age of 25, and he had been the cobbler and sometimes handyman to the household of Dome Ausrue during all those years,

having elected to stay as a regular servant after the great Skaling liberation, thirty years previously.

Notoriously haughty and supercilious with servants and Skalings alike, the Ska of high caste almost never spoke directly to underlings. However, in the case of Duke Luhalcx, who as a personal fancy cultivated leather crafts and artisanship, he had worked elbow to elbow with Stephanos in the barn for several years, in total isolation, and, in the course of time, they went as far as coming to a first-name basis, at least within the confines of their workroom.

The Duke was listening to Stephanos' recollections, half-awake, while some soup found the way into his body. He saw scenes long time gone in his mind, he heard voices long time dead.

When Tatzel was five, she was playing alone one early evening in the back building corridors where the servants' lodgings were located, and, penetrating deeper than usual in the viscera of the palace, she came upon her father, who was hiding in the shadows and looking at something from behind a low wall separating the end of the corridor from a storeroom below the ground level.

Her father noticed her and signaled to hush and not make noise, then waved her near him and held her close. Some murmuring noise and some softly speaking voices came from the chamber behind the wall, along with the faint glow of a lamp.

Tatzel could not keep herself quiet and in due course tried to say: "Father, what are we doing here?" But the Duke impeded her mouth with his hand, then lifted her up in his arms so she could see.

The storeroom was lit by a single, faraway candle and behind the casks, tubs and pallets were several of their Skalings, facing the opposite wall, their head bowed, their voices muttering something in unison that sounded too muffled to be intelligible.

The Duke looked at Tatzel and whispered to her: "See? They are venerating their ancestors. Something similar to what we do in the Chamber of High Honors. Now listen," and he turned again to watch.

From the group of bowed heads one of them lifted up and picked something nearby, Tatzel could not see from where. This person appeared now to be their cobbler. He lifted a piece of wood to eye-level, but wait, it was not a piece of wood, it was a carved object, something of a stick, almost a yard long, sprouting two arms

from the sides. The man lifted it even higher, and his voice raised in volume while he was invoking something. He then took something from somewhere again, and when it came into view it was a cup or some small receptacle. Still chanting, he moved to the side where some other indistinguished person was kneeling, and he touched the head of that person first with the stick he carried, then with the cup, and finally poured some liquid from the cup over the head of the kneeling person. Then he lifted him up, and the person was one of their scullions.

Tatzel could not constrain herself anymore and called out "Heyyy there! Coraldus!!!" for she often had played in the kitchens and she was acquainted with the Welsh scullion.

The group of people immediately disbanded in a fright, some of them scuttled the way of the stables, some others hid behind casks, others yet came their way and passed by them pretending to be inconspicuous and about their business. They filed like schoolboys in front of the Duke who simply looked down at them, and were away before he could think of something to say. Last was the cobbler. Their eyes met. The cobbler, bowing his head low, moved away to the stairs and was gone. Tatzel and the Duke retired and the incident was quickly forgotten.

In the years to come, while the cobbler and the Duke worked together in their workroom, where they produced leather panels fire-inscribed with legends of the Ska Iron age, ceremonial masks and breastplates, they often engaged in discussions, sometimes heated, about the rites of the Ska and the rites that Stephanos practiced, an ideology that the Duke often referred to as "a pitiful glorification of the weak". But once outside of their workroom, their conversation usually reverted to the standard between regular Skalings and their masters: none whatsoever.



Stephanos had given up trying to feed the Duke. The hour was late and the soup was now cold, but the Duke had not eaten much, and his breath was becoming heavier and more apart by the minute. He called over his shoulder to the maid who was sleeping in the next room: "Dewenach? Dewe, come here!" She appeared, her eyes swollen and blinking, her hair in a ruff: "How

is the Duke? Is he better?" she whispered, straightening her gown.

Stephanos signaled in the negative with his left hand, away from the sight of the Duke, to which Dewe the maid frowned. "I'll go fetch the cerusic," she said, and disappeared.

The Duke was breathing very heavily and his gaze was fixed upon the ceiling. At times he seemed to smile to unknown thoughts, a couple of times he almost laughed softly.

The cerusic showed up and waved Stephanos away to the side. He produced some balms and unguents and proceeded to apply some on the Duke's chest, opening his shirt a bit.

He also blew some powder through a short goat horn in his ears and in his nostrils to the effect that the Duke sneezed and seemed to revive for a few instants, looking about the room.

The cerusic then wanted to apply a couple leeches but the Duke at the sight of the things waved him away rather vigorously with a grunt. The cerusic haughtily retreated and packed away his tools. He spoke to the maid then he was gone.

Dewe came over to Stephanos and told him the cerusic would be there again at dawn. She would be in her chamber now, should he need her.

Once she was gone, the Duke waved Stephanos close to him.

"Tell me . . ." he croaked; Stephanos put his ear really close to the Duke's face. "Tell me . . . of your hero . . . with no sword," the Duke managed to say.

"My hero . . ." thought Stephanos. "Do you really want to hear his story?"

The Duke nodded with his eyes.

"Are you going to mortify me afterwards? Like you used to do?" he mused.

The Duke moved his head to signify "no". He opened his mouth several times but could not find the strenght to form words. Eventually he whispered: "Maybe this time . . . I can listen."

And Stephanos spoke, he spoke for the whole night, he told a story of expectations and omens, he told of a birth in sorrow, of a life of solitude and longing, of a lonely boy in a faraway land, surrounded by scorn and suspicion, frightened by his responsibility, unloved and misunderstood, who took to the road one day with the certainty of a non-return, in pursuit of his mission. He

told then a story of sharing, a story of giving, a story of loving, of friendship and compassion, of unity of hearts and big hopes, a story of witnessing, with truth in one hand and love in the other, a story of glorious days to come, for all men alike. The story went sour, as Stephanos told of cracked faith, of crippled destiny, of unjust blood, of scorn again, of suspicion again, of fear again, to the ultimate sorrow, the heart a wreck, the soul in shreds, the sacrifice as the only way left out and the most minor of all possible evils.

Stephanos then spoke on, of a great rebirth, of joy and blue skies, of hopes once again, of witnessing the world, and healing, and spreading the word faraway, to the lands beyond the seas and to the land where Stephanos was born. Stephanos also spoke of his namesake, who had seen the blue skies as the last time before sacrificing himself to hateful hands, and his heritage who had carried on, through more suffering and much fear, through the centuries, until the day when the Father of our hearts will come again, and not in the clouds, but in flesh and blood, to take our hands and lead us away where we can really be what we were meant to be.

Stephanos raised his eyes to the tall and narrow windows, fitted with colored glass panels, that were filtering the first faint glow of pre-dawn, and tears came down his cheeks in a slow and somberly fashion, as the Duke's breath now was at its last.

The candle had almost extinguished. Stephanos looked compassionately down at the Duke, who laid as any man has ever laid down in his ultimate hour, when nothing matters anymore, nothing means anything anymore, except what lies beyond.

So slowly,

very slowly,

in the last hour of night,

before an immobile silence,

the Duke Luhalcx, former pillar of a nation, detached himself from everything and floated away into a marvellous, strange and incredible Eternity.



# Dragonchaser

by *Tim Stretton*

## Chapter 14

It was only two mornings after Mirko's release from the Fanarites that the day of the Peremptor's Nomination Ball dawned bright and sunny. Mirko lay in his bed until nearly midday, having previously arranged to give the crew a day away from *Sapphire Light*. He dressed with greater than usual care, selecting the plum and umber coat over a brilliant white shirt, breeches of a light grey, white gaiters and a pair of cutaway umber shoes. His lodgings were not equipped with a glass, so he had to take the overall effect on trust. Clambering astride Boodle, he rode at a gentle pace up the mountain road towards Formello.

From the watchtower Mirko's approach was espied and two guards descended respectfully to swing wide the gate. Mirko raised a hand in salute and rode through to the main courtyard where he dismounted. Liveried slaves took Boodle off to the stables and Mirko was escorted into the reception room inside the castle. There was an air of hushed expectancy about Formello: this was a significant day in the life of its master.

Larien soon came down the stairs from her own apartments. "Mirko!" she called. "I should hardly have recognised you — you look quite the courtier."

Mirko politely inclined his head. Larien herself had taken great trouble over her own appearance and he could not remember ever seeing her so alluring. Her dress took as its basis the Azure, the main body a rich navy blue with sleeves of a lighter shade, and cuffs again of navy. The cut was daringly low, revealing a white expanse of chest and, to the probing eye, a little more. Her long hair was piled on her head in an elaborate coiffure, and two large sapphires depended from her ears; another hung around her neck on a silver chain. The total effect was utterly captivating.

"Larien, if I am a courtier, I hardly know where to begin with my compliments. You are lovely beyond compare."

She kissed him on the cheek, and Mirko caught the scent of a subtle sweet perfume. "I find simple praise

the most convincing," she smiled. "I know what I look like — what woman doesn't — and it's enough to know you appreciate the effect."

"Oh, I certainly appreciate it," said Mirko with a smile. He was saved from any further effusions by the blast of a herald's horn.

"Make way for the Elector Lord Bartazan!" and indeed Bartazan was descending the stairs from his apartments, with the Lady Inuela on his arm. Bartazan was attired entirely in the Azure, even down to his gloves, while Inuela was simply but richly dressed in a flowing white dress. Mirko bowed as they approached, Bartazan responding with a measured courtesy; he suspected that Bartazan was not fully reconciled to his presence on such a significant day.

"Who are the others?" whispered Mirko to Larien as the rest of the party made their way down the staircase.

"That's Inuela's sister Ysabel and her husband Calaran, with their son Balaran. Calaran is the cousin of the Elector Malanaz."

Ysabel strongly resembled her sister, although she was several years younger and carried a less oppressed air. Calaran had the look of well-bred stupidity Mirko had noticed in other Electors' family connections, while Balaran was at the unfortunate age where acne was his most noteworthy feature. Mirko began to realise why his invitation had caused such displeasure with Bartazan; no doubt his presence would considerably lower the cachet of the party.

Attended by various liverymen the group made its way back out to the courtyard, where a number of splendid open-topped carriages awaited. Bartazan and Inuela were assisted into the first, drawn by four striders, with four-foot high wheels to ensure the masses had an adequate view of them. Calaran's family were assigned the second carriage, smaller but still impressive, while Larien and Mirko clambered aboard the last with the minimum of ceremony. The coachman inclined his head as he positioned himself at the front of the vehicle, and Mirko grinned back at him; he might as well enjoy the occasion.

Mirko was never able subsequently to remember many of the details of the journey to Coverciano. The route took them through the Old Town, where the crowds seemed more inclined to cheer than jeer, although in some quarters the balance was close. Mirko himself attracted a certain number of ribald comments

which, following Larien's example, he affected not to notice. Bartazan liberally distributed handfuls of silver coins where the crowds were deepest, to contemptuous clucking from Larien.

"Why does he do that?" asked Mirko. "None of these people can vote for him?"

"Don't you believe it," said Larien. "Given a free vote, there is no way at all Bartazan would get twenty-six Electors' votes; but there are any number of Electors who will be swayed by the mob. Many many years ago now, centuries even, the Electors chose Gilard Gilardson of House Sey for Peremptor; the people had bayed for Kattenkoop: the mob ran wild, Gilardson was torn limb from limb, and several Electors were lynched. It's never happened before or since; but no Elector will ever forget it."

"Kattenkoop? Any relation to Drallenkoop?"

"Yes, he was the Elector for House Drall at the time. There was another election, and of course Kattenkoop won. It would have been better if he hadn't; it was his conduct in office which has made House Drall unelectable ever since. He disregarded our old liberties and suppressed all opposition."

"Hardly unusual conduct for a Peremptor, I'd have thought."

Larien laughed, her cheeks glowing in the sea breeze.

"No, you're right. What really finished him were the rumours that he was dabbling in the Old Craft. Who knows whether he was or not? I find it unlikely myself. Anyway, he was hounded from office, and lucky to escape with his life: there is no worse crime in Paladria. No Drall has stood for Peremptor since."

"Paladrian politics is certainly a bloody business."

"It will be if my uncle wins—that you can be sure of."

Moving out from the Old Town, the carriages moved along the Esplanade towards Coverciano; this was the region where gentlefolk lived, and crowds were discouraged. Mirko looked out into the bay; several galleys were busy practising for The Sorcerers, now only three days away. He recognised the long pennon of *Morvellos Devil*, and saw *Fanar's Glory* drilling herself in smart turns; the easy style of Inisse at the helm was easily recognisable to the seasoned observer.

Larien caught the direction of his attention. Gently touching his knee, she asked: "Do you wish you were out there?"

"Under the circumstances, no," he smiled. "One day's practice won't make any difference—and Cascais will be at the Ball anyway. *Dragonchaser* can't practise either, if Drallenkoop is here."

Coverciano loomed into view, the brilliantly white-washed walls reflecting the bright early afternoon sun. There was a queue of carriages awaiting admittance at the gates, and Bartazan had to wait his turn like the rest. Nearby Mirko saw the carriage of Koopendrall, gleaming in gold and scarlet; the four-seater also included Drallenkoop and his companion, a young woman Larien dismissively referred to as "that flighty Allara, supposedly the Elector Tychonod's daughter, although with a mother like that it's impossible to be certain."

Mirko raised a hand in salute to Drallenkoop, and *Dragonchaser's* master responded in kind, adding in a bow to Larien; she responded with a glare which also took in Allara.

As they moved forward they drew level with the green open carriage of the Elector Nool Vavar, in which Cascais was also seated, as befitted an Elector's son. Cascais had outdone himself in finery, his otherwise sober costume appearing to have peacock feathers sprouting from each shoulder. Mirko could not repress a smirk, while Larien called out a compliment which Cascais returned in kind.

At last the Bartazan carriages reached the head of the queue. The footmen took them away while the dignitaries disembarked. The courtyard was heavily populated with Peremptor's Guards, conspicuous in their black uniforms and four-cornered hats.

"My Lord Bartazan? This way, if you please."

The party was escorted into the giant formal ballroom, which had not been used on the previous occasion he had visited Coverciano. Footmen freely distributed Televen wine and baked quails' eggs as the assembled throng took their seats. Mirko found the occasion lacking in stimulation and applied himself early to the wine. The ballroom was undoubtedly impressive, the ceiling richly studded with jewels of every colour, the seats upholstered in Peremptor's purple, and even the finger bowls adorned with rubies; but Mirko was eager for lunch to begin.

At last everyone was seated. Mirko looked around to see who he could recognise. Drallenkoop's party was largely out of sight at the other side of the hall; Nool

Vavar and Cascais were nearby, and Mirko recognised various of the Electors he had seen at Formello soirées.

There was a long blast from a herald's horn, and the chatter around the room ceased.

"All stand to mark the arrival of the Peremptor of Paladria, the August Dignity Medina of House Luz!"

Mirko stood with the others as a group of persons swept into the room; he looked with curiosity at Medina, a tall figure younger than he had expected. His robes were purple trimmed with white. His lady and children followed at a respectful distance, and various high officers from the Peremptor's Guard made up the party. Mirko noticed Corrando standing towards the rear of the group.

Medina paused at his seat. Stretching out his arms, he said:

"Dear guests! I welcome you to Coverciano for this most important of days. Please, be seated and enjoy the hospitality we have prepared for you. After we have satiated our appetites, we will turn our attention to the more serious business: Nominations for the August Office!"

With this Medina took his seat, and footmen appeared from various alcoves to serve the first course, a spicy soup laden with croutons. Bartazan seemed in a good humour.

"Well, Captain? How do you find Coverciano?"

"Highly impressive, my lord. It fully reflects the dignity of the Peremptor's office."

Bartazan nodded. "Indeed it does; and since I intend it for my own residence very soon, I find it most suitable. After the Nominations we will repair to the gardens, which are also rather fine."

Mirko forbore from observing that he had been to Coverciano before; no doubt Bartazan's thoughts were elevated by his forthcoming nomination. He returned to his soup, before turning his attention to the roast boar garnished with fennel, with potatoes and shallots which formed the basis of the main course. The salad of cold fowl which followed also proved highly acceptable, and by the time the mango and kiwano sherbet dessert came around, Mirko enjoyed a pleasant feeling of satiety. The conversation was not, by and large, of a level of stimulation sufficient to stave off post-prandial stupor: Larien contented herself with an occasional private smile, and looking around the other tables; Calaran's discourse marked him as, if anything, even less intelligent than his appearance, while his wife wisely kept her own

counsel. Young Balaran scowled his way through all four courses, making occasional peevish complaints to his mother. The Lady Inuela kept up a stream of polished inanity which Mirko judged essential in helping such events to pass off smoothly.

The penultimate course arrived. Mirko found the horse-chestnuts, shelled and dipped in honey and cinnamon, a little cloying for his palate. Larien, observing his lack of enthusiasm, leaned across and took one from his plate.

"Do you mind?" she asked. "These are particular favourites of mine."

Mirko smiled. "Be my guest. I'm saving room for the marinated sea-slug."

Larien popped the chestnut in whole, her eyes immediately watering from the heat of the honey. "You'd think I'd have learned at my age," she laughed, fanning her mouth and coughing. "Here, let me try with another."



## Chapter 15

By the end of the final course—the marinated sea-slug had been sweetened to perfection—Mirko was following Larien's example and scrutinising the tables around him. The other guests did not appear to be in riotous spirits either, with the exception of one table in the far corner, which on closer inspection proved to be Koopendral's. Mirko thought that 'N' would be interested to hear more details of the event, and wandered off towards the privy past Koopendral's table. On his way back, to his astonishment, he saw not just Koopendral, Drallenkoop and their companions, but the animated figure of 'N' herself. What conceivable reason could 'N' have for being Koopendral's guest at the Nominations Ball?

Stumbling over the carpet in his surprise, he attracted the attention of Drallenkoop.

"Watch out, Ascalon! This Televen is strong stuff!"

Mirko affected a sheepish grin and returned to his seat as quickly as he could. His puzzlement was rapidly increasing. 'N' had always appeared to be a gentlewoman: could it be that she was in fact a member of House Drall? The idea was not inherently ludicrous; and indeed would explain why she was employing him

to spy on Bartazan. If his supposition were correct, it would mean he too was working for Drallenkoop—or at least Koopendrall.

Larien leaned across and touched his hand. “Are you all right?”

Mirko roused himself. “Yes—just a little too much wine. But listen—can you see the Drall table from here?”

“Just. Why?”

“I saw someone I recognised at it. A woman, short, fair hair, dark eyes, sort of attractive?”

“‘Sort of?’”

“You know what I mean. Do you know who she is?”

“It sounds to me like Catzendralle—she’s some sort of eccentric relation, Koopendrall’s cousin or second cousin or some such. How do you know her?”

“I don’t—I’ve just seen her somewhere before, maybe a regatta. It’s not a matter of any significance.”

Larien smiled and rearranged a lock of hair which had escaped its binding.

“It’s significant when my escort is noticing other women. I can’t see the interest—‘sort of attractive’ is a generous assessment, and Koopendrall has obviously given her up as unmarriageable or she wouldn’t be a spinster at her age. I seem to recall she has a past, anyway . . .”

“I didn’t ask for a character assassination,” said Mirko with asperity. “I simply wondered who she was. Listen, the speeches are about to start.”

This fortunate break seemed to take Larien’s attention elsewhere. As Medina stood up, a footman discreetly slipped a note to Mirko: “From my Lord Koopendrall’s table, sir.” Mirko looked at the front: a single ‘G’ on the front marked it as ‘N’s work. Quickly breaking the seal, he registered the short message:

*Meet me in the Orange Grove immediately after the nominations. Even by your standards this represents unsatisfactory conduct.*

‘N’

Sighing, Mirko folded the note away in his coat, and reattached his attention to Medina.

“Lords and ladies, may I please have your attention! My second five-year term as Peremptor is coming to an end. It is not for me to assess the credit I have brought to the office during my tenure; the verdict on this score will of course be delivered by my brother Electors. I

will not list the boons of peace and prosperity which have attended Paladria while I have been Peremptor, or the liberties I have restored. Let us instead consider for a moment the history of the August Office, and the men who have filled it with distinction.”

Mirko leaned across to Larien. “How long does this normally last?”

“Don’t worry—Medina is no waffler.”

The Peremptor paused a moment to drink deeply of his goblet.

“The first Peremptor was of course my ancestor Pertinax Luz, chosen by his peers to root the Old Craft out of Paladria for good. In this he succeeded, for the Old Craft has never returned; Pertinax’s peers became the first Electors, and Pertinax wisely decreed that the August Office should ever more be selected from among this group by its members. Pertinax was not greedy for office, and the tradition of service to the common weal has ever after been a prime requisite for candidates for Peremptor. Other Electors from among the Luz have also served the people in this way; Pertinax the Second, who negotiated a treaty of friendship with Garganet; Romualdo of the Low Taxes; Verizon the Just, who codified our ancient laws. These are the men whose blood flows in my veins, men of force and vigour, humility and dignity. In my own way I have tried to follow their example.

“But never let it be said I lust for power. If a man of proven integrity, capacity and energy should step forward from among the Electors, and announce himself willing to take on the burden, I will relinquish the August Office without demur. My brothers, I do not know who among you intends to serve Paladria; but look into your hearts, to find that integrity, capacity and energy: if you do not find them, stand aside and allow a worthier man to serve.”

Larien whispered to Mirko: “See how smooth he is: the ‘integrity’ is intended to bring Bartazan’s arraignment to mind.”

Mirko agreed that Medina appeared to embody precisely the qualities of hypocrisy, plausibility and ruthlessness necessary in a successful ruler; Bartazan was altogether a less polished gem.

“It remains only to say that, since I cannot be assured that a more fitting candidate will indeed step forward, I once more declare my readiness to serve the people of Paladria in the capacity I have filled for the past ten years. Electors, I submit to your judgement!”

There was a ripple of applause around the room, genuinely enthusiastic in some cases, desultory in others, and on a few tables—such as Mirko’s—stony silence.

“I will move now to the question of Nomination. Brothers, do you propose a candidate?”

The Elector Nool Vavar rose portentously from his seat.

“Your Dignity, it would not be healthy for the state of Paladria were you to be returned, unopposed, to the August Office, since this would provide no validation for your no doubt progressive programmes. In this spirit, may I propose the Elector Bartazan of Bartazan House?”

Bartazan inclined his head towards Vavar.

“I will endorse this nomination!” “And I!”

In a matter of seconds, Bartazan had his five nominations. Medina called to him in a full voice:

“My Lord Bartazan, Ilkmeister of Bartazan House; your peers have nominated you for Election, for a third and final time. What answer do you give them?”

Slowly Bartazan rose from his seat and looked around the room.

“Your Dignity, my brother Electors! I am not worthy of the honour you have bestowed upon me,” he said, holding up his hands against the expected storm of protest, “no, my brothers, this is not simple rhetoric! Twice in the past, I have allowed my flag to climb the Electoral Pole: on both occasions, the claims of the noble Medina have been preferred. The opinions of the Electors are clear and concise: Medina is the man for the August Office.

“In allowing my name to go forward a third time, I of course engage in a considerable risk, since an Elector defeated three times is debarred permanently from the August Office. I should in all prudence withdraw my candidature against a time when the noble Medina has tired of his heavy responsibilities. But my sense of what is due to the spirit of Paladria is strong. No-one else volunteers to stand against a man with a record as impressive as my lord Medina’s; and as the sage Nool Vavar reminds us, for Medina to be returned unopposed denies him the full endorsement his magnificent achievements deserve. In this spirit, I accept my nomination, in the absence of another candidate.”

From the floor came a cry: “I nominate the Elector Koopendrall!”

Heads turned to identify the miscreant. It was the Elector Restivant of House Annix, something of an eccentric personality, known for his animosity to Bartazan. Koopendrall permitted himself a wintry grin, his chances of nomination, let alone election, negligible.

Restivant contented himself with a chuckle as the other Electors frowned. Bartazan appeared somewhat discomposd.

“It seems the entertainment has begun before the nominations are finished. My lord Medina, my qualifications are slight, when measured against the great names of the past. But three previous Bartazans have held the August Office, and with reckless candour, I accept the nomination of my peers.”

With this, Bartazan returned to his seat. Medina rose.

“My brother Bartazan, your disinterestedness and selflessness inspire us all, and serve as an example to the whole of Paladria. I welcome you again to the Judgement of Equals. Now, with the Nominations concluded, we may proceed to the frivolities. Musicians! Play! My guests, the Palace of Coverciano is at your disposal. The evening is young—disport yourselves in the pleasure gardens to your hearts’ content.”

Mirko and Larien wandered easily into the open air.

“Wasn’t that just the most hypocritical performance?” asked Larien. “Could anyone have been fooled by my uncle’s reluctance; everyone in Paladria knows he covets the Office above everything. Medina will destroy him.”

Mirko smiled slightly as he looked at her. “Unless I—”

“Let’s not revisit that, Mirko. I understand your position: that doesn’t mean I like it.”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “Look, here comes Cascais: will you excuse me for a while? I must attend to an item of business.”

Larien looked surprised but nodded her head.

Walking towards a footman, Mirko said:

“Please direct me to the Orange Grove.”

“This way, sir.”

The Orange Grove was descriptively if unimaginatively named, a grove of citrus trees giving off a beautiful clean scent. Mirko inhaled the fresh perfume deeply; it was perhaps the only natural thing he had yet encountered at Coverciano.

Turning slightly, he realised 'N' was next to him. In her ceremonial regalia she seemed taller, a burgundy dress setting off her fair hair and complexion to advantage. Her eyes seemed a little dull, and once again Mirko thought she looked tired.

"Hello, 'N'."

"Hello, Mirko."

This, he noticed, was the first time she hadn't called him Ascalon. He wondered what this augured.

"Won't Larien be missing you?"

"I've left her discussing apparel with Cascais; I doubt she'll notice I'm gone."

"I'm sure you undervalue your charm—but that's not why I want to talk to you."

"No?"

"What are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same question. I came because Larien asked me to; and I certainly didn't expect to see you—my lady."

"So you've established who I am?"

"I assume I have the pleasure of addressing the Lady Catzendralle, of House Drall?"

'N' pursed her lips. "Why did you have to find out?"

"Why didn't you tell me to start with? Because you didn't want me to know I was working for Koopendral?"

"I didn't think you cared who you worked for. Gold is gold."

"It's not quite that simple now, is it?"

Rather to Mirko's surprise, 'N'—or Catzendralle—smiled. "It never was simple, Mirko. Nothing in Paladria is simple. It's my own fault—I should have guessed Larien would bring you."

"Does it matter that I know who you are?"

"Follow me," she said quietly, walking into a nearby maze. "There are better places to talk than the Orange Grove—but you'd never have found this one."

Mirko followed Catzendralle as she steered flawlessly through the maze, finally stepping through an artfully concealed entrance into yet another garden.

"This," she said, "is the Secret Garden—and for once, the term means exactly what it says. Only two people know of its existence, and they're both standing here."

Mirko looked around the garden, with its gravelled paths, neat lawns and shrubs, and borders of flowers in every colour.

"I'm not sure I believe that, my lady. These gardens appear to be immaculately maintained, and your observation implies that you do the gardening yourself."

"Sit down," said Catzendralle with a quickly repressed smile, calmly folding her legs under her as she sat. "This garden is unique; it is maintained by the Old Craft."

Mirko started. "The Old Craft has been gone from Paladria for hundreds of years!"

"Indeed it has. But the garden is maintained by a charm of stasis, itself many hundreds of years old. It will persist forever, since—as you observe—the Old Craft is no longer practised here."

"I have to ask how you know about it."

Catzendralle laughed. "And equally, I don't have to tell you. There are many things only I know: I make it my business."

"It occurs to me," said Mirko, "that this is the sort of place you'd bring someone to kill them, especially if they'd found out an important secret about you."

"Mirko! I just start to like you, and see signs of real discrimination and competence, and you come out with an idiocy like that! There are much easier ways of killing you which don't require me to look you in the face while I do it. I brought you here because I imagined you'd have certain questions, and I'd rather answer them away from eavesdroppers. And the Secret Garden is so beautiful—and it's nice to share it with someone for a change."

Mirko was never more suspicious of Catzendralle than when she played the ingenue. It was just one more ploy to keep him off balance.

"Catzendralle, what do you intend to do about the fact that I know who you are and who you work for?"

She sighed and lay back on the grass, looking straight up into the sky. "What can I do? I can kill you, as you suggested—"

"I didn't exactly suggest it . . ."

"—but I'm not going to. The other option is simple: nothing. I don't like my agents to find out who I am, for all sorts of reasons, and it's never happened before. But I have to live with it. You have been useful and energetic so far, and as a foreigner I doubt you'll be staying here forever. And then of course, if I'm exposed, you're exposed. We'll just carry on the way we are. I'm inconvenienced by today, but not endangered."

Mirko looked across at her; her eyes were closed as she lay on the grass. "So you trust me?"

Without moving, she said: "Never make that mistake. I'm forced to trust you within certain limited parameters, no more than that."

After a pause, Mirko said: "You have a lonely occupation, if you can't or won't trust anyone. How did someone like you end up doing this?"

Catzendralle opened her eyes and rolled over onto her side to face Mirko. "I won't ask what 'someone like me' is supposed to mean; I don't think I'd like the answer."

"You know what I mean; you are gentlewoman, not uncomely, intelligent. Such a background would not generally lead to a career in espionage."

Catzendralle sighed. "I doubt that you call Larien 'not uncomely' to her face. Leaving that aside, a gentlewoman who is educated and unwilling to be married off at her relatives' whim finds very few opportunities present themselves. I was approached to undertake some minor assignments, showed potential, and in time ended up where you see me now: in Coverciano's secret garden, hoping my agent won't unmask me."

"Essentially your motivation is boredom?"

"Mirko, there really is a lot you don't understand. I have two sisters: Jallendralle is married to an Elector's brother, an odious character, violent when he's drunk and promiscuous when he's sober. She got to marry him because I refused to."

She shuddered and continued. "Yanderalle isn't married at all, and she's older than me. A stimulating day for her involves playing with Jallendralle's children; more typically she sketches or works at a silkscreen. You cannot imagine how lucky I am to do what I do. Well-born women in Paladria have about the same amount of freedom as slaves."

Mirko was silent at the intensity of Catzendralle's quiet observations. "I'm sorry—I had never thought—"

She smiled. "Men never do; which is one reason why a woman can be really rather good at what I do."

Mirko felt a sombreness to her mood. He stood up. "Are you going to show me round the gardens?" he asked, stretching out his hand to help her up.

Catzendralle got lightly to her feet; her hand was cool and dry in Mirko's. "Don't think," she said, "that because you've found out who I am, and I've told you something about myself, that our relationship has changed. Your instructions are the same as before, I pay you the same as before, and I am 'N', not Catzendralle."

"Do you never relax? You can trust me, you know, even though you don't want to."

"No, I don't ever relax: I prefer staying alive. You have been careless enough with your own safety so far; I don't relish such a cavalier approach to mine. And you should be getting back to Larien."

"I would as happily stay here with you."

Catzendralle turned her dark eyes on him. "Don't say that if you don't mean it; most of all, don't say it if you do. I don't employ you for your company. As it is, you may have some explaining to do to Larien."

Mirko shrugged. "You're more interesting than you appear at first sight, Catzendralle. You should try letting people like you for a change."

Catzendralle said nothing for a few moments. "Can you find your way out of the maze?" she finally said sharply.

"Yes, unless it's obscured by some Old Craft trickery."

"It's not. I'll be in contact after The Sorcerers. Now go—I'll stay here for a while."

Mirko made his way out of the secret garden. Somehow Catzendralle had managed to make him feel guilty that he had found out who she was, and boorish for wanting to know more. He still didn't know what to make of her; sometimes she seemed genuinely warm towards him, but if he reciprocated she reacted defensively or as if he'd affronted her. Since she was paying him, that was her prerogative.



## Chapter 16

Mirko was rather surprised, on finally locating Larien, to find her in conversation with Koopendralle's party on the Sunset Lawns. Even more to his surprise, she did not seem offended by the time he had spent with Catzendralle.

"Mirko!" she said. "Have you met the Elector Koopendralle? We are just discussing the prospects for next week's regatta. Drallenkoop you know of course, and the Lady Allara—I would not answer for who she knows."

Mirko bowed to Koopendralle—the man, it seemed, who was paying his wages. "My lord. I am honoured to meet the man who sponsors *Dragonchaser*."

Koopendrall waved away the compliment. "She is Drallenkoop's galley; he maintains her from prize money. She's nothing to do with me—although of course I take pride in her achievements."

The Lady Allara, a young woman with blonde hair and disconcertingly wide blue eyes, asked Mirko, "Do you think you will win next week, captain? They say *Sapphire Light* has been performing well."

"It would be rash to speculate on the outcome, my lady. *Dragonchaser* is the boat to beat, and in a week's time all will be known. I can influence only the performance of my own galley."

"I have to observe, Mirko," said Larien, "that the Lady Allara's knowledge of galley-racing is not large, and her commendation is not of immense weight. Am I not right, Allara, in saying that you have never watched a race from start to finish?"

"Certainly, my lady Larien, I have not made it my business to throw myself at every galley-master on the Bay; and consequently find little to occupy me on the waterfront."

Larien arched her eyebrows. "I notice you are the guest of the most prominent galley-master of all today. As a result I would not think you best-placed to insinuate on the conduct of others in this regard."

"I am not sure how your own escort will feel at hearing my Lord Drallenkoop styled 'the most prominent galley-master of all' when his own reputation has soared so dramatically. I accompany Drallenkoop at his express invitation, which I accepted out of regard for his superior intellectual and social qualities, rather than his success in the regattas."

Larien shot Allara a glare which effectively quelled any further conversation. Koopendrall took advantage of the pause to address Mirko.

"How did you enjoy the speeches, sir?"

"I was favourably impressed with their brevity; their content fostered an idea of humility in the participants which I rather suspect would not be borne out on closer examination of their characters."

Koopendrall laughed. "You speak with dangerous latitude about your employer, especially with his niece present."

"I am sure that even my lord Bartazan would not seriously claim humility among his key virtues."

"Although I do not own *Dragonchaser*, naturally I take a keen interest in her performances. Tell me, do you

genuinely believe you have a chance of winning the Margariad? Do you—"

Koopendrall was interrupted by the arrival of four Peremptor's Constables, led by Corrando. Bowing to the gentlefolk, the officer addressed Mirko:

"Good evening, Captain Ascalon."

"Good evening, sir."

"I am sorry to inconvenience you, but I will have to ask you to come with us. This is a matter of some seriousness."

"You will see that I am engaged with my Lord Koopendrall. Can your business not wait?"

Corrando looked mildly apologetic and a trifle embarrassed. "Sir, in view of the gravity of the accusations, that is not possible. I imagine you will prefer to accompany us under conditions of dignity rather than force us to use restraint."

"'Gravity'? 'Accusation'?"

"This will be more expeditious if you accompany us. Possibly a misunderstanding has occurred."

Mirko turned to the assembled company. "My lords and ladies, please excuse me; I believe the Peremptor's Constables have arrested me."

"No!" cried Larien, who had been stunned into silence. "Do you know who I am? You cannot take my uncle's galley-master."

"I do know who you are, my lady. Under the circumstances your intercession is futile—possibly worse than futile. Please allow me to do my job."

"Mirko!"

"Larien, just find your uncle and tell him what's happened."

In silence the Constables led Mirko back into the palace, well away from the banqueting area.

"This will be your residence for the immediate future," said Corrando, conducting Mirko to a cell of spartan but relatively unthreatening appearance. "Among my other duties I deal with espionage against the Peremptor: in this context there are various matters we should discuss. Please divest yourself of any weaponry."

Mirko silently removed his dagger and handed it to Corrando.

"Thank you. Now, let us sit and consider the charges laid against you."

"I would find that more straightforward if I knew what they were."

"I have received an allegation that you have been intriguing against the Peremptor on behalf of the Elector Bartazan. In addition your name has been mentioned in connection with the death of Bartazan's slave-master Padizan."

"The allegations are false. I now intend to leave."

Corrando gave a soft chuckle. "Sadly the Peremptor's justice does not operate in quite this fashion. Two scenarios present themselves: firstly, you may answer my questions in such a way as to convince me of your innocence, a remote but conceivable outcome; or you remain in custody until arraignment, trial and inevitable conviction."

"It is three days from The Sorcerers Regatta. I can hardly oversee *Sapphire Light* from Coverciano."

"Your enthusiasm does you credit. Hard as it may be to believe, however, there are more important things in Paladria than galley-racing. You will remain here until you leave—an observation more profound than it appears."

"Who has accused me? What evidence do they adduce?"

"I am scarcely likely to share the name of my source."

"Let's just assume your informant is associated with House Drall. How convenient it would be for me to be incarcerated at the time of an important regatta, just when I am about to inflict a significant defeat on *Dragon-chaser*. Am I near the mark?"

Corrando pursed his lips. "Maybe. Maybe not."

"Look, Corrando, what exactly am I supposed to have done?"

"Murdered Padizan. Intrigued against the Peremptor."

"Both allegations are absurd."

"In my experience both the innocent and the guilty make much the same point."

"What do I need to do to get out of here?"

"For now, that option is not available to you. We will speak again tomorrow."

"Am I allowed visitors?"

"You may require someone to bring you food and clothes."

"I demand to speak to Bartazan."

"Not a wise choice, from your perspective. You are, in any case, expressly prohibited from all contact with all members of the House of Bartazan."

Mirko pondered his situation. The person most able to help him would be Catzendralle, but he suspected she would not be eager to be involved in the affair. On the other hand, as it seemed likely that allegations had originated within House Drall, she might very well be able to resolve the misunderstanding. After all, whatever offences he were guilty of, the murder of Padizan and intriguing for Bartazan were not among them.

"In that case, please convey a message to the Lady Catzendralle that I am here and would like to see her."

Corrando stroked his chin. "The Lady Catzendralle?"

"Yes. She is here tonight."

"You pick the most curious friends. I will arrange for someone to contact her."

With that, Corrando turned and left the room, making sure to take Mirko's dagger with him.

As the door was locked Mirko composed himself for rest on the straw mattress which constituted his bed. It seemed likely he would be here for some time, and fretfulness would not make the time pass faster. Who could have done this to him, and why?

House Drall certainly seemed the likeliest culprits. Although Drallenkoop hadn't seemed especially concerned, there was a widespread feeling that *Sapphire Light* might seriously challenge *Dragonchaser* in the next races. With a stand-in overseer next week, that now seemed unlikely. Then again, Catzendralle had made it very clear that there were many vested interests who wanted to see *Sapphire Light* fail, starting with Medina himself. Since it was Medina's own constables who had arrested him, this possibility could not be discounted.

His list of enemies did not stop with Bartazan's political rivals, he realised. As a result of the episode at the Temple, he now had not just Gambar Inisse but the whole Fanarite establishment against him—although if they had been responsible here, he would have expected sacrilege to be on the bill of charges. Then there was Fenneker, who had sworn revenge on both himself and Bartazan; and even Padizan's sister Nadien. The fact that Padizan's murder was laid to his account gave weight to this otherwise flimsy contention.

Mirko sighed and shifted himself on the bed; it was by no means plush. But soon he found himself drifting off into sleep. Just at this moment he heard the lock turn rustily and sat up in alarm. Did Medina's men go in for secret night-time murder?

A well-modulated voice said: "You can leave us, Corrando. And no listening at the door, if you value your job."

"As you wish, my lady."

In the faint light which entered through the grille in the door, Mirko saw that his visitor was none other than Catzendralle. She sat down on the edge of the bed.

"Mirko! Are you all right?"

"Unhurt; but puzzled and angry. Do you know what's happened?"

"Corrando told me on the way here. You shouldn't have asked for me—people will wonder at the connection."

"I thought you might be able to help me. I'm no use to you here."

"Neither are you any hindrance. Having you out of the galley is by no means disadvantageous to me at the moment."

Mirko noted that this represented an implicit acknowledgement that he was capable of beating Drallenkoop, but forbore from pursuing the topic.

"You know that I'm innocent. And your family put me here—which led me to believe you could get me out."

"Both of your statements are tendentious. I don't know you're innocent at all. Padizan was undoubtedly killed by one of Bartazan's retainers—it could have been you. And I really don't know what makes you think House Drall put you here."

Mirko sat up in annoyance. "This isn't the time to play games with me, Catzendralle. You know, by every reasonable definition of the word, that I didn't kill Padizan and that I'm not intriguing for Bartazan."

Catzendralle smoothed her hair back in silhouette, a nervous gesture Mirko had noticed before. "I'm sorry—I'm just trying to show you that, as ever, things aren't as straightforward as you imagine. Of course I believe you're innocent—but you have many enemies, as I've tried to warn you. House Drall is by no means the most hostile of your opponents; added to which, Drallenkoop wants to beat you on the open water. He entertains no possibility of *Sapphire Light* beating him."

Mirko stretched out on the bed. "Catzendralle, I just don't know what's happening. I don't know why I'm here or who put me here—and I'm hardly in a position to find out. And I get the impression Paladrian justice can be somewhat arbitrary; I draw only limited comfort from my innocence."

Catzendralle gently touched his hand. "You are too useful an agent to be locked up here for long. I will find out what I can, and do what I can to get you released."

"Thank you."

"Will you be all right in here?"

Mirko smiled. "I have limited scope to better my condition."

"That wasn't really what I meant. What you said in the secret garden—well, I'm trying to let you like me."

"You don't have to try that hard, Catzendralle. I do like you."

Mirko noted a flush of colour in Catzendralle's cheeks. "I should go now. It wasn't very sensible to come here at all."

"Good night, Catzendralle."

The lock scraped shut as soon as she had left. Mirko turned on his pallet to face the wall and tried once again to compose himself to sleep.



## Chapter 17

Mirko awoke early the next morning, having passed a poor night's rest. A Constable appeared and left half a loaf and a flagon of water, which he forced himself to consume although he had small appetite. A short while later Corrando appeared.

"Good morning, Captain. I hope your night was not too disturbed."

"I had planned other ways of spending the evening. Now, have you come to release me?"

Corrando clucked apologetically. "Your stay here will be less onerous if you do not raise your hopes with unrealistic expectations of freedom. This morning I will ask you questions; it is in your interest to answer fully and honestly, but you will not be leaving for some while."

"Go ahead. I have nothing better to do."

"Good, you show some co-operation. Perhaps you would like some ale?" and he reached out a bottle and two cups.

"Now," he continued. "What can you tell me about Padizan's death?"

"Only what everyone knows: he arranged for Gambar Inisse's escape—for a consideration—acted imprudently afterwards, and wound up dead."

"How do you think his death came about?"

"Candidly? I have little doubt that a retainer of Bartazan's may have been over-enthusiastic in avenging the House's honour."

"You don't think that Bartazan connived in or ordered the death?"

"There's no evidence to suggest he did."

Corrando frowned. "Don't think to deceive me, Ascalon. You were present at the dinner where Bartazan unveiled Padizan's head on a plate and explained exactly why he'd had him killed."

"If you knew, why did you ask me?"

"To prove your mendacity to myself. I no longer require convincing. You are Bartazan's man of business; you either killed Padizan or had him killed, and have been working to destabilise Medina's election campaign. There are no more questions for you today—but tomorrow, I'll expect to hear truth—in all its phases."

Corrando stalked out in displeasure. Mirko lay on his bed and cursed. Why was he protecting Bartazan? He might as well have admitted that he knew Bartazan had ordered Padizan's death. It was still possible that Bartazan would secure his release, but given how close the matter touched the Elector personally, it seemed unlikely he would risk it.

The day passed with unbearable slowness. The cell, away from the direct sunlight, was uncomfortably chilly; given the poor quality of the food, his constitution would be unable to stand many weeks of this.

Late in the evening there was an immense commotion on the corridor.

"Let us go! Let us go! The Hierophant will hear of this!"

Corrando's voice: "Silence! You are under arrest. Come quietly to the cells."

"Never! We are innocent, we intended no mischief. We merely wished to conduct a conversation."

"The circumstances—specifically the weaponry and your numbers—suggest otherwise. For now, you are detained on charges of conspiracy and insurrection. The Fanarite doctrines will not save you here."

"Are we not entitled to avenge slights and sacrileges? You take the worship of Fanar lightly, my friend."

"Enough! Men, the cells with them, now."

Mirko could understand little of the background. A group of Fanarites had seemingly taken exception to someone's conduct, and decided to settle it by violence.

They were an obstreperous faction, beyond a doubt; their acts towards him had proved that.

That night, Mirko's rest was even more disturbed than before. The Fanarites alternated noisy complaints and imprecations with equally noisy devotional practices. Mirko vowed that, should he be released, he would under no circumstances join the Fanarites; especially since their preferred use for him would be as a human sacrifice.

Early the next morning Corrando once again appeared.

"Get up, you're going home."

"I thought I was murderer and spy."

"So did I—so do I. Not everyone agrees. For now, at least, you're a free man. And if I were you, I'd be looking over your shoulder."

"What does that mean?"

"It means not everyone likes you. Specifically: keep away from the Fanarites, and steer well clear of the Lady Catzendralle."

Two guards escorted Mirko from the palace. At the front of the building, a rattlejack was waiting with a driver and Larien perched on top. Larien jumped down lightly and embraced Mirko.

"How are you?" she asked, her eyes full of concern.

"Tired, puzzled, no worse. Someone accused me of killing Padizan."

"I know—the Peremptor's Constables came to see my uncle. He didn't tell them anything, of course. How could he, when he'd had Padizan killed himself."

"And you do believe that I had nothing to do with it? I could not prove my movements for the whole of the day in question."

"You would not a kill a man in cold blood, a man who had not harmed you. Of course you're innocent."

Mirko silently contrasted her attitude with Catzendralle's.

"Thank you for believing me. It is easy when you're in the cells to think that no-one does."

"I tried to see you yesterday but they wouldn't let me. I couldn't bear to think of you cut off in there."

"The Garganet embraces fortitude. The situation, while vexing, was by no means terrifying."

"Only because you don't understand Paladrian justice. There was every chance you would have been convicted."

"It's over—for now, at least. Where are we going?"

"My uncle has a town house nearby—he is naturally keen to speak to you."

Bartazan's Paladria residence Whitecroft was by no means as imposing as Formello; two storeys in height, hidden behind a screen of manzipar trees, it was a place where he could be close to the pulse of events without making an obvious presence in the town. Just about every Elector and rich merchant employed something similar.

Larien took Mirko into a richly-furnished reception room.

"Thank you, Larien. I wish to have a few private words with Ascalon," said Bartazan.

Larien departed with a stiff incline of her head.

"Ascalon, sit down. Perhaps you'd like a drink."

Mirko selected a strong red wine and waited for Bartazan to come to his business.

"I was visited by Medina's police yesterday," he said. "Their attention materially inconveniences me."

Mirko sipped at his wine. "I too found myself discommoded, especially since we both know I was guilty of neither of the offences in question."

"You are well paid," said Bartazan with a shrug. "A certain amount of inconvenience is inevitable in your circumstances."

"I would describe the situation as going beyond 'inconvenience'; all the more so since I might easily have been freed sooner through your intervention."

Bartazan frowned and looked down into his goblet. "I did not summon you to hear a litany of your unimaginative and essentially minor grievances. The only expeditious way I could have secured your freedom was to have admitted to Padizan's murder myself, which would have constituted perjury as well as reckless altruism."

Mirko saw no point in pursuing the matter further. "I assume there was a reason you brought me here?"

"I referred earlier to my material inconvenience. As you know, I have already been arraigned for sacrilege and my reputation has suffered further—at an important time—from the allegations surrounding Inisse's release and Padizan's death. I am the victim of a powerful conspiracy—one which also appears to encompass your own destruction. I can the more effectively protect us if I know everything that you do."

Mirko smiled. Bartazan would kill him if he knew everything Mirko did. There was a limit to the information he could provide.

"I've no doubt at all," he said, "that the incident with the Fanarites was just what it appeared; Inisse and his friends wanted revenge for your treatment of him."

"Do you also attribute the events at Coverciano to Inisse?"

"It seems to me unlikely; they would have ensured I was charged with sacrilege, given that I killed one of their devotees at their own altar. Medina, or maybe House Drall, are likelier candidates."

"Mmmm. I suppose Medina might choose to strike against me that way—either alone or in concert with Koopendrall. But do not discount the Fanarites. Do you know that several were arrested last night?"

"Yes. They were in the cells next to me."

Bartazan smiled softly. "Do you know why they were arrested?"

"Not in any detail."

"They were on their way to your lodgings to kill you."

A chill ran down Mirko's spine. "Are you sure?"

"The Fanarites are boasting about it."

"As far as I can see, that lets them off the hook over the arrest. If they knew I was in custody, why would they then look for me at home?"

Bartazan nodded. "Sound reasoning. Medina is the most likely culprit: but then why would he have had you released? He could have held you as long as he chose. Maybe it was House Drall after all."

Privately this was Mirko's belief too, but he was keen to keep attention away from Catzendralle: the route to her led ultimately back to himself. "Why would House Drall bother with me? I am no real threat to them. Drallenkoop is sure I can't beat him on the water."

Bartazan stroked his chin. "What is the worst thing that could happen to House Drall? Not defeat for *Dragonchaser*, that's for sure. No, their nightmare would be 'Peremptor Bartazan'. By striking at my galley-master, they strike at me, sap my energies. This cannot be. You must take greater care of your security."

"So it's my fault that your enemies are trying to kill me?"

"Ascalon, you have the Garganet touchiness. All I am saying is, look after yourself, for I cannot."

"Or will not."

"The distinction is over-precise."

"Do you have any further questions or observations, my lord?"

"Not at this moment. If I were you, I'd assign a couple of the more trustworthy slaves as your companions—perhaps the Garganets?"

"I have a galley to prepare for an important race: if you'll excuse me."

With a curt bow Mirko turned and left the room. Larien noticed him leaving the house and ran into the street after him.

"Mirko! What did he say?"

Mirko scowled. "'Watch your back' covers the main points."

Larien gave a sympathetic shrug. "We always knew my uncle was not a man to be trusted. Come on, let's go down to the Old Town and find something to eat—you must be hungry."

Mirko realised that he was indeed ravenous—the food in the cells had not induced an appetite. "I would sell out a thousand Bartazans for a portion of fried wheelks," he said with a smile.

The rattlejack swiftly conveyed them to the heart of the Old Town, reassuringly unchanged despite Mirko's privations since he had last seen it. The bustle of craft from all parts unloading: galleys from Estria, West Gammerling, the Northern Reach, Aylissia and the Near Isles, all with their characteristic goods. Tomorrow was market day, and there were profits to be made. Larien selected a tavern with tables out on the waterfront overlooking the galleys, and Mirko ordered up beer and wheelks. They ate and drank in companionable silence for a while.

When Mirko had finished his portion he looked across at Larien, still eating daintily. Her hair was loose today, and one lock was repeatedly blown across her face by the sea breeze, causing Mirko to smile at her largely ineffectual efforts to prevent it.

"What are you looking at?"

"Nothing," laughed Mirko. "I was just enjoying looking at you. Does that fall within my permitted privileges?"

Larien flipped the stray lock aside. "Yes, I suppose it does," she said. "Do you remember, I once said to you that I had few attachments, but always deep ones."

Mirko looked down into his mug. "It was the first time we met, at Formello."

Her eyes sought his. "Yes it was," she said quietly. "I didn't know if you'd remember."

"My mental processes are generally sharp enough."

"Do you remember the first thing the Lady Inuela said to you?"

Mirko laughed. "Since you ask, no."

"There you are, then. I must have made some kind of impression on you."

Mirko met her gaze. "Oh, you managed that, for sure."

"I remember hoping, when you were at the lake with Carnazan and me, that you'd turn out to be what I thought you were."

"What did you think I was? And have I?"

Larien ran her finger round the rim of her mug. "You seemed to have a largeness of spirit, a decency of soul, which is hard to find in Paladria. I suppose they're the qualities you would associate with a Garganet gentleman."

"In Garganet I was no gentleman. I came from unremarkable origins: what made me what I am was the Garganet navy. We had a code, written and unwritten, and I believed it, and I lived it. Until one day I found I couldn't . . ."

Larien reached out and touched Mirko's hand. "Do you want to tell me about it?"

Mirko left his hand under Larien's. "I don't know if I do, Larien: maybe you'd need to be Garganet to understand it."

"Try me," she said, leaning across until her head almost touched his. Instinctively, Mirko leant back a touch.

"There is the Garganet Naval Code," he said. "It governs our lives. Its first article is this: *Never to surrender, never to flee, always to fight*. It's the basis of our invincibility. Anyone coming upon a Garganet galley knows it will always fight if attacked, no matter what the odds. Even if a Garganet galley is quicker and faced with overwhelming odds, we fight. We don't surrender our ship, and we don't outrun trouble."

"It sounds an inflexible sort of arrangement."

"It has its logic: it deters all but the most determined foes from attacking. Not only do we always fight—we always fight well."

"What happened? I can see your pride in it, even now."

"I was commanding a scout galley off the Northern Reach, a little craft, smaller even than a Paladrian racing galley. Garganet wasn't at war with the Reach, although there's always tension, and there are often skirmishes. We ran upon four fighting-galleys, each

three times our size. They sounded the Attack Horn and tried to encircle us. The Code is absolute—we had to fight to the death or capture.”

“And?”

“And I couldn’t do it. I had reached my rank through initiative and independence of thought; I just couldn’t see the merit in sacrificing my life and my crews’ for nothing. I ordered the helmsman to hug the coast where the heavier galleys couldn’t follow us in. We lost them in the fog which always settles in the evening in those parts. I brought Renown home safely and with useful information from my scouting foray. And of course, I was court-martialled, stripped of my rank, discharged and exiled.”

“Mirko! That’s so harsh!”

“I could hardly complain. The Code is explicit; and to have shown any leniency would have been a fatal weakness. Although in fact, the sentence could have been much harsher.”

“How could it possibly . . .?”

“The Adjudicants could have determined I had broken off an engagement—because the Attack Horn had been sounded—rather than evaded one. That would have been death. Since I was of no important family, I imagined they might have done so. But one of the Adjudicants was a brave man, with real moral courage—the only important sort. He pleaded my case with the other Adjudicants when I was too proud to. So I got off lightly . . .”

“Mirko—I never realised this at all. And my uncle was so disparaging about how you’d come here—how could you let him?”

“It hardly mattered, Larien. The disgrace of my exile, the loss of the profession I loved—nothing else could rival that humiliation. But since I’ve been here, on the sea again, working with the galleys and the seamen—it’s given me energy and enthusiasm again.”

Larien leaned across the table and kissed Mirko full on the lips. “You asked me if you’d lived up to what I hoped you were. Yes, Mirko, you have. You are an honourable and decent man.”

Mirko stood up and took Larien’s hand. “Come on—let’s get some fresh air,” he said as he led her out into the street.

They wandered through the lanes around the docks. Mirko bought a bracelet which he put on Larien’s wrist; she responded with a delighted exclamation. All traces of reserve were now gone, it seemed. Mirko was not

wholly relaxed, ever aware of the danger of the Fanarites; but it seemed unlikely that they would menace him in such a public place.

“Larien,” he said, as the sun sank low in the sky. “How do you feel about me? Really feel, I mean?”

Larien turned to face him. “Mirko, you always want too much. We have had a wonderful afternoon, and you are charming company. You have merits I see nowhere else in Paladria. But that isn’t what you want me to say, is it?”

“I don’t have a predetermined response I’m looking for,” said Mirko. “In truth, I don’t know what my own feelings are for you, so I can hardly expect any greater clarity from you.”

“Oh, Mirko—why are things always so difficult? I am an Elector’s niece, and not in control of my own destiny. I have a limited amount of veto power over my associates, but my future will be determined by my uncle. Whatever happens between us, things can never develop beyond a certain point. If you forget that, you could be another Gambar Inisse: don’t think Bartazan wouldn’t imprison or kill you if you got in his way.”

“I’m not interested in Gambar Inisse, other than to prevent him killing me.”

“Mirko, you just don’t understand Paladria or the Paladrians.”

“I’ve been abducted and imprisoned twice; I’m starting to get a good appreciation.”

“That wasn’t what I meant. You still think the Margariad is about you and Drallenkoop; you can’t see that people will die if Bartazan wins.”

“Bartazan won’t win,” said Mirko with unintended heat. “He’ll be on the dockside.”

“More fool you, Mirko. You may be decent, honourable, all the noble things I said about you; but you’re also pig-headed, ignorant and plain stupid. Make what you will of that.”

Mirko swung her to face him. “The way you present it, the qualities would seem to go together. I may show intelligence and political acumen if I ensure *Sapphire Light* performs badly; but there’s no honour in it. Are you still asking me to throw the race?”

Larien coloured. “Why do we always end up here? Yes, if you think you can win either The Sorcerers or the Margariad, then make sure you don’t. Listen to this straight: if you win, the best that Koopendrall, Drallenkoop and any number of their allies can hope for is

exile. Bartazan has waited a long time, he knows how to bear a grudge, and he is not a temperate man.”

“Larien—”

“In addition, he will feel able and obliged to marry me off to one of his odious cronies, Sarindorp or that unspeakable Jaralludian. And you’d let all that happen to win a boat race!”

“Larien! Don’t—”

“Mirko—that’s enough. If the thought of me in Jaralludian’s bed isn’t enough to stay your hand, well, go ahead, race as hard as you like! Do what you want—but do it without me!”

“I hardly had a great choice as far as—”

“Just leave me alone! I’ll get a rattlejack home. You just go back to your rooms and work out exactly how much value you put on your conscience. I only hope you can live with yourself.”

Mirko was left staring at the waves lapping at the dockside. After a few minutes he turned and went back to his lodgings.

Nursing a mug of beer, he took stock of his achievements to date since arriving in Paladria. Whatever Larien had said about his honour, he felt soiled and compromised. Every relationship he had in the city was based on some kind of duplicity or abuse. He was in the employ of a clearly evil man, and the contention that his opponents were probably no better was hardly sufficient justification. And he was not even serving Bartazan wholeheartedly as long as he took Catzendralle’s money.

Catzendralle . . . she was the root of his problems, even if not deliberately. It had been from some absurd quixotic notion of impressing her, of convincing her that he was not solely motivated by money, that he had arranged Inisse’s rescue: an act that had led to the death of Padizan, the implacable enmity of the Fanarites and danger for his whole crew. And still he didn’t know where he stood with Catzendralle. She was a curious mixture of hard-headed competence and flashes of unexpected emotion.

This was all before he even came on to Larien, infuriating, subtle, inconsistent. He was sure she was attracted to him, but it was hopeless to pursue a relationship with her. Not only was she ever-conscious of the difference in their social class, but he felt that he would never understand her enough to be close to her. Some men preferred women to be mysterious and unfathomable, an attitude he could not understand. For

him, such distance was simply a barrier to intimacy. But it was her he’d told about the court-martial. He shook his head; he could know her for years and still not understand her any better.

With an inner shrug, he drained his beer and made for his bed. The one thing he had done openly and honestly since he’d been in the city was his training of *Sapphire Light*—and a hard session would be necessary tomorrow.



# Finister

by *Till Noever*

## Book One

— 3 —

The *Aquiel* labored its way north along the Gulf of Thalonica. In the darkness, the captain kept well away from the shore. Endless Beach was a pale band far off to port. In the distance a faint glimmer of lights marked Thalonica. End of the journey. Her home—her prison—for the rest of her life. Nerys turned away from the sight and went back to her stateroom at the stern; assigned for the captain's use at normal times, though he'd had to vacate it for the occasion of this important passenger. Two guards, in the employ of her future husband, saluted her as she passed. That was one thing she apparently could count on for as long as she was a Wearer's wife: that his guards would salute her.

*What a thrill. . .*

One of the guards opened her door, waited until she was through, and closed it behind her. Nerys plonked into a chair and stared moodily at the opulent cabin; the bed in the corner. She did not want to sleep tonight. It was her last night of freedom. She wasn't going to waste it in unconsciousness.

She got up and went to the shuttered windows, which faced out to the stern. She unlatched the shutters and swung them open, looking out at the gurgling wake of the ship. It was like looking at the life she'd left behind. Fading away into the distance like the wake, the ocean absorbing it forever into its endless wastes.

"I like it with you," Y'liaan said, tickling Fliz with a blade of grass. "I don't much like it with the clients." She lay on top of him, the sweat on their bodies slowly drying. With every wriggle the sand, which had attached itself to her during their happy exertions, came crumbling off her, falling onto on him like fine rain.

"I like it with you, too," he told her. He did. She was nice and soft and gentle. Not like some of the others;

the older ones mainly, for whom it was all business—even on those occasions when they expressed their gratitude. It was a service rendered. The motives were immaterial. It was still an exchange of equivalences. With Y'liaan, however, it was different. She did this because she *liked* to do it—with him, and no one else. That made her special.

"You're thinking again," she said, chiding him gently. "I know. I can almost hear it!"

Fliz laughed, and the laughter shook them both. It appeared to stimulate her, because she wriggled herself into a more comfortable position. Her left hand slid down along his side.

And then the pain stabbed through him. He gasped for breath. Y'liaan ceased her ministrations. "What is it?"

He couldn't answer. Still his breath would not come. It was like something clamped around his chest, not allowing it to expand. The slightest attempt to breathe resulted in immediate and excruciating pain. And then, as suddenly as it had come, it passed. The pain was replaced by the sensation of a terrible void, somewhere inside him. Maybe in his gut; maybe in his soul.

Something terrible had passed.

Y'liaan, aware of his condition, rolled off him.

"Are you sick?" she asked, concerned.

"I don't know," he wheezed, panting to catch up with his lost breathing. He sat up. "We must go back." He knew this to be important. "Now."

"Of course," she said. Never questioning his need. As she never had. It was one of the things he found difficult to handle with her: that she should so completely bow to the needs she perceived as his. He knew that he should have been pleased about it—after all, what man didn't hanker for a cooperative woman? But he was not pleased. It was like something was missing from her. Something that mattered. One of the reasons that, while he liked Y'liaan, it would never amount to anything more than that. Which was good, of course. He was, after all, a Willet.

Y'liaan had recovered her clothes and was putting them on. He groped for his and did the same. Presently they hurried back along the beach. Fliz left Y'liaan back at her house and, driven by a terrible urgency, proceeded to the *Pink Palace*. When he arrived there, however, he stopped and flattened himself against a wall. An astuno patrol emerged from the front door and hurried off. Behind them Oweena, the matron, poked

around the door frame, only to disappear immediately. Fliz took a quick look around and crossed the alley. In the lobby, the working whores milled around. Not a client in sight. They saw him and fell silent. The matron approached him. "Fliz . . ." She was at a loss for words. Fliz's intestines knotted up because suddenly he knew. Didn't know how he knew, but he did.

"What happened?" he croaked. He knew the answer already, but the question came out as a reflex.

Oweena sighed and took his arm. "Somebody came in here," she said tonelessly. "A man. He . . . he wanted *you*. But you weren't here. So he went to talk to Felicia." She hesitated. "We don't know what happened. It was all over so quickly. Felicia screamed and screamed—and she must have gone after him with a knife; but he killed her . . . and somebody said it was with lightning. And . . ." Her voice broke up as the memory overwhelmed her. ". . . Audile."

Fliz found that again he couldn't breathe. He fought for air as the panic struck him. Then, when he could draw breath again, he pushed the matron side and, heedless of those standing in his way, rushed into the kitchen—which stank of cooking and spices, and blood and death. The two bodies had been placed on the big table and covered with sheets. Fliz pushed his way through the women standing around in a daze and gently pulled away the covers to reveal the faces of Felicia and Audile, both of them still twisted in a rictus of pain and horror. His tears ceased to flow; a terrible coldness came over him, protecting him against the pain and the guilt that was threatening to smother him.

Something made him look around—and into the face of a beautiful woman, whom he'd never seen before, and who regarded him with great compassion. "I couldn't save them," she said softly. "I'm sorry . . . but it was too late."

Fliz didn't understand what she was saying. Who was she? Why would she have saved them? How *could* she?

He tore his gaze away from her to face Oweena.

"A man, you say? What did he look like?"

Oweena shook her head. "I do not know. I cannot remember. None of us can. It's as if . . ." She made a gesture of complete bewilderment. "We know he was here, but it is as if we never saw him. So, how do we know that he *was* here?"

Fliz didn't care. He glanced at his dead mother and sister, went over to their corpses; kissed their cold, pale faces. Then he pulled the sheets back over them again.

"Please bury them for me," he whispered. "I will pay you. But I . . . cannot." His voice cracked. "Please . . ."

The matron nodded.

"Thank you." He glanced at the beautiful stranger again, wondered absently what she was doing here. Then he tore his eyes away, and without another word walked out of the *Pink Palace*—knowing that, if it was in his power, he would never come here again.

He went back to the *Oldeman*—only to find that another disaster had struck. The hotel had been gutted by a fire earlier in the day. Fliz had an inkling that it wasn't because Joaz had been careless with his fireplace again. As if to confirm this, as Fliz stood there, contemplating the collapsed framework of what used to be his home, Joaz came shuffling around the corner and stopped beside him.

"Where are we going to go?" he croaked sadly.

Fliz shrugged. He was beyond caring. "I don't know," he said curtly and walked away.

He had to think. There was no doubt in his mind that his actions earlier today had initiated this whole fatal chain of events. But why? He dug his hand into his tunic, groping for the peculiar item he had acquired at such a terrible cost. His hands froze. He'd forgotten his pouch. He had taken it off, earlier tonight, for his sexual explorations of Y'liaan's willing body. It must still be out there, somewhere in the rim of undergrowth separating Endless Beach from the grasslands.

It occurred to Fliz that Y'liaan had saved his life tonight. Without her invitation he might have been at the *Pink Palace* or the *Oldeman*. And he might well be dead. But, he told himself, at least Felicia and Audile would be alive. The guilt threatened to close in and bury him. Weak with emotion Fliz leaned against a cold wall, taking slow even breaths to calm himself. The ghastly, horrified faces of his mother and sister appeared before his eyes. Presently he leaned forward and vomited on the pavement, until he had nothing left to spew up. A few dry retches shook him, but then the spasms subsided. He pulled himself together and breathed deeply. He would have to find that pouch and what was in it. Now. Whatever it was, he was going to find out. He owed his dead family that much.

The *Aquiel* lay at anchor off Thalonica, awaiting the day to pull into the harbor. The wind had swung it around; the stern windows now afforded a sweeping view of the city. Nerys stood, her head resting on her arms, staring at it. A brief few hours and it would be over. As of tomorrow she might as well be dead. That much she had determined for herself on the more than three dreary days aboard the *Aquiel*. No matter how one viewed it, the Nerys she had known was about to be destroyed. Not physically, maybe. But everything else would be. As the years went past that which had been Nerys—what had made her so . . . precious—all that would be gone, as surely as if someone had stabbed a knife through her heart. In the end she would be a painted, tattooed breeder-matron, with pendulous breasts and other marks testifying to the bearing of too many children. Fat from a lack of opportunity to exercise; skin creased in disgusting folds, obscenely decorated by Corran's private artist. Immersed in a world that was not her own, she would lose her precious memories—and those that remained would be painful at best; glimpses of something irreversibly lost.

The sound of oars. She went to a side window, raised herself on tiptoes and peered out. A small boat had pulled alongside the *Aquiel*. Nerys could make out a dark figure clambering on board. The boat was attached to a thin rope and left to drift until it was almost exactly underneath her. The rope tautened; the boat came to a rest relative to the ship. Nerys heard the footsteps of several people clunking on the wooden planks of the deck. The footsteps moved up to the captain's office, just above her own quarters. A door thumped shut. Nerys caught indistinct whiffs of conversation. She tried to hear what was being said, but found herself thwarted. She moved around her quarters, trying to find a more advantageous position.

Here! The voices were more distinct. She pressed her ear against the wood . . . caught shreds of intelligible phrases; unsure of who uttered them, the voices sounding much the same.

"Tonight . . . last opportunity . . . Kilyer will pay handsomely . . . Corran will be crippled . . . the woman must disappear . . . Corran will know . . . Kilyer . . . protection . . . ancient enmity . . . guarantee of safety . . . wealth . . . Floater no more . . ."

The import of what she was hearing finally registered with her. She jerked back from the wall. Then, fascinated, she placed her ear against it once more.

"Guards . . . loyal . . . kill . . . will be difficult . . . must . . . no choice . . . reward . . ."

Nerys, her heart pounding, tip-toed back to the window and peered down at the boat again. A thought began to form in her head. A thought so crazy, so totally mad, that it set her heart pounding.

What was she thinking? How could she even contemplate it? She had decided that she did not want to be a homeless drudge. What could possibly become of her here, hundreds of miles from home, where she knew *nobody*; nor the customs of the land; nor anything, really.

And yet; and yet . . .

What she'd heard . . .

She might never live to become old enough to forget. Possibly not even old enough to see the sun rise again. It was a contingency too dreadful to contemplate.

She peered at the boat. It was as if . . . Nerys shook her head. Superstition. There was no such thing as 'fate' or 'luck'. Her father, too, was buried in his own superstitions. The belief that the Golden Branch brought anything but the envy of others who didn't have one, was just as much superstition and aberrant nonsense as the Wearers' belief that Pastor was awaiting them on the other side of Caravella. Why did men believe such stupid things? How could they not see that *nothing* guided the world?

And yet, as she looked down, she suddenly wondered.

The conspirators were leaving the captain's office. Nerys tensed. Whatever was happening here, the same blind chance that had placed the boat below her would also take it away again. Probably soon.

Nerys, dizzy with the possibilities that lay before her, weak with fear and apprehension, and yet curiously, breathlessly elated, came to a decision. She took a deep breath and, without another look behind, climbed on the window sill. She looked down. The water was not that far below. She had never done this of course, but . . .

She jumped.

The water enfolded her. She struggled and finally surfaced again, gasping. The boat was only a few strokes away. A few seconds later her hands closed on the side of the boat. She pulled herself half-way out of the water and cautiously scanned the ship to see if anybody had heard the splash. She saw no movement; no heads peering over the side. Trembling with apprehen-

sion, she dragged herself into the boat. She crawled to the prow and fumbled to undo the rope that tied the boat to the ship. She tore several fingernails in the process; but finally it was done. The rope splashed into the water. Silent as a wraith, the boat began to drift away from the *Aquiel*, toward Thalonica. Nerys crouched down low, trying to keep out of sight. If anybody looked, let them think the boat had detached itself by accident.

Presently, the *Aquiel* was lost in the distance and darkness. Nerys sat up and clumsily shipped the oars. Her marine experience was negligible, but instinctively she figured out what to do. When she had some control over the boat's motion, she pointed it toward the pale line of the beach and started rowing.

Rutger, recovered from his shock, waylaid one of the *Pink Palace's* whores and her companion as they strolled along a badly-lit alley on their way to a nearby tavern. He touched the man with his lightning weapon; adjusted to the lowest setting, such as only to induce unconsciousness. The sailor slumped against a wall and collapsed on the pavement. The woman opened her mouth to scream, but Rutger's mind overcame hers before she could utter a sound. A short while later Rutger knew where Fliz might be. He left the whore unconscious, draped over the prone sailor.

Rutger found Y'liaan's house without trouble. He paused outside it and felt around with his mind. The people inside were asleep. Three of them. The dreams of the young girl came through clearly. The image of the thief was strong, reeking of animal sexuality and abject infatuation. Rutger sidled to the front door, found it yielding to his touch, and, despite the almost complete darkness, made straight for the girl's bedroom. As he did, he sensed a stirring from the parents' room. He cast a tendril of thought that wove itself around their minds and sent them into a sleep deeper than they'd ever known. Rutger proceeded to Y'liaan's room and entered. He stood quietly before the bed, and insinuated his way into her mind. He encountered no resistance. Good! He had no time to waste.

Fliz's whereabouts were unknown to her, but there was a memory of intense passion, barely cold. In a thicket, somewhere along Endless Beach. Rutger probed deeper. As he advanced through the layers of her memories, unguarded in her current state, he found more traces of Fliz; always in the context of passionate

encounters along Endless Beach. The memory of a secret hideaway was prominent. Rutger prodded and elicited more details: how one located it; the nature of the access. Snippets of dubious utility.

Rutger, frustrated that he could get no more, finally released his hold and left the house. Outside he paused, brooding. Fliz was as elusive as ever. By now he would, however, be aware that someone killed his mother. And there was the destruction of the *Oldeman*.

Fliz would know that someone was on his trail. Rutger was certain of that. He would submerge in the city and . . .

Or maybe not. Maybe he would want revenge. Which meant that he would be looking for Rutger—and all Rutger had to do was wait. The thought held a certain attraction. He could prepare the trap for the thief at his leisure. There were drawbacks, however. Time was on Fliz's side. The thief didn't know that of course, but those were the facts. Rutger could not afford waiting. He had to find Fliz. Tonight, if at all possible.

The images of trysts in bushes behind Endless Beach came back to him. They were very strong. They had associated with them an feeling of . . . safety, maybe? Rutger experienced the faintest trace of an insight. He pursued it further, but it eluded him. He relented. The inklings fluttered back, to hover around his consciousness like moths around a light. He snatched at them, caught one, and held onto it.

Assuming that, at least for the moment, that Fliz had been frightened and that hiding was foremost his mind, where would he go? Fliz was a creature of the city, and this was the logical place to submerge. But maybe . . .

Fliz strode along Endless Beach. Urgency drove him, causing him to break into an occasional trot in his eagerness to return to his hideout—which lay further along the beach than the myriad other places used for clandestine meetings between lovers of all kinds. Access was by a passage through a straggly thicket of Grandfather's Beard, which Fliz always took pains to hide by pulling strands of the creeper across its opening and, when they left, by brushing away the signs of their passage across the sand.

Janus rode high in the sky, casting a dim, diffuse light across the white sands. Jagged, drifting banks of cloud drew across it, temporarily dimming its radiance, plunging the beach and the rim of straggly under-

growth into a periods of deep darkness. Fliz stopped and peered across the headlands at the lights of Thalonica's eastern outskirts. He located a marine signaling beacon, and by its position relative to the headlands knew that he was almost there. He plodded on and finally arrived at the spot—just as a massive cloud drew in front of Janus. Fliz groped at the wall of creeper vine and located the opening. He drew the cover aside and slipped into the short passage which he and Y'liaan had created, and which they'd maintained by pushing the invading creepers aside, or, if necessary, hacking them off. Fliz felt himself to the end of the short passage. Janus was still hidden and he could see nothing at all. He went down on his knees, his hands exploring the hideaway. Nothing. Fliz forced himself to calm down. Where had he left his pouch? Over here? He ran his hands over the ground and touched cloth.

Triumph!

It was when the roar of the surf had grown too loud and all-pervasive to ignore that Nerys finally realized that her simple plans for escape might be fatally flawed. She ceased her rowing and peered at the beach. As she did, she also noticed that the waves underneath her boat had grown in size. When the boat hit a trough the crests around her were so tall they blanked out her view of the beach. Nerys felt panic rise inside her. The water beneath her assumed a sinister aspect. The black, almost oily, unruffled surface; the waves passing below her with silent and ponderous inevitability, only to crash onto the beach beyond; the unknown horrors that might lurk in the depths below. . . . Nerys' hands gripped the plank she was sitting on. Anything solid was better than the endless waters underneath.

But now the boat turned this way and that, prodded by the rolling waves, moving closer to the shore with each moment. Nerys' imagination supplied horrifying images of being mangled as the breakers crashed into the boat, turned it over, and tossed it about like a toy. Death would come after all. If not at the hands of Corran's enemies, then in the wet, salty ocean beneath her. She shook herself.

*No!* She would *not* yield as simply as that. She had come come too far to give up now.

The boat, she knew, was a danger to her now. A competent swimmer by herself though might survive

unhurt. She considered herself one such. She would take her chance.

Nerys hesitated for another moment, then divested herself of her skirt of fine silk. She considered herself. Half-naked in her undergarments and her blouse. The blouse would have to go as well. And what would she wear when she ran into people? What would they think and do when they saw her like this?

Nerys made a vexed utterance. The issue was moot. If she weighed herself down with too many garments she would never live to reach the beach and face all those problems she was now anticipating. The blouse came off. Nerys swung her legs over the side of the boat and, with a curious sensation of dread and reckless elation, slipped into the warm waters. She pushed herself away from the boat and struck out toward the beach.

The waves aided her progress. Before she had time to become exhausted she had reached the line of breakers. She rode the first one and was propelled even faster toward the beach. A large breaker behind her sucked her backwards, then pulled her under and crashed over the top of her. She held her breath as she was whirled around, losing all sense of up and down. Then it was over and she shot to the surface again—with just enough time for one breath before another wave took hold of her and repeated the process. When that one drew back, Nerys suddenly felt sand underneath her feet. She struggled to gain a foothold, but the water sucked her back. Another wave pummeled her and rolled her further up the beach. When the waters drew back she got up and stumbled further up the gentle incline of sand. She looked back. Janus had emerged from behind a cloud and was casting a diffuse glow over the sand. Nerys, heedless of her exhaustion dragged herself up the beach, and over the dry sand until she came up against a band of dense, creeper-like vegetation. Here, tired and exhausted, she leaned lay down, curled up on the still-warm sand and, as a jagged cloud pulled hid Janus again, drifted off into an exhausted sleep.

Fliz emerged from the creepers onto the beach. Astonished, he stared at the shape of a boat which the surf had thrown on the beach. Fliz approached but found it empty, its hull cracked, one oar missing, while the other, by some quirk of chance still hung in its noose. Fliz leaned over the boat and inspected the inte-

rior. Through a crack in the clouds Janus' light shone down on him, highlighting the broken planks. Already sand covered the bottom. Fliz looked up. The patch of light swept away from him, raced along the beach, paralleling the upper edge, heading for Thalonica. Then, suddenly, it veered aside and slanted out over the gulf; but not before Fliz thought he saw. . . .

He froze. The beach lay in darkness again. His eyes might have played him a trick, of course. Even if they hadn't it could just be a harmless. . . .

No. Fliz knew! Something about the figure, distant and fleeting as the impression had been. Besides, when people walked along the beach they didn't usually keep to the upper edge, where the sand was soft and walking came hard. The only reason why someone would do that was because he was trying to conceal himself, or because he was looking for something, maybe in the thicket.

Fliz ducked behind the boat. He looked at the sky. The cloud covering Janus was large. He peered along the beach again. The figure, if there ever had been one, was not discernible. Meaning that he probably wasn't either. Good! Fliz got up and ran, close to the waterline where the lapping waves would wash away the traces of his passage. His feet tangled in an object he'd not seen in his rush. Fliz stumbled but caught himself. He bent down and saw that it was a small pine branch, a few tufts of needles still adhering to it. Fliz picked it up and continued running until he was well past his and Y'liaan's hideaway. He angled up the beach until he reached dry sand. Using the branch to wipe out his tracks, he reached the tangled growth of bushes, vines, and creepers. He felt around until he located an entrance point and crept inside. There he composed himself to wait.

Rutger was beginning to wonder if his intuition had let him down. The hideout was much further out than it had appeared from the girl's mental images. The critical alignment of headlands and signaling beacon had not yet been achieved. A long way to go for a tryst. But then again, as he had learned from Y'liaan's mind, there were good reasons to conceal their erotic association.

The thicket behind the beach appeared to be a veritable haven for people pursuing sexual activities. Their animal emanations assaulted his probing mind as he walked along. If Fliz was anywhere near, his identity

would be safely concealed without much effort on his behalf.

Rutger plodded on and finally left the popular spots behind. The emanations faded into the distance, leaving his mind free to probe the thicket for his quarry. He looked up. A beam of light from Janus was sweeping across the beach. Rutger stopped dead when it swept over a distant dark object, down by the water's edge. A large piece of flotsam? Maybe a boat? The patch of light swept toward him, hiding the object again. Rutger continued his progress. The light touched him and whisked past. The beach lay in darkness again.

Rutger sensed a human emanation. It was faint, but unmistakable. He stopped again, trying to hold onto it, wanting to ascertain its origin. He decided that it was close. Rutger looked out over the gulf and noted that he was not too far from Fliz's hideout. So, he was there! His intuition had not failed him.

Rutger tried to assume the Gait of Stealth, but found that the effort of keeping it up on the soft sand made it impractical, as he could not, at the same time, keep his mental probe fully acute. Rutger desisted and confined himself to trying to walk as closely as possible to the edge of the thicket in order not to be seen.

The emanation was growing stronger. Rutger slowed down. He probed and. . . .

Defeat.

Whoever it was, it wasn't Fliz. Unless Fliz was a woman! And asleep!

Rutger strained to penetrate the darkness ahead. Some distance away he thought to discern an object on the sand. He moved closer and saw that it was the curled-up sparsely clothed body of a young woman. Rutger probed her mind, but found that she had, just now, entered a cycle of deep sleep.

He shrugged and stepped around her. She was of no concern or interest to him. He went on. To his left he saw a dark shape at the water's edge. He stopped. The cloud drew away from Janus. Rutger saw the hulk of an abandoned boat, washed up by the pounding surf. He hesitated but decided against risking exposure by going down there. He continued along the thicket. Presently, the beacon lined up with the headland in the manner he'd see in Y'liaan's mind. He slowed down, his mind probing for emanations.

Nothing.

But. . . .

Rutger stopped.

Footprints. Leading *to* or *from*? He leaned closer. People had come and gone. Maybe more than one; maybe more often than once in recent hours.

Whatever, the prints betrayed the location of the hideaway. From his tunic Rutger extracted the tube which projected lightning and, with his free hand, pulled aside the thin curtain of vines concealing the crude passage.

Still he sensed nothing. Nothing at all.

He felt his way into the passage; arrived at its end. Certain that he was alone he extracted another small instrument. A beam of light flickered over the mat of vines and leaves forming a crude bedstead.

Nothing.

Rutger, cursing softly, used the light-stick to help him find his way out of the thicket and back to the beach. He extinguished the light, pocketed the device and the weapon, and stood quietly for a few moments. He'd been so certain that Fliz was here—it was hard to believe that he could be wrong. A magice's intuition was a finely honed instrument, which, used properly, was very reliable indeed.

And then Rutger knew! Fliz *was* here. Somewhere. Nearby—and yet out of his reach. The thief, though he could not possibly know, still somehow *knew*. Rutger swallowed the bitter taste of defeat. For tonight at least Fliz had won. Rutger forced himself to acknowledge that there was nothing he could do now that was anything but a waste of time. He should return to Thalonica and make plans to trap his elusive quarry in some other way.

Fliz saw the flicker of light and poked his head out of the thicket. At the same time he made sure that he was not too interested in what he saw. Interest implied attention, and somehow people noticed attention. Fliz composed himself to the point of view of an indifferent observer. From this perspective he saw the figure stand still for a moment. Presently the man headed for the water's edge and set up a brisk pace toward Thalonica. Fliz noted that, for the moment at least, his adversary had admitted defeat.

Fliz's small victory gave him little comfort. Now, that the immediate danger had passed, the memory of his dead mother and sister came back to him. Their cold, horror-stricken faces. That man, walking away from him, had killed them. And all because of . . . Fliz felt the pouch under his tunic. Because of this thing!

What was it, that a man would murder innocent women to regain its possession?

What if he *did* return it? Just left it somewhere the stranger was certain to find it?

No—not after what had happened. There was nothing that man could do to him anymore. Then Fliz thought of Y'liaan and amended his judgment. There *was* one more innocent.

Fliz's course of action was clear to him. It was a major step; a complete break with his life and everything he'd known. But the last members of his family were dead and Thalonica had no more hold over him. It was time to leave. There was a whole world out there. He'd often wondered what it was like; but he'd also had a duty toward his family. That duty had died with them.

Where would he go?

He knew that the stranger would find out what he'd done and follow him. And one day they would meet—and the stranger would pay for his crimes.

Fliz emerged from his hiding place and stood, pondering the odds. It was more likely that the stranger killed *him*. This was no ordinary man. He carried incomprehensible instruments and no doubt possessed other powers that made him into a most formidable enemy.

Fliz shrugged. Maybe he would die—but he would die trying to avenge his slain family.

He started toward the city, keeping to the thicket for fear that he might have misjudged the stranger's intentions. He passed the entrance to his hideaway without stopping. He saw a dark shape in the sand at the edge of the thicket and stopped. The shape lay immobile. It looked like a curled-up human figure. Fliz approached cautiously. In Janus' soft light he saw that it was a scantily clothed young woman. She appeared to be in a state of total exhaustion; if she was alive at all. He bent down and listened for a breath; found it and straightened again. He considered her further. By the necklace she wore he knew that she was neither Willet nor Floater. What was she doing here? Was there a connection between the beached boat and this girl?

Fliz shook his head. The cares of others must come second to his need to stay alive and avenge his family. Fliz got up and continued toward Thalonica.

He had taken but a few steps when he stopped again. He uttered a soft hiss of vexation. Why was he doing this? He stood in indecision for another few moments,

then returned to the prone sleeper and sat down beside her.

What was he to do? What *could* he do?

She whimpered softly in her sleep. A sound full of sadness, fear, and loss. It occurred to Fliz that the fate that had left her in this place, at this time, might have been just as troublesome as his own. Reason advised him to leave her here. Something more profound prevented him from doing so. He contemplated the sleeping figure. Who was she? A Thalonican? Surely not. She reeked of wealth and privilege, despite her sad condition. If she was Thalonican she had to be a Wearer's daughter. But Wearers daughters were creatures of shame, and this one here was not. A rich Floater? Maybe. Her hair, though dank and matted now, was long and gave the appearance of being used to grooming and care. Her undergarments were more opulent than a Willet's dress. The necklace was a finely crafted band of gold. Her ear-rings were equally exquisite. Fliz knew jewelry!

From Gaskar, maybe? If she was, what was she doing here? A woman like her . . .

And then Fliz knew; and the knowledge made his feet twitch. He forced himself to calm; but further reflection only confirmed the monstrous suspicions that had been forming in his mind. Unconsciously he slid away from her. If she was a new Breeder, and if, as it appeared, she had gone to some length to escape from . . . a ship, bringing her here maybe? . . . then she was more trouble than he'd want on his hands. Even now she might be missed and the search for her underway.

She jerked in her sleep, muttered something unintelligible, and rolled on her back.

What could he do?

Leave!

But when they found her . . .

Fliz had heard stories. Every now and then a new Breeder refused to submit to her chosen fate. If she did this, she forfeited all rights as a person. The Wearer who owned her could do as he pleased. Anything . . .

She opened her eyes. At first he didn't notice, because he was looking up and down the beach again. But then he felt her gaze like a physical prod. He turned to look at her.

For a few silent moments they stared at each other.

"Who are you?" she asked, still lying flat on her back, staring at him. The lilting accent confirmed his suspicions

A Gaskarian, without a doubt.

"Nobody of consequence."

She said nothing.

"You know they'll be looking for you," he said.

"Who?"

"You tell me."

"I don't know what you mean."

Fliz stood up and looked down at her.

"Listen carefully," he said curtly, "I have no time for lies or evasions. Neither, if you have any intelligence, do you."

She made a sound of protest and levered herself up on her arms.

"Quiet," Fliz said, cutting her off. "You have no idea how lucky you are. Anybody in his right mind would immediately turn you into the astunos, who'd return you to your Wearer, and that would be the end of that."

"And you're not?" She was adjusting rapidly.

"You know what they'll do to you?" he asked her.

"They'll just . . ." She fell silent.

"Of course you don't! If you'd known, you might have thought twice about what you did." He sighed. "Things are as they are."

He looked up and down the beach again. They would come. With dogs. He did not have much time.

"I don't know why I'm doing this," he said, "but I'm doing it anyway."

*Fool!*

He glanced her again. For the first time she looked fully at him. Her face was a pale oval, framed by her still-wet hair. He could not help but notice that she was probably beautiful. Which wasn't good, because people would notice, and that was the last thing he—and she—wanted.

"Come."

He turned to go. She hesitated. He stopped and looked at her. "Come with me or die." He turned and started to move away from her.

Behind him he could hear her scramble after him.

Nerys looked after the man's retreating back. He was arrogant and overbearing, and he had no consideration for her feelings. But he was also her only hope. She thought about what he'd said: "*Anybody in his right mind would immediately turn you into the astunos.*"

Why wouldn't he? Or would he? Maybe he was just leading her on?

Nerys shook her head and started to move after him. He'd known who or what she was before she even knew he was there! Whatever he planned, turning her in didn't seem to be a part of it. And from the indifferent way he treated her it appeared that her beauty didn't capture him either. Which was unusual but, so she told herself, she wasn't looking her best. Not that she cared what he thought.

Though maybe she should: the thoughts and intentions of this man might determine her fate!

Nerys hurried to catch up with him. He headed toward the water, where the sand was harder; his strides lengthening and never looking back. Nerys found the neglect irksome. When she caught up with him she would tell him so. But as she fell in beside him all she could say was, "I'm Nerys."

"Fliz."

She considered his garments. Definitely a drudge of sorts; or whatever they called them here.

"I'm a thief," he said, as if he'd known.

Nerys' step faltered for a moment. Of all the people she had to depend on in the time of her greatest need, it had to be a criminal.

"Oh?"

"I'm sorry the welcoming committee wasn't more august," he said. She thought she detected a trace of mockery. "I'm sure you're not used to dealing with people of my kind." No mockery. Just icy sarcasm; uttered with precision and inflections which contradicted his apparent low status.

"I don't care what you are," she said, but it sounded false even to her own ears. She hastened to add, "I am grateful for your help."

He uttered a choked kind of laugh. "Spare me," he said.

For a little while they strode on in silence. A cool breeze from the ocean made her shiver.

"Why are you helping me?" she said lowly. She hadn't wanted to ask it but she needed to.

He didn't reply. She thought that he might not have heard her, but she did not want to repeat the question. Maybe no answer was better.

"What did you think you were going to do?" he asked her. "After you jumped ship I mean? That's what you did, didn't you? Somehow you managed to steal a

boat and get off the ship." He chuckled. "Remarkable." He shook his head. "Stupid but remarkable . . ."

"What would *you* know?" she snapped.

"Who's your Wearer?" he asked her, indifferent to her retort.

"Corran. Why?"

His step faltered. "That's very unfortunate," he said lowly. She almost didn't understand him over the roar of the surf.

He stopped and grabbed her arm. "Who *are* you?"

"What do you mean?" she hissed. She tried to wrench her arm out of his grip, but he was strong and didn't let go. "I'm just a girl who doesn't want to bear a child every year or so for the rest of her life; who doesn't want to be painted like a mural; who doesn't want to be owned—and especially not by some self-important, superstitious moron."

He gave that choked laugh again. "Is that all?" he said dryly. His hand dropped off her arm. She rubbed the place where he'd grabbed her. The audacity of him!

"What's your Index?" he asked.

"Why?"

"What is it?" he grated.

She told him. He stared at her. "No wonder Corran wanted you. I bet he paid handsomely. A woman like you—maybe two—he'd need nothing else to guarantee his entry to Pastor's paradise."

"You believe this nonsense?" she asked him.

He chuckled. "I might—if I was a Wearer." He made a dismissive gesture. "Let me inform you of a fact pertaining to your existence; something you might not yet have become aware of. As of the moment you absconded from that ship, your Index immediately plummeted to zero. You, therefore, are nothing. Or, more precisely, you are now a Willet. Like," he performed a tiny mock bow, "myself; and thousands of others. Your only right is to be alive—for as long as it suits those who choose to let you live, because it happens to be useful to them. The professions you may choose in order earn enough to survive are severely limited. Whoring is probably the most lucrative—even if it is also the most dangerous. If you were found to be pregnant, you would be killed even before the child is born. That way two inconveniences are disposed of at the same time."

He fell silent. His head snapped up. She opened her mouth to say something. "Quiet," he hissed.

He listened for another moment. He looked at her. "Corran wastes no time."

"What . . ."

"Dogs!"

Now she heard them, too: faintly; sharp little sound penetrating through the dull roar of the surf.

Fliz stood in an attitude of concentration.

"What are we going to do?" she asked. In that moment it finally came to her just how much she completely depended on the stranger; the criminal; the lowest of the low.

Fliz sighed and shook his head, as if bemused by his own thoughts. She knew what was going on in his head. Why should he help her? He owed her nothing; nothing at all. He could walk away and leave her to her own devices—and never fear the consequences.

So, why didn't he?

He started to take off his tunic. Nerys, fascinated despite herself, wanted to turn away—but she didn't. The parting garment revealed a lean, finely muscled torso. Underneath he wore nothing but thin daka-wool loin-shift. Nerys hastily turned away. Fliz chuckled siccantly.

"What are you doing?" she hissed, keeping her face averted.

"Evading the dogs," he said to her back. "I advise you to do the same. I hope you're a good swimmer."

"What?"

"Do you want to live?"

"Yes, but . . ."

"Then follow me. Now!" Over the sound of the surf she heard his feet splashing through the water. Nerys made a vexed sound and turned around. He had tied his tunic around his waist and was already well into the waves. He turned and gestured to her.

"Hurry!"

The sounds of the dogs came to her disconcertingly clear. Nerys hesitated no longer. She waded into the waters, which presently began to tug at her legs, and then at her body. She saw his head in the waves and began to swim after him. A wave caught her, dragged her back, and left her in shallow water. Nerys turned and waded out again. Another wave pushed her back to the beach. Nerys looked down the beach. In the distance she saw a row of bobbing lights. A dull panic caught hold of her. Again she turned toward the ocean. Another wave towered above her. Then, beside her, a dark shape appeared.

"Dive *under* it!" he shouted at her. "Now!"

Too late. The wave was upon them.

She felt a strong grip on her right arm as he pulled her under water and dragged her with him. The wave went over them and rolled them over; but it did not push her back. She felt herself pulled to the surface. Then he let her go. She took a gasping breath, only to swallow a mouthful of water that send her into a coughing spasm. This time he grabbed her around her waist, and, with both of them on their backs and his free arm and his legs propelling them, pushed them further out to sea. Another wave lifted them high up, but they got past it. It crashed onto the beach only a short distance after it had passed them.

He let her go. She turned over on her belly and followed him further out to sea. After a while he slowed down. They stayed there, treading water, looking back at the beach, where the lights had reached their former position—and moved on without hesitation. It appeared that the water had washed away the evidence of their existence.

"What now?" she gasped.

"We stay here until they're gone."

"In the *water*?"

"They'll find the boat. They'll comb the beach. There is nowhere else we can go."

"I cannot swim that long!"

"Learn to conserve your energy."

"I don't know how."

"I'll show you."

Time passed. The lights came back along the beach and presently disappeared in the distance. Fliz prodded Nerys, who seemed to be enjoying her newly acquired technique of floating on her back.

"We can go back now. Let's hope they think you drowned."

He said it but he didn't believe it. They might consider the possibility, but they'd be watching anyway, just in case. Not too alertly, he hoped.

They made it back to the beach and dragged themselves out of the water. Fliz could not restrain an amused grin when Nerys fastidiously turned away until he had slipped into his sodden garments again.

"You can look now," he told her.

She turned around: slowly, prepared to look away the instant she realized that he was deceiving her.

"What now?" she asked tiredly. She ran her fingers through her wet hair.

The breeze had cooled down just enough to bite into their wet bodies. He found himself shivering slightly. She would be feeling the same.

"Now we run—back to Thalonica."

"Run? I can scarcely walk!"

"We have to keep warm," he told her. "If we don't we'll get sick. Running will keep us warm. Come!"

He turned away and broke into a trot. When he realized that she wasn't following he stopped. "You've come this far," he told her. "Why give in now?"

She muttered something that might have been a curse. Again he told himself that she was perhaps more trouble than she was worth. But how much was anybody 'worth'? It was all a matter of perspective, was it not? He was not worth a second thought to someone like Corran. Not even a first thought, for that matter. Yet to himself and his mother and sister he had been worth very much. So much that, for whatever reason and through whatever unknown circumstance, they had died so that he might live. In this way, matters had assumed a state of grave imbalance, which he would have to address sooner or later. Maybe saving the life of this spoilt Gaskarian rich-girl was part of that redress . . .

Nerys grunted and reluctantly broke into a slow jog. Fast enough, he thought. As long as it kept her warm.

Alternating between jogging and walking they reached the outskirts of Thalonica. Nerys was not enchanted with what he proposed to do next.

"I'm not a whore!"

"Just act like one," he said indifferently.

Stiffly, she attempted compliance. Inwardly he laughed to himself. How did a whore behave? How would she know?

*Let her figure it out!*

They entered the southern harbor district with Fliz's arms around her shoulders: a familiarity she obviously resented and tolerated with evident difficulty.

"A bit more enthusiasm," he told her.

"I don't want to," she hissed into his ear.

"Whores as a rule don't argue with their clients," he said. "They try to oblige. It's better for business."

"I don't care," she grumbled.

He veered aside and pulled her with him. As a result of this move they collided with a huge sailor, heading in the opposite direction along the alley. The man

stopped and glared at him. Fliz made an obsequious gesture. "Your pardon, dear sir. I was careless." The sailor grunted something and moved on.

"Why did you do that?" Nerys hissed.

"Because for what we have to do next we require funds. Inns seldom provide rooms for those who cannot pay." He jingled the purse he'd purloined from the sailor. Nerys gasped and tried to pull away from him; but he held her in a firm grip.

"Be still," he said curtly.

She resisted for another moment, then, apathetically, allowed herself to be pulled along. They arrived at a sign indicating that this was the *Traveler's Respite*. Fliz looked up at the facade. It would do. This wasn't his part of town and nobody here was interested in anything but his money. He pulled Nerys inside. At a table, two individuals were playing a game of cards: a fat man with the nose of an over-ripe Kint plum and the smell of untold days without washing; and a lank husk of a man with a thin head and a nose that could double as a hooked dagger.

The fat man looked at them and sized them up. "Yes?"

"A room," Fliz said. "With facilities, if possible."

The fat man looked at his companion. "Facilities," he echoed. "What else do they want nowadays? Clean sheets?"

"Definitely," Fliz said.

"Then go somewhere else," he fat man told him.

Fliz jingled the purse. The fat man's deep-set eyes widened imperceptibly. His face exhibited sudden animation.

"For a price, of course, we provide such things."

Fliz nodded. "I thought so. How much?" He raised a hand. "Remember," he told the fat man, "that avarice is a curse—and that you are not the only inn in the city."

The fat man regarded him for a moment. Fliz divined his thoughts. They might be easy prey, but then again, they might not be. Three faros in the hand were worth more than three in someone else's. How much could he extract from these two wet-looking strangers? Where did they come from? What brought them here? Would they go to the competition just a block down the road?

"Ten faros," the fat man said. "For that you'll get water and a basin. Clean sheets are three faros extra. Candles another two."

Fliz shrugged. "Twelve faros for the room, clean sheets, and dry towels. And I want an oil lamp. Take it or leave it."

"You rob me!"

"Twelve faros had and not had," Fliz pointed out, "makes a total of twenty-four. You might want to consider that."

"What do you say?" The fat man was suitably confused.

"We wish to rest," Fliz told him. "Make up your mind."

The fat man grumblingly agreed to the price and showed them to their room. Fliz looked around. It was no palace, but it would do. A short while later a middle-aged woman of medium stature knocked on their door to deliver a decanter of water, a set of clean-looking sheets, and a dry towel. Before she disappeared, Fliz gave her a faro. She stared at him. Fliz motioned her to stay. He nodded at Nerys, who sat on the bed.

"We went for a swim and need dry clothes. I would pay you well." He jingled the purse again.

The woman looked at Nerys from round, curious eyes. "I have not seen her before," she said to Fliz. "and you're not from here either."

"I picked her up in the northern district," Fliz supplied.

The woman nodded, as if this explained everything. "I might know how to get such things."

Fliz gave her twenty faros. "Here, that should suffice. If they're good and you're honest there'll be five more for you."

The woman eyed the coins in her hand. "I will do this—if you don't tell my husband. He'll just want the money—and I could do with it myself! The miserly . . ."

Fliz assured her that her husband had no need to know about any of their transactions. The woman departed. Fliz turned to Nerys.

"She won't be back," Nerys said darkly.

"She will," he said. "She wants her five faros." He sat on the bed beside Nerys. She shifted a fastidious few inches away from him. Fliz grinned sourly. He got up again and retrieved the sheets from a chair near the door. He threw them onto the bed. "Here."

"What do you want me to do?"

"What do you think?" he asked, knowing full well that she probably hadn't spread a sheet over a bed in her entire life.

"I . . ."

"Learn," he told her. "Nobody will ever do it for you again."

She glared at him but, when he sat down on the chair, proceeded to do her best to get the sheets on the bed. Every now and then she threw him venomous looks, to which he responded with an expression of careful indifference. When she was done, she plonked herself on the bed and let out a big sigh.

There was a knock on the door. Fliz opened it. The woman held out a bundle of folded garments. Fliz inspected them, pronounced himself satisfied, thanked her politely, and gave her five more faros. She left. Fliz bolted the door and came to the bed. Nerys looked up at him.

"You're not . . ."

"You think I'll sleep on the floor?" Fliz chuckled dryly. "Come on. Move over."

She rolled to the far side of the bed, as far as she could go without falling off, and turned her back on him. Fliz grinned, took off his sandals and the belt with his safe-pouch, turned off the oil lamp, and lay down on the rough mattress. For the moment at least, they appeared to be safe. Tomorrow was a different matter, of course, but that was tomorrow. Right now his limbs ached from the efforts of the night.

He became aware of Nerys' even breathing. What was going on in her mind right now? She had survived the immediate consequences of her actions. That was something. What lay in the future nobody could know.

"They were going to kill me anyway," she said lowly, as if she'd read his thoughts.

"What?"

"A man came and spoke to the captain. They were going to get rid of me to harm Corran."

"You heard this?"

"Yes. So, you see, I'm not so stupid."

He exhaled sharply. "No," he said softly, "you're not. In fact, you're very brave. It's just that sometimes 'brave' and 'stupid' are hard to tell apart."

There was a silence.

"What you did was brave, too," she said softly. He felt the shift of her weight as she turned around. "I know that, and I'm grateful. I just . . ."

"You'll learn," he said.

"How can I learn if I don't know *what* to learn."

"I'll try to help."

"You're not going to . . ."

"Leave you? Like this?" He sighed. "No. But you may find that you chose the wrong man. My own situation is somewhat . . . difficult. You might be better off if . . ."

No . . . she wouldn't be. The *Pink Palace* was not the place. Even if she adapted; sooner or later someone would find out who she was, and that would be the end of her.

"If what?" her voice came through the darkness.

"Go to sleep," he told her. "We'll talk about these things tomorrow."

Another silence. Fliz began to drift off.

"I'm frightened," she said suddenly.

Fliz jerked out of his somnolence. He rolled over and reached out. His hand touched her arm. He gave her a gentle squeeze and left his hand there. "Don't be," he said. "The odds can be leveled to work in your favor. You just have to learn how to do it."

She said nothing, and presently her even breathing told him that she had finally surrendered to her exhaustion.

— 4 —

At daybreak, Rutger still had not worked out a plan for the entrapment of the redoubtable Fliz. This was irksome, but it was also a necessary consequence of a lack of information and unfamiliarity with his current surroundings. And then there was the complete lack of communication from the Isle. Despite repeated efforts, his tablet remained blank. Also, several days ago, there had been an . . . event. He did not know what else to call it. It had happened during a late afternoon when he'd suddenly experienced the briefest flare of an inexplicable, devastating panic. The attack faded, to be replaced by a mental silence that was as shocking in its suddenness as what preceded it.

Since then he'd been unable to function with his usual effectiveness. A partial explanation, no doubt, why Fliz had been able to evade him; repeatedly.

Rutger left the tavern where he was staying and proceeded to the market. He didn't know *what* he was doing. Angling for an idea, maybe. An inspiration.

What avenues were left unexplored? What leverage did he have? Fliz's mother was dead, his place of residence destroyed. In his eagerness to close with his quarry, Rutger had destroyed the very means by which to get close to him. A mistake he would not repeat.

Rutger, following an intuition, stationed himself in the market in such a manner as to invite Fliz's colleagues to approach and try to steal whatever they could from this stranger. He didn't have to wait for long. A featherlike touch at his garment. Rutger's hand snapped out and clamped down on a scrawny wrist. An exclamation of surprise from the victim.

Rutger dragged the thief into view.

"You are not very good," he said dryly.

"What do you mean? Why are you holding onto me like that? Let me go!" The man's ratty face was twisted in pain.

Rutger shook his head and probed the man's mind. He found panic, images of astunos, a terror or torture, schemes to extricate himself from this situation.

Rutger considered the thief. "What is your name?"

"Tane."

"Well, Tane, prudence dictates that I turn you over to the astunos. They will, no doubt, put an end to your larcenous activities."

The man's apprehension turned to terror.

"Please . . ."

"However," Rutger continued, "I may reconsider this option—under certain conditions."

"I'll do anything . . ." Tane began.

"Quiet," Rutger commanded. Tane fell silent.

"I could also let you go and make you rich at the same time," Rutger told him. "How would you like that?"

Incredulity mixed with the apprehension. Interspersed, a smattering of hope.

"Well?" Rutger asked.

"I would like that."

"Good," Rutger said. "I have a task for you. Perform it and be rewarded. Fail me and the astunos will have your hide."

"What do I have to do?"

"Are you familiar with a certain Fliz?"

Tane's eyes widened. "Fliz is a Willet," he said scornfully. His thoughts betrayed envy, mixed with a measure of anger.

"You don't like him," Rutger stated.

"He is a Willet. Yet he has . . . connections."

All of which, or so it seemed, Tane considered exceedingly unfair. A few fleeting memories on the surface of Tane's mind sketched an picture of past grievances. Rutger was satisfied. His intuition had served him well.

"I have a matter to settle with Fliz," he told Tane. "Find him for me and I guarantee that you'll be rid of him forever."

"What do you want me to do?" In his eagerness to dispose of Fliz, Tane didn't even bother to inquire about the exact nature of the reward Rutger had hinted at.

"Find him. Ensure that he does not know you found him. Report to me. I will do the rest."

At this stage Tane was panting with eagerness. But now he remembered other aspects of the situation.

"You mentioned . . ."

"Five hundred faros."

A glint of avarice in Tane's eyes. "Eight."

"Five," Rutger said.

Tane wasn't stupid. He recognized a lost cause when he faced one. "Five," he agreed.

Rutger told Tane where to find him and dismissed the thief. Tane melted into the crowd. Rutger pondered the wisdom of enlisting a helper. He discarded the notion. Tane was a suitable instrument. Fliz's hiding place would soon be a secret no longer.

Fliz rolled out of the bed, careful not to wake the sleeping Nerys. In the daylight falling through the slits and cracks in the shutters, he padded to the other side of the room and changed into the garments the woman had brought them last night; a plain, coarse tunic and pale-blue, loose-fitting trousers from the same material. They were clean and a casual inspection would place him into the category of a low-class Floater. Yet, should he be approached by someone who knew his Willet status, they would not necessarily invoke raised eyebrows and suspicions.

Fliz scratched his untidy, short beard. If he had it shaved off; maybe the hair cut as well . . . he might be able to hide behind the altered appearance for long enough to arrange for a passage out of Thalonica.

On the bed, Nerys stirred. Fliz went over to the window and opened one of the shutters. Bright daylight flooded the room. Nerys squinted into the light, disoriented and confused. He went over to her and sat down on the side of the bed. Her undergarments had shifted in her sleep and were now arranged in such a fashion as to expose her in a manner she would surely find unsettling. Fliz knew *he* did. Fastidiously he averted his eyes. From his peripheral vision he saw her arrange the garments into a more modest configuration.

Fliz rose and retrieved her new clothes. He tossed them on the bed. "I have to go out," he told her. "Get dressed and wait for me."

"Where are you going?"

In due course he would have to explain matters to her. But now was not the time.

"You cannot stay in Thalonica. Neither, for different reasons, can I. Our purposes therefore seem to coincide, at least for the moment. I will arrange for passage out of here."

"Where to?" she said glumly. "There is nowhere for me to go."

"I don't know yet," Fliz admitted. "Wait for me." He turned to leave.

"How can I know . . ." she began.

Fliz glanced at her. ". . . that I'll return?" he said scornfully. "Alone? Without astunos?"

"I didn't mean . . ."

He went back to the bed and stood glaring down at her. "I will tell you this once," he said coldly. "Trust me—or trust me not. If you don't, I would prefer if you weren't here when I return. But if you're still here, I expect that, no matter *what* I am in your eyes, you trust me implicitly. I have no time to waste with explanations for everything I do."

She flinched under his words. But her eyes were defiant.

"I didn't mean that!" she snapped. "Why must you assume that I don't trust you?"

Fliz snorted cynically. "Because," he said, "you're the spoilt brat of a Gaskarian merchant—and because I'm a Willet and a thief—which to you surely is the lowest of the low." He shrugged. "I don't blame you for your opinions. They are as they have to be. But I have things to do. You're just another complication added to my life."

"Then why do you bother?" she retorted. She swung her legs out of the bed and got up. She stared at him angrily. "If I'm so much trouble . . . why didn't you just leave me there? You would be safely attending to your business, and I would . . ."

"Because . . ." he started. He made a gesture of dismissal and turned away. "Do as you wish. If you're still here when I get back, I shall assume that you've come to terms with your feelings about having to trust a thief. If not, don't be here."

He opened the door. "Lock it," he said curtly, and slammed it behind him. He didn't *want* to know what she had to say.

Fliz went downstairs and told the fat man behind the dilapidated counter that he would return. He gave him another five faros to keep the room for the morning, and hinted that there might be more. He left the hotel and started looking for a barber's shop. On the way he divested three passerby of their purses, so that by the time he found the shop, he had ample funds. Fliz reflected that, with just one day's intensive work, he could make himself so rich that he wouldn't need to work for a year. The problem with such a scheme was that sudden wealth or leisure in a Willet would instantly attract undue attention, and would probably eventually become fatal. But such constraints had now been lifted. He would fleece as many victims as he could, and get out of the city by first daylight tomorrow.

The barber shaved off Fliz's beard and cut his hair. In a reflecting pane in the barber shop Fliz hardly recognized himself. Who was this somber, clean-cut individual? He turned his head this way and that. He thought to detect a trace of his father's features. His father, who would have been horrified to know that his only son had to make a living by larceny. Fliz shrugged off the thought. His father meant nothing to him. When his world collapsed he had thought only of himself and his own misery and abandoned his family to their fate. What kind of a man was that?

It occurred to Fliz that here lay at least a part of the explanation for his actions with regards to Nerys. If he deserted her, he would become like his father, and dishonor his dead mother and sisters. That wasn't the only reason, of course, but Fliz didn't care to investigate further.

The barbershop, like all such places, was a node for the dissemination of gossip. The owner, a certain Gnos-sam, was curious about the stranger who'd walked into his shop. He probed with the skill of years of practice. Fliz countered with an equal skill at evasion, making up a story specific enough to satisfy the barber, yet sufficiently vague to discourage further probing. He also picked up several snippets of valuable intelligence. An off-duty astuno, in the chair as Fliz arrived, communicated news of the search for an escaped new Breeder. Duke Corran had posted a reward of a thousand faros for information leading to her capture; five thousand faros for the astuno or astunos who captured

her. In addition, Corran's men were combing the town. She would not remain free for long. If she was alive. There were suggestions that she might have drowned.

The barber expressed his amazement at the foolishness of the woman. But who understood women?

The news unsettled Fliz, who had to make an effort to control his eagerness to get out of the place. He decided not to go to the caravan office after all, but, stopping only to purchase a pair of scissors, a comb, and a bottle of dink-water, headed straight back for the inn where he'd left Nerys. If she'd decided to leave . . .

Nerys stared at the closed door, too angry for words. How dare he? Who did he think he was? Arrogant, conceited . . .

She slammed home the bolt and went to the window. From there she saw Fliz go down the alley and disappear around a corner. She took a few deep breaths to calm herself. She hadn't been so mad at anyone for a long time. Not even at Teufel with his self-centered blindness; or the drudges who'd tried to take advantage of her in Gaskar. But Fliz—well he was something else! A thief. With an arrogance that would have suited a duke! He hadn't even allowed her to catch her breath.

What did he expect? How could he expect her to trust a thief? Just because he said so? The man's life was built on larceny. Deceit was a second nature to him. And he wasn't stupid. So, why would he even *think* that she should trust him—blindly!

The worst of it all was that the question that set off his tirade had *nothing* to do with the issue of trust. All she'd wanted to know was—and this was embarrassing enough, without him making it worse through his lack of consideration for her—where she'd find the . . . well, the ablutions. The latrine. Whatever passed for that kind of place around this hovel.

Nerys went back to the bed, thinking that, unless she wanted to wet herself, she'd really have to go soon. She looked around, but, while the woman had provided a carafe of water for washing, there was no . . . whatever it was they should have provided. Nerys peered under the bed. Nothing. She sighed.

Damn Fliz! Her eyes fell on the purse he'd purloined from some innocent victim. He'd left it behind; no doubt because he planned to stock up on his funds along the way somewhere. It must be wonderful, she reflected wryly, to be skilled in such matters. Labor was not

required when there were rich pickings all around you and all you had to do was help yourself to it.

Nerys caught herself, scandalized at her thoughts. Was this the result of just a few hours' exposure to someone like Fliz? What would it be like—what would she be like—after some *days* of this? Was she that malleable?

She picked up the purse and hefted it. Fliz had chosen his victim well—or else he'd been lucky, of course. She counted the remaining cash. Sixty eight faros. Several faritos, eight of which made up a faro.

Another thought crossed her mind. What if Fliz had left this here in case she decided to leave him? Encouraging her to leave, maybe. Yes, that was a distinct possibility. After all, he'd made it quite clear that she was an unwelcome burden. And how could she blame him? She'd burst into his life with the suddenness of a natural catastrophe, without so much as a by-your-leave. Something had compelled him to help her last night. Whatever it was, it was not there this morning. He'd made that quite clear. The whole talk about 'trust', asking her to do something which he must know she'd find impossible: all designed to maneuver her into a situation where she only had one choice. And he could tell himself that she had left of her own volition; and that it wasn't his fault.

Nerys considered the coins and dropped them back into the purse. She got up and put on the clothes he'd thrown on the bed. She pulled back her hair, tied it into a knot behind her head, took the purse and left the room. She made it down the stairs to come upon the revolting fat man, who looked up at the sound of her steps. His expression told her exactly what he was thinking. His mouth opened to a grin which exposed his rotting teeth.

"Your friend said he'd be back," he leered.

"If that's what he said, that's probably what he's planning," she said with a bravado she didn't feel. She was acutely aware that the fat man could block her way to the exit by taking just two steps.

"He might not be pleased to find you gone," the fat man said.

"Where's the . . . latrine?" she countered, evading an answer to his comment.

The fat man was easier distracted than she'd expected. He nodded at a door at the other side of the tiny lobby. "Over there. Use of the facilities is one faro."

"For a . . ." She couldn't bring herself to be more explicit.

He chuckled. A rasping kind of sound, as if it caused him pain. "Not just once," he said. "I'm not avaricious." He coughed. "One faro per day—if you have a room here, that is."

Nerys dared not ask further. She extracted single faro from the purse and tossed it to the fat man. He caught it with a practiced flick of his hand. Nerys proceeded into the latrine to relieve her aching bladder.

She emerged from the filthy 'facility' and found the fat man in animated conversation with another individual. Taking advantage of the distraction she slipped out the front door.

"Hey," he called after her, "what am I going to tell your friend?"

She didn't answer but hurried down the alley. She had no idea where she was, but the sounds and smells soon led her to a wider street, lined with several rows of stalls in haphazard arrangements. The melange of smells made her mouth water. She found a stall that offered a food she recognized. A short while later she stood between two stalls, munching away on a juicy sausage, wrapped into a large roll of thin bread, garnished with a variety of greens and spices. Not all of them she knew, but other people ate it, and it didn't appear to do them any harm.

Standing there her perspective on life took a turn. All of a sudden it didn't seem so bad at all. She was still alone, still lost, still hunted, still with no idea of what to do next—but right now she was here, unmolested, eating a delicious breakfast, and savoring the moment.

Imperious voices made her head turn. An astuno patrol was making their way along the stalls. Nerys almost dropped the uneaten food. She looked around in panic. Backing off was out of the question. The stalls were against the wall of a house. The only way out was forward, across the flow of people and into plain view of the astunos.

Did they know what she looked like?

The answer came unbidden. An astuno halted at a stall only a few paces away and held up a sheet of parchment. She caught a glimpse of the drawing on its surface. A good-enough likeness. Suddenly she felt as if everybody was looking straight at her. The casual glimpse from the boy yonder, the passing gaze from that woman. They knew—and if they didn't know now

they would within moments. The panic rose in her throat. She was lost. This much was certain. The astunos continued their inexorable progress along the stalls.

A quick movement on her left; almost too quick to notice. A voice from behind her. She jerked and bit down an exclamation.

"Quiet," he hissed.

She felt her knees go weak with relief.

"Turn around," he said. "Slowly."

She did, facing him.

"How did you . . ."

He made a tiny, imperious gesture signaling her to be quiet. "Come."

Where to?

Fliz grabbed her arm. The touch was oddly reassuring. He pulled her to the back of the stall and along a narrow space left clear between stall and wall. They were now hidden from casual view by a fragment of canvas hanging down from a frame. Why, wondered Nerys, had she not seen this?

A few quick steps and they came to a window, just above her head. Fliz stopped and pointed.

"Up there?" she whispered.

"Come." Without another word he bent down and put his arms around her knees. He heaved. She felt herself lifted high. Her arms grasped the window sill. She struggled to get a proper hold. He let go of her knees. She felt a push under her feet as he almost threw her into the window. She lost her hold and fell into the inside, where she landed in a heap on the floor, probably bruised but otherwise intact. There was a scrabbling sound and his hands appeared on the sill. A moment later his body followed, and presently he landed beside her on the floor. He crouched down, looking around with animal caution. When she opened her mouth he put a finger on his lips.

A few moments passed. Fliz took her hand and helped her up. "Are you hurt?" he whispered.

"No."

"Good."

From outside the window she thought to hear the noises of a conversation. Then, footsteps; male voices exchanging opinions. Presently they faded as the men moved away.

"Where are we?" she hissed.

"Somebody's house," he said dryly.

Nerys looked around the room. Two beds. A crude wardrobe. Clothes strewn across beds and floor. A lidded chamber pot.

Fliz approached the door and opened it carefully. From somewhere else in the house the sound of kitchen utensils clanging against each other. Fliz motioned to Nerys. Quiet as wraiths they slid along a narrow corridor until they came to the front door. Fortunately, the kitchen was on the other side. Fliz opened the door and peered out. Nerys slipped out after him and found herself in a narrow alley between the backs of two rows of houses. From a few steps away a threesome of urchins stopped playing and stared at them. Fliz waved at them, reached into his tunic and came out with three coins which he threw in their direction. They laughed and rushed to pick them up. Fliz put his finger on his lips. The urchins giggled and pulled grotesque faces. Fliz made a face back and waved at them. As if this had been a command of sorts they seemed to lose interest and returned to their play.

"Come," Fliz said to her and dragged her on. They doubled back to the market street, where Fliz hesitated, before stepping out into the crowd. Nerys followed even more reluctantly. Fliz hurried along, leaving her no option but to follow. They left the market street and re-entered a system of alleys. Fliz gave the impression of looking for something. Suddenly, he stopped and pulled her into a deep-set doorway.

"This is a good place," he said. "Now we must hurry."

He pulled a pair of scissors from his tunic.

"Turn around," he said to her.

"What are you . . ."

"I'm going to cut off your hair," he told her.

"My hair?" Nerys was scandalized. The thought was inconceivable. "No."

He grabbed her arm and turned her around. "Have you looked around yourself at all?" he hissed. "How many women with long hair did you see? The only ones you will see are just growing it so when they sell it they get more faros. And they generally keep it carefully wrapped up!"

"They *sell* it?"

"It's all they have to sell," he told her grimly. "That and their bodies. The Wearers pay well to provide wigs for their Breeders."

"They cut off their hair?" The idea was too monstrous for words.

"Turn around," he said. "We don't have much time. Somebody could come along any moment."

"Please!"

"Your hair or your life," he said mercilessly.

She sighed and submitted to the inevitable. She felt the scissors snipping through her locks and it was as if they cut through her very life-blood.

"So," he said as he worked, "you've decided not to trust me." He sounded casual, but she detected an underlying timbre of . . . what? She could not place it.

"I have done nothing of the sort," she said.

"You left."

"I decided that you did not need me to burden you."

He was silent for a moment. The scissors completed their ghastly work. He continued to clip here and there; trying to make it look better she guessed. Well, nothing could ever make this better. Nothing.

She felt a cold liquid trickling into what was left of her hair. "What are you doing?"

"It's Dink-water," he said, and started to massage it in. He produced a comb and began to run it through her hair in a methodical pattern. Nerys ground her teeth as she was subjected to the indignity of having her hair bleached. She hoped that she wouldn't have to look into a mirror again for as long as she lived. Finally, Fliz pronounced himself satisfied with the results. He rolled up the hair he'd cut off and handed it to her. Nerys didn't look at it and shook her head. "No." Fliz shrugged and sequestered the hair and his implements somewhere under his tunic. He peered out at the deserted alley. "We were lucky."

Nerys looked at him. He stood back and inspected her. "I dare say nobody'll know."

She stepped closer to him. "I want to say something," she told him.

"Yes?"

"Do you actually know what you have just done?"

Fliz shrugged. "I have completed your disguise."

"You really don't know, do you?" Of course he didn't. Basically, he was just an ignorant lout. Competent and effective. Crafty and skillful. But ignorant nonetheless. Insensitive and crude.

"In Thalonica it may not matter," she said with passion, "but it does in Gaskar. The hair of a merchant woman is her *pride*. Once she enters puberty it is never cut again. It may be trimmed at the ends in order to keep it healthy, but never more than the width of two fingers. To cut a woman's hair is to take away part of

what she *is*! And you have done this to me—without so much as asking me for my permission."

He nodded thoughtfully. "That may be so." He shrugged. "Just trust me that much, alright?"

"Damn you!" she snapped. "Why do you keep talking about 'trust'? I am telling you that you've violated me more than you'll ever know and you talk about 'trust'? But if you *want* to talk about it . . .

"How *can* I trust you—you, who tells me that I'm a burden to him? Don't you know how I *feel* about being dependent on one such as you? One who steals for a living? One who cuts off the hair of a merchant's daughter without the slightest hesitation or remorse? One who is so . . . arrogant! And yet you know *nothing*! Nothing at all."

He looked at her; all expression had fled from his face, which had become a lifeless mask. Then he nodded softly. "As you wish," he said tonelessly. He handed her a heavy purse. "Go to the Teeshan caravansary. You'll find it easily. Ask for Master Wert. Tell him Fliz sent you. Tell him you want a passage to Tyssel. When you get to Tyssel, which is a place that treats women comparatively well, ask for the house of Opar. Tell the head of the house that the son of Felicia sends you. Tell them that Felicia is dead; that she was murdered, and that her son will avenge her. Tell them that he asks them to take care of you, because he cannot do so himself. Do this, and you may live."

He smiled, but the smile did not reach his eyes. "Good luck," he said softly. He pivoted and strode away.

Nerys stood rooted to the spot, watching him turn a corner and disappear from view. Did he expect her to run after him? Who did he think he was? She owed him her life, this much was true. But did he really think that this entitled him to such an utter disdain of her—such a total lack of respect for what she considered important?

She felt the purse in her hand. Thus had he rid himself of her. She understood that now. He had given her money he'd stolen from others and simply disposed of her. In the end, like all others, he had deserted her.

Good riddance! She felt like flinging the purse to the ground—but she wasn't that stupid! She would . . . do as he told her. She had no choice. No matter how much it rankled to be beholden to a criminal, she had to take the offering. If it meant that she would live, and maybe even live without fear, then she

would swallow her pride and do as this thief, who had no respect for her, but who . . .

Nerys uttered a small sound of vexation. When she had rejected Hellas and all the others—for the sake of one whom she might never know; who would lay down his life for her and her alone; who would never desert her in her hour of need . . . And what did she get? An arrogant thief who cared not a whit about her feelings, but was as touchy as anything when it came to his own, and quite willing to leave her to her own fate when it suited him.

Damn him!

Nerys started running. She came to the corner around which Fliz had disappeared. He was nowhere in sight. She looked this way and that. To her left, the alley led to the market street, several blocks away; to her right it led deeper into a maze of alleys that she didn't dare enter by herself.

She leaned herself against a wall, weak from emotional and physical exhaustion.

A scraping sound from her right.

She whipped around. Fliz stood there, looking at her with an inscrutable face. "I apologize," he said.

She exhaled sharply. The relief was almost too much to bear. She felt like crying; but she wasn't going to show him how much it mattered that he just . . . *was*.

"Please don't," she said. "It is I who should apologize. I'm thinking only of myself. It's just . . ." She shook her head. "No excuses," she said. "I don't want to make excuses."

He touched her hair; an oddly tender gesture. "It was lovely," he said softly. "I did not want to do this, but . . ."

"I know," she said.

"One day . . ." he began.

Nerys shook her head. As she looked at him she noticed, for the first time, that his beard had been shaved off. He'd also had a haircut. He looked . . . different. Not quite as scruffy. Almost respectable. He was, she told herself, not entirely unhandsome.

"One day," she said, "maybe. Right now I just want to make sure that I'll live to see that 'one day'."

An approving smile spread across his features.

"Very good," he said softly.

She was learning; slowly, for surely it wasn't easy for her—or for him, for that matter. For a moment there, as he walked away, he had actually been prepared to

leave her to her own devices. But that had passed just as quickly as it had begun. Then he knew that her fear made her say those things to him—and he could not blame her for her fear. Besides, she was right. He was uncultured; ignorant of the finer points of life; a creature of the nether regions of society. His tastes were simple; his priorities were survival and looking after those he cared about. A task in which he had failed—so maybe he wasn't even good enough for *that*. How could he blame Nerys for regarding him with disdain? To expect anything else from her, especially in her current situation, was to expect superhuman qualities. But she was learning—with a lively intelligence he'd never seen before. A remarkable woman indeed. To leave her to her fate was unthinkable.

As he walked along, with Nerys trailing him just as he had instructed her, he pondered his next steps. They would go to the caravansary and arrange for their passage. Where to? Tyssel was the only place he could think of. It was a long way to go, and would give the stranger, who would surely find out what Fliz had done, ample time to catch up with him. But *he* would not be able to use a caravan. If he wanted to catch up with them he'd have to go by himself. A perilous enterprise. It was possible that the steppe and its perils would take care of him and he would never get close to Fliz. But if he did; well, Fliz would be prepared.

What if the stranger were *not* able to trail him though? Then he would lose him, and Felicia and Audile would never be avenged!

Another intolerable notion! He would just have to make sure that he left a spoor so bold that it could not be overlooked; yet so subtle that nobody would suspect that he'd left it behind on purpose. Fliz wondered how best to go about it.

They arrived at the caravansary near the northern outskirts. For Nerys, Fliz negotiated a passage in a wagon. It would be expected. Women did not ride. He offered himself as an armed 'companion'. The owner and originator of the caravan, a lank individual of indeterminate age and origin, knew Fliz from a previous 'transaction' and accepted him for the post. This way the cost of Fliz's passage was greatly reduced, and a horse would be provided for him. But he would also have to do his share of guard duties. This implied a certain danger, but, as he explained to Nerys, no more so than if he'd sat in a wagon, doing nothing while nomads attacked the caravan, as they often did.

Nerys was not convinced and let him know that she wasn't. "You have to fight? I may just be a rich merchant daughter from Gaskar, but even I can figure out that you'll be more exposed on a horse than in a wagon."

"And I have a horse!" he pointed out. "Meaning that, if things turn desperate, I could come for you, and we could try to escape."

"Is it that dangerous?"

"It depends. The steppe people have their moods. One day they may feel benevolent and let the caravan pass with just a toll of a few horses or some food. On other days . . . well maybe they get out of their bed the wrong way. They are testy and unreasonable. The caravan master is unwilling to bow to their demands. There is a fight. People die. Mostly nomads, because their weapons are inferior."

"But it could be you!"

"I will be careful."

"You do not seem like the careful type to me."

Fliz laughed. "I am almost thirty years old. I am a Willet, but I am still alive—and free!—and I'm the best thief in this city. Believe me: I am careful—very much so."

She didn't believe him, but he had mollified her—after a fashion.

Attached to the caravansary was a hostelry where the passengers could rest before departure. This was usually in the early morning, so that the caravan could reach the first way-station before nightfall. As luck would have it, a caravan bound for Gaskar was about to depart the next day. Its purpose was the conveyance of passengers, goods, and livestock to and from the small towns which lay between Thalonica and Gaskar. At Wainstay Station the caravan would split up. Half of it would veer off to the north, to continue on to the Bessynian Mines and beyond to Port Ish. In due course it would return to Thalonica, thus completing its mission. The other half of the caravan would continue on to Gaskar.

Along their way the caravans often underwent one or more transformations. The animals returning to Thalonica were unlikely to be the same as those who left. The people would also change. Most of the regular employees might still be in evidence, but everybody else would have been left behind on route. People like Fliz, who attached themselves to the enterprise for a time, united in a temporary common purpose, then went

their own way. Some caravans did not return at all, but effectively dissolved along the long and arduous track. Animals and wagons might be sold to other caravans. If the price was right and the leader made a profit for the owner, anything could happen.

"And some caravans do not return because the nomads win," Nerys guessed.

Fliz agreed. "It is rare, but it has been known to happen."

"Why do we have to leave in this manner?"

Fliz studied her. She grimaced. "Why are you looking at me like I was some freak?"

Fliz came to a decision. He nodded at the mess hall attached to the hostel. "Let us find somewhere to sit. I have a long story to tell. When I'm done you might reconsider your decision to stick with me."

Fliz procured a large pot of green tea, two cups, and a plate of fluff-cakes. Nerys poured the tea as Fliz told her his story.

When he was done she was silent, staring at her cup, half a fluff-cake uneaten on the table by her left hand.

"Now you understand?" he said.

She looked up and into his face. "I *am* a burden," she said.

He shook his head. "No. You are a contingency. Like a thunderstorm. A river to be forded. A mountain to be climbed. A natural . . ." He was looking for a word.

"Calamity?" she supplied.

He laughed. He liked her wry sense of humor—if and when she chose to display it.

He shook his head. "I was merely thinking in terms of something that I have no power to change. That which just *is*. Maybe even . . . has to be . . ."

He got the impression that she was . . . pleased?

What did he say?

Who knew women?

"Can I see this thing?" she said.

He extracted it from inside his tunic and laid it on the table between them. She stared at it, fascinated. "Can I touch it?"

He nodded. She picked it up gingerly and inspected it.

"What could it be?"

"Maybe one day I'll know."

She looked at him. "I will not be in your way," she said, "but I will do what I can to help."

He didn't think that there was be much she *could* do, but he didn't tell her that. The offer was genuine. He should take it in the spirit in which it was made.

"Thank you," he said.

"I mean it."

"I know you do."

Nerys returned the device and he sequestered it inside his tunic. They left the mess hall and ambled around the wide yard where the caravan's wagons stood, lined up, waiting for the morning; big, four-wheeled drays, each drawn by six galopers, which would be exchanged at the way stations along their route. Their wheels were rimmed with an elastic material, extracted from Kino trees, which replaced the need for a suspension. There were fifteen wagons altogether; requiring a total of almost a hundred galopers. There would also be almost as many guards, many of them travelers like Fliz volunteering for such duty in exchange for a reduced fare. They would be under the command of about twenty trained caravaneers, who in turn answered to Possa Jennikov, the caravan's master. Jennikov obeyed none but Master Wert, a Floater of the upper ranks, and the owner of Teeshan Caravans. These were the links in the chain of command.

Fliz could see that Nerys was impressed. They came to the end of the compound and turned back. As they did, Fliz caught a flicker of movement from the corner of his eyes. Casually, so as not to give away anything, he turned to look.

"What is it?" Nerys asked him.

"What do you mean?"

"You tensed up. What did you see?"

"Maybe nothing," he said, surprised at the acuity of her perception. "Maybe someone who doesn't want to be seen. This is my guess." He took her arm. "Let us pretend that we've noticed nothing at all."

They started walking back along the row of wagons, continuing their conversation for the benefit of whoever might be watching. Finally Fliz spied a familiar face—which turned away the moment he glanced at it. But not fast enough.

"Tane," Fliz said softly.

"Who's that?"

"A moderately competent thief with an overinflated opinion of his own abilities."

She gave him a quick, wry look.

"Tane should not be here," he said. "His territory is adjacent to mine, near the eastern wharves."

"You think . . ."

"I do."

"What will you do?"

Fliz thought for a moment. "I don't want this man to know where I'm going too soon. We need a day's head-start at least." He paused. "I wonder why Tane's still here. He has seen me, he must guess my intentions. Why is he waiting? He should be off to report his findings?"

"Report?"

"What else could he be here for?"

"What can you do?"

Fliz was silent. Then he looked at Nerys and grinned. "I know!"

"You do?"

"He's wondering what I'm doing with *you*! Maybe he even hopes to catch me in a compromising position. That would definitely please him. He's denounced me to the astunos at least twice!" Her face told him that she didn't understand. "I'm a Willet," he reminded her. "I am prohibited from . . . enjoying . . . female company."

She looked at him, her eyes round. "Completely?"

"That aspect of it: yes."

"What if . . ."

"If they catch me?" He grimaced. "If I'm lucky I'm just neutered. Else I'm killed—right *after* being neutered."

"That's monstrous! Why do you live in a place like this? How can you stand it?" Her eyes widened; she put a hand on her mouth. "I . . ."

"One can only make choices if there *are* choices," he said. Right now he had to make some choices about how to eliminate Tane. Soon.

"I need your help," he said

Tane, crouching out of sight behind a wagon, saw Fliz give the blonde woman a proprietary hug, then walk away in the direction of the caravan master's office. Tane grinned. This was getting more and more interesting. Maybe he should stay around for another while and watch Fliz do some really stupid things. If his freakish employer did not get him, the astunos surely would.

Tane shook his head. Fliz was a Willet! How dare he presume to the rights of his betters? What was he up to? Who was this woman? Even though her clothes were, at best, those of a very-low-caste Floater—or, more likely, a Willet whore—Tane could tell that she was not. There was a pride in her bearing; an air of disdain, as if she knew that she was better than all those she surveyed.

And she had allowed Fliz to *hug* her? Squeeze her like one might a tavern wench? What was going on here? Tane found himself fascinated by tantalizing unknowns.

He looked after Fliz's retreating figure. He was, Tane noted, groomed and clean—as if he were . . . what?

Fliz entered the office. Tane returned his attention to the woman, who remained where she was, idly surveying the scene around her. Again, Tane marveled at her bearing and the air of hauteur clinging to her like a halo. He emerged from his cover and slowly, inconspicuously, worked his way closer to her. She kept looking away from him and he had no trouble getting to within a couple of paces without being noticed. He formulated a plan of approach and took the last two steps.

She heard him and turned around. A pair of arresting brown eyes fixed on his face. They narrowed slightly, resulting in a strangely amused expression.

Amused?

"Hello," a voice said behind him. The tip of a very sharp object pricked his lower back. The woman's mouth twisted into a smile. She looked over Tane's shoulder.

"You were right," she said. "He *is* stupid."

"Definitely," Fliz's hated voice said at Tane's back.

"What do you want?" he croaked.

"I want to know what you're doing here," Fliz said.

Tane tried to turn around, but the pain in his lower back suddenly intensified. He turned his head back, but found that he could not look into the woman's eyes. The scorn and contempt he read in there was like a slap in his face. He felt himself flush with embarrassment.

Who was she, and what was she doing with *Fliz*?

Fliz prodded with the knife. Tane arched his back.

"You were going to tell me something," Fliz said.

"I'm just . . ."

"Just what?" Fliz prompted. "This is far outside your territory."

"I don't have to tell you anything," Tane blustered.

"True," Fliz admitted. "And I don't have to let you live either."

"You wouldn't kill me!" Tane rasped. Fliz was a lot of things, but a murderer he was not. In fact, maybe he should call Fliz's bluff right now . . .

He jerked away from Fliz—only to find an arm snapping around his neck and the tip of the knife digging very painfully into his back. "Why—are—you—here?" Fliz's voice said, right next to Tane's right ear.

There was a new, lethal, edge in the voice. Tane felt a frisson of fear run along his spine. He gasped as the knife drew a gash across his lower back. A warm liquid trickled down into his pants.

Maybe he *didn't* know Fliz as well as he'd thought. Maybe . . .

"I was told to find you," he gasped.

"By whom?"

"A man."

Fliz tightened his hold around Tane's neck. The woman looked on with interest.

"I don't know who he is," Tane croaked. Fliz's choke hold eased off a bit. "He gave me faros. He wants you."

Fliz took his arm from around Tane's neck. Tane gasped for air and croaked something unintelligible. Fliz, one hand gripping Tane's left arm and the other continuing to press the knife against the man's back, marched him between two unattended wagons and into the stables beyond. With nobody paying them any attention, he continued to prod Tane into a hay store, where he tied him up securely, attaching the hands to the feet behind Tane's back, so that he might not be able to wriggle and prematurely free himself. He shoved Tane into a space between some bales and covered up the opening with bales he dragged from an adjacent pile. With some luck the stable-boys would tidy this place up sometime tomorrow when the caravan had departed. They would find Tane and release him. The way Fliz figured it, Tane would then return to the stranger to report his findings—suitably slanted to present his own failure in the best light possible, of course.

When Fliz was done with Tane he returned to Nerys, who had followed them at some distance.

"An unsavory fellow," she commented.

"Very," Fliz agreed. He grinned.

"Why are you smiling?" she asked.

"'Unsavory' is an attribute that might be applied to me as well," he noted dryly.

"No." She sounded definite.

He looked at her, surprised. She shook her head. "I could think of a number of things to call you." She suppressed a smile. "'Unsavory' is not among them. 'Willful' and 'stubborn' are. 'Arrogant' is another."

"I suppose I should be grateful."

"Maybe."

The rest of the afternoon passed in unaccustomed lassitude. Fliz briefly contemplated the wisdom of another visit to Thalonica proper. Some more funds could surely only come in handy. But he told himself that it was too dangerous to leave Nerys on her own.

His suspicions were confirmed when, in the late afternoon, a patrol of astunos came to the compound. Wert was an individual of some consequence, and they did nothing to antagonize his clients; but they cast sharp glances at all those present. Fliz and Nerys found themselves at the focus of attention of at least one inspection. They pretended to indifference, sipping tea and talking animatedly about inconsequentialities.

When the astunos were gone Fliz heaved a sigh of relief. But it wasn't over yet. Just after nightfall a threesome of guards in the uniform of Corran's house arrived. They proceeded to Wert's office and remained in there for some considerable time. Fliz took Nerys aside and into the shadow of the wagons, ready to bolt should this become necessary. They waited until the men emerged again, looked around briefly, and presently departed.

Before he went to rest for the night, Fliz slipped away to check on Tane, whom he found, still bound and gagged behind the bales of hay. From behind the gag Tane issued strangled noises. Fliz grinned and withdrew. He returned to Nerys, who expressed her dismay at the sleeping arrangements. Fliz shrugged. There was nothing they could do. Wert's dictates were definite and strict. The hostel was communal: several dormitories accommodating dozens of people each. Men and women were kept separate. No allowance existed for married couples.

"I have never experienced such a thing," Nerys fretted. "All these people . . ."

"They're all women," Fliz reminded her. "You're not likely to be molested. I thought you might consider that preferable to having to share a room with a criminal."

She glanced at him sharply, but he grinned at her to show her that the remark had, at least for the most part, been jocose. Her face softened somewhat, but he had an uncomfortable inkling that he had not fooled her one iota.

