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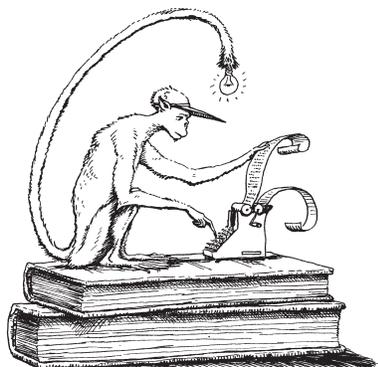
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Editorial

Gentle Readers.

Thank you, Bruce! It's been a long time since there has been a letter, and we are so pathetically grateful for any sign of readership response it isn't funny. Even something negative might be nice, rather than the usual deafening silence, which only now has been interrupted, again, by Bruce. And, while I can only revel in some perfunctory spatters from the praise heaped upon Tim's current opus, I want to use this as an opportunity to encourage Tim to work hard—harder, extremely hard!—on getting published. Where there's one admirer, there will be others. This is almost axiomatic.

Also in this issue: more of *Dragonchaser* and *Finister*.

And then, as I write the above, I suddenly realize that the date is September, 11, 2003—and the images come back, playing back in my head, clear and indelibly engraved, as if today were two years ago . . .

Don't forget.

Till Noever



Dragonchaser

by Tim Stretton

Chapter 18

It was the morning of The Sorcerers, the second greatest of the Paladrian races. Mirko was awake with the dawn, and took an early breakfast of hot fresh bread and light beer. He felt an unaccountable optimism which was not borne out by logic. *Sapphire Light* had done nothing to suggest she could beat *Dragonchaser* in a long technical race; Larien had not been in contact since they'd argued on the waterfront; Catzendralle had neither communicated nor provided funds since his incarceration; and the Fanarites were still eager to sacrifice him for profaning their temple. All taken with all, his circumstances lacked promise. But his optimism would not be denied, and he left his rooms with a light step.

As soon as he started to walk along the main street towards the Arba Dock, he was accosted by a figure in white robes, trimmed with a blue-green—seemingly a Fanarite.

"Captain Ascalon—a moment if you please."

Mirko paused politely, if a little warily. The Fanarite did not appear to be a young man, but it was as well to be careful. The stout leather undershirt he wore provided only a certain amount of comfort.

"At your disposal, sir, but please be brief. I have a regatta to attend."

The Fanarite bowed. "I am the Hierophant Borseggio," he said. "I am the chief interlocutor with Fanar Himself."

Mirko found this a largely unimpressive distinction but concealed his thoughts. "I am at a loss as to your business with me."

Borseggio smiled. "You will be aware that certain devotees had vowed to kill you, in recompense for your sacrilege."

"Sacrilege! It was self-defence. What was I—"

Spreading his arms, Borseggio interrupted. "That is past. I am here to tell you that you no longer need fear retribution from the Brothers of Fanar."

Mirko frowned. "Why should I believe that?"

"Equilibrium has been restored. Fanar is again content."

"How so?"

"Your profanation of the temple defiled our sacred space and displeased our God. However, a reparation has been made, and there is no further debt."

Mirko still felt some way short of understanding the situation. "What form did this reparation take?"

"A payment was made which allowed a very proper and proportionate sacrifice to be made. The temple is cleansed and you walk again as a man free of taint."

"And Inisse?"

Borseggio placed his head on one side. "Inisse naturally feels a degree of resentment against the House of Bartazan. His personal goals remain his own, but they are no longer Fanar's."

"In other words, Inisse will still kill me if he can?"

Borseggio shrugged. "Who can see into a man's soul? If I were you, I would be inclined to give him a wide berth."

Mirko nodded his thanks to the Hierophant—who appeared to be expecting a more quantifiable gratuity—and went his way. Soon he was in the heart of the docks, with crowds thronging the approach. Mirko was quickly recognised.

"Make way for Captain Mirko!", "Forward Sapphire!", "Honour to Bartazan!"

The approach to the jetties was defended by Peremptor's Constables who stood aside at Mirko's arrival. The crowd was in high spirits, the mood jovial and unthreatening. All of the galleys seemed well-supported although, as ever, *Dragonchaser* commanded the loudest congregation.

Walking along the jetty Mirko noted the draw; this time *Sapphire Light* had only a middling position, next to *Dragonchaser*, but behind *Morvellos Devil* and especially *Excelsior*, which had the best draw of all. Given a good start, she would prove very difficult to catch. Dralenkoop, giving some last instructions to his overseer Mengippu, seemed as unworried as ever. Mirko saluted him before leaping aboard *Sapphire Light*.

Cascais was already at the helm, looking less nervous than for the Hanspar. The drills *Sapphire Light* had conducted over the previous month had not served to make him a good helm, but the most flagrant errors had been eradicated from his performance. Mirko hoped for at least a solid competence.

Jenx was at his drums, chewing on *falcx*; his eyes indicated that he had already given it ample time to take effect. After a quick word, Mirko stepped into the rowing area to speak briefly with each man. The Quartermen, he noted, all seemed at the right pitch of tension, with even Florio having set aside surliness and cynicism. The galley was as ready as it would ever be.

Mirko gave the signal to Jenx and the crew rowed slowly out to the start line at Four rhythm. The Sorcerers was unique in the Paladrian calendar in that the race was over two laps of the same course. The galleys rowed out into the bay with the Hanspar Rock to port, for the most part with a strong cross-current, before reaching the open sea and bearing to port towards The Sorcerers. At this point the galleys were rowing directly into the current, before executing the technical turn around—or through—The Sorcerers, heading back towards the docks with the current, before flipping back around the Hanspar with the current, back up to The Sorcerers and home again. There were those who felt it was a harder race than the Margariad itself, even if the prize money were far less.

The conditions were a little unusual today, Mirko noted. There was a surprisingly high wind, and a perceptible swell, even this close to shore. Choppy white breakers slapped against the galley's bows. It would make helming that much more difficult, he thought.

The vessels jostled on the start line, *Sapphire Light* up against *Dragonchaser* on one side and *Fanar's Glory* on the other; not an arrangement Mirko would have chosen. It would be important to start well, at the very least, and pull away from the Fanarites as soon as possible. Inisse was visible at the helm, but ignored Mirko's traditional call of good wishes. Drallenkoop was in high spirits on *Dragonchaser*, even offering a side-wager of fifty valut on the result. Mirko was no gambler, but on this occasion, motivated by a rush of blood, he agreed.

The horn sounded loud, and the race was underway. *Sapphire Light* settled into her customary ritual.

"Jenx! Beat Eight!"

Jenx beat out the rhythm, a fast one for the start of a long race. Mirko was determined to get a good start; he did not want to be adrift of *Dragonchaser* from the outset and more importantly, he wanted to be clear of *Fanar's Glory* as quickly as possible. Inisse was a dangerous and unpredictable influence.

Pull-pull-pull. *Sapphire Light* soon found her rhythm and moved strongly forward. *Dragonchaser* was also beat-

ing Eight but from a slightly less favourable start position; *Sapphire Light* inched ahead. *Fanar's Glory* was beating Seven and *Sapphire Light* moved up alongside her.

"Cascais! Careful now—watch Inisse! Jenx, keep them at Eight!"

Fanar's Glory started to drift across *Sapphire Light*; it might charitably have been ascribed to the wind, but more likely Inisse was 'closing the door'—a manoeuvre discourteous but not illegal.

"Cascais! Give her space—we have the speed of her—go wide, man!"

Cascais pulled the galley well wide of *Fanar's Glory* to pass, a course that brought them across *Dragonchaser's* line.

"Ascalon! Straighten up!" shouted Drallenkoop. In the circumstances Mirko thought it best to ignore him.

Maintaining her Eight rhythm, *Sapphire Light* gradually pulled past *Fanar's Glory*. "Cascais! Back on the straight!" Cascais pulled *Sapphire Light* into line; *Fanar's Glory* was now full astern and unable to create any more mischief. Looking back, Mirko saw that *Dragonchaser* was having a rather easier passage.

"Jenx! Beat Seven!" Mirko called as he settled *Sapphire Light* into a more sustainable rhythm. There was plenty of time to reel the other boats back in. At the head of the field, *Excelsior* was pulling ahead strongly. *Kestrel*, who had enjoyed a favourable draw, was now dropping back, and *Morvellos Devil* moved ahead into second place. *Sapphire Light* was fourth with *Dragonchaser* just behind in fifth.

The positions were maintained as the galleys passed the Hanspar. Shortly after *Sapphire Light* caught and passed *Kestrel*, with *Dragonchaser* following immediately. Mirko was sure she was using him as a pace guide, and probably a wind-break too. She could go faster than this—but it was a long race and no doubt Drallenkoop was confident of getting past at The Sorcerers. The crew seemed happy with Seven and Cascais appeared relatively calm.

The Sorcerers approached. The current was running strongly today, and the wind this far into the open sea was strong also. If Cascais could get around the rocks competently, *Morvellos Devil* would be catchable before the end of the first lap.

"Cascais! Be ready! Steady does it!"

Cascais' face was taut with concentration. Mirko noticed *Dragonchaser* increasing her tempo to increase the pressure; she was ready to profit from any error.

But Cascais' approach line was better than usual; he did not try to hug the rocks too close; perhaps the drills had been useful after all.

"Turn! Cascais! Turn! Turn!"

But Cascais had taken his lessons too much to heart. He let *Sapphire Light* move well beyond the normal point for a turn, to make a wide, lazy arc around Anazgro. The gap he'd left would fit a galley—and looking over his shoulder, Mirko saw that *Dragonchaser* had gone to Nine and was shooting through.

"Jenx! Nine, Nine!"

It was essential that *Sapphire Light* should hit the faster current past the final rock, Basile-Orario, still ahead—but the rapid move from Seven to Nine was a very difficult one to bring off. Florio and Damiano's quarters managed the transition successfully, but Walisse and Larze were struggling. The combination of wide line and broken rhythm proved too much, and *Dragonchaser* came past to great cheers and catcalls from her crew.

Mirko cursed. *Dragonchaser* had played them for fools again: Drallenkoop had bided his time to the rocks, conserving energy and waiting for *Sapphire Light* to make her inevitable mistake; and Cascais had obliged with an amateur's turn—again. It would be necessary to address the situation more seriously after the race, Elector's son or no Elector's son.

"Jenx! Beat Seven!"

Mirko felt that the best option was to consolidate while the current was with them on the leg back into the bay; if strength and morale permitted, they could put in another assault in the latter half of the race.

As the galleys came back to the Hanspar for the second time, *Excelsior* still led. There was a comfortable gap to *Morvellos Devil* in second, who was herself now strongly threatened by *Dragonchaser*. *Sapphire Light* remained secure in fourth, although *Fanar's Glory* was performing more strongly than expected to remain in contact in fifth. Realistically, at this stage of the race, the winner was likely to come from the first three, with *Excelsior*, a strong galley well commanded, probably the favourite.

Mirko instructed Jenx to increase the tempo as *Sapphire Light* approached the Hanspar. Ironically, with nothing now at stake and the race already lost, Cascais executed a perfect sweeping turn around the rock; a circumstance which caused Mirko more vexation than otherwise. Although the crew continued with a high

tempo, *Sapphire Light* could make no headway on the craft ahead. *Dragonchaser* put in one of her customary surges and passed a tiring *Morvellos Devil* with ease. Approaching The Sorcerers for the second time, though, it seemed apparent that *Excelsior* still enjoyed a commanding lead.

Excelsior pulled off a fine turn around The Sorcerers; Drallenkoop's only option now was to thread the needle between Anazgro and Ryozaax, and then Ryozaax and Basile-Orario, and Mirko was not surprised to see her do it. At the tempo she was rowing, it was an extraordinarily risky stratagem; but Drallenkoop shot through, to come out ahead. That was only half the battle, though; the current always died for the galley who threaded the needle, and *Excelsior* was coming from behind with a much stronger momentum. Mirko's view was imperfect, but it looked as though *Excelsior* was still going to nose ahead before the run to the finish.

Suddenly Drallenkoop must have swung the helm across. *Dragonchaser* slewed into *Excelsior*'s line, completely blocking her run. Raidis at her helm had two choices: plough into *Dragonchaser*'s side—a collision which would probably harm *Dragonchaser* more—or veer off, losing speed and line. He went for the latter option, for whatever reason. *Excelsior* narrowly missed *Dragonchaser*, but was virtually stationary. *Dragonchaser* continued across the current, and used her speed to swing herself back round into position. While *Excelsior* struggled to build her rhythm up to racing speed, *Dragonchaser* streaked away. The race was hers.

Sapphire Light put in a strong finish. Cascais again botched The Sorcerers, this time grazing Basile-Orario on the way past, but *Morvellos Devil* in third place was tiring rapidly, and *Sapphire Light* passed her on the way down the home run. A third place finish was not discreditable but, Bartazan aside, he doubted that anyone else would even notice where they'd finished. The story was all about *Dragonchaser* and *Excelsior* today; Drallenkoop would have some explaining to do.

Sapphire Light had finished only a minute or so behind the two winning boats, and they were both making fast to the jetty when she arrived. The crew of *Excelsior* were jeering and catcalling across to *Dragonchaser*, which was taking no notice. Leaving Mengippu to superintend his slaves, Drallenkoop leapt ashore to a mixture of cheers and jeers from the crowds, which were kept well back from the jetties. Smiling, he ran over to the race officials to hand in his race medallion to signify vic-

tory. Turning to acknowledge the crowd, he found his way barred by Raidis, his hand resting on his sword hilt.

"You dog, Drallenkoop: you balked us."

Drallenkoop laughed in his face. "That's all part of racing. You should learn to race if you want to play with the grown-ups."

"Grown-ups settle their differences like men, Elector's boy," said Raidis, pulling his sword half from its sheath. "Is that how you want to play this one? Or perhaps you'd rather apologise?"

Mirko had jumped from *Sapphire Light* and tried to intervene. "That's enough, Raidis, tempers run high on the water."

Raidis looked at him in scorn. "You saw what he did—unless you were too far behind. We had the speed of him out of The Sorcerers, and he just swung across us. That's not racing—not the way I was brought up to it, anyway."

Drallenkoop said: "You want to finish taking that sword out? I'm ready for you. Mengippu! Bring my blade."

Mengippu hastened from *Dragonchaser* carrying Drallenkoop's duelling sword. "Now then," Drallenkoop said, strapping it on, "Do you want to make something of this? Or not?"

Raidis whipped his blade out and held it upright in front of him. "I await your pleasure, my lord." Haidis had stepped alongside to act as his brother's second, while Mengippu was in position for Drallenkoop.

Drallenkoop took a step back and adopted the duelling pose. "At you now!" he cried, and surged forward. Mirko, as a Garganet necessarily a keen swordsman, watched intently; it was too late to interfere now.

Raidis was the more attacking swordsman; Drallenkoop was content to parry and give ground where necessary. His sallies were less frequent but more dangerous. Raidis was bold and determined, but his defence was not strong: twice with consecutive feint-lunge combinations he was nearly breached.

The jetty was not a good place to fight, too narrow to allow a full range of movement. Both fighters were forced to keep one eye on their position less they stumble into the sea. Drallenkoop began to fight a little more aggressively; little by little he was wearing his opponent down. Confident of victory, he began to flourish and showboat, enraging Raidis still further; still he

was not quick enough to respond. Drallenkoop manoeuvred him close to the edge of the jetty, forcing him back against a mooring post. Desperately Raidis kicked out, catching a surprised Drallenkoop on the wrist; backing up, he stumbled, and Raidis was upon him. He stood over him with his rapier.

"Yield!" he called. Drallenkoop tried to roll away but Raidis kicked him back into position. "Yield or die!"

Three Peremptor's Constables rushed through, their black cloaks trailing. "Enough!" the lead man—Mirko saw it was Corrando—called. "Break it up now!"

"Yield!" cried Raidis in desperation.

Corrando had his sword out, and he stood poised at Raidis. "I said enough, on the Peremptor's warrant."

"But—"

"Put up your sword, Raidis. This is a regatta, not a tourney."

Drallenkoop got to his feet and brushed the dust from his clothes while Raidis complained to Corrando. "You had no right to do that. That was a fair duel with seconds; you should have let it run its course. You waited until I'd won and then stopped it."

"I'm sorry," said Corrando. "It was not a true duel; neither of you specified 'death or blood'. Without that you offend the Peremptor's peace. Think yourself lucky I don't arrest the pair of you; it's only because it's regatta day I don't."

Drallenkoop bowed ironically to Raidis. "Thank you for the sport," he said. "If you'll excuse me, I have a trophy to collect." He turned to walk back towards the crowds and the presentation area on the main Esplanade. Raidis spat onto the jetty, and Drallenkoop found his way blocked by Haidis.

"Don't think you won today, Drall," said Haidis in a level voice. "Not the race, and certainly not the duel."

"There was no duel. You heard the Constable."

"No?" said Haidis with his dead lilac eyes. "Perhaps you'd like a more properly constituted one. 'Death or blood'—your choice, Elector's boy." He held Drallenkoop's gaze.

Drallenkoop looked down. "I fight my duels on the water," he said, and walked off to the Esplanade. Haidis was not a man to laugh but the bitter smile he turned Drallenkoop contained more than sufficient mockery.

The trophy was presented from a specially constructed dais designed to afford all spectators the best view. A herald announced Drallenkoop: "Three times

winner of the Margariad, and today a third win in The Sorcerers Regatta! Let's hear your cheers for the noble Drallenkoop!"

But instead the noise from the crowd was a lusty booning, interspersed with catcalls. "Drallenkoop cheat! Drallenkoop cheat!" went the chant. Drallenkoop smiled, held the trophy aloft, and made his way over to the House Drall enclosure. Mirko looked across into the scarlet and gold pavilion, and caught a brief glimpse of Catzendralle through the entrance. He smiled briefly and nodded, but she did not respond. He wondered what she had made of the day.

The festivities had started on the Esplanade, with the drinks booths beginning to do better trade than the food stalls. Mirko was as yet in no mood for revelry, and walked back over to the jetty where Cascais was forming the crew into ranks. He broke off at Mirko's approach.

"I'm sorry, Ascalon," he said. "I didn't steer well today."

Mirko shook his head. "Let's not talk about this now, Cascais. Tomorrow, when we've all had a chance to think, will be better."

"What's to say? I made a mistake—"

"—two mistakes, to be more precise—"

"—and I'm sorry."

"This is the real world, Cascais. Saying sorry doesn't make everything all right."

"I don't know what more I can say." His mouth drooped.

"I resign' would be a good start."

Mirko thought Cascais was going to cry. "I won't resign!" he said defiantly. "I'll practice and I'll get better. We just need some more drills."

Mirko sighed. "We've done nothing but drill for three months. Your performance has improved from woeful to inept; and you save your worst for races. Can I make this any clearer?"

Cascais stuck his jaw out. "I'm not resigning and you can't sack me: my father—"

"—is the Elector Nool Vavar, yes, I know. If you don't have the decency to resign, I won't sack you."

"Only because you can't."

"That's enough, Cascais. Go home—I don't want to see you at Coverciano tonight."

Cascais shrugged and walked off to continue arraying the slaves for the march back to Urmalest. He

turned his head and said "I'll go home—but you won't keep me off *Sapphire Light*. Don't even try."

Mirko leaned against the mooring post and sighed. Today the crew had promised to be *Dragonchaser's* equal; but as long as Cascais remained at the helm that counted for nothing. He would have to try and persuade Bartazan that it might be worth sacrificing a vote sometimes . . .



Chapter 19

Later that evening Mirko made his way to Coverciano for the customary regatta soirée. He had missed the main banquet, but since he had little appetite this did not concern as much as it would normally have done. Larien looked sullen in one corner, paying only the most desultory attention to Lady Inuela's conversation. Bartazan was talking earnestly to several men, including the Electors Nool Vavar and Sarindorp. Neither Larien nor Bartazan looked promising subjects for conversation, but he knew that duty compelled him to approach Bartazan, at least.

"Good evening, my lord," he said as he walked across the room.

Bartazan turned him a look of surprising cordiality. "Ascalon! What a day's racing we've had today!"

"Indeed we have, my lord. I'm only sorry that *Sapphire Light* was so far off the pace."

Bartazan waved the apology away. "Pah! The slaves raced well today—if it hadn't been for an unfortunate miscalculation we might even have won."

Since Cascais' father was present Mirko judged it imprudent to analyse the 'miscalculation' any further, and merely nodded.

"But," continued Bartazan, "to hear a crowd booning Drallenkoop! That was a pleasant moment, indeed."

Nool Vavar nodded and Sarindorp smiled. A third man with a flushed face and stark green eyes said: "It can only do you good in the election should Drallenkoop lose a little of his lustre."

"Well said, my Lord Jaralludian. I have hopes, I have hopes," said Bartazan, draining his goblet.

"Those hopes remain some way short of fulfilment," said Mirko. "We do not have the quality on the boat to ensure success."

Bartazan frowned. "My lords, will you excuse us a moment?" he said, drawing Mirko aside. "Don't think I don't know what you're hinting at," he said. "Nool Vavar is no fool; impugning his son in this company does not help me."

"My lord, let me be candid—"

Bartazan pursed his lips. "Your candour I can do without. I assume you are going to ask me to sack Cascais."

Mirko inclined his head. "He is nothing more than a liability."

"We have had this conversation before, Ascalon. I need Nool Vavar's vote, and the three he commands. I might secure Jaralludian's anyway by offering him Larien, but I cannot afford to offend such an influential man as Vavar. It's not even as if you can supply a helm who knows the waters well enough to do any better."

"My lord, with a decent helm I can beat *Dragonchaser!* You won't need to worry about Nool Vavar!"

Bartazan's eyes clouded. "Let me be candid with you for a change, Ascalon. I have two strategies to win the Election. The Margariad is very much the second of them. Anything can happen on the water; there are no guarantees, even for the best boats. Electors are very different; votes can be guaranteed, by all kinds of methods. At the moment, I count myself behind Medina, but the gap closes every day. One or two more Electors will tip the balance. I'd like you to win the Margariad for me; but you'll need to do it yourself."

Mirko bowed. "Unlike many folk, I welcome plain speaking. Your position is amply clear. I thought you had more courage."

He turned and walked off to see Larien. If there was scope for the evening to get worse, Larien probably provided it.

"My Lady Inuela, my Lady Larien—may I join you?"

"Of course, captain," said Inuela, bringing a smirk to Larien's face. "Larien and I were just discussing today's extraordinary events."

"Yes, third place for us was rather extraordinary, if not wholly unprecedented," said Mirko with a smile.

Inuela started. "That wasn't exactly what I meant."

"Mirko is sporting with you, aunt," said Larien. "He knows exactly what you mean."

Inuela smiled. "With a lord like mine, one becomes slow to recognise humour."

"I did say you couldn't win, Mirko," said Larien with a penetrating look.

"That didn't stop me trying, my lady. I finished with my honour intact, not a claim every master could make today."

"So you think Drallenkoop forfeited his honour today?" asked Inuela.

"His conduct on the water was sharp practice, to say the least; his behaviour on the jetty afterwards was craven."

Larien flushed. "You are calling Drallenkoop a coward?"

"It's no part of duelling to be rescued by the Constables when you're losing."

"It surprises me to hear to you talk of cowardice in breaking off an engagement, captain."

Mirko's face froze. "You forget yourself, my lady."

"Larien, what are you talking about?" asked Inuela. "You seem to have upset Captain Ascalon to no purpose."

Larien flushed even redder. "Leave it, aunt. I said something I shouldn't have done."

"So did I," said Mirko. "But not today."

"Oh, why can't I hold my tongue?" cried Larien. "I've wanted to see you all week, Mirko, and not to insult you. Please, I'm sorry."

Mirko shook his head quickly. "Larien, it's been a long day. I can do without quarrelling with you too."

"Then we're friends again?" she said breathlessly.

"I suppose so."

"Aunt, please excuse us—there's something I'd like to show Mirko in the Velvet Garden."

Inuela simply smiled. "Of course—I had promised to talk to the Elector Mempersink anyway."

Larien took Mirko's arm and led him out into the gardens. As they walked through the fragrant bowers, she said: "Hot tempers run in the Bartazan line, I'm afraid. I should never have argued with you in the first place, and I certainly shouldn't have said what I did earlier."

"It's past now," said Mirko. "We should just accept that there are some things we can't agree on. When the racing season is finished affairs will be that much simpler."

"What will you do afterwards?" Her large blue eyes looked deep into his.

"In truth, I haven't decided. Your uncle says he'll make me Master of the City's Fleet if he wins the Election—a promise I am hardly building my future around. But I can't go back to Garganet. Galleys are all I know,

so I may stick around here and see if I can get another engagement for next year.”

Larien smiled. “I’d like it very much if you did stay. Did you know that Drallenkoop’s overseer Mengippu is retiring after this season? I’m sure that Drallenkoop would take you on as overseer without a second thought. That would be marvellous—you’d be in the best galley and Drallenkoop is a most liberal master.”

“I am sure Drallenkoop already has a lengthy list of candidates for such a prestigious position; besides which, I am not sure his opinion of me is as high as all that.”

“Oh no! he speaks very highly of you.”

“You seem to know a lot about his plans and thoughts,” laughed Mirko. “Are you sure there’s not a little bit of wishful thinking here?”

“The world of the Electors is a small one. I am not ignorant of what goes on in House Drall.”

“Anyway,” said Mirko, “if I worked for Drallenkoop you would hardly be able to be friendly with me as you are now.”

“We’ll see,” she said, showing her strong white teeth. “Once Bartazan loses the Election he can never stand again—it will be his third defeat. Suddenly he’ll find he doesn’t have so many friends.”

“Larien, I’m pleased we’ve cleared up our misunderstandings. I have to transact some business now—perhaps I might call on you tomorrow?”

“I’d be delighted,” said Larien. “I’m at the townhouse for now. I’ll see you tomorrow.” She leaned forward and kissed him quickly on the lips. “Don’t forget,” she said, looking back over her shoulder as she walked away.

Mirko summoned a servant, paper and pen, and composed a brief note, reflecting as he did so on the novelty of parting from Larien on good terms. He could not remember the last time he had done so.

Finishing his note, he sent the servant away to deliver it. Trusting to his sense of direction, he made his way into the Labyrinth. Soon he found the concealed entrance to the Secret Garden and settled down to wait for Catzendralle, wondering how she would react to being summoned in this way.

The sun was declining in the west, casting much of the garden in shade, but one corner still enjoyed full sunlight, and Mirko took up station on a secluded seat, enjoying the cool fresh smell of the manzipar trees. If this was the effect the Old Craft could have, maybe it wasn’t such a bad thing after all.

Mirko had lost track of time in the stillness of the Secret Garden by the time the foliage gave way to reveal Catzendralle with her quick clever movements. He raised a leisurely hand to attract her attention. Catzendralle smiled and came over to sit beside him on the bench. She was dressed in a russet dress which managed to be simultaneously demure and alluring. It seemed she generally took more care with her attire when she visited Coverciano.

“Thank you for coming, my lady.”

Catzendralle smoothed her hair back from her forehead. “You don’t have to call me that. My name is Catzendralle, and my friends call me Catzen.”

“Friends?”

She frowned. “I do have some.”

“That wasn’t what I meant—I was just a little surprised at the implicit invitation to count myself among them. Previously you’ve been at pains to remind me I’m the hired help.”

“Don’t be so Garganet, Mirko. I’m inviting you to call me Catzen. It’s up to you whether you do or not.”

Mirko laughed. “I’m sorry—Catzen. I get too used to being around Larien. And no, I haven’t forgotten what you warned me about her.”

“Why did you want to see me?” she asked. “I assume it will take some time, and I’ve brought a pitcher of good Garganet wine with me.”

Mirko could not help but be suspicious at this unprecedented friendliness, but felt that tact compelled him to take it at face value. Taking the goblet Catzendralle had handed him, he said:

“There are several things. I have a report for you, which you can read at your leisure.”

Catzendralle took the paper and tucked it into her dress.

“And then I wanted to say thank you for getting me released. At least, I assume it was you.”

Catzendralle’s deep dark eyes twinkled. “I might as well accept the credit since you’re so ready to offer it.”

“And finally, I’d like to ask a favour. Or if you want, you can treat it as my *douceur* this time.”

Catzendralle sat up straighter in her seat and took a long sip of her wine. “Oh yes?”

“Give me Cascais.”

“In what sense?”

“You never tire of telling me you know everything about everyone. I want to know enough about Cascais to get him off my boat.”

"It's Bartazan's boat—which I assume is the problem. Do I deduce you want to dispense with his services and Bartazan doesn't?"

"I don't think that's any secret. I want you to tell me whatever I need to know about him to make him resign."

Catzendralle stood up and went to sit on the grass. "Why should I?" she said quietly. "You know that I can't afford to have you win the Margariad; what better than to keep you lumbered with a helm like Cascais?"

"That implies you think I can win without him. Implied compliments are often the most sincere."

"Mirko, this isn't a game. Yes, I think you can win, and I know a lot more about galleys than you think. Given a decent helm, I do think you'd push *Dragonchaser*. But that wouldn't help me, and I don't think it would help you."

"Catzendralle—Catzen—the galleys are all I've got. You know I can't go back to Garganet and I don't want to be your agent forever. This means something to me: if I lose, I lose, but I want to do it on my own terms."

"Mirko, you aren't talking in language I understand. You've given me no reason to help you."

"Other than helping me to get something I want. I thought that's what friends did."

"That's not fair, Mirko. I've done everything I can to help you so far."

"Like having Padizan killed?"

Catzendralle flushed. "I've helped you more than you know. I *did* save you with Padizan, even if things didn't turn out as I'd expected. And have you ever asked yourself how you escaped from the Fanarites? Or why you happened to be in the safest place in Paladria the night they came to kill you?"

"You?"

"I've said more than I should. Let's just say I've called in a lot of favours to make sure you stayed safe."

"I didn't ask you to."

"You'd be dead if I hadn't. The Fanarites would have killed you either time, and Bartazan would have done far worse if he knew what you'd done."

"Thank you," said Mirko stiffly. "But this favour I *am* asking you for. Think of it like this. If Cascais resigns from the boat, do you think Nool Vavar will be happy? Won't he be suspicious that Bartazan has put pressure on him? Bartazan needs Nool Vavar's vote, and his little cronies. How about taking this chance to sow some disension?"

"That doesn't help me if you win the Margariad."

"You really do think I can do it."

"Who would you put at the helm?"

"Florio. He's helmed in Garganet, he's rowed the bay for three years. He'll be better than Cascais, that's for sure."

Catzendralle sighed. "I should say no out of hand; but I'll think about it. I need to assess the potential outcomes. Will that do for now? I don't want us to argue with half the bottle left."

Mirko smiled and raised his goblet. "To friendship." "Friendship."

They sat in companionable silence and savoured the very fine Garganet wine, which brought back many memories for Mirko.

"Do you like my secret garden?" asked Catzendralle.

"It's magical," said Mirko. "Timeless."

"And so it is, very literally," said Catzendralle. "Had you forgotten the maintenance spell? This garden is unchanged for three hundred years."

"I find it hard to believe. I never imagined the Old Craft to be so benign."

"It was never the Old Craft that was evil," she said.

"It was the use that people put it to. It's no different to any other form of power in that sense. Paladria was never Gammerling; there were no lords of the Old Craft here. When East Gammerling was blasted, of course we drove out the Old Craft the same as everywhere else. But like so many other things here, it had never come across the mountains with full force anyway."

"You seem almost nostalgic for the Old Craft."

Catzendralle was briefly silent. "I wouldn't want you to think that. The Old Craft has been driven from our realms for good reason; but because it was never loved in Paladria, it's never been truly hated, either. I could tell you of folk even now who sport with it—high born ones in some cases. Death to them if they're caught, of course, but can you imagine such dabblings in West Gammerling or Estria?"

"You intrigue me—there are people in Paladria who practice the Old Craft?"

"I didn't say that. The Old Craft requires a gift—if you aren't born with it, no amount of study will give it to you. There are some in the city who flirt with the trappings: grimoires, conjurations and the like. It's a frisson, like an orgy—which it often accompanies—but with a whiff of danger. It has no more to do

with the real Old Craft than Bartazan has to do with public service.”

“You seem to know rather a lot, Catzen.”

“I always do, Mirko, I always do.”

Mirko smiled. “You won’t forget to think about Cascais?”

“I’ve already given you your answer,” she said. “You just need to know where to find it.”

She kissed him lightly on the cheek with lips cooled by the wine, and left him to ponder the day’s events.

Sleep was elusive for Mirko that night; the day had contained too much to digest, and his mind raced through the small hours. A night-owl hooted with irritating irregularity, and eventually Mirko rose from his bed and poured himself a pitcher of ale.

All in all, he reflected as he sipped his drink, the race itself had not gone badly. Cascais aside, *Sapphire Light* had acquitted herself very favourably. She was a match—or close to it—for both *Dragonchaser* and *Excelsior* in a straight line, and ahead of all the others. *Dragonchaser* came into her own around the rocks, and it was for this reason imperative that Cascais were dismissed; a question to ponder later. Given, by whatever means, a decent helm, there was no reason at all why *Sapphire Light* could not mount a serious challenge in the Margariad.

Dragonchaser, too, had revealed unexpected flaws which could only help his case. She had been very fortunate to beat *Excelsior* today; the baulking manoeuvre could easily have backfired, and Drallenkoop’s subsequent conduct indicated how badly he had been discomfited. The ‘duel’ had served to undermine his popularity, previously unassailable, and created a valuable fund of malice between his two greatest rivals. Here too were fine grounds for optimism.

His relationships with both Larien and Catzendralle—Catzen—were no more straightforward. Larien was as inconstant as the wind: today, she had flared up on the slightest provocation, and then gone to great pains to soothe his feelings; and then tried to persuade him to make his future in Paladria. She was undeniably alluring, and he flattered herself that she was attracted to him; but he found her unpredictability unsettling, and she undoubtedly worked to keep him at a distance. On any number of occasions their relationship had seemed set to blossom, only for some distance

to appear between them. He sensed this represented an underlying pattern in their relationship.

Catzendralle was scarcely any easier to read. Their relationship was based—or had been—on the gold she paid him, but that seemed to be less and less the case. That was as much down to Mirko himself, he supposed: if he hadn’t rescued Gambar Inisse to prove to Catzen that he wasn’t motivated by money, things would never have developed the way they had. But now he knew who she was and who she worked for; and as she’d implied, from that point onwards she had either to trust him or kill him. Fortunately she’d preferred the former option. Now it was ‘call me Catzen’, and she’d even considered giving him Cascais—perhaps. In some ways he felt a closer affinity with her than he did Larien. She was much more consistent in her attitudes, and she’d certainly saved him over Padizan, even if he didn’t necessarily believe her about the Fanarites and his imprisonment. All it needed now was for her to give him Cascais. What had she said? *I’ve already given you your answer. You just need to know where to find it.* But she hadn’t at all; she’d gone on to small talk about maintenance spells and the Old Craft . . . unless . . . it couldn’t be that simple, could it? *I’ve already given you your answer.* Laughing aloud, Mirko leaped from his seat.



Chapter 20

Mirko had given the crew the next day off; their muscles would be groaning after The Sorcerers and he saw no profit in flogging them any further. It also meant he did not have to see Cascais, for whom he had very different plans. After spending a pleasant morning with a charming Larien, he made his way down to the Urmal-est and summoned Florio, Damiano, Walisse and Jenx. The fourth quarterman, Larze, he could not bring himself to trust.

The group soon found themselves in the Waterside where Panduletta found them a secluded booth. Once the mugs of Widdershins had been brought, Mirko moved on to business.

“Florio,” he said. “How would you like to be the helm of *Sapphire Light*?”

“*Sapphire Light* already has a helm—of a sort, at least.”

"You four are going to help me change that," he said. "Florio, if there were no Cascais, how would you feel?"

"I don't want the job badly enough to kill him for it."

"You won't have to."

"In that case," said Florio, "I'd make a rather better helm. I've rowed these waters for two years; I know the currents and I know how to helm. What do we need to do?"

"Boy! More beer!" called Mirko. "Here's what we need to do."

Late that night, Vavar Cascais was entertaining a young woman of flexible principles in his Old Town apartments when a series of noises disturbed him. He called irritably on his two house slaves, but elicited no response. With a muttered apology to his companion, he went to the front of the house to investigate.

Two figures in black, their faces covered by masks, loomed before him. The larger, bulky and menacing, made a muffled snorting sound. The smaller figure pranced and hopped around the chamber: "Vavar Cascais! Vavar Cascais!" it chanted. "Bring me to Vavar Cascais!"

"Cas—Cais" whispered the other heavily.

Two more masked black figures stepped from the shadows. "Cascais! Cascais! We call on Vavar Cascais!"

Cascais slunk back in alarm. The small prancing figure gyrated with ever greater speed. "I smell Cascais—you are Cascais!"

"Ah—no, you're mistaken—no Cascais here."

The large figure hissed. "This is the one who broke my rest. He must be extinguished!"

Cascais shrunk back against the wall. The prancing figure advanced towards him. "I am the demon Maibalides!" he announced with a shrill cry. "I come from Below!"

"No!" cried Cascais. "Leave me!"

Maibalides continued. "This is Bambalar," he said, indicating the larger figures. "Your meddlings have disturbed his eternal rest."

Cascais stared, wide-eyed in terror. "The balance must be righted," shrieked Maibalides. "One for one, one for one! One has left eternal rest, another must begin it."

"You—no, no!" Cascais sobbed. "It was a prank, no more."

Maibalides shook his head sadly, his caperings ceasing in intensity. "The Old Craft does not admit of

'pranks,'" he said. "You must accompany the demons Alizar and Elizar as they take you Below."

The two black figures from the shadows stepped further forward, reaching out for Cascais.

"Please!" wept Cascais. "It was an error, trivial, foolish. I meant no harm."

A fifth figure in black stepped from a place of concealment to whisper in Maibalides's ear. Maibalides nodded.

"Cascais," he said heavily. "Do you truly repent of your acts?"

"Yes, yes—anything! I'll do anything!"

"The damage is small, on this occasion," said Maibalides. "Your potential to do harm is great, however. You must swear to forsake the Old Craft forever."

"Yes! I abjure and repudiate it utterly!"

"Yield up, then, your grimoires, your folios, your librams!"

"But—"

"Choose! Yield them up to me, or accompany me Below."

"A moment! I will of course furnish the grimoire immediately."

Maibalides nodded. "Attend him," he instructed Alizar and Elizar.

Cascais shuffled back into another room, making his way to a locked cabinet which, after several fumbling attempts, he managed to unlock. He handed over a bound volume and several other adjuncts which the demons briefly inspected. The trio returned to the main room, where the fifth figure studied the material in more detail, before nodding to Maibalides.

"Vavar Cascais!" called Maibalides, with greater rapidity in his movements. "You are chastised! Never again meddle with powers you do not understand! Consider yourself a fortunate man!"

Cascais babbled something unintelligible; the demons swiftly left the room, at least two of them failing in their attempts to control sniggers.

Early the next morning Mirko presented himself at Cascais' town house on his fine strider Boodle. The house-slave on the door manifested a black eye and responded with surly gravity to Mirko's request to speak to his master. Some minutes later he returned and with poor grace invited Mirko to enter the parlour, where a pale Cascais awaited.

"Cascais, good morning!" exclaimed Mirko.

Cascais nodded heavily. "I am by no means glad to see you. I have experienced a disturbing night."

"Wine can be a terrible thing when taken to excess."

Cascais thought better of an explanation. "I hope you will state your business concisely. I understood you were not intending to drill today."

"No indeed, but my intent was to ask whether you had reconsidered your resignation."

Cascais set his jaw. "I most certainly have not. I will attend for training tomorrow."

"I should have thought you would be wary of—meddling—in events beyond your understanding."

Cascais coloured. "'Meddling'? Why do you say that?"

"No reason. Helmsmanship is a calling beyond your current capacities."

"Ah. Well, I do not find myself minded to resign from *Sapphire Light*. I will see you tomorrow, if that is the sole purpose of your business."

"It isn't quite that simple, Cascais." He brought from his coat a brass object of uncertain purpose. Cascais blanched.

"Where did you get that?"

Mirko shrugged.

"What is it?" Cascais asked.

"You tell me."

"I don't know what you're trying to achieve."

"How about this?" Mirko produced a volume. "I believe it's known as a 'grimoire'."

"You can't do this!"

"I've done it. I understand the Old Craft is not popular in Paladria. Let me be completely explicit: when I learn that you have tendered your resignation, I return your artefacts. Until then, I retain them. If I become impatient, I turn them over to the Peremptor's Constables."

"I'll tell them I've never seen them! It's you who'll have explaining to do!"

Mirko sighed. "In addition, everyone in Paladria, from Elector to doxy, will learn how you were terrified by five men in sheets and masks. If my nose didn't mislead me, you went so far as to soil your breeks; an amusing anecdote, don't you think?"

Cascais narrowed his eyes. "I was right about you from the start. No class, no breeding, no grace."

Mirko bowed. "You have until tonight to see Bartzan. Good day to you."

Without further ceremony he left the house and leaped astride Boodle. His work had proved extremely satisfactory; all that remained was to install Florio at the helm. And sometime he'd have to say thank-you to Catzen.

The slaves were exercising aimlessly in their compound at Urmalest when Mirko arrived. Immediately he summoned Florio, Damiano, Jenx and Walisse. A nearby rattlejack conveyed them down to the Waterside where Panduletta was quick to ensure they were adequately supplied with Widdershins.

"Thank you for your efforts last night," said Mirko, raising his mug. "Cascais has assured me this morning that he will be resigning as helm of *Sapphire Light*, which has of course been the object of our labours."

Damiano smiled. "Well done, Ascalon." Jenx and Walisse nodded in agreement.

Florio said: "That would appear to leave the position vacant. Do you have a replacement in mind?"

Mirko smiled. "The man in question will need to be familiar with the principles of helmsmanship, ideally acquainted too with current and tidal conditions in the Bay of Paladria. The best candidates are likely also to have some experience of galley racing."

Florio savoured his beer. "The prime candidate would appear to be Drallenkoop, despite his recent mishaps. A decent case might also be made for Raidis, and how can we forget the daring Gambar Inisse?"

"It seems to me unlikely that any of these would be eager to come aboard *Sapphire Light*."

"The field narrows somewhat beyond that point. Essikant, formerly of *Fanar's Glory*, is currently without employment, but largely for good reason."

Mirko smiled. "Your curiosity need run no further. Gentlemen, please meet your new helm, the Gentle Florio."

Florio sat back in his seat, spreading his arms. "This is a signal honour, Ascalon, and one I do not merit."

"Do not affect modesty, Florio. You have helmed competently enough in Cascais' absences. You are the best—and effectively the only—candidate for the role."

"That is unfortunate, since I decline."

Mirko's jaw sagged. "'Decline'? You are a—no, but why should you turn it down?"

"As you so nearly said, I'm a slave. I'll do it if you make me, but you'll be wishing you had Cascais back."

As you said, I'm the only candidate: I think that gives me quite a strong bargaining position, don't you?"

Mirko simply stared.

"So, do you want to hear my conditions?"

"Conditions?"

"This will be much easier if you re-engage your brain. You need me; well, to get me to agree, you have to give me what I want. Is that so hard?"

Mirko set his jaw. "It depends what you want."

"Freedom."

"What? You want your release?"

"Is that so surprising? Did you think I intended to stay a slave forever?"

"But—"

"So, I'll do it if you give me my freedom. And the others, of course."

"The others?"

"The rest of the crew. As soon as the race is over, we all walk free. What's the difficulty? We aren't your slaves."

"Exactly! Even if I agreed to this lunacy, you'd still need Bartazan to agree too."

"Lunacy?" asked Damiano quietly. "Where's the lunacy in wanting our freedom?"

"Jenx, Walisse: do they speak for you too?"

Jenx said: "They speak for the whole crew. Freedom after the race, and we'll win it for you. Otherwise . . ."

"This is mutiny!"

Damiano said: "Not entirely. You can insist Florio helms, you can insist we row. And we'll all do what we're told. But when it comes to it, you won't win. Be reasonable, Mirko: it's no skin off your nose."

Mirko sighed and drained his mug. "I can tell you now, Bartazan won't agree: in fact, he'll probably have you flayed. Let me offer you a deal instead, not too far from what you want—and one Bartazan just might agree to."

"We're listening," said Damiano. "We do trust you."

"Up to a point," interjected Jenx.

"You get your freedom—if we win. Bartazan won't need you then; he'll be too busy being Peremptor to worry about *Sapphire Light*," said Mirko.

"No," said Florio. "Freedom—unconditionally."

"Florio," said Damiano. "I think we should take it. Mirko's right—Bartazan won't accept anything less. If we hold out, we'll end up with nothing."

Florio shot Damiano a piercing look. "Jenx?"

Jenx shrugged. "You know Bartazan. He won't free us if we lose. Don't you think we can win?"

"Walisse?"

"I never expected a chance of freedom anyway. I've been a slave fifteen years. I say we take the captain's deal and row like we've never rowed before."

Florio shrugged. "Looks like I'm outvoted. We'll do it. If you get Bartazan's word that he'll free us if we win, I'll helm *Sapphire Light*, and the others will row you to glory."

Mirko nodded. "We win together or we lose together. Just like Garganet."

Florio pursed his lips. "If that's how you like to think of it."

"I'll see Bartazan tonight. If he concedes, we'll go from there. For now, back to the Urmalest."

That night Bartazan of Bartazan House was entertaining at Formello. Mirko road up the long mountain road on Boodle in a pensive humour. Given that by now he should have learned of Cascais' resignation, the conference promised to be an uncomfortable one. As luck would have it, Bartazan was disengaged that evening, and Kanspiris led him to a comfortable parlour to await the Elector's pleasure. He sipped on a pleasant wine which, to a palate refined by a summer of society banquets, still seemed to him several notches below the highest standards.

Eventually Kanspiris reappeared to announce that Bartazan was free, and conducted him up the wide stone stairs towards the private apartments. Looking back down the stairs, Mirko saw a cloaked figure leaving the main reception hall—a man he had seen somewhere before. He frowned; this man was presumably one of Bartazan's agents, and 'N' would want to know about it.

Kanspiris conducted Mirko to the very suite of rooms where once he had hidden under the bed. Bartazan was not such a dignified character as he liked to appear, Mirko remembered with a smile.

Bartazan rose from his seat and gave Mirko a stiff bow. "Ascalon."

"Good evening, my lord."

"Please, sit. We have much to discuss. Kanspiris, some wine."

Mirko seated himself on an unyielding couch while Kanspiris attended to refreshments.

"Much has happened since our last meeting, Ascalon. You may be able to explain certain events to me."

Mirko took his goblet and looked reflectively into it. "You refer to . . .?"

Bartazan frowned. "I am too occupied to waste time fencing with you, Ascalon. This evening Cascais came to me and resigned from *Sapphire Light*."

"He intimated his intentions to me. Candidly, the move is to everyone's benefit. I am freed of a largely inept helm; Cascais is at liberty to adopt pursuits more suited to his talents; and your chances of winning the Margariad are greatly enhanced. We should drink a toast."

Bartazan failed to raise his goblet. "Vavar Cascais had wanted to helm a racing galley since he was seven years old. His father asked me to allow him to do so, and I was happy to oblige. Nool Vavar, an influential man, naturally came to look upon me as a friend."

"It was a generous act, to be sure, to forfeit any chance of success on the water to gratify a friend's son's childish impulse. I hope he was suitably grateful."

"Are you sporting with me, Ascalon? Nool Vavar controls three, possibly four, Electors' votes. As long as Cascais was in the galley, those votes were mine. Now, how do I assure myself of his continued friendship? He may feel his honour compromised by his son's demotion."

"A question for a politician to resolve, indeed. My own view is that his honour was more compromised by his son's worthless performances on the boat. You might suggest that circumstances are now more to his credit."

"Ascalon, did you have anything to do with Cascais' resignation?"

"Me? How could I? I wanted you to sack him, but I could hardly induce him to resign."

Bartazan narrowed his eyes. "In my spheres of interest, Ascalon, I quickly become attuned to lies. I'm hearing one now."

Mirko shrugged. "Cascais is off the boat. That helps you win the Margariad. Rejoice in your good fortune. I assume you attempted to persuade him to stay?"

"Of course. I even threatened to visit his father. He only became more agitated. Whoever had put the idea into his head had done a thorough job."

Mirko smiled. "Since you blame me, at least you can accord me the credit for professionalism."

Bartazan shook his head and set his goblet down with a careful gesture. "I don't know why you persist in

antagonising me, Ascalon. You are utterly dependent on my patronage."

"'Antagonising' is not wholly the right word. Garganets are not given to sycophancy, and we judge situations on their merits. My—let's call it latitude—comes from the fact that I intend to win the Margariad, and I believe I can do so. That entitles me to a certain degree of respect."

"I take it you intend to helm *Sapphire Light* yourself?"

"No indeed! I could do the job, but I know too little of the currents, and have forgotten too much of the helmsman's disciplines to excel. Florio will take the helm."

"A slave!" Bartazan exclaimed. "You intend to helm my galley with a slave!"

"He's the best man available. He knows the waters, he can take orders, and he can steer. Do you object?"

"The galley of Bartazan of Bartazan House, helmed by a slave and overseen by a renegade! Can you imagine how the Electors will laugh? My prestige will be materially damaged!"

"Ignoring your inaccurate characterisation of myself as a 'renegade', I would observe that your prestige will be materially heightened by the Margariad victor's laurel. And if you don't want *Sapphire Light* helmed by a slave, free Florio before the race."

"A freedman! Are you mad? Your concepts reek of lunacy. I was warned of your egalitarianism and other mental instabilities before I hired you; I imagined the reports exaggerated. Do you have any further follies to suggest?"

"I suspect that you will characterise my incentives to the crew as follies, at the very least."

"'Incentives'?"

"It had occurred to me that the crew would row with greater commitment if they had a more direct stake on victory."

"I intended to feast them to the very limits of their gullets in the event of success."

"My scheme was somewhat more radical. In truth, I intended to offer the men their freedom."

"What!" cried Bartazan at huge volume. "Free the whole crew! My name would be a laughing stock across the city! A man who could not compel obedience from his slaves and had to barter their freedom instead. Bartazan of Bartazan House to bargain with his slaves! My reports were if anything understated: your doctrines

would bring the city to its knees. I should have you whipped!”

Mirko calmly sipped at his wine. “I have no doctrine; I am in fact the most pragmatic of men. In this case, to offer the men their freedom would elicit a small but potentially decisive improvement in performance. You lose nothing: if we fail to win, the crew remain slaves; if we do win, you will be Peremptor, and a gesture of magnanimity will become you. No doubt many of the crew would sign on to row for wages anyway; they know nothing different. The ones who would leave are most likely malcontents whom you’d be better off without.”

The dangerous purple flush which had swept across Bartazan’s face had subsided, to be replaced by an expression of everyday ill-humour. “You are a rogue with no respect for place or custom; a man of my stamp is soiled by the association. You cheat me of my helm and jeopardise votes among the Electors. You propose to overturn the natural order and release my slaves. Why, why, should I not have you whipped?”

“Because I’ll win you the Margariad; and a ‘man of your stamp’ generally recognises a useful tool when he has one. Now, do you agree to my suggestion?”

“Very well,” said Bartazan with an approach to a sigh. “Against my better judgement, I will support you. Bartazan is nothing if not a gambler; I have wagered on you, and I’ll cover my bet. But Ascalon—”

“Yes?”

“Don’t fail me. Paladria will be no very safe place for you if you do.”

Mirko inclined his head. “I wouldn’t have it any other way, my lord. You back my judgement, and so do I. Good night, my lord.”

Mirko stepped briskly from the room before Bartazan could respond. His heart was pounding. To treat the Elector in such a cavalier manner was not a comfortable pursuit: he was thin-skinned, vindictive and resentful. But a more measured approach would not have borne fruit. Bartazan had agreed to the key point, however reluctantly. Popularity he could do without.

Seized by a sudden impulse, he turned aside and made his way to Larien’s apartments, knocking firmly at the door.

“Who is it?” came the voice from inside. “I am bathing.”

“It’s Mirko. I’ve just been with your uncle.”

“A moment! I will be with you immediately.”

Larien was as good as her word, opening the door covered only by a large Azure towel which did not appear securely fixed to her person. “You surprised me—come in.”

The steam from her bath had caused strands of her hair to clump together, and her complexion had an unusually high colour. Mirko thought she looked utterly delightful.

“Don’t just stand there like some mooncalf,” she said. “I’ve invited you in once. What more do you want? No towel?”

Mirko smiled. “Perhaps we can save that for later,” he said as he stepped through the door and closed it behind him.

Larien seated herself on the couch. Mirko said: “Don’t you want to get dressed?”

She paused for a moment. “On balance, I think not. Provided you don’t object, of course.”

Mirko suppressed a leer. “I can bear the present circumstances with fortitude.”

“Let’s have a drink. I seem to remember Televin wine is to your taste.” She got up from the couch and swept past Mirko in a cloud of fresh scent. “I’ve had a letter from Carnazan. He’s in Garganet.”

Mirko sat up. “Really? Where?”

“The Patron’s Dockyards. Somehow he’s persuaded them to build an experimental hot-air craft.”

Mirko laughed. “You can get anything built in Garganet if you have the money. Either he took some with him, or he’s convinced someone his ideas have merit. In truth, the folk of Garganet are avid for innovation.”

“One day, Mirko, one day he will prove them all wrong. He’ll come back and be the Elector and everything will be all right.”

“I understood Bartazan had disinherited him.”

“Where did you hear that?”

Mirko remembered that Catzen had told him, not something he felt able to admit to. “I imagined it was common knowledge. He’s chosen that pustulous youth we met at Coverciano, hasn’t he?”

“Balaran, yes.”

“Curious, I thought. If I understand, the boy is no blood relation.”

“Not curious if you understand my uncle. He has no interest in family or posterity. All he wants is power and status. He certainly feels no family feeling for Carnazan or myself. Carnazan has slighted him in public;

Bartazan has returned the favour. He appears strong and decisive and his enemies fear him the more.”

“I now appear strong and decisive too,” said Mirko. “I’ve finessed Cascais off the boat and made Bartazan agree to free the crew if he wins.”

Larien’s hand went to her throat. “You are insane! He will kill you! He cannot brook opposition.”

“On the contrary, he respects strong opinions and conviction. He can’t prove I dealt with Cascais, and I’ve made him see reason over the slaves. I still believe I can win the Margariad, and I’ve made him believe it too.”

“There’s only one problem with that,” she said. “Now you will have to win it, or his rage will be terrible.”

Mirko shrugged. “I’ll win. Believe me. *Dragonchaser* has been lucky in recent weeks. *Excelsior* should certainly have beaten her in The Sorcerers.”

Larien leaned into him; the towel seemed even more precariously affixed than before. “I shouldn’t worry about you,” she said. “But I do.”

“You needn’t,” he smiled. “I’m a big boy.”

Larien raised her eyebrows. “Are you now? Shall we test the truth of your assertions?” Her towel finally gave up its unequal struggle to cover her, and sank with measured dignity to the floor; but Mirko, his attention already elsewhere, failed to notice . . .



Finister

by *Till Noever*

Book One

— 5 —

The caravan left the depot in the first light of a dreary morning. A fine, drifting rain drenched everything in sight. Errant gusts blew it into the wagons and soaked its passengers; even those who had retreated well under the canvas covers. The wagons filed out of the compound one by one, each dragged by six huge galopers, creatures of unknown origin, but thought to be related to their smaller cousins: ordinary horses. Galopers were equipped with eight giant claws on each foot, their legs were like tree-trunks, their backs higher than many a man's head. Their long tails were hairless and ribbed with hardened rings of cartilage, making them appear like the tails of giant rats. Despite their bulk and the power residing in their rippling muscles, however, galopers were the most docile animals imaginable, and appeared to submit themselves willingly to domestication.

As the caravan filed out onto the Tyssel Road the guard-riders, among them Fliz, strung themselves alongside. He contrived to array himself close to the wagon transporting Nerys, whom he'd only seen briefly this morning. She waved at him from under the canvas she was using to fend off the rain. Fliz waved back and concentrated on keeping his position.

Fliz's experience with horses, bows, and the logistics of military or similar operations derived from the one year he had spent in the service of Duke Polder. It was his one and only attempt to escape from the ignominious existence of a thief; the only alternative open to a Willet, who wanted to be something else than the human equivalent of a rat. Fliz hated rats. They reminded him of himself. Intelligent, tough; even, he supposed, caring—to their brood at least. But they were rats nonetheless. Grubby, sneaky, worthless scavengers.

Fliz found, however, that a Willet in the armed service of a Duke was still a Willet. The experience had

been more humiliating than he could have imagined. He'd learned how to wield a sword and shoot a bow. He was even allowed the use of a horse, because Polder fancied that mounted guards looked better and were more effective than those on foot. At least in his own eyes it vastly improved his standing, and thus led him to keep huge stables, whose prohibitive cost eventually sapped his wealth and ruined him. He committed suicide rather than face the disgrace of seeing his elevated position slide into oblivion. Before he killed himself he murdered all his Breeder women, to prevent them from becoming the property of his rivals.

Long before Polder's spectacular demise, however, Fliz had resigned his position. He found that taking orders from the self-important morons entitled to give them was even more degrading than his life as a thief. He returned to his old haunts, perfected his skills, and decided that he'd rather be a rat than a whipped cur. It also kept him close to his surviving family.

This, Fliz realized, was his second attempt at breaking away from what he was. As he rode into the driving rain he wondered what lay in store for him this time. So far, he decided, it looked very . . . interesting. Certainly different to anything he'd ever imagined. Which was mostly Nerys' doing. Unintentional as it was, she, more than the mysterious stranger even, had taken his life and given it a quick twist, leaving him so dizzy that he still could not quite figure out what was happening to him. Fliz shook his head at the thought, and clicked his tongue to encourage the horse to accelerate its pace.

The caravan threaded its way out of Thalonica and onto a slushy Tyssel Road, working up the gentle incline into the Telloor Mountains and toward Traitor Pass. It crested the pass by the middle of the day and, like a giant centipede, began the descent into the steppe beyond.

Rutger had begun to doubt the value of his intuition. Tane had not returned the previous evening, and there was no sign of him during the morning either. Rutger sat in his room, pondering the implications of this when there was a knock on his door. He directed his attention to whoever stood outside. Tane. Rutger probed further. Confused thoughts. Memories of a nightmarish night. He opened the door and let Tane inside.

The thief looked exhausted. Bits of hay adhered to his shabby clothes. Rutger extracted what information

he could, and supplemented what Tane didn't want to tell him, by reasons of pride and fear of non-payment of the promised reward, by probing the thief's shallow mind as he spoke.

So—Fliz knew. That was regrettable, but he should have expected it, at least as a possibility.

Rutger paid Tane and dismissed him. Tane departed, his pride still injured, but content with the purse of faros he collected. Rutger didn't bother trying to erase the memories from Tane's mind. It was too much effort, and unnecessary besides. Tane was too dull to bother with any further.

Rutger pondered his next steps. The caravan was well on its way. He would have to procure a horse and follow it. Fliz must not be allowed to get away.

The rain stopped around midday. Caravella burned away the clouds; the air turned hot and humid. The caravan master ordained an hour's rest. His command propagated along the wagons, which presently came to a halt. The passengers emerged from the wagons, stretched, and dispersed into the tall steppe grass to attend to their bodily functions. The galopers were fed and watered by the small contingent of stable-boys. Half of the riders were allowed to dismount to do the same. The rest remained on their horses, keeping a vigil. Halfway through the period, those resting were summoned to exchange places with their fellow guards.

Fliz had to wait until he was allowed to dismount. He found Nerys among a flock of woman passengers. She appeared to have overcome her reluctance to communicate with complete strangers. It was good to see her thus. She adapted better than he'd expected. The night in the communal hall must have achieved something productive.

He waved to her and she approached him.

"How's your back?" she asked.

"Sore," he admitted. "I am not a horseman."

She chuckled. "The benches in the wagon aren't the most comfortable either," she said and rubbed her backside. It occurred to him that, even a day ago, she would not have been caught dead doing something like that in public view.

As if reading his thoughts she ceased her ministrations. She laughed, somewhat self-conscious. "I think I'm getting used to all of this."

"Good."

"Is that all you have to say?"

"What else would you have me say?"

"I don't know? Maybe that you admire my . . . adaptability?"

"I do."

She looked at him to see if he was joking. Fliz contrived to keep a serious face. She relaxed. "I am hungry," she confessed. Fliz indicated a wagon, around which a crowd had formed. "Let's see what swill they serve."

"This a part of the service?"

"It is; as long as you pay for it. We paid for transport—and protection. Everything else is extra."

"Even food and drink?"

"Especially food and drink. And if we want a good night's rest at Wainstay Station we will have to pay for that as well. Otherwise it's the wagon and your favorite bench for you. I get to sleep in the open."

Nerys groaned. They approached the kitchen wagon, and, after some waiting, found themselves at the head of the line. Fliz purchased a loaf of bread and a strip of dried meat. He didn't care to try the other offerings. Experience with field-cooking had taught him that his intestine paid heavily for such daring. The other passengers appeared to have no such reservations. Maybe their nether regions were immune to whatever lurked in the stew.

Fliz noted that Nerys was not excited about the food, but she refrained from grumbling. They moved aside, leaned against a low boulder at the wayside, and chewed on the dry fare. Fliz retrieved a canteen from his saddle, and they used the water to wash down the food.

All too soon the rest was declared at an end. Nerys returned to her wagon. Fliz remounted. The caravan lurched into motion again.

Later in the afternoon, only two hours out from Wainstay Station, one of the co-opted guards raised an alarm. He thought he'd seen movement in the tall grass off the eastern side of the road. Three scouts went out to investigate, but found nothing. A short time later another guard, a regular employee, claimed to have seen a definite movement. Fliz noticed that the matter disturbed the 'regular' guards. Commands were issued, bows were detached from saddles; arrows readied. The caravan proceeded in a spirit of tense caution.

The road entered a shallow depression, which the recent rains had temporarily transformed into a muddy stream. The wagons slowly rumbled through the ford and emerged on the other side, to begin climbing out of

the depression. A shout came from the tail end of the caravan. It ended in a choked gurgle as the guard slid off his horse with an arrow through his chest.

Possa Jennikov shouted orders. The guards rallied into their pre-arranged positions. The nomads emerged from the tall grass like specters. They wore loose, dirty rags that provided them with camouflage. The figures knelt in the grass and raised their bows, concentrating on the rear end of the caravan. A deadly rain of arrows battered the defenders. A dozen guards died immediately; another dozen or more were wounded. The rest fought gallantly, eventually repulsing the nomads, who retreated as suddenly they had appeared. They, too, had not been spared, though their toll of dead and wounded was far more moderate.

Fliz had been among those commandeered to defend the rear section. His horse took an arrow and collapsed under him. Fliz managed to get himself out of the saddle and his feet out of the stirrups just in time to avoid being crushed by the animal. He dropped one of the nomads with an arrow in the chest, wounded another, and missed with his remaining arrows. He dropped his bow and drew his sword to continue the battle. But by then it was all over, and the nomads had retreated. One of the regular guards, who had fought beside Fliz and dropped a nomad himself, gave Fliz a slap on the back. "Well done." He went over to a wounded nomad writhing on the ground and cut his throat. "There, that'll teach them. Bastards!"

The rush of the battle wore off. Fliz ran to check on Nerys; whom he found alive and well, though scared, underneath a wagon where she and other women had taken cover. She looked relieved when she saw him. She was also remarkably calm. The reaction, he knew, would come later. He hoped he'd be around to help her through it.

The nomads had achieved nothing but a decimation of the defenders. Which may well have been what they wanted. The caravan buried their dead by the side of the road; to the sounds of wailing and lament from the women who had lost their spouses, sons, or fathers. Fliz watched the proceedings from a distance. The cynic in him wondered whether their lament was for their loved ones or merely for their providers. Nerys, also watching, made no comment. She stayed close to him, and he guessed that she was probably glad to still have him around. The sight of the disconsolate widows must be disconcerting for her; driving it home what it

would mean if *she* was suddenly left to her own devices. She was definitely not ready for that. Not yet.

The caravan finally resumed its travel with increased urgency. It was a somber trek to Wainstay Station, where it arrived about an hour before nightfall. There was a rush for the limited hostel places. Fliz and Nerys came too late. Nerys refused to stay in the wagon.

"It may rain again," Fliz told her. "The wagon is the best place."

"What will you do?"

"I'll sleep underneath."

"I think I would like that better."

Fliz glanced around the fenced-in compound with its tall wooden guard towers. The caravan had drawn up in a wide circle around the periphery. The galopers had been detached and placed into holding paddocks, where they were fed and watered. The arrangement of the wagons gave Fliz pause; too close to the fence; vulnerable to attack. If the nomads chose to attack the compound—which they did only very rarely, usually for completely incomprehensible reasons—the wagons were a line of defense; the rationale behind placing them in this fashion.

Maybe, thought Fliz, it wasn't such a good idea to sleep either in or under them. He looked around. "Come," he said to Nerys. She followed him to the hay depot, a huge barn on the far side of the compound, well away from the area where the caravan had parked, and the caravan's horses were corralled. Behind the barn was a pen which held a dozen or so horses. A lean-to beside the pen protected a rack which on which rested bridles, saddles, and other gear. On the steppe side of the pen reared one of the circle of watch towers, on the top of which Fliz saw the figures of two armed guards.

Fliz approached a stable-boy, who stood leaning on a pitch fork, surveying the milling passengers talking, eating, getting ready for the night. Two faros changed hands, in return for an assurance that the boy would look the other way when Fliz and Nerys sneaked into the barn later that night to find a resting place. Fliz promised the boy another five faros in the morning. The grubby face lit up. "Really?"

Fliz nodded. "Really."

"I know a very good place." Fliz had an idea that the boy had some interesting notions about what they wanted a 'good place' for. He patted the boy on the back. "Later."

They returned to the caravan. "I'm surprised that not more people do the same," he said to Nerys.

Nerys shrugged. "I've noticed that people don't seem to think of that which isn't right in front of their faces," she said. He glanced at her sideways. "Present company excepted," she added.

Fliz chuckled. The remark could be taken in two ways. He wondered whether she was aware of this.

The evening wore on. Torches were extinguished. People retired to their resting places. Fliz and Nerys, having dined on the simple fare offered by Wainstay Station, were among the last to sit in the mess-hall. A burly, barefooted individual in a dirty tunic and breeches had begun sweeping the room with a giant broom. Two women were cleaning people's leftovers from the tables. Fliz and Nerys got up and stepped outside. Around the wagons only a few torches indicated activity. A few shadows scurried this way and that and presently disappeared. To their left, in the hostel, a few lights still flickered. The stars shone from a clear sky. On the eastern horizon, the first glow of Janus rising.

"A good night," a voice said behind them. "Better than yesterday. You couldn't see a thing. If they'd snuck up on us we wouldn't have known until it was too late."

Fliz turned. The speaker was a tall, solidly built individual, wearing a loose jerkin and leather breeches. He carried a crossbow. To his belt were affixed a short sword and a dagger.

"Nomads?" Fliz asked.

"They're behaving strangely as of late," the man nodded. "That attack on you today. . . ." He shook his head. "Who understands them? All I know is they're getting frisky—for reasons known only to them." He grimaced. "I wonder if it's a new band from up north. We found corpses on the steppe. Nomads. Seems like they're fighting each other as well. It usually happens when someone's trying to bully in on someone else's territory."

"That motive at least is familiar," Fliz commented.

The man shrugged. "That's *all* you'll ever understand about nomads! That, and the fact that they hold grudges."

"Grudges? Against whom?"

"Everybody, I'd say! Wainstay, definitely. We've killed so many of their kind over the years that just

about every one of them hates us with a passion. They hate Master Jennikov, too."

"Jennikov? Why?"

"They've tried for his caravans before. Never succeeded. What happened today was. . . unusual. Normally it's the nomads dead on the steppe." The man chuckled; a coarse sound. "On his last trip, during a raid, Jennikov caught one of their cubs. It fought like a rabid cat, but they subdued him. Jennikov brought him here and questioned him. And when Jennikov asks questions. . . ."

"Anyway, it wasn't much use. Their language is. . . queer. All gibberish."

"What happened to the boy?" Fliz asked.

The man shrugged. "Jennikov dumped his corpse somewhere along the wayside the next day. His present to the nomads."

"He killed a *child*?" Nerys said, aghast.

The man looked at her; surprised; wondering perhaps how a woman dared break into what was, to him, a colloquy between men. Fliz was amused but held his tongue.

The man overcame his perplexity. "What else was he supposed to do? Set it free, to have it grow into another raider?"

"But. . . ."

The man ignored her. "Jennikov knows what he's doing," he said to Fliz. "He's taken more caravans through the steppe than anybody I know. You're in good hands." He looked around the compound. "And you're safe here." He glanced at the sky. "Janus is almost up. They can't sneak up on us tonight." He pointed at the guard towers. "We'll pick them off one by one. Not a thing to worry about."

The man considered them for a moment. "You heading west or north?"

"West."

"Well, then you'll continue with Master Jennikov. Have a safe journey." He touched a couple of fingers to his forehead. "Get a good rest. The trek to Deep Gully is quite a haul. Master Jennikov will want to leave before daybreak." The man ambled off in the direction of the guards' dormitories.

Fliz and Nerys stepped into the darkness, out of the circle of lights from the buildings. Here they stopped. Fliz looked around but saw nothing untoward. They doubled back in the direction of the barn. One half of the big, hinged door stood open. A figure detached

itself from the wall. Fliz tensed, but then, by various signs, recognized the boy.

He led them into the pitch darkness of the barn, through a small labyrinth of stacked bales. Orienting themselves by touch only, they had to climb a stack of bales, which had been arranged like a row of giant steps. Fliz thought he saw the faintest hint of light piercing the blackness. But maybe it was just his eyes, playing him tricks,

"Here we are," the boy hissed. "Makes yourselves comfortable." He chuckled. "I'll see you before you leave." The sounds of his departure faded away.

Fliz felt around himself and discovered that they were in a small nook, formed by the outer wall of the barn and an arrangement of hay bales. He peered through a crack between two planks and saw the stars outside. The floor of the hideout was soft with loose hay. Fliz suspected that the boy used this place as a retreat for himself; and maybe for other purposes as well. Tonight he'd surrendered it to them for in exchange for a few faros. An innkeeper in the making.

Fliz heard Nerys prod about their nook. He took off his sword and placed it into a corner. "Time for bed," he told her.

Nerys rested on her side on the soft hay, turned away from Fliz. She could hear him breathing close behind her. His proximity was comforting at the same time as it was unsettling.

"Good night," she said.

"Good night."

A rustling sound as he shifted his body in the hay.

For a while they lay still. Sleep, however, refused to come.

"Fliz?" she whispered.

"What?"

"Today . . ."

Another rustling sound. The sound of his voice told her that he had turned to face her back. He was close. Very close.

"If there's anything I can do to help . . ." he said, leaving the rest of the sentence in the air.

"I . . ." If she turned around now she would touch him.

Why was she thinking this?

"I was afraid," she said, not moving.

"So was I," he admitted.

"You? You fought like . . ."

"I always fight when I'm afraid," he said. "That way I forget that I am."

Interesting. Was that why he fought with her yesterday—after he'd cut off her hair?

What an intriguing thought: Fliz afraid of . . . her?

If she turned around now she would touch him . . .

The thought came back, unbidden.

Why was it so . . . frightening?

Or was it something else? The issue remained elusive.

"I wish I could do that," she said.

He chuckled. "You'll find your own way of handling it," he assured her. She reflected that, for an uncultured thief he was surprisingly . . . sensitive. Rough and uncivilized, but nice nonetheless. And if she turned around now she would . . .

No.

Still, she could not help but wonder what would happen if she *did* turn around. If she touched him. Maybe their faces . . .

No.

For some unknown reason her thoughts wandered back; to the suitors she had rejected, much to her father's initial chagrin; until he finally figured out an even more profitable way to use her. There had been . . . five? Six? Hellas was probably the least desirable. Apart from the permanent stench of *acho* adhering to him—a consequence of his diet and his preference for the herb—he was also too old; about Fliz's age. She had also heard from reliable sources that he and his male friends occasionally indulged in games and practices—with each other!—which she found, to say the very least, vapid.

Then there was Ystian, who was charming and good looking and the darling of all the girls. Her mother simply had not been able to understand why Nerys would not have him. Nerys initially hadn't been sure herself. But then she figured it out. The problem with Ystian was that she knew that she would never, never ever, be able to trust him. There was something shifty about him; sleazy, decrepit. Something that remained well hidden for most of the time; but every now and then she caught a glimpse of it—and what she saw frightened her.

And then there were Regis, Osker, Taffer . . .

Any of them would have been considered an excellent match, but she'd said 'no'. And because of that she now lay in the hay, in a barn on a forsaken waystation in

the middle of nowhere, beside a thief about whom she was having lewd thoughts. How low could she sink?

Still, if she turned around now . . .

Or maybe not! After all, Fliz had never given any indication that the attraction she was used to exerting on men extended to him. Only once had he alluded in a complimentary way to any feature of her; and that was when he told her that her hair—the same he had only moments before chopped off without any remorse—was ‘lovely’. He’d probably said that only to make her feel better.

What *did* he think of her? Was she so much *not* the kind of woman he was attracted to, that he just saw her as a pitiful wretch needing his help? What kind of woman *did* he like? Nerys was certain that he liked *some* women—and he certainly had not been entirely abstinent; even though he was a ‘Willet’. She didn’t know how she knew that, but she knew. He had known women. Maybe many. Risking his manhood and his life for the sake of his base urges. Was that why she was wondering, yet again, what would happen if she turned around now . . .

She thought of the louts who’d tried to have their way with her on Yon Circle. One part of her compared Fliz with Umpkin, Troy, and Feeble. Another chided her for even considering a comparison. Those three had been vulgar creeps. Fliz was a lot of things, some of them not particularly attractive, but he was nothing like that. All he shared with them was a lowliness of status, and the uncultured ignorance that went with it. Apart from that he was . . . nice.

Nerys sighed. It would have to do for the moment.

She rolled over, but shifted herself in such a way that it did not bring her closer to him. Still, in the faint rays of light seeping in through the joints in the planks she saw that he was very close indeed.

“I *will* cope,” she affirmed.

“I know,” he said lowly.

She wanted him to touch her. Just his hand . . . on her arm maybe. Like he sometimes touched her when guided her somewhere. That was all she wanted. No more.

Which was exactly what he did; as if he’d read her mind. He patted her arm and squeezed it gently. “I know,” he repeated. He withdrew his hand again, leaving her feeling terribly alone.

She made a vexed noise and wriggled closer. “I’m cold,” she said, like a little girl.

“It’s cooling down a little,” he agreed. His arm went around her. She wriggled even closer. Her head touched his chest. His arm tightened briefly.

“Good night,” he said softly.

“Good night,” she replied, knowing that she could not possibly go to sleep like this. His breath played in her hair; she felt his heart beat in his chest. How could she *sleep*?

But then her exhaustion got the better of her; and presently she ceased to be aware of anything as she drifted into oblivion.

By the sound of Nerys’ breathing he knew that she had finally gone to sleep. Which was just as well, because if she had not . . .

The feel of her body’s warmth against his aroused in him a queer feeling of protectiveness. There was something else, too. Something more complex and disturbing. It was almost embarrassingly intense and he was glad that nobody could see his face; that this knowledge was his alone.

Nerys gave a little twitch. For a moment he thought that she’d woken up and decided to move away from him. He began to lift his arm off her. She sniffed and wriggled closer, curling up against him; fitting herself to him as snugly as she could. He lowered his arm around her again. It *would* get cooler. This way they’d be keeping each other warm.

Unbidden, tinged with a wave of guilt, Y’liaan’s image came to him. Was it really only two nights ago that he had rolled with her in the thicket behind Endless Beach? It seemed more like an eternity; another life, already fading into the distance; left behind like he’d left Thalonica behind—together with the cold corpses of his mother and sister, now rotting somewhere in the ground, never again to breathe, laugh, cry, fear, hope, and suffer. Maybe, he thought, he should have stayed to bury them. He pushed the notion aside. Things had happened. He was here now, with his arm around a Gaskarian merchant’s daughter, who had dared not to submit to her father’s decrees. What strange, twisted paths fate chose to contrive.

He must have drifted off then, because there was a sense of the passage of time not accounted for. He didn’t know what had woken him. Maybe it was the stillness; the cessation of the soft susurrations of the breeze blowing across the steppe. Fliz’s eyes snapped open. The girl had rolled onto her back, but her arms

were wrapped around one of his, clutching it tightly. Her breathing, broken by soft, erratic snores, was the only sound.

Fliz lay still. Imminence pervaded the very air he breathed. Events perched on the edge of actualization. Fliz found himself sweating; the cold perspiration of tense anticipation.

He nudged the sleeping girl. She muttered something in her sleep and turned on her side again. Her head tucked itself under his chin. After a brief wriggle she lay still again.

Fliz sighed and told himself that he was a fool. Over-wrought and tense with apprehension about the next day, and the next . . .

He tried to relax. His ears picked up a tiny sound outside, just beside the barn. Like a foot crunching on stone. Fliz strained to hear, but there was no more. Only Nerys' soft breathing against him.

Then—another sound. Fliz jerked. He tightened his arm around her and rubbed her back.

"Wake up," he whispered.

She rolled away from him, muttering. He shook her gently. "Come on. Wake up."

"What? . . ."

"Shh . . ." he whispered and put a hand over her mouth. "Quiet."

She sat up. "What is it?"

"I think . . ."

"What?"

"Something's going to happen," he whispered. He pressed his eyes against the crack between the boards and attempted to peer outside—and froze when he saw several dark, mottled-looking figures scurrying across his narrow field of view.

"Wait here!" he told her.

"No!"

He had no time to argue. "Come then," he said. He found his sword and began to scramble back down the steps of hay. He heard her following him. They reached the ground. Fliz stopped Nerys and put his mouth close to her ear. "*Please*—wait here!"

"Alright," she whispered. "Just don't leave me."

"I won't."

He slid away and approached the door. He peered around it and saw several figures hurrying across the open space toward the compound with the wagons. What had happened to the guards on the towers behind the barn? Had the nomads overwhelmed them?

Fliz looked around for something to attract the attention of the guards. Something that wouldn't cause the attackers to turn on *him*. But there was nothing he could do.

He stepped around the doorway and, at the top of his voice shouted: "They're here!" The scurrying figures froze. He could see them turn in his direction. He ducked behind the door. Running footsteps, discarding caution, headed his way. From afar he heard shouting. The guards had been alerted.

Around the corner came the dark shape of a nomad; a monstrous apparition in his strange garb. Fliz whipped up the sword and ran him through. The figure collapsed on the ground. Fliz jerked out the sword and lifted it, ready to strike the next man to enter.

More shouts from the other side of the compound. The nomads outside returned their attention to the guards. Those on the towers were releasing a hail of arrows at the attackers. Another lot emerged from their dormitories, weapons in hand, charging the nomads. Others lit torches which illuminated the battle scene, the fighting figures casting ghastly shadows across the grounds.

Shouts and curses; the screams of the wounded filling the compound. The nomads fought without a sound; ferocious, bitter, deadly. Their numbers were staggering, outnumbering the defenders by a large margin. To Fliz, watching the battle from the barn with Nerys standing close behind him, it seemed like all the nomads of the steppe had congregated here to do their evil.

"They're losing," he told her.

"There are so *many*!" she exclaimed.

Fliz could see the faces of passengers peering from the wagons. Then, a scream. The faces of the people disappeared—to be replaced by the figures of nomads who leaped off the wagons and into the fray. Fliz wanted to be sick. He took a deep, shuddering breath. There was nothing he could do to help these people. All he'd achieve would be his own death.

He peered around the door. Their side of the compound seemed to be clear. All the fighting was happening somewhere else.

Fliz took Nerys' hand. "Hurry."

They sidled along the barn, around the corner, away from the melee and toward the holding pen. Fliz grabbed a bridle from the rack under the lean-to. No time for a saddle. He climbed over the fence into the

pen of skittish horses. By some miracle he managed to get the bridle over the head of one, and pulled it after him. He opened the gate to the pen. The remaining horses, sensing freedom, bolted out of their confinement.

Behind him, over the sounds of the battle, Fliz heard shouting. Someone had spotted them! He didn't dare look behind him, but grabbed Nerys and helped her mount the horse. He climbed after her, took the reins, and kicked the horse's flank. The animal bolted. Fliz almost slipped off but caught himself. Nerys leaned forward and clung to the horse's neck. Somehow, Fliz managed to get the animal to respond to his promptings. But where to go? A fence blocked the way out north. At the other side, the battle raged.

An arrow whizzed past his head. Fliz kicked the horse and raced toward the fence. The animal veered aside sharply, almost throwing them off again, and galloped along the fence, toward the station buildings and the battle. Another holding pen appeared ahead. This one was empty; the gate stood open. Following a hunch, Fliz guided the horse into the pen. He could have cried with relief when he saw that there was indeed another gate, leading to the outside. Fliz slid off the horse and undid the crude latch. The gate swung open. Nerys reached out and helped Fliz scramble onto the horse again. They raced through the gate and out into the open steppe. Fliz turned west, aiming for the road to Tyssel. From the compound emerged a number of horsemen, blocking their way. Fliz steered the horse toward the north and gave it free rein. The shapes behind them failed to give chase. Maybe they knew that they would get them later. For, where could they go? There was just the endless steppe.

Fliz slowed their headlong flight. In the south, where the station should be, a light grew. Fliz stopped the horse. Flames licked high into the sky as Wainstay Station burned. Nerys made a sound of despair. "What are we going to do?"

He gave her an assuring squeeze from behind. She leaned against him, apathetic and tired.

"We're alive," he said.

"For how much longer?"

They came across the north road several hours later. By that time they were exhausted. The horse plodded on, but its gait betrayed its tiredness. The 'road' was a

narrow rutted track through the grass of the steppe. They stopped and dismounted.

"Maybe we'll run into someone," Fliz suggested. "Let's not give up yet."

Nerys didn't reply. Fliz suggested a rest. With a grateful sigh she plonked herself into the grass. Fliz tied the horse to a nearby bush and collapsed beside her. In the east, behind the Telloor Mountains, dawn was announcing itself with a faint glow. They rested until Caravella had risen high enough to clear the tops, and started off again, heading north. Neither cared to return to Wainstay Station to see how the battle had come out.

Caravella rose high in the sky. The day was getting hot. No creeks or waterholes were in sight. They dragged themselves on, their throats parched, hunger gnawing at them. They came upon a muddy creek, in the process of drying out again. They lay down and reluctantly drank the foul-tasting water. The horse, oblivious to taste, seemed to enjoy his drink without such reservations.

Sometime into the late afternoon, they spotted a group of four riders heading toward them. They halted and let them approach. Maybe, thought Fliz, their ordeal was over.

When he saw the men close up, however, Fliz wished that they had had the presence of mind to hide in the thickets beside the track. The men's attire and demeanor revealed them to be mercenaries. The kind that hired out to train a Wearer's contingent, or maybe to a caravan master for protection on a long trek. All carried swords in well-worn scabbards; crossbows were tied to their saddles; their faces and arms were scarred from battle. They definitely merited the attribute 'unsavory'. Probably worse. Their sly grins, as they surveyed him and Nerys, sent a frisson of unease down his back.

"Who have we here?" The smallest one of the lot, an individual with a knife-edge nose, a scar across his right cheek, the eyes of a rat, and a voice that sounded like a saw dragged across a rock, leaned forward and inspected them. Fliz decided that, despite his small stature, he was probably the leader of the bunch. Very likely the most intelligent—and vicious.

"Travelers in need of aid," he said, keeping his voice even.

"Where from?"

"The nomads took Wainstay station. We managed to escape."

The little man looked at his companions. "I knew it. They had it coming," he said, superior in his wisdom. The others nodded. They had been listening with only partial attention. Fliz's stomach squirmed when he realized that they were all far too preoccupied with Nerys.

"And you got away?" the little man asked.

"We were fortunate."

"Indeed." The little man looked around him and dismounted. He gave a twitch of his head and the others followed suit. "As good a place as any for the night," he said.

Mutters of agreement. The little man pointed at a thicket close by. "In there."

He looked at Fliz and Nerys. "You, too." It wasn't a request, or even a suggestion, but a command. The others, forming a loose circle around them, left them no option but to comply.

Fliz thought to make conversation. "How come you venture out alone like this?" he asked the little man as they made their way through the grass. "Don't you fear the nomads?"

One of the men behind him guffawed. The little man grinned slyly. "They leave us alone. We don't have anything they want. They know we'd kill a lot of them before they get us." He chuckled. "The nomads aren't stupid. But they have a long memory."

Fliz felt Nerys close by his side. She had said nothing since they'd met the mercenaries, but he felt her apprehension like a physical touch. As he spoke he was also trying to work out how to extricate them from their new predicament. If it had been him alone it wouldn't have been a problem. Fliz's talent would have helped him to get away at the first opportunity. But now there was Nerys—and he had not the first inkling of what to do. He took her arm and pulled her alongside him. The touch seemed to comfort her. He wished that he could do more.

They entered the straggly thicket and came upon a clearing of sorts, where the grass didn't grow so high. The men unsaddled their horses and left them to graze. Rough louts that they were, they knew that they depended on these animals, and looked after them accordingly.

Fliz asked the little man for water. He considered Fliz for a moment, then nodded slowly and signaled to

one of his men. The man produced a canteen, which Fliz gave to Nerys. Before she drank, she wiped the opening, which elicited derisive smirks from the mercenaries.

"What's your name?" the little man asked.

Fliz told them. "Polkis," the mercenary said, "and over there you have Hertog, Asper, and Gervin. We're . . . travelers." His mouth twitched. "You'll stay for the night, won't you?"

"Maybe we should . . ."

Polkis made a quick gesture, cutting of Fliz's reply.

"You'll stay. We want to hear everything about the raid. After all, we're headed in that direction."

With practiced efficiency, the mercenaries proceeded to build a fire and ready themselves for the night. Polkis took Fliz and Nerys aside and motioned them to sit down. He considered Nerys. "You're not from Thalonica."

"I'm a Gaskarian," Nerys replied, not without pride. "I was on my way home."

"In the company of *him*?" Polkis asked, nodding at Fliz. "He's just a low-caste Floater. What's a Gaskarian merchant daughter doing with a Thalonican Floater?"

"He's taking me home," Nerys said testily.

"Methinks, you're going in the wrong direction," Polkis noted sarcastically. He laughed and motioned them closer to the fire.

Night came with the usual summer suddenness. The men unhitched wine-sacks from their saddles and proceeded to guzzle themselves liberally. Food did not appear to be on their list of priorities. They sat around the fire, laughing at crude jokes that were funny only to them, and occasional oblique remarks that sent Fliz into new paroxysms of apprehension. Their eyes never strayed long from Nerys. There was an air of unhealthy anticipation. It was, Fliz understood, a game; one they probably had played before, and would play again. What was to come was a foregone conclusion. They could wait; enjoy the growing terror of their victims, as the inevitability of their fate became clear. Watching, not just Nerys, but Fliz, too; waiting for whatever futile action he might choose to attempt in order to avert the inevitable.

Fliz and Nerys sat close together, but it was a false comfort for both of them. Fliz didn't dare look at her; for fear that she might read the hopelessness in his own eyes.

The men tired of the game. Their victims appeared unimpressed. It was time they understood the seriousness of the situation. Polkis rose to his feet. He came over and sat down on Nerys' other side. As if on a secret signal, the other three got up and approached them. Fliz didn't dare look around at the men behind him.

Nerys fastidiously slipped away from Polkis, closer to Fliz. Polkis grabbed her arm and jerked her back. She tried to push him away, but he caught her hand and grinned. "I've never had a merchant slut," he said. Nerys froze. Polkis laughed. "Didn't you know I was Gaskarian?" He licked his lips. "I guess not. To you merchants all drudges look alike, don't they?" He chuckled. "You're going to remember *this* one!"

Nerys glanced at Fliz, seeking support; help; a sign.

Polkis saw the look and laughed. "He's not going do anything." He eyed Fliz shrewdly. "You see, he knows. If he so much as twitches, neither of you lives through this. On the other hand, if he lets it go then maybe he gets a turn as well. I bet he'd like that."

Polkis got up and pulled on her arm. "Come on, merchant slut." Nerys looked at Fliz again. She opened her mouth, but no words came out. Fliz shifted his position. A hand clamped down on his shoulder. Polkis dragged Nerys with him, away from the fire. She tried to kick him but he just laughed and backhanded her across the face. She screamed once. He backhanded her again. Across the distance she cast one last glance at Fliz, and it was like a stab into his soul. Polkis was right. Fliz *knew*; and if life had taught him anything it was that sometimes, if it took utter humiliation in order to survive, then that's what it took. That was the way things were. It was the most painful of lessons, but there came a time when you had to learn it. And yet, as Nerys looked at him one last time, as her eyes widened in the knowledge that he was about to betray even the trust she had finally placed in him, he also understood that maybe life's lessons weren't as simple and clear-cut as he thought they were.

And there was something else, too; something that was more important than everything else . . .

Nerys couldn't believe it. She knew it was happening; yet it couldn't be.

Fliz sat there, defeated. He wouldn't do a thing. How could he let this happen? Surely, there was *something* . . .

But he just sat there, watched by the three mercenaries, his head bowed in defeat and maybe shame; glancing at her briefly, then back at the fire. Cowed; afraid; deserting her in her hour of need—like everybody had. When it counted he was just a rat from the sewers of Thalonica. And to think that, last night, she had even *considered* . . .

She felt tears welling up in her eyes. Polkis' hand slid under her tunic and grabbed one of her breasts. Her flesh crawled at his touch, and she squirmed away from him. He grunted with satisfaction and started to push her down to complete his subjugation of her.

Then everything changed.

From the corner of her eyes she saw it. A subtle change in Fliz's pose. He placed his hands on the ground; leaned forward. Then he leapt up, whipped around, and grabbed the thug, Asper, by his jerkin. Before Asper had a chance to make a movement, Fliz heaved, rolled on his back, dragging the much larger man down with him. Fliz bent his knees and planted the soles of his feet on Asper's chest. The man's momentum carried him forward and over Fliz, who heaved again, pushed, and launched Asper headfirst into the blazing campfire. The mercenary uttered an unworldly screech. He scrambled out of the fire, clawing at his burned face with his equally burned hands, rolling on the ground, moaning and howling. The other two converged on Fliz who leapt to his feet again. Polkis, his attention distracted, ceased his groping of Nerys' breasts. And Nerys just stared, because she finally *saw*.

Fliz . . .

Not the thief; or the uncultured lout; or the crafty survivor; or the mutilator of her precious hair; or the arrogant know-it-all . . .

. . . but Fliz: the gallant hero of her imaginations— who'd been right there, from the moment she opened her eyes on Endless Beach; the one and only, who had stood by her through all of this from the beginning—and who now was about to give his life because he could not bear the thought of her humiliation. For nothing; because he could not win. He knew that, but he tried anyway. Because of her. *Only* because of her.

Fliz . . .

Nerys found that she couldn't breathe. Her heart was so full that it wanted to burst: full of love—and of sorrow, too, because it was too late. He would never know—and if there was only one more thing she

wanted from this life, it was that she wanted him to know this: that she loved him; that she hadn't meant any of those horrid things she'd said; that she had been too blind to see . . .

Fliz tackled Gervin. He moved with a speed that made him almost invisible. Gervin grabbed for Fliz, but doubled over when Fliz kned him in the groin. Behind Fliz, Hertog had grabbed a stout branch. As Fliz straightened, Hertog swung. The club impacted on Fliz's head with sickening finality. Fliz toppled and crumpled on the ground. Nerys screamed.

"Shut up, merchant slut!" Polkis grinned and pushed her to the ground. He reached between her legs, felt for her womanhood, prodded, tore her undergarments, and roughly spread her legs. Nerys lay limp and apathetic. Let him do his worst. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered anymore. Fliz was dead. What more could they do to her?

Then: a report; like the crack of a whip. Polkis froze and ceased his gropings. Now, over Asper's moans and whimpers, Nerys heard a curious syncopated swishing sound, growing in pitch by the moment. Nerys, jolted from her apathy, turned her head to look. Gervin, still holding his crotch, had frozen in the process of getting up. Hertog stood like a statue, staring across the fire. Nerys followed his gaze. On the other side of the fire stood a big man. His hands, clenched into fists, were moving at his side in small, precise circles. The swishing sound had become a hum. Two objects whirled through the air around his hands.

One of the stranger's hands stopped moving. Something arced through the air; too fast for the eye to follow. Gervin yelled out in sudden pain, let go of his crotch, and doubled over backward. He lost his balance and, arms flailing, toppled into the fire. His matted hair caught alight. He screamed and scrambled away from the flames, pawing at the conflagration on his head.

Another projectile arced through the air. A sickening crunch. Hertog's face caved in. Where his nose and eyes had been there was now a gaping hole. The back of the head exploded out. The body stood for a moment, then crumpled in an untidy heap. Blood pumped into the ground in big spurts.

Polkis jerked out of his paralysis. He jumped up and leaped for his sword, which lay on the ground a few feet away. The man on the other side of the fire made a quick motion; his arm drew back and snapped forward. A glittering object flashed through the air and embed-

ded itself in Polkis' side with a thunk. Polkis took another step, stumbled, and fell to lie beside his sword.

Gervin had extinguished the flames in his hair and was trying to get up, confused but combative. But something was wrong! His legs buckled under him. He muttered a curse and drew his sword; used it to heave himself up into a standing position. The stranger stepped around the fire. Gervin shouted an imprecation, lifted the sword and swung it at him. The stranger moved quicker than a man of his size possibly could. His hand clamped around Gervin's wrist. A quick wrench; a crack; the sword fell to the ground. Gervin's hand hung limp. He screamed again. The stranger wrapped an arm around Gervin's neck and jerked. Another audible crack. Gervin's head lolled to one side. The stranger let the corpse slide to the ground.

Nerys levered herself up on her arms. Her gaze fell on Fliz's body. Disregarding the stranger, who stood silently, brooding and alert, she picked herself up and scrambled over to Fliz. She knelt beside him and cradled his head in her hands, heedless of the blood that ran over her fingers like treacle. The world blurred as she bent down and kissed his face, wetting it with her tears.

Too late . . .

Nerys jerked back.

"Fliz?" With trembling, bloodstained fingers she pushed back his hair; touched the side of his head; found the tear in the scalp; a huge bruise. But the bone felt solid and whole.

"Fliz?"

She kissed him again; tasted his blood.

"Fliz?"

The faintest stirring. She kissed his eyes, his mouth; met with the faintest response.

If I can ask for anything at all from this life. . .

Fliz groaned. His eyelids fluttered.

"Fliz!" Her tears flowed again, but they were tears of joy.

Fliz's eyes opened; unfocused and blank. They closed again; opened; stayed open; focused on her face. A faint, painful smile. She'd never seen anything more uplifting in her life.

Fliz's gaze veered away from her, to the stranger towering beside them. His lips moved. "Who are you?" he whispered.

Nerys turned her head. The stranger hunkered down beside them. "My name," he said, in a voice tinged with sadness, "is Caitlan."



Book Two

— 1 —

"He's gone."

Caitlan turned away from the giant map covering the far wall of the Hall Of The Covenant. Ailin followed suit. At the other end of the hall stood Pandrak.

"Rutger," Pandrak supplemented. "He has left the Isle."

"Does it matter?" Caitlan asked. "He's the only free magice left on the planet. Without support from the other magices . . ."

Pandrak stepped around the long meeting table. He stopped between them and contemplated the map. "It does matter," he said grimly. He pointed at the map. "Here, the Valley. Here, the Isle. See that red line there, passing through the Keep, Finister, and beyond, to Fontaine? Somewhere along that line is something he seeks."

"What does he hope to find?" Ailin asked.

"I wish I knew," Pandrak told her. "No one knows."

"It sounds like a search doomed to failure," Caitlan said.

Pandrak turned and looked him full in the face. "What he finds may turn the tide against us," he said. "There is a reason why the remaining seven chose to wait for us; why they surrendered and chose exile: because they think that Rutger will succeed. They still have hope. Which gives me pause . . ." He moved away from the map. "Come," he said, "let me show you something. But I warn you: it will turn your world inside out."

Ailin gave Caitlan a tiny, secret smile. A feeling of warmth bathed over him. Sometimes he still found it hard to believe that she actually existed. After decades of not even knowing that something had been missing from his life, she had stepped into it with a smile and an uninhibited affection that left him breathless. The fact that she was a circe made the matter even more wondrous. Caitlan thought, yet again, that the very

notion that, but for a quirk of fate, he might never have met her, was frightening.

And nothing frightened Caitlan—or so he had always liked to think.

He took Ailin's hand as they followed the magice down the hall and through the massive tika beam door. Beyond it was a system of vaulted passages; huge, precisely cut slabs of rock, supported by interlaced arches of tika. Pandrak led the way with the deft surety of a man who would have known his way through this maze in a blindfold. Caitlan and Ailin followed a few steps behind, looking around them, marveling at the architecture. The construction of Nameless Keep must have been an undertaking that made Castle Keaen look like a minor effort. The place had been intended as an impregnable fortress.

Caitlan grimaced. 'Impregnable'?—Hah!

Pandrak halted. "Here we are."

Caitlan looked around. The passage looked like a dozen others they'd been through. "What's here?"

"Something they didn't think I knew about. Actually, they still don't. That's why they've sent off Rutger, and why they're surrendering and pretending that they've given up hope."

He placed his hand on several of the stones in rapid sequence and pushed against each of them. A rumble. With the sound of sucking air a whole section of wall moved back and to one side, revealing a gaping dark hole. Pandrak stepped forward and touched something out of Caitlan's sight.

Caitlan and Ailin blinked as bright light suddenly swelled into being inside the opening, exposing a long flight of steps leading downward, winding out of sight around a corner.

"Come," Pandrak said. Gingerly they followed him into the hole. They were down maybe a dozen steps when, behind them, the section of wall slid back into place with a deep rumble that shook the ground.

Pandrak smiled. "I can open it from here," he assured them.

"I never doubted it," Caitlan said dryly.

Pandrak laughed. "Maybe you didn't," he said, and turned to continue his way down. Caitlan felt Ailin's hand tighten around his. He gave it a reassuring squeeze in response.

Caitlan counted the steps. Two hundred and eighty six. He tried to comprehend the nature of the light sources, but the brightly glowing strips along the walls

were beyond his ken. He reached out gingerly; found them cold to the touch.

The steps halted before a door such as Caitlan had never seen before. It was a gray surface, completely smooth and seamless. On one side were three round pads, each the size of a copper doon; colored yellow, red, and blue. Pandrak touched them in a particular sequence: red, blue, red, blue, yellow. With a hiss, the door slid to one side. Beyond it, darkness—which again was broken almost immediately after when here, too, light came into existence. Pandrak stepped forward and motioned for them to follow him. Caitlan and Ailin, still holding hands, stepped over the threshold, and found themselves inside a large, elongated room. In the center a table, surrounded by chairs, which were affixed to the floor. In the middle of the table rested a hemispherical object. Around it, scattered parchment and the paraphernalia of writing attested to the kinds of activities that might have taken place here.

Caitlan took it all in, but he wasn't sure *what* it was he saw. He glanced at Ailin. She just as bewildered as himself.

"This is the most secret of secrets," Pandrak said. "Only an inner cabal of three—Morgen, Rutger, and Talis—were allowed in here."

"How did *you* come to know?" Ailin asked.

How indeed?

Pandrak stood, brooding at the object in the center of the table. "They took the young man from his love," he said softly, the mellowness of the tone almost concealing the passion roiling below. "They thought they could make him into one of their own. But they couldn't and the young man swore that he would never forgive them for what they did." He looked up. "Fortunately," he said wryly, "the young man had the talents to conceal his intentions from their probes. He was just what they wanted from a recruit; he had great potential and talent. But he also hated them; and from the first day of coming here he thought of nothing but how to inflict harm on these men. And when he found out that his love had given birth to a boy, whom he *knew* to be his own, his intentions firmed into a determination to know what he could not only to harm, but destroy them."

Pandrak smiled a crooked smile. "One of my talents is that, when I don't want to be seen, *nobody* sees me. This is a skill all magices learn; but only a few develop it to perfection. I always was so good at it that I thought it wise to conceal the fact."

He raised a hand. "Watch."

And he was . . . gone. Caitlan thought he saw . . . but the memory of what he'd seen fled his mind like the shreds of a dream.

Pandrak's voice came from behind them. "And so, for more than a decade, I learned their secrets." Caitlan spun around. The magice shrugged.

"I'm glad you're on our side," Caitlan muttered.

Pandrak chuckled. "I always was." He motioned. "Look."

He touched a carbuncle on the table, near the hemispherical object. In response there appeared, above it, a huge globe; apparently solid; suspended in mid-air. Most of the globe was blue; the rest showed the same jagged shaped they'd seen on the map in the Hall above. Pandrak touched another protuberance. The globe began to rotate slowly.

"This is a representation of the world we live on. Mostly water. A few landmasses." He pointed as they rotated into view. "Tapide; Finister; Unterthal; Aslam. The smaller ones: Cosinante; Grelande; the Taelinic Group." Pandrak touched the carbuncle. The globe stopped rotating. In the center of the side facing them: Finister and the Valley.

"Many centuries ago there was nothing on this world but native flora. Tikas, noquos, tassel trees, hypher and fask. A wealth of other kinds of tree and grass.

"Then, from the stars, came a huge vessel. Not a ship as you know it. Not a ship that floats on water, but a ship that *surrounded* its occupants; provided them with air and sustenance as they traveled across an endless void without air, with searing heat and bitter cold, from their world—which seems to have been much like ours—to this one. It was left somewhere above, circling our world. Smaller vessels delivered the occupants to the surface. Many thousands of them.

"They explored the land. Using their skills, knowledge, and the forces at their disposal, they built cities. Keaen. Sacrael. Thalonica. Gaskar. Brys. Ragoshima. Alaste.

"When they had established a framework for their intended civilization, they caused themselves to forget everything they'd known; inserted false memories about who and what they were; started their lives again."

"Why would they do this?" Ailin whispered.

Pandrak shrugged. "I don't know. There is no record of their motives. Only of what they did."

"If they erased all knowledge of what they had been," Caitlan said, "how is it that you know all this?"

"I didn't say 'all,'" Pandrak replied. "A small group of them—though their memories, too, had been altered—at least retained a knowledge of that very act. These men were placed on Skele. Below Nameless Keep they constructed this . . . room, so that the guardians of the past—the magices—would have the means to watch over the rest, and to ensure that the spirit of what the founders had intended would be preserved." He paused. "And," he continued, "to be there if anything should go so gravely wrong that drastic actions might have to be taken."

"Define 'gravely wrong'—and 'drastic,'" Caitlan said.

Pandrak grimaced. "History has shown that the passage of time and the occurrence of change are irreversibly linked," He said. "The magices were meant to do what they could to prevent such changes as the founders considered undesirable; changes that would destroy what they had come here to build. What just happened in Keaen was such a change. The invention of the printing press was another. Of course, some changes were considered benign. But those that weren't had to be prevented from developing into anything detrimental to the founders' intentions.

"But through the centuries the magices' numbers had dwindled; their purpose had been diluted; they had themselves be altered by factors that even the founders had not foreseen. So, they failed; despite their ruthlessness; despite the deliberate killing of those who were considered dangerous. And, with their lives at stake, with their whole purpose at the brink of collapse, they are now willing to take the final 'drastic' step."

"Which is?" Ailin asked.

"If, and only if, failure is inevitable, so the founders decreed, this . . . thing . . . whatever it is, will provide a . . . 'solution'. This is my guess. The instructions are not explicit. For excellent reasons, no doubt."

Caitlan stepped closer to the globe and reached out. His finger passed through the surface without resistance. Caitlan's hand jerked back.

"It's just an image," Pandrak said. Caitlan nodded. He was getting to the point where he refused to be surprised. He traced the path of the red line he'd seen on the map in the Hall Of The Covenant on the surface of the globe.

"How do you know that whatever Rutger seeks lies along this path?"

Pandrak went over to a corner of the room and picked up a small oblong box, made from the same gray material as everything else around them. He set the box on the table, and extracted three curious-looking items from his pocket. Each was attached to a golden chain. Pandrak inserted the objects into slits, set into circular frames, on the front of the box.

"It takes all three keys to open it," Pandrak said. "I took them off our captives. Here—help me. We must turn all three at the same time."

Caitlan and Ailin did as they were told. The lid of the box sprung open. Pandrak took out a small, oblong device, about the size of the palm of his hand.

"This is one of a pair," he said. "The other one's gone; with Rutger, no doubt."

He pushed the small buttons on face of the device in a particular sequence. A rectangle of polished crystal lit up. On it appeared the image of an arrow, pointing . . . where?

Pandrak turned the device. The arrow moved such as to always point in the same direction.

"This is how we know," Pandrak said. "The arrow points along this line." He traced it on the globe. "Now imagine what happens if you were, say, here." He indicated the location of Thalonica, on Finister. "Then the arrow would point . . . maybe . . . in *this* direction. Meaning that you have two intersecting lines which give you the location of what you're looking for." He looked at them meaningfully. "And by now, Rutger may well have a good second reading. And that means that he may already know where to find what he's looking for."

"So it could be too late," Ailin said. "Rutger could already have found it."

Pandrak nodded. "Possibly. I just hope that he hasn't."

"How can we know?" she asked.

"By finding Rutger."

"He could be anywhere," Caitlan said. "On the sea. On land. Finister is big."

Pandrak nodded. He pushed the buttons on the device in a different sequence. Caitlan saw that the arrow shifted ever so slightly. "Now it points at Rutger," Pandrak said. "This is another of its functions: to point at its twin."

Caitlan saw Ailin's hand give an involuntary twitch. They exchanged a quick glance; the knowing, intimate

touch between two who share a precious secret. She was thinking the same thing as he. This strange device . . . like their lovers' tokens . . .

Ailin gave him a little smile. Caitlan felt like kissing her there and then. Plus doing a number of other things. Having her around was a definite distraction. The kind a man like himself had to avoid; the kind Caitlan was no longer able or willing to avoid. Not with Ailin around. Time, he told himself yet again, to bow out of his profession. It wasn't so much that he was getting too old; merely that he had changed too much.

Pandrak appeared not to have noticed the interlude. "We must find Rutger," he said, "before he finds this thing."

Caitlan nodded. "After we leave the magices on Transkele," he said to Pandrak, "we should sail on to Finister. A magice and a weaponsmaster—we can find him."

"Especially with the help of a circe," Ailin added crisply.

Caitlan turned to her. "Ailin, I . . ."

She regarded him with raised eyebrows. "You *what*?" She put her hands on her hips and cocked her head. "Remember your promise, Caitlan of Tinagel!"

Caitlan heaved a sigh. "But . . ."

She shook her head. "We go together, my love. No matter where it takes us."

Caitlan glanced at Pandrak who watched the scene with ill-concealed amusement. "Methinks, weaponsmaster, that here is one person who will not be denied," he said dryly.

Caitlan grinned ruefully and put an arm around Ailin's shoulders. "No matter where it takes us," he said into her hair.

"Good."

From behind him, Pandrak's voice. "Armist . . ."

Caitlan let go of Ailin and turned around. "What about Armist?"

"We communicated earlier—using the devices at my disposal here. The Tegels are not amused by events in the capital. They're also severely offended by the fact that the new order places Tahlia into such an elevated position. It appears that the House of Tegel is considering secession from Keaven."

Caitlan chuckled siccantly. "Well, Tahlia *did* dispose of that odious pervert." He grimaced. "Armist needs you."

Pandrak nodded. "Rutger is important—but so is what happens in the Valley. I fear that Armist . . ."

"We go," Ailin said firmly.

"It is not that simple. The magices will have to be carefully guarded. They will try their best to avert their fate."

"Let them try," Caitlan said.

"They will toy with your minds—until you do not know yourselves anymore."

"I know," Caitlan said. "They have tried already; when we bound and gagged them, and locked them in the vault."

Pandrak looked surprised. "You *know* this?"

Caitlan nodded. "I felt a . . . resistance. Strange thoughts entered my head: that it was unnecessary to confine them; that maybe Armist's revolution was an act of treason. Things like that."

"What did you do about these thoughts?"

Caitlan shrugged. "They weren't mine. I recognized them as such. I dismissed them. They have not returned."

"Amazing," Pandrak breathed. "I wouldn't have thought that . . ." He looked at Caitlan queerly. Caitlan felt a subtle pressure behind his eyes.

"Stop it," he said icily.

"You sensed this?" the magice asked, astonished.

Caitlan felt Ailin's presence at his side. He knew why he could do these things; which were alien to him—and yet, somehow, after what Ailin had done to him, after her gift, he was . . . unsurprised. A lot of odd things were happening in his head. He suspected that he was just beginning on a long path to a place that lay far off and out of his sight.

Pandrak frowned; perplexed. "Odd," he mused. "I cannot . . ." He seemed disturbed. "I do not know what you're thinking!"

"Good," Caitlan said. "I rather prefer it that way."

"I used to be able to . . ."

"Things change," Caitlan told the magice.

Pandrak cast a swift glance at Ailin. The shadow of a suspicion flickered across his face. Then, as quickly as it had come, the expression was gone; but Caitlan knew that he would figure it out eventually. Maybe he already had.

"Go and help your son," he told Pandrak. "We will deliver the magices. Then we go to Finister and find Rutger."

"And when you've found him?"

"Something will suggest itself. It always does."

As they filed out of the room, Caitlan turned to Pandrak. "How do you sail a ship in the void?" he asked Pandrak.

The magice smiled. "The ships sail themselves."

"They are *alive*?" Ailin asked.

Pandrak shook his head. "No—but they are capable of understanding and executing specific commands."

"Then they must be able to *listen*," Ailin said. "They *must* be alive."

Pandrak shrugged. "I do not understand these things. Nobody does. But the records tell us what I told you. The ships understood. They knew what the orders meant, and how to execute them. That is all I can tell you." He pointed at the yellow, red, and blue pads beside the door. "Here, too, it was this way. This door used to open on command. All you had to say was 'open'. There are reasons to believe that one didn't even have to *say* it, but that the *thought* was enough!"

"How could a lifeless thing read thoughts?" Ailin objected.

"An excellent question," Pandrak said dryly. "Let me know when you find the answer. But, if we accept that it *is* possible . . ."

"I think I find this frightening," Ailin said darkly.

Caitlan said nothing. It was all very strange—and, he thought, quite wonderful.

The seven magices, hands bound, eyes blindfolded, mouths gagged, tied to each other with a single rope affixed to their wrists, were marched through the small settlement surrounding Nameless Keep; heading for the wharf and the ship that would take them into exile: the *Trece*, a fat-bellied square-rigged two-master. Curious onlookers watched the procession, their faces betraying nothing of how they felt about the whole affair. There was a certain amount of subdued muttering and whispering, but that was all. Caitlan, who led the magices down the path to the wharf, noticed, yet again, that despite the usual differences between the people, there was an oppressive sameness about them. It was a subtle thing; nothing he could have put into words—yet it was all around him: in the faces, the expressions, the gestures, the way they stood there and stared.

Men only.

The procession had moved onto the planks of the single wharf when, from the crowd, a man stepped forward. He wore a gray tunic, loose breeches, and rough thonged sandals. His shoulder-long hair was drawn

back and tied together with a piece of cloth behind his head. A pair of lackluster, pale eyes regarded them with scorn. Caitlan jerked on the rope. The magices stopped shuffling.

"What are we going to do?" the man asked, in a voice so devoid of emotion that it sent shivers down Caitlan's back. The men behind the speaker had fallen so silent that Caitlan thought they might be holding their breath in expectation of what he had to say.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

Pandrak came to stand by Caitlan. The crowd, shuffling forward, was gathering into a semi-circle around them.

"Let me deal with this," he told Caitlan. He turned to the men. "You are to act as you always have," he said, and Caitlan felt power radiating from his words; carried by the timbre in his voice, or maybe just by subtle nuances of inflection and tone. "You have your duties. Follow them. Your duty is your guide. Till the fields, sow and reap. Repair your dwellings if they need it. Maintain proper order and conduct yourselves as you always have. Stay away from the Keep, which is closed to all."

Pandrak's words had the desired effect. Only the man who had spoken appeared dissatisfied. "Why are they leaving?" he asked, pointing at the magices—who stood passive, but, Caitlan thought, whose attitudes betrayed their close attention to what they heard. Caitlan had an inkling that they were not surprised by the events around them. He glanced at Pandrak, who made the slightest gesture with his head. Caitlan tugged on the rope; the magices had no option but to start moving again.

Pandrak spoke to the crowd again. "They are leaving because they have lost their purpose. But you have not. Continue to do as you have always done and all will be as it should be."

Caitlan shook his head. He exchanged a look with Ailin, who walked a few steps to his right. She was as bewildered as he.

"Now go!" Pandrak commanded, and Caitlan felt the impact of the magice's words like the crack of a whip. He looked back and saw the crowd disperse. Pandrak stared after them as they filed away. He came after Caitlan and Ailin.

"They know nothing else," he said softly. And, to the seven magices, he said, "that you are allowed to live may be the greatest crime of them all." He grimaced. "But,

no matter what they have done,” he said to Caitlan and Ailin, “to kill them—which is the only alternative to exile—would be . . .” He sighed. “I cannot do it. Not in cold blood.”

Caitlan gave him a gentle slap on the back. “Thus you betray your humanity,” he said. “I am not sure that they would have accorded you the same consideration.”

He jerked a bit harder. The magices stumbled, but didn’t fall. He led them up the gang plank under the watchful eyes of the *Treecce*’s sailors, and sequestered them in one of the poop cabins. He tied the rope so that they might sit on one of the benches, but could move nowhere else. Pandrak watched the proceedings with a jaundiced eye. When Caitlan was done, he inspected and tested the arrangement. Finally, grudgingly, but still with evident misgivings, he pronounced them to be as satisfactory as could be expected under the circumstances.

“They will attempt mischief,” he insisted.

“I know,” Caitlan assured him. “We will do our best not to let them succeed.”

Finally, Pandrak agreed to leave the ship and board the sloop *Tynwand* which would take him back to Keaen and Armist.

As he walked down the gangway Ailin called him back.

“There’s . . . something.” She hesitated. “With the situation in the Valley . . . there may be bloodshed?”

Pandrak’s face was grim. “It’s possible.”

“People will die,” Ailin said. “You will need help.”

“Help?” Pandrak regarded her quizzically.

“Help,” Ailin affirmed. “The kind of help only a circe can give.”

Pandrak’s face went very still.

“Promise me that you will not abuse what I tell you know,” Ailin demanded.

Pandrak nodded. “I swear.”

“In Sacrael, there’s an inn. The Stag. If you need help, go there. Ask for Zygie. Tell her who you are. Tell her I sent you. Tell her everything.”

Pandrak stood still for a few moments. Then he smiled.

“Thank you.”

He bowed and departed.

From the poop of the *Treecce*, Caitlan and Ailin watched the smaller boat set sail, cruise out of the small bay, around the headlands, and out of sight.

The captain of the *Treecce* came up behind them. “We are ready to set sail whenever you give the word.”

Caitlan turned around. “We should leave now.” He nodded at the shore where the crowd, which had dispersed after Pandrak’s command, was slowly gathering again. “I do not like the look of this,” he said.

The captain, one Esdram Sodim and a native of Tinfeil, nodded his agreement. “You’re right there,” he muttered. He waved his hand at the mate. “Cast off.”

The mate signaled an acknowledgement. Four sailors undid the ropes which held the *Treecce* to the pier. The mate leaned over the starboard side and shouted something at the occupants of the tugboat. Almost imperceptibly the *Treecce* began to swing away from the pier as the tug-boat, its oars manned by eight brawny sailors, pulled it away and into open water. The captain gave the order to unfurl the sails. A favorable wind billowed them. The tow-boat shipped alongside. Ropes were tied to prow and stern. These were connected to a pulley system which lifted the boat by means of a sturdy wooden derrick. When it had cleared the deck the arm of the derrick swung over and deposited the boat in its designated place, to be tied down for the voyage. Presently, the wind pushed the *Treecce* out of the bay and into the Limpic Ocean.

Caitlan and Ailin stood, looking back at the wharf, where the crowd had gathered in full strength now, a sea of faces turned in their direction. Caitlan took Ailin’s arm; together, they went to the prow and looked ahead, over the endless ocean and an uncertain future.

“You know,” Ailin said thoughtfully, “I don’t think our ancestors were very nice people.”

“What makes you say that?” he asked, surprised.

Ailin shrugged. “Look at what they did; at what kind of world they built for themselves! Putting the magices into place to keep it as they wanted it. Look at the Valley—the pointless enmity between Keaen and Tergan. Remember what Pandrak told us about Gaskar and Thalonica; and Fontaine and Brys. Everywhere it is the same.” Her eyes flashed. “What kind of people were they? How did they manage to persuade part of their company to live lives of drudgery and squalor—while the rest live in privilege and wealth? The House of Keaen and the Barons. The Tergan nobility? The Merchants of Gaskar. The Wearers of Thalonica. The Margraves of Fontaine. The Dukes of Brys?” She shook her head. “Or maybe they didn’t have to ‘persuade’ anybody. Maybe they brought the dreags, drudges, and willets

with them. Someone whom they could *make* be like that; whether they wanted it or not? Someone who had no choice? Did they *grow* them—like Pandrak told us they grew their animals? Could they have done the same thing with *people*? What kind of terrible folks were they?”

He had never heard her talk like that. When she paused she looked a little surprised herself. There were aspects to Ailin, the circe, his lover and friend, that maybe even she did not know about.

“I haven’t thought about it like that,” he admitted. “But, yes, it is strange. The length to which they went to ensure that things were kept the way they wanted it . . .”

“Those men are evil,” she said, and he knew she meant the magices.

“They know no different,” he objected.

“Pandrak knew different.”

“Pandrak had a very personal motive for knowing different.”

“Maybe,” Ailin admitted, “but they all had a choice. Pandrak just had a stronger motive.”

Caitlan tightened his arm around her shoulders. “Maybe it’s not as simple as that,” he said.

“I think it is!” she insisted.

Caitlan chuckled. “You’re a fierce one.”

She turned her head and looked up at him. “And don’t you forget it,” she laughed.

“Most definitely not,” he said.

The trip to Transkele, given favorable winds, should take less than two days. The quicker, thought Caitlan, the better. The seven men in the rear cabin were a calamity-in-waiting. Once they had been delivered to Transkele, with enough provisions to last them for at least a year, he would breathe easier.

He had arranged for the crew to stay as far away from the stern as practicable. This wasn’t easy, as the business of sailing necessitated activity all over the *Treeca*. Caitlan made it a point of carefully studying every member of the crew, trying to discern changes in their behavior. The magices, Pandrak had warned, would attempt subversion of the weakest of minds. Caitlan had tried to figure out just who fell under that category. In the final analysis, he realized, there was only one person on board that he could trust. Unfortunately, Ailin was not a fighter, and if things went wrong, she would not be able to help him. She knew this, and

he knew that she felt badly about it. But she was who she was, and, though he’d recently taught her a few basics of self-defense, he knew that her instincts would probably betray and cripple her in the crucial moment.

How long would it take for the magices to subvert the crew—or even just a few members of it? Hours? Days?

Caitlan sighed and took upon himself the task of attending to his prisoners. No matter who they were, they had a right to drink and food. But Caitlan drew the line at assisting them with their bodily functions. Let them suffer. It was a minor matter, compared to the suffering they had inflicted on others. Besides, if Pandrak was right, their training would alleviate any such discomforts—for a while anyway; for long enough to get them to Transkele and off the ship.

As night approached, Caitlan procured several flasks of water, loaves of bread, and strips of salted and dried daka meat. He and Ailin went to the magices’ cabin. Caitlan took the gags of their mouths—one at a time!—and fed them. Ailin stood by, watching the procedure with a grim face. The magices accepted the simple fare without a comment; due no doubt, to Caitlan’s dire warning that, should any of them even think of speaking, he would instantly forfeit any further privileges for the remainder of the trip.

As soon as they entered the cabin Caitlan sensed the fleeting tendrils of pressure on his brain. Thoughts that were not his insinuated themselves.

“Stop it,” he told them curtly. “Unless you want to spend the next two days unconscious.”

The pressure ceased immediately. Caitlan wondered briefly if he shouldn’t maybe knock them into oblivion anyway. He resolved that he would do just that if there was the slightest hint that anything was amiss.

The feeding over they left the magices to their unknown thoughts and schemes. Returning to the deck they discovered that the ship, which had made good progress during the earlier hours, now lay becalmed in a smooth sea.

Esdrum Sodim came to talk to them. “I do not like these clouds,” he said, pointing to jagged fragments in the north, illuminated by a settling Caravella. He sniffed the air. “It’s going to be a rough night,” he predicted.

“Is it going to take us to Transkele faster?” Caitlan wanted to know.

Esdrum Sodim guffawed. "If we're lucky. If we're not, we'll have our hands full just trying to survive." He eyed Caitlan knowingly. "Get some sleep, weaponsmaster. You look like you haven't closed your eyes for days! Now's the time to rest. In a few hours we may need every hand to keep us afloat."

Caitlan shook his head. "Who will watch the magices?"

Esdrum Sodim shrugged. "Two or three hours are not going to make any difference. I will keep an eye on my crew. I know them well. If any act as they shouldn't I will know."

Caitlan grimaced. "Not meaning to be offensive, captain, but who's going to watch over *you*?"

Esdrum Sodim grinned. "You have to trust *someone*," he said, not unreasonably. "I'm not easily influenced."

Ailin hooked an arm under Caitlan's. "He's right," she said. "Let's go."

The captain grinned even broader. "I wouldn't need to be asked twice!" he laughed.

The fatigue which had slowly worked its way into Caitlan's body and mind was becoming too noticeable to be ignored. He always told his students that, if nothing else would, fatigue would get them in the end. Reactions slowed down; thought processes became imprecise and sluggish; judgment was fatally impaired. Maybe it was time to listen to himself.

"Come on," Ailin said softly and tugged at his arm. In their cabin she made him lie down on the lower bunk, and, in the last daylight shining in through the open porthole, started undoing his clothes. "Just making sure that you'll actually go to sleep," she said as she tugged here and there and somehow got it all off. She stood up, undressed herself, and laid down on top of him. "When I'm done with you, you won't be able think of anything *but* sleep," she whispered. Her lover's charm, a twin to that around his own neck, dangled from her throat and tickled his chest. Caitlan looked at her wondrous eyes, only inches from his own, and he knew that he was indeed the most fortunate of men. And then he stopped thinking as she took him, and he took her, and the ship and the magices and the whole world ceased to exist for a few precious moments. And finally, sometime after they had made love, and with her still lying on top of him, he finally surrendered to a deep and dreamless sleep.

The storm came from the north-west. It hit suddenly, about an hour after nightfall. One moment the seas had been calm and placid; then there were a few gusts, catching the sails and jerking the *Treecce* about like a giant hand. There was another brief lull; just long enough for Esdrum Sodim to order his men to the masts to haul down the sails. They were about halfway through the chore when the storm front hit them with the unyielding suddenness of a giant flail. One sailor screamed as he lost his footing and plummeted like a rock. The wind took him and hurled him sideways. His body crashed against a horizontal yardarm and bounced off into the waters, which had turned from placid to churned.

Inside their cabin, lying in pitch darkness now, Caitlan and Ailin struggled to get back into their clothes. Water sprayed into the open porthole. Caitlan managed to get himself to the wall, pull the port close, and latch it. In the blackness he bumped into Ailin. A sudden heave sent them both to the floor.

"Ouch!" The whole cabin seemed to consist of sharp, unavoidable corners. Clumsily they helped each other up and, still only partially-dressed, opened the door—only to find themselves instantly drenched with spray from the he waves crashing across the *Treecce*'s deck. Caitlan looked up and saw that the sails had been furled and tied up. The dangling shreds of another were being whipped about by the storm.

He put his mouth to Ailin's ear. "Get back in there!" "I . . ."

"Go! There's nothing you can do here. In there you'll be safe." When she hesitated, he gave her arm a quick squeeze. "Please! I may have to help these people, and I can't do that if I'm worried about your safety!"

He heaved a sigh of relief when she did as he'd told her. The door closed behind her. He realized that he was still holding his belt and fastened it around his waist; patted the knife and a hard-leather pouch containing the device Pandrak had given him. Then, holding onto anything that provided him with a firm hold on the ship, he made his way across the deck

He found Esdrum Sodim beside the steersman.

"How are we doing?" he shouted.

"If it doesn't get any worse, we'll ride it out!"

"Anything I can do?!" Caitlan shouted over the howling gales.

"You may want to check on your prisoners!" Esdram Sodim shouted back.

He was descending the stairs from the poop castle when, from the corner of his eyes, he caught the flicker of a motion. He turned—and jerked aside, bringing up his arm in a defensive motion. The wooden club hit his lower arm with numbing force. At the same time the *Trece* gave another heave. Caitlan lost his balance and tumbled down the remaining steps. A wave crashed across the deck; the water washed him against a mast. Caitlan, disoriented, his arms flailing, impacted with his head. He lay there dazed, barely conscious enough to grasp a stray loop of rope with his good hand. Another wave washed across the deck and tried to take him with it. Grimly he held on. The water let him go. Caitlan pulled himself toward the mast and tried to get up.

Then he heard the scream.

He jerked up. Ailin!

Through the darkness shadows moved in his direction. Beyond them others; dragging a struggling figure between them, away from him.

Caitlan struggled to come upright. Three shapes converged on his position. Caitlan ducked behind the mast. The shapes—tumbling, but definitely more competent than himself on the swaying deck—were upon him. Caitlan hooked his injured arm around the mast and took out his knife with the other. As the first of the men came upon him he swept the knife forward and in an upward motion sliced open the sailor's belly. The man screamed and collapsed on the deck. A wave caught him and washed him away.

Another scream from further away. Ailin again. Caitlan, beside himself with despair, and realizing that he had no time to spare, let go of the mast and stepped around it. He stumbled, but his knife speared another assailant and tore into his breastbone. The *Trece* gave a heave. The man slid to the deck. Caitlan tried to jerk out the knife, but lost his balance, slipped and fell. As he did, he saw the three silhouettes on the far side of the deck. He hit the deck with his injured arm. A numbing pain shot into his shoulder. He spun around, scrabbling to get to his feet and to the other side. The ship heaved and he slipped again; was washed away from his goal. As he struggled to get a hold on *anything*, he saw . . . and the sight would forever be burned into his memory. For now it was Caitlan who screamed. Shouting her name at the top of his voice as the two

men who held Ailin lifted her up and flung her into the churning sea.

Caitlan slammed into the railing. The impact took the wind out of him, but somehow he grabbed a hold of whatever it was and there he held on as he stared at the spot where his life had just ended.

The paralysis passed. Caitlan let go of his hold and, on his belly, began to crawl to the other side of the ship. He didn't know what he was doing, only that he had to get there, because that's where she was, and he had to save her because she simply couldn't be gone . . .

Another wave caught him and slammed him against the poop castle. There he lodged, groggy and miserable. He looked up. Two figures towered above him. With a scream of rage he jumped up. His injured arm was agony, but somehow it didn't matter anymore. Nothing mattered anymore. Ailin was gone. She was gone . . .

. . . and these two had killed her!

Caitlan, braced by the door behind him, delivered a terrible blow. It crushed one sailor's breastbone and drove the shards into his heart. With the fury of a wounded elec Caitlan whipped around and drove his good elbow into the other man's gut. The sailor doubled over. Caitlan raised his arm and whipped it down. The man's neck snapped like a twig.

The world around him a red haze of rage and grief, he braced himself against the door. Then he realized where he was. He whipped around and jerked on the latch. He ripped the door open and stepped into the magice's cabin. He could not see them in the darkness but he felt them. Though the *Trece* heaved and shuddered, he groped his way until he'd found one of the anchor points of the rope which held them in place. He struggled to undo it. That done, he let go of it and, pushing them out of his way, went to the other anchor point. He undid the last knot, wrapped a few loops of rope around his good hand and pulled them toward the door, which was slamming open and shut with the wind and water battering it. The motion of the ship helped him. Though they were seven men, they could not contrive a coordinated resistance. But Caitlan felt their pressure on his mind. It lacked coordination, but still, it was like knives stabbing into his skull. Sparks appeared in his field of vision. A wave of nausea as an unseen enemy pushed his thumbs into his eyesockets.

Caitlan gave the rope a cruel jerk. The pressure ceased. The seven half-slid, half-walked as he heaved on the rope and dragged them out onto the deck. The ship leaned to port. Caitlan jerked again. The ship leaned further. The bundle of men lurched forward and slammed into the railing. A wave crashed over them. Caitlan held onto the railing with one hand, the rope with the other, as it was almost wrenched from his grasp. The men were washed about like rag dolls on a string.

The ship righted; the water receded. Caitlan let go of railing and rope and lifted one of the gagged, bound magices by his tunic. He shoved him halfway over the side, reached down and, taking the man's legs, toppled him over completely. The body's weight jerked on the rope; the neck hung askew. The weight pulled the next magic against the side. Caitlan heaved again. Another body went overboard. And again and again. The corpses, their necks broken, their bodies dangling from impossibly angled heads, were battered against the side of the ship. A final heave; the last magic toppled over the side; the whole grotesque chain disappeared in the churning waters. A wave caught Caitlan and washed him across the deck. He slammed into the mast again, by some miracle caught hold of the rope again, and held on . . .

. . . and held on . . . as the waters battered the ship and he saw it over and over again . . . as they heaved her over the side and he wasn't there for her . . . because he'd broken his promise to her . . . and so he hadn't been there when she needed him . . . and now she was gone . . . and with her all that was good and gentle in his life . . .

Why didn't he let go? It would be so easy to let go. Open his hand . . . let the loops unfurl . . . let the waves wash him away . . . to join her in her watery grave.

Ailin was gone . . .

But he held on . . . because he did not know *how* to let go. But the image burned before his eyes as the waters continued to batter the *Treecce*.

The rear-mast snapped with a crack. Caitlan watched with detached disinterest as it crashed into the deck and crushed the captain and the steersman beneath its weight. The rudderless ship became an even more hapless toy of the elements. Presently the second mast snapped. Caitlan hoped that it would finish him off, but it didn't. Distantly, he saw the figures of sailors

stumble about the deck. He contemplated calling out to them, but refrained. Who knew if the magices' influence still held sway—even after their death.

A rational part of his mind worked on the puzzle of what happened. Had the minds of the magices overcome so many sailors in such little time? At least five! Three who went after him. Another two who . . .

Caitlan screamed . . . his rage, his despair, his guilt . . .

The tug-boat had worked loose in its fastenings and was washed overboard. How long had they been in this now? Where were they? How far had the storm taken them? Surely, they must be widely off-course. How could he think such things when she was gone?

A splintering crash. The *Treecce* jerked violently. Caitlan almost lost his grip. Tortured planks screeched and cracked. The ship was spun around. A horrible cracking, grating sound as its belly was torn open. Another wave lifted it and brought it down with another sickening crunch.

Land? Caitlan thought of the captain's navigational charts. The Teeth of Magog? Could the storm have driven them this far?

A wave caught the ship and jerked it sideways. The poop castle sunk out of sight, the motion accompanied by an all pervading creaking, tearing, and groaning as the *Treecce* broke in half. Caitlan found himself suspended in mid air as the part of the ship he was on tilted to sit suspended at a crazy angle. The rope cut into his wrist. Dangling there helpless like a hanged man he saw the white froth of the breakers as they bashed themselves onto the rocks on which the ship had foundered.

More waves crashed into the fragments of the former *Treecce*. The now-vertical deck beside Caitlan tilted further. He saw the danger and tried to jerk his arm out of the noose that, so far, had been his lifeline. Another wave slammed into the fragment. The deck tilted toward the horizontal again, slamming Caitlan against it. He knew he'd not get another chance.

Why bother?

Just because . . .

He freed his hand and let go of the rope. He slid down the deck, crashed into the railing, heaved himself over it and let go. If he was to die, let it be now.

The waters closed over him. He surfaced and gasped for air. Life wasn't done with him yet. The crest of a wave caught him and carried him past and beyond the

rock on which the ship had foundered. Again he was whirled under water. Again he struggled to surface. Again he succeeded. The waves and wind tossed him like a doll. He swallowed brine and spat it out, heaved and gasped for air, struggled and fought for . . . what?

Let go, something said. Just let it be.

And then the rage and the guilt took him again—and he knew that he had to try. For Ailin's sake. For though she was . . . gone . . . and he didn't have the courage to even *think* 'dead' . . . he still owed her something. Not that he knew what his survival had to do with that. For, what could he do for *her*? It was all too late . . .

And so Caitlan of Tinagel, former weaponsmaster to the Keaen, former lover of a circe who gave him the gift of life, battled the storm and the waves—and somehow he survived; and the waves carried him to shore and dumped him unceremoniously on a rocky beach, rolled his limp body over and over, and left him there, unconscious but alive.

Above his limp form the clouds tore apart. The glow of Janus shone through. The storm abated.



Letters

Hi Till,

In the latest *CLS* [23] you lamented that you had not received a letter in over a year — possibly that was mine in praise of the 'Zael Inheritance'.

Surely an opportunity to praise Tim's writing again cannot be passed up. While I stand by my previous evaluation of the 'Inheritance' as a gem, I must step up and praise Tim's new one as well. It is polished. He has a truly light deft touch with characters, male and female. The Vancian atmosphere, wit, and mystery are omnipresent. I am astonished that Tim's works are not in bookstores everywhere. We must have more!

While Tim's works happen to register very strongly on my particular barometer, I also enjoy your writing, Till. I read and enjoy all of it. Also, you are doing a great service to publish the *CLS*. With all the controversies going on the message boards, the *CLS* is a unifying solace for all.

Respectfully,

Bruce Downing

New Hampshire, USA

