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# The Cosmopolis Literary Supplement

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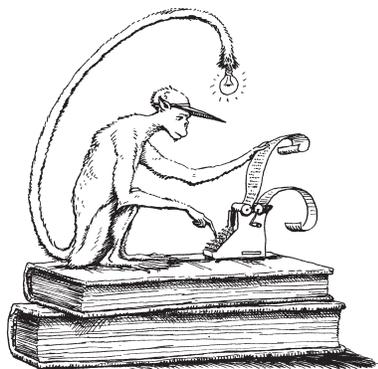
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## Editorial

Gentle Readers:

In this issue, more of *Dragonchaser* and *Finister*, as well as a cornucopia (plethora, panoply, and I'm searching some more similarly hyperbolic synonyms) of letters. Fortunately all are complimentary—some to the extent of making me blush—to the *CLS* and its contents and, for a change, my own writing.

And so I heave a sigh of relief. Secretly, I must have feared censure! I wish to thank the writers of those letters for their encouragement. If only those same materials they seem to find pleasing to read didn't almost always end up in the slush piles labeled 'Unsolicited'!

This, however—or so I keep telling myself—is part of a writer's training and what my elder daughter calls, firmly tongue-in-cheek, 'character-building'. Because a rejection letter, no matter how it is phrased, is always a blow—and I, for one, have almost 30 years' worth of them; with only one paid-for publication, *Keaen*, to show for all the effort. The encouragement in the letters in this issue compensates for some of the shed blood, sweat, and tears—and those desperate attempts to convince those around me who suffer grievously from my absence when writing requires my presence that I'm not just wasting my and everybody else's time.

Thanks all, and read on.

Till Noever



# Dragonchaser

by Tim Stretton

## Chapter 21

The next few weeks subsequently merged into a seamless pattern in Mirko's memory, with events taking on a leisurely equilibrium. There was an interval between the Sorcerers and the Margariad known as the Challenges, in which galley-masters wagered amounts of varying size for head-to-head races. Mirko threw *Sapphire Light* enthusiastically into this programme, while ensuring he avoided races against either *Dragonchaser* or *Excelsior*, the only two boats he seriously regarded as dangers. *Morvellos Devil* was beaten twice over the Sorcerers course and once around the Morvellos lighthouse—although the mermaids were not on this occasion in evidence—and *Fanar's Glory* was satisfyingly trounced on consecutive days around the Sorcerers.

Mirko did not attach excessive significance to these victories over inferior opposition, but the value of such ascendancy was manifest in the high morale of the crew, and particularly in the fine performances of Florio at the helm. While Mirko felt it would be an exaggeration to regard Florio as actively enthusiastic, his conduct was marked by a dour professionalism. He grew ever more confident around the Sorcerers, and while Mirko did not express the thought, he felt that at need Florio might even prove able to thread the needle.

A further benefit of the Challenges was the revenue *Sapphire Light* managed to accrue for Bartazan. After a fortnight, *Sapphire Light* remained unbeaten with a profit of 4,000 valut; an outcome which appeared to reconcile the Elector to Mirko's sharp practice in removing Cascais. Larien remained sportive and affectionate, if prone to occasional fits of gloom which Mirko found it best to ignore. Catzendralle alone seemed dissatisfied; Mirko was spending so much time on the water that his opportunities for gaining intelligence from Bartazan's household were strongly curtailed. She appeared to be growing in her conviction that *Sapphire Light* might win the Margariad, which also contributed to her frequent pettishness. She was also several weeks in arrears with his *douceur*, which he was able to overlook temporarily

all the while he enjoyed a percentage of the proceeds from the Challenge races.

Mirko was not of a temperament to expect events to run smoothly for any significant uninterrupted period, and his pessimism found itself confirmed one morning after *Sapphire Light* had performed well in unseasonably stormy conditions around the Morvellos Lighthouse, leaving *Kestrel* trailing in its wake.

As was his habit after a victory, Mirko was making his way to the Waterside Tavern with his key lieutenants Florio and Damiano, when Damiano exclaimed:

"Look! In the docks—a Black Ship!"

Mirko looked across and saw the unmistakable sight of a black Garganet galley, seemingly damaged in the storm—a most unusual sight in Paladria.

"Do you recognise her?" asked Damiano.

"No," said Mirko. "She's clearly a thirty-two, a scout boat, but her pennon's gone."

"There's only one way to find out," said Florio briskly, setting off towards the vessel. "She must have come in while we were on the water. No doubt some of her crew are still about."

Mirko had no great enthusiasm to investigate the Garganet galley; her officers would be unlikely to give him any cordial reception, and their presence could easily unsettle both Florio and Damiano. But neither regarded themselves as slaves, or under his orders off the water, and both were already on their way to the galley.

"Hallo there!" called out Florio. "What ship are you?"

A face looked up from the deck. "We're *Spray*, out of Garganet, if it's any of your concern. And don't mock our accent!"

"He's not mocking your accent," said Mirko. "He's Garganet, as are we all."

"Garganet, you say? What ship are you out of? I didn't see another one here. We've trouble replacing our oars—these damned Paladrian ones are eighteen inches shorter than ours."

Florio turned to Mirko with a malicious smile. "Well, Captain, what ship are we out of?"

"That's enough, Florio," snapped Mirko, nettled. To the crewman he said, "You, fellow, where are your officers? Our business would be better transacted with them."

The crewman shrugged. He called out towards the stern, "Captain, there's another Garganet ship here—here are there officers."

"Thank you, Gremio," called an unseen figure, leaping ashore and approaching the others from behind. Tall and fair, with a negligent ease of manner, he said: "I'm Captain Rexio of the *Spray*, and very glad to meet you."

Mirko turned slowly. "Rexio!"

Rexio's expression of frank good humour froze. "What kind of joke is this? I'm told there's a Garganet vessel here and I find you? What Garganet vessel can you possibly command?"

Mirko set his mouth. "Your crewman misunderstood, Rexio. He heard the accents and thought we were from a Garganet boat."

Florio interjected: "I take it you two are acquainted?"

Damiano hissed at Florio to be quiet, but silence could not remove the smirk attached to Florio's face.

"You might say that, sir," said Rexio sardonically. "I was the overseer on *Renown* when the then-Captain Ascalon ran away. I thought never to see him again; a situation to which I reconciled myself with the minimum of difficulty."

"I assure you, Rexio, the feeling was entirely mutual. For what it's worth, I'm glad you got your own command," said Mirko.

"What it's worth," said Rexio, "is exactly nothing. Your good opinion has all the value of a stale fart. Now, do either you or your associates know anywhere we can get four custom-made oars?"

"Annkin's Yard on Queely's Hard. I'll get someone to take you over," replied Mirko tonelessly.

Rexio bowed slightly. "I am obliged to you. I also require provisions for my crew."

Soon after, a sullen Mirko found himself in the Waterside Tavern listening to an increasingly elevated Florio expand on the ills of his situation while a sympathetic Rexio listened. Damiano, as was his habit, contented himself with the occasional pithy interjection. Eventually Rexio tired of Mirko's indirect discomfiture and pursued a more direct tack.

"How do you justify this, Ascalon? I understand that the disgrace of your court-martial will inevitably have soured your temper and lowered your standards, but to race second-rate galleys around a millpond with two Garganet slaves in your crew scarcely represents career progression or personal growth."

Mirko looked into his mug and spoke slowly. "There is a limited range of options available to a cashiered

Garganet officer. My work here is not as discreditable as you might think; the races are honest, the seamanship by and large good, and Florio and Damiano would be slaves regardless of whether or not they rowed on my galley. In fact, crewing with me is their only real chance of freedom."

Rexio contented himself with a smile. "I can't imagine the best galley in Paladria would seriously inconvenience an average Garganet boat. Paladrians don't understand the sea."

"Maybe not, but they understand their own bay. You'd be surprised how well the best boats—*Dragon-chaser*, say, or *Excelsior*—would perform against a Garganet vessel."

Rexio laughed. "You think one of these hick galleys would out-race *Spray*?"

"You wouldn't even beat us."

Rexio's face lost its humour. "There are ways of proving that, Ascalon. When our oars are replaced—well, you might fancy a turn around the bay."

"Do you have money?"

"Mirko!" hissed Damiano. "You don't have to do this—and you shouldn't."

"We'd win—or don't you think so?" said Mirko.

Damiano frowned for a moment. "Well, yes we would, the way we've been going. Any of the usual courses and we'd be a match."

Rexio looked around the faces and took a long pull of beer. "You, Florio, do you think so too?"

Florio's eyes were expressionless. "Since you ask, I do believe *Sapphire Light*, in waters her crew were familiar with, would out-run any Garganet galley of like size not accustomed to the waters."

"Well then," said Rexio with a slow smile, "we have a wager. Can you cover a thousand valut?"

"A thousand? I took you for a larger man than that," said Mirko. "Double it and we have a race."

Rexio's hesitation was barely perceptible. "Two thousand it is. Tell me when and where; *Spray* will be ready." He stood and strode briskly across the crisp wooden floorboards of the tavern.

Damiano turned towards Mirko. "I hope you know what you're doing."

Mirko laughed. "What can I lose? First of all, I think we'll win on our own waters; and secondly I'm wagering Bartazan's money, not mine. The race will be excellent practice for the Margariad."

Florio showed the beginnings of a smile. "Sometimes I almost admire you, Ascalon."

"Steer me straight and the feeling will be mutual."



## Chapter 22

Three days later Mirko made his way down to the Arba Docks where *Sapphire Light* was moored. It was the morning of the challenge with *Spray*, and he was surprised at the attention the race had attracted. He had viewed the affair as essentially a private matter between himself and Rexio, but a crowd of decent size was already in attendance. They had seen two races already, with *Dragonchaser* comfortably outpacing *Morvellos Devil* around the Hanspar without needing to set any rhythm above Eight; while an encounter of desperate ineptitude between *Kestrel* and a lacklustre *Fanar's Glory* through the Sorcerers had resulted in an unconvincing win for the latter.

As he walked through the competitors' enclosure towards *Sapphire Light*, Mirko saw Drallenkoop and Larien engaged in animated and not especially cordial conversation. He waved at Larien who returned a pained glance, while Drallenkoop scowled. Mirko had been aware that Larien cultivated Drallenkoop as a studied insult to her uncle, but today there seemed to be an undercurrent of ill-feeling between them. Drallenkoop leaned towards Larien to emphasise with greater vigour; Larien extended her arm in Mirko's direction with an expression of disgust, turning on her heel to walk towards him.

"Larien!" called Drallenkoop. "Come back here, now!"

"You can't have it both ways, Drallenkoop!" Larien shouted back over her shoulder. "You wanted this: now you've got it!"

Mirko looked quizzically at her. "Are you all right, Larien?"

Larien brought her feelings back under control with an effort. "I am now," she said, her colour raised. "I was going to ask you a favour."

"Go ahead," said Mirko, inclining his head sideways with a smile.

"Take me out with you today. I want to be part of the race."

Mirko ran a hand through his hair. "Larien, this *is* a race. I've two thousand valut of Bartazan's money riding on this, and I can hardly justify the extra weight."

"Weight!" cried Larien, her colour rising again. "Are you saying I'm fat?"

"Larien, don't be so silly—"

"Oh, and silly as well! Fat, stupid Larien, why would you ever want to have me on your boat, or in your bed?"

"Larien! What has got into you? I can't have any weight on the boat that isn't pulling an oar. That's all I meant."

"I turned down Drallenkoop so I could go out on the water with you, and you won't even take me!"

"You should have asked me first—and anyway, what exactly did you 'turn down' Drallenkoop from?"

"Oh, not you as well! Drallenkoop doesn't own me, and neither do you."

"For Fanar's sake, Larien, I never claimed to. You just never told me you were that friendly with him, that's all."

"Are you jealous, Mirko? I've told you often enough, I socialise with Drallenkoop to annoy my uncle. Now he's annoyed because I've stood him up to see you, and you get all possessive when you see me talking to him."

"Oh, just forget it, Larien! I have had enough of wondering where I stand with you. I have a race to win and I don't have time for any more of your power games. Go back and see Drallenkoop, for all I care."

Larien set her mouth. "I'm coming with you. I'd prefer to come voluntarily, but if not, I can make you."

"Oh yes?"

"Does my uncle know where your stake money for this race has come from? Or the size of the stake?"

Mirko hesitated. "Of course."

"I think not. According to Kanspiris this morning, Bartazan thinks this is a hundred valut race to settle a grudge between you and *Spray's* captain. If he knew you'd put 2,000 valut of his winnings down I wouldn't like to be on your deck."

"May I ask how you know? Challenge details are confidential between the captains and the galley association."

Larien smiled triumphantly. "No great difficulty when the Secretary of the Association has been trying to get inside my underwear since I was fourteen. A mixture of flirtation and blackmail can go a long way."

Mirko frowned. "This time, if you fall in, you drown. Deal?"

Larien's face lit up. "Deal!"

She leaned forward and kissed him. "It's no secret you are adept at blackmail yourself," she said. "Cascais was somewhat reticent on the details, but he hates you, whatever you did to him. I'm sure you and I can be more civilised."

Mirko shook his head with a rueful smile. "One day you will come to grief, Larien; but not today, I suspect. Come on."

The herald sounded the horn and the race was underway. *Sapphire Light* immediately launched into Tempo Eight, as he'd agreed with his officers before. The first battle was to reach the Hanspar ahead; if *Sapphire Light* went round that turn in second place, the race was as good as lost.

The day was windless and the sea calm, the waves making only small white tips as they broke. *Sapphire Light* settled easily into her rhythm but Mirko was alarmed to see *Spray* easing gradually ahead.

"Jenx! Go to Nine! Go to Nine!" he called, his first gamble of the race. Despite their improvement in form and confidence over the season, this was not a sustainable tempo for the crew. Nonetheless they responded with a crisp discipline which pleased him. *Spray* did not match *Sapphire Light*'s increase in tempo, and Mirko knew that Rexio was confident of reeling in any deficit over the remainder of the race.

*Pull-pull-pull-pull.* *Sapphire Light* maintained the rapid tempo with an easy vigour. Slowly she pulled ahead of *Spray*. "Come on lads, keep it going!" called Jenx from the drum-cockpit. Damiano and Larze, the two nearest Quartermen, smiled grimly and Larze added an obscenity for good measure.

The Hanspar rock approached and Larien, next to Mirko on the observation platform, squeezed his arm in excitement; Mirko, concentrating on the relative positions of the two galleys, scarcely noticed. "Florio! You've got room—take it steady!"

Florio failed to acknowledge this obvious remark and pulled *Sapphire Light* into a long gradual arc around the Hanspar, ensuring that he did not leave sufficient space for *Spray* to pass on the inside. The manoeuvre was executed with characteristically unobtrusive excellence, and as *Sapphire Light* straightened up to begin the pull towards the Morvellos, Mirko had time to watch *Spray* skirt around the Hanspar with a conservatively

wide margin. He estimated that *Sapphire Light* had a lead of probably a single length—useful but by no means decisive. The long haul towards the Morvellos with the current behind the boats gave *Spray* every opportunity to narrow the gap.

"Jenx! Go to Eight! Go to Eight!" he called. Tempo Nine had served its purpose in getting *Sapphire Light* around the Hanspar ahead; but to attempt to sustain it any further would guarantee a collapse on the long home straight, against the strong current from the Morvellos to the Arba Docks.

The galleys traded stroke for stroke as they continued their passage towards the Morvellos. There was little Mirko could do at this stage; the crew was rowing at its maximum sustainable tempo, there were no awkward currents or adverse winds, and he had time to look around him and take in the scene. He could hear Larien breathing fast next to him but he did not turn to look at her. Ahead lay the Morvellos Lighthouse with its colony of mermaids, as yet too small or hidden to be seen. The lighthouse stood proud against the sky, behind it in the distance the coast of Aylissia. On the port bow was only horizon to the south, and Mirko wondered, as so often before, what lay beyond. A galley could row, he knew, so far out that the Paladrian coast and the Namaran Mountains were just a smudge in the distance; and still the horizon stretched away unchangeably and unimaginably. Long before he had come to Paladria, an impressionable cadet in the Garganet navy, he had resolved one day to reach for the horizon in a well-provisioned galley. One day, he thought, one day . . .

"Captain!" called Florio, breaking his reverie. "*Spray* is making ground!"

Mirko turned on the observation platform. *Spray* was still maintaining Tempo Eight, but her crew, professional rowers all, had a more powerful stroke and this advantage was bringing her slowly but surely back on terms with *Sapphire Light*. Mirko looked ahead to the Morvellos: it was essential that *Sapphire Light* went round the lighthouse ahead; he knew that his tired crew would not be able to overtake the disciplined Garganets against the current if they fell behind. With the automatic reckoning which became second nature to galley-masters, he calculated that *Spray* would catch them a little before the lighthouse; although possibly not soon enough to effect a passing manoeuvre as well. Mirko

had now to decide whether to gamble on increasing the tempo once again.

*Pull-pull-pull.* *Sapphire Light's* rhythm was starting to become ragged; the crew, facing backwards, could see the now perceptible progress *Spray* was making. "Damiano! Larze! Walisse! Ketchelon! Hold the tempo! Keep Eight!" Mirko called in desperation. Once a crew lost its rhythm, the discipline was extremely difficult to reimpose. Damiano and Walisse were keeping to the stroke rate immaculately, and Damiano's Quarter was so well drilled that they followed him. Walisse was keeping the majority of his Quarter to tempo, but Larze and Ketchelon, the least experienced Quartermen, were exercising seemingly no influence over their own Quarters. Mirko shook his head quickly. Moving to Tempo Nine was out of the question; holding Eight was proving a challenge, and any attempt to increase the pace would simply cause a disintegration.

He jumped from the observation platform to the deck and stepped across to the helm. "We can't go any faster," he said briskly to Florio. "You're going to have to make the turn of your life."

Florio gave a resigned shrug. "It's not about technique, it's about nerve," he said. "Who dares go closer to the rocks? I can go in as close as you like for a short line—but you risk ripping the bottom out on the shoals. How badly do you want to win?"

Mirko cursed. "I want to win the Margariad more than I want to beat *Spray*. I need a whole boat to do that."

"There you are then," said Florio. "If *Spray* leaves me a gap I'll take it; but I'll not pretend there's one if there isn't."

"Be ready, and follow my instructions," said Mirko sharply, climbing back to the observation platform. The Morvellos were no more than a minute's rowing ahead, but *Spray* was now level, and on her observation platform Rexio looked across exultantly.

"Florio! Hard to starboard! Hard to starboard!" cried Mirko.

Florio complied instantly: this was standard Garganet procedure, to veer across into an opponent's path to disrupt her rhythm. It was, in truth, a fairly desperate expedient, but if it were even partly successful, *Spray* might be unable to recover in time to pass before the Morvellos.

Almost instantly *Spray* had responded. As *Sapphire Light* swung abruptly to starboard, *Spray* steered to port,

effectively entering the space left by *Sapphire Light* with no loss of rhythm. She surged ahead, and Mirko knew the ruse had failed utterly, had cost *Sapphire Light* ground rather than gaining it. Rexio had known the ploy was coming and had been ready. Mirko's mouth set into a grim expressionless line, but it was no time to brood: the lighthouse was upon them.

"Florio! Watch *Spray* — look for the gap! Jenx, go to Nine! Go to Nine!"

Mirko knew as well as Florio that there might not be a gap. If Rexio took a line close enough to the rocks, there would be no scope for a dash down the inside. It was also a gamble to increase the tempo to Nine: it meant that *Sapphire Light* could exploit a gap if it appeared—but it risked destabilising the crew and gave Florio less time to react to the shoals. Mirko knew that his only real hope lay in Rexio's ignorance of the waters which might impel him to give the Morvellos a conservatively wide berth.

"Mirko! Look—mermaids!" cried Larien excitedly.

Mirko shot her a glance of annoyance for distracting him with sightseeing at such a crucial moment—he could not even spare to time for a reproof—but he noticed the mermaids on the rocks at the foot of the lighthouse a short distance away, looking out at him with their striking blue eyes inscrutable.

"Arse!" called Florio from the helm. "Look at *Spray*!"

Mirko shared Florio's sentiments. *Spray*, whether by fortune, good planning or a combination of the two, had adopted just about the best line possible as she swung around the rocks. Theoretically there was room to take a tighter inside line, but Mirko knew that to take it would tear the bottom out of *Sapphire Light*. The sea was calm, and the crew was unchained; conceivably some of them might avoid drowning or being dashed on the rocks; but then again they might not. And Larien would drown for certain.

Mirko shook his head at Florio, in case there had ever been a question or a doubt. The race was lost, for *Sapphire Light* would never make up the deficit against the current.

*Come in. Mirko, come in!*

Mirko looked around. No-one was saying anything. *Mirko, our friend Mirko, come to us.*

The mermaids! Who else could it be? Mirko remembered that morning on the beach, when the mermaid had called inside his head for help.

*It's safe. The tide is high, the rocks are low. You have room. Come in, come in.*

It could only be the mermaids, unless Mirko was going mad. But in Garganet, mermaids had an evil reputation, calling to galleys, driving the crews mad and beguiling them to destruction against the rocks, for purposes that always remained obscure.

*Mirko! You saved me, Mirko! Trust me, trust me! Come in, the tide is high, the rocks are low. Mirko, my friend Mirko, come in!*

Before he realised what he was saying, Mirko called down to Florio: "Inside track! We have room! Inside, man!"

Florio looked up in bewilderment. "You know we don't! You'll gut us!"

"Helm, inside! Jenx, go to Ten! Ten!" he called with an exaltation of recklessness. The hairs on his arms stood erect, a chill swept over his skin. This was insane, it was suicide. But it would work.

"Helm! Do you hear me? Inside!"

At Tempo Ten Florio had either to comply or run into *Spray's* stern. With no expression he swung the helm to starboard to bring *Sapphire Light* inside *Spray's* line and unprecedentedly close to the lighthouse and its hidden shoals.

*Easy, Mirko. That's close enough to be safe.*

"Straight, Florio. Close enough!"

Rexio looked back from his observation platform in astonishment. It seemed he had learned the best line from local racers—and he knew that *Sapphire Light* was too close. He dared not come inside himself or cut across *Sapphire Light's* line for fear of gutting his own boat; and he cursed impotently as *Sapphire Light* slipped through on the inside.

The boats were close enough that Mirko could hear the bellowing from *Spray's* officers. "Ten! Go to Ten!" yelled Rexio on the point of hysteria.

Mirko knew that neither boat could sustain Ten against the current for any length of time; but looking at the exultant faces of his crew, he knew it would be *Spray* who cracked first. They believed in the recklessly brilliant judgement of their captain, but more importantly, they believed again in themselves, the crew who had taken *Sapphire Light* through a gap that didn't exist against the pride of the Garganet navy. Without allowing a hint of his triumph to reach his face, Mirko relaxed. *Spray's* crew was broken; the race was won.

Mirko felt a pain in his arm; turning, he saw Larien had dug her fingers so deeply into him that she had drawn blood; and he hadn't even noticed.

"How did you do that? How did you know?" she asked, her clear blue eyes alight. "You could have sunk us!" But there was no reproach in her tone or her eyes.

Mirko simply shook his head with a smile. "I could hardly explain," he said. "Just enjoy this feeling. Who knows when it will come again?"

Larien looked away. "I don't know if Drallenkoop is worried about you," she said. "But he ought to be. You really can beat *Dragonchaser*—and I never believed you."

From past experience Mirko sensed that the conversation was likely to turn into a plea from Larien that he throw the Margariad. "We will see, Larien," he said. "That will be another race altogether."

Larien looked back up into his face and smiled. "I never realised how much this meant," she said. "'Excitement' is too pale a word for what we've had today. I should never have asked you to lose to spite Bartazan. I'm sorry, Mirko, I had just never known what this felt like, what I was asking of you. Forgive me, and win if you can," she finished with an averted gaze.

"Oh, Larien," he said with an hesitant laugh. "You can always surprise me."

"I won't kiss you then, since I'm sure you're expecting it."

"Save it until we get back," said Mirko with an easier smile. "We still have a race to win."

Larien contented herself with silence as *Sapphire Light* continued her triumphant pull against the current. *Spray* had seemingly given up any chance of victory and Mirko was able to savour the progress towards the finish line without even residual doubts that *Sapphire Light* might somehow squander the race through some folly, negligence or ill-chance. The gentle yawing of the galley prevented any faint sense of unreality become established, and by the time the victory horn was sounded, *Spray* was some eight lengths in the distance.

"Hooray! Hooray for *Sapphire Light*!" came the calls from the spectators' area. "You showed the Garganets! Three cheers for Ascalon! Three cheers for Bartazan!"

Mirko allowed himself a grin at this last; since Bartazan had unwittingly provided the stake money, he was entitled to share of the acclaim, or so Mirko reasoned. Larien appeared less amused, and shot him a minatory glance.

As the dockhands began to make *Sapphire Light* fast to her jetty, *Spray* arrived; Rexio did not look across. Mirko handed Larien down from the observation platform and stepped across to the overseer's cockpit.

"Men!" he called. "We have won a mighty victory today! We have beaten a galley as good as any racing in Paladria this year. Drallenkoop must beware! *Dragon-chaser*—look to your laurels! Well rowed, men! One more performance like this and you will all be free!"

"Fonar bless you, sir!" shouted Walisse; Florio, sauntering up from the helm, contented himself with spitting noisily over the side. "I suppose you're pleased with yourself," he said harshly to Mirko.

"I'm pleased with all of us—you included," said Mirko levelly. "You helmed brilliantly today."

"Don't stroke my arse, Mirko. Something went on at the lighthouse and it had nothing to do with my helmsmanship. We'll discuss it later—and you'll get no 'three cheers for Ascalon' from me."

"You might try smiling occasionally, Florio. We've beaten a really good boat for the first time today: it doesn't get much better than this."

"Maybe not for you—a free man with 2,000 valut in his pouch. I'm as much a slave as I was this morning, and there's no coins to bulge my pouch. You tell me why I should be smiling."

Mirko shrugged. "Have it your own way, Florio. In a fortnight's time you'll be free. For now, I'll stand you all the Widdershins you can drink at the Waterside."

"See you there," replied Florio, vaulting off the galley and striding through the acclaim of the crowd.

Mirko made a more measured disembarkation from *Sapphire Light* and stepped across to the Association booth to pick up his winnings. As custom dictated, Rexio was also present and looked displeased at being kept waiting. Mirko bowed.

"Well raced, Rexio. You were unlucky today."

Rexio's expression retained the inflexibility of *Spray's* timbers. "I wish I could say 'well raced' to you; but we both know you beat us with a fool's gamble. You could have sunk *Sapphire Light* with any stroke. We took the tightest straight line and you cut inside us."

Mirko smiled. "Maybe we just know our own waters a little better. Don't get too distressed."

Rexio gave a half-smile. "You mistake my emotion. What you see is scorn, not distress. It's cost me 2,000 valut to learn that you've sunk so far that you'll risk

your galley and your crew to win a race. There's no doubt who was the faster boat out there today."

"Indeed there wasn't, Rexio. The first boat to cross the line earns that title, and I believe there were eight lengths between us at the end."

Rexio turned to the Race Secretary. "Are there any further formalities? I am eager to conclude my business and be away."

"Very well," said the Secretary. "Rexio, these are your 2,000 valut. Observe that I hand them over to Mirko, along with his own 2,000 valut stake, making a total of 4,000 valut. Mirko, would you like me to apply this sum to *Sapphire Light's* challenge account?"

"You may return the 2,000 stake to the account; the remaining 2,000 represents Bartazan's down-payment on my salary which is currently somewhat in arrears."

"Is that so?" cried a voice with impatient hauteur, stepping from within the booth: none other than Bartazan of Bartazan House.

Mirko flushed. This had not formed a part of his plans. "My lord!"

"Did you really think to conceal a transaction of this magnitude, with my money, from me?"

Rexio smirked. "A reasonable question."

"Your galley has achieved a splendid victory today: celebration, or at least magnanimity, would be becoming and appropriate responses."

"'Celebration!' You may celebrate, Mirko, that I choose not to lay an action against you for attempting to defraud me of 2,000 valut; and praise my magnanimity in allowing you to retain command of *Sapphire Light*."

Mirko laughed aloud, for Bartazan had surely overplayed his hand. "My lord, if you feel you could attract a galley-master of equivalent stature this close to the Margariad, do not allow your loyalty to me to prevent you. Simply pay me my retainer and I will depart with good grace."

Bartazan's face began to mottle, never in Mirko's experience a sign of congeniality. "I need twenty-six votes among the Electors to become Peremptor. I currently count on twenty-three, assuming that I still retain the support of Nool Vavar. Be assured that if I were confident of the other three, I would hang you from the gibbet at Formello, or have your throat cut in an alley."

"Under the circumstances I might prefer to see Medina retain his incumbency. Perhaps I will resign

anyway; in truth I never trusted you to make me Master of the City's Fleet."

Bartazan took a step towards him. "Ascalon, you are a man I despise, a mercenary scoundrel preaching a hypocritical fantasy of egalitarianism. My association with you makes me a laughing stock. If I win the Margariad there will be rather less laughter. In truth, you are by no means fit for a high civic post; but be assured that I will pay your bonus on the understanding you depart immediately."

"And honour your promise to free the crew."

Bartazan's lower lip jutted in annoyance. "Do not vex me with trivialities. I have agreed to free them, and free them I shall. For now, hand over my 2,000 valut and I'll say no more."

With a sigh Mirko handed over his pouch. "I will be seeing them again when you pay me my victory bonus."

Bartazan turned without response. "Larien!" he called to his anxious niece waiting nearby. "You are needed at Formello tonight: come with me now, and do not think to be consorting with riff-raff on the waterfront."

Larien shot Mirko an apologetic smile and followed Bartazan to his carriage. Rexio smiled insolently as he lounged against the booth. "Rather a waste of time for you, Ascalon: no winnings, and no girl. Better luck next time, eh?"

Mirko returned a smile of weary contempt. "Some things are worth much more than money, Rexio: and imagining you explaining to your father how you lost to a Paladrian slave galley skippered by a Garganet exile just happens to be one of them. Now, I assume you have no further business here: why not get out of my city?"



## Chapter 23

Mirko's spirits were surprisingly undimmed by his encounter with Bartazan or the confiscation of his winnings; proceeds which, he had to admit, were by no means his entitlement. He had achieved everything he had set out to do: put Rexio in his place, and showed the racing fraternity that *Sapphire Light* was a galley to be taken seriously. He made his way to the Waterside Tavern with a light step, hailing Panduletta with a spring in his step as he called for beer.

Florio and Damiano were already ensconced in the corner with several empty mugs on the bench in front of them. Since neither of them possessed a single valut, Mirko suspected they were drinking at his expense; not, in the circumstances, an unreasonable act.

"Gentlemen! Good of you to wait for me!" he said.

Damiano merely shrugged; Florio said: "I am sure your prize money will allow you stand a couple of crew members a drink."

"Ha! If you want to see any of the prize money, apply to Bartazan. For now, the largesse is all mine."

Florio raised his mug with an ironic flourish. "You might care to tell us exactly how you came to conceive your race-winning manoeuvre."

A figure appeared from the shadows: "And then again you might not . . ."

"Catzend— 'N'! How long have you been here?"

"I knew you'd show up eventually," said Catzendralle with a weary smile. "As it turns out, I didn't have long to wait."

"Florio, Damiano, will you excuse us a moment?"

Damiano contented himself with a leer. Florio said, "What's it worth not to tell Larien about your other lady friend?"

Mirko frowned. "It isn't like that at all! 'N' is just—"

"'Just!' " cried Catzendralle. "That wasn't what you said last time," she continued, sitting heavily on his lap and throwing her arms around his neck.

Mirko was at a loss for words. Catzendralle had been distinctly chilly in recent meetings; and even at the height of their intimacy she had hardly been the type to throw herself into his arms.

"Now then!" she said, nuzzling at his ear. "Aren't you going to invite your colleagues to allow us a little privacy?"

The situation became ever more baffling. Fortunately Damiano rose from his seat, hauling Florio upright with him. "Don't let us detain you, Mirko. You've earned an evening's relaxation. Don't be late for practice tomorrow!"

Florio drained his mug with a flourish. "I shan't hurry back to the barracks in the circumstances. I assume your credit is good with the doxies as well as the taverns."

Mirko was unable to respond as Catzendralle's lips were firmly pressed against his. He was beginning to accommodate himself to the situation and kissed her

back with growing vigour. Catzendralle pushed him away.

"Mirko! What are you doing!"

Mirko sat back in astonishment. "Nothing you weren't. Although I never knew you felt like that."

Catzendralle slipped off his lap and onto the bench beside him. "Like what? I was just getting rid of the other two so I could talk to you."

"You mean you weren't doing that for real? That's not very flattering."

"I was concerned you would give away my identity. I'd rather be taken for a tart than your paymistress."

"Catzen, you really ought to be more careful with people's feelings."

Catzendralle looked quizzically at him with her large brown eyes. "I thought you were only interested in Larien?"

"It's not quite that simple, Catzen. Larien passes the time, and she has no serious designs on me."

"I thought you had become attached to her."

"That was always your interpretation. I have to say I found kissing you more rewarding than I had expected."

Catzendralle blushed, a sight Mirko felt he wanted to see more of. "I haven't come here to flirt with you," she said. "You owe me some information."

"And you owe me some money."

Catzendralle dropped a purse of coins on the bench. "This should settle your arrears, and a little more. But I'm expecting you to tell me how you managed to win today."

"Some of us just have the gift of galley-racing," said Mirko airily. "I wouldn't expect you to understand."

Catzendralle's eyebrows rose. "Really? Even though I used to stand on the observation platform of my uncle's galley."

Mirko smiled complacently. "Going out on a galley hardly makes you an expert on racing, Catzen."

"Oh no? Not even when your uncle is Addacatzen and he let you take the helm?"

"Addacatzen?"

"He won the Margariad twice in *Sunrise*. He was the best galley-master House Drall ever produced until Drallenkoop. He knew how to race, and he knew the waters. Don't patronise me with giggly girl putdowns."

"Catzen! I was doing no such thing, although I never realised you had quite such a racing pedigree."

"Of course not: you learn what I tell you, and that's how I like it. But I know—know as someone who has

steered the Morvellos—that there was no passage where you took one today. I also know that *Spray* took the best line available."

"How do you know that? Rexio called a good line—but he doesn't know the waters."

"No, but he had local knowledge. He had the best charts in Paladria."

"Oh yes?"

Catzendralle pointed to the pouch of coins. "Most certainly, since I sold him the information—the proceeds of which are sitting in front of you."

Mirko took a long swig of Widdershins, conscious as he did so that he was being remarkably forbearing. He set his mug down on the table.

"May I ask why you did so?" he asked with icy politeness.

Catzendralle smiled pleasantly. "Indeed you may. In no particular order of priority: I found myself short of money; I was keen to discomfit Bartazan by inflicting an expensive defeat on his galley; and I wanted to ensure that you lost."

Mirko stared at the broad beams in the ceiling. "I scarcely know where to begin. I really thought you and I had something; forget Larien, she's a bored flirt. But you and me, Catzen, I had begun to think you had real feelings for me. And you sell Rexio the information you think will beat me?"

Catzen flushed crimson. "What are you saying? Mirko, you're drunk! Feelings?"

"I'm not drunk at all. I think—thought—that you had opened up to me and that . . . but anyway, I was wrong, otherwise you wouldn't have betrayed me to Rexio."

"Forget Rexio!" cried Catzen in a passion. "I want to know what these 'feelings' you're talking about are."

"And if you had proved yourself worthy of them I would have done. I was obviously wrong about you. Just tell me why you sold Rexio the charts."

"Tell me about the feelings first."

"There *are* no feelings. There *was* a sale. Now tell me!"

Catzen looked away. "I couldn't have you winning. Not because of Bartazan: because I didn't want you in danger. You still don't know the risks you're running," she said quietly.

"You did it to help me?" asked Mirko, almost levelly.

"Essentially," said Catzen, looking up with greater composure. "There are people who will try and kill

you, Mirko. Believe me, because I know them.” She stared down at the table. “And I don’t want that to happen. I want you to stay alive.”

“It did feature in my plans,” said Mirko dryly.

Catzen looked up into Mirko’s face quickly, and then looked away again. “Perhaps we should set this aside for now. Please, just tell me what happened out there today. I need to know.”

Mirko set his mouth. “You need to decide whether you’re interested in me as spymistress ‘N’ or Catzen. As far as I can see, only ‘N’ needs to know, to find out where her scheme went awry.”

Catzen drained her mug angrily. “If you’re going to play games I’m going. Whatever you might think, I care about you, and I want to make sure nothing happens to you. That sounds more like Catzen than ‘N’ to me. But if you can’t see that, I’m not wasting time trying to convince you.”

“Catzen, don’t—”

She wrapped her cloak around herself and stepped from the saloon without a backward glance, her head bowed. Mirko stared for a moment into his mug. If he went after her, he was her tool forever; but if he let her go—well, that had its disadvantages too.

He reached into his pocket for a valut-piece. Flipping it into the air, he thought: *if it comes down galley up, I’ll follow her; if it’s the Peremptor, I stay here.* The coin dropped to the table, rolled erratically towards Catzen’s empty mug, which it struck to fall and lie flat. Dragging it back towards him, he saw Medina’s stern face staring up at him. He shrugged; the mug had retarded its true motion, he thought, knocking it to the floor. Bending to retrieve it, he saw Medina again. *What kind of man entrusts his destiny to the toss of a coin anyway?*

With a shrug he stepped briskly from the table towards the exit Catzen had left. She could not have gone far, and would scarcely be difficult to find.

Locating Catzen proved even easier than he had expected, since she was waiting almost immediately outside the door, staring out to the moonlit sea from the waterfront.

“You didn’t get very far,” said Mirko with a frown.

“No.”

“It’s almost as if . . .”

“Not ‘almost’. I was waiting for you; I knew you’d follow me.”

Mirko sighed. “How?”

Catzen shook her head with the beginnings of a grin. “Will you ever learn not to ask me that? In this case, the answer is simple; women develop the skill early. It’s like archery; the more you practice it, the better you get.”

“I must appear very transparent to you.”

“Men in general do not present a great challenge to the perception. You are easier than most because you’re more honest than most.”

A wooden railing fenced off the waterfront from the sea, and Mirko went to lean against it. “You have this curious habit, Catzen, of blurring insult and compliment in such a way that I can’t tell which is which.”

She came and leant against the railing so close to him that her arm rested touching his. “Your difficulty is that you try to make a distinction. Sometimes a remark is just a remark.”

He looked across at her. “What happened at the Morvellos today—you might not believe it.”

“Like I said, I have you down as honest. Try me.”

“It was the mermaids . . .”

In the moonlight it was difficult to tell, but Mirko thought she had lost something of her colour.

“Go on.”

“They called to me—in my head. They called me in.”

Catzen shook her head. “There’s not one man in a hundred that the mermaids talk to—and not one in a hundred of those that they don’t mean harm. Don’t you have them in Garganet?”

“Yes, yes we do. They have much the same reputation there, and they’ve never tried to talking to me there.”

“Has one ever talked to you before?”

“No—no, that’s wrong. Once, on the beach here. Two fishermen were tormenting one they’d captured. They clearly planned worse mischiefs still. I had only just arrived here, I was still bitter about everything, and I have to admit that I didn’t care. Then she called to me in my head, pleaded with me to help her. So I sent them packing with my sword at their arses. It was not an occasion of any great consequence. But the voice in my head today, it said: ‘You saved me’, so maybe it was of consequence after all.”

“Mirko, you have the most extraordinary skill of sailing through events unscathed. How could you possibly believe the mermaids would guide you through safely?”

“I just knew they would. And they did.”

They leaned silently against the rail for a period. Mirko was conscious of the warmth of her arm against his, her body heat finally leaching out through her cloak. He looked at her out of the corner of his eye as she stared out to sea; the moonlight softened her features, gave them a cast of the innocence and optimism they must have had when she was young. He sensed, underneath her competence and cynicism, a vulnerability and loneliness; or was he just projecting his own feelings on to her? He felt himself drawn very powerfully to her, an affinity which made his attraction to Larien seem a thing of coarse sensuality, a reflexive gratification of base appetites.

Catzen smiled and pushed herself back from the railing. "Don't even think about kissing me."

"I wasn't—well—"

"Remember how predictable I've found your conduct tonight."

Mirko ran a hand through his hair. "Catzen, you were the one who was so keen for me to talk about feelings with you earlier."

She shrugged, her dark eyes unfathomable in the gloom of the night. "The fresh air has sharpened my wits. When you know what your feelings are, I might let you tell me."

"How do you know I don't?"

She laughed and skipped back a pace. "One day you will stop asking me 'how'—or perhaps not. For now: be honest with yourself about how you feel about Larien. When you really can tell me that you don't care for her—then you can talk to me."

Mirko continued to look out to sea. "You've been telling me all this time not to get too attached to her—for motives I hesitate to speculate—and now I tell you I'm not, you don't believe me."

She stepped back towards him and laid her hand on his forearm. "My motives were not as discreditable as you might imagine. And even now, I could tell you things about her you might not want to hear; but I won't because I want you to resolve things yourself. Whatever you decide about Larien has to come from your heart."

"I don't pretend to understand what's going on in your mind, Catzen."

"You don't have to. Listen, I wasn't going to tell you this, but I can't live with my conscience if I don't. One of the reasons I warned you off her was because I thought she'd break your heart; I didn't think she was

sincere about you. Well, that was wrong. She isn't the innocent you think she is; but she does care for you; and if you want her, I imagine she'd be yours without too much difficulty."

"How—"

Smiling, she shook her head. "'How' again? This is what it comes down to: she cares about you; she won't make you happy; and Bartazan will kill you if he thinks she's seriously attached to you. Your choice."

Mirko laughed as he looked into her face. "That's your unbiased view, is it? You have a compelling way of putting things."

"If you really loved her you wouldn't care about Bartazan. You are pig-headed enough where the Margariad is concerned; excessive prudence over your personal safety is not one of your faults. . . although I wish it were. Goodnight, Mirko: remember what I've said."

"And sorry about selling the charts?" asked Mirko as she walked away, but her black-cloaked back was already all but invisible.

He turned and started to walk back towards the tavern; as he did so he noticed three men, cloaked and hooded, walking in his direction. Automatically his hand dropped to his rapier hilt. Catzen was certainly right that he had few friends around Paladria.

"Ascalon?" said the man in the centre of the three; Mirko recognised his face but could not put a name to it.

He nodded briskly. "Kindly state your business briefly. The day, as you might imagine, has been somewhat draining."

A flicker of a smile crossed the other man's face. "Nothing would give me greater pleasure than to deal with you briskly, sir. My name is Remario, Covarc Remario. My business is in the nature of speculative transactions."

"A bookmaker? I know where I've seen you now. What odds are you offering on *Sapphire Light* for the Margariad?"

Remario's mouth drooped. "I am no longer taking bets on *Sapphire Light*, since you ask. This morning you might have got six for one."

"No longer taking bets? Am I to take it you consider our victory a certainty?"

"I am not a patient man, Ascalon. If *Sapphire Light* wins the Margariad I am, if not ruined, markedly inconvenienced."

Mirko looked around the waterfront. It was utterly deserted. In Paladria people often disappeared in such circumstances.

"I should have thought this was part and parcel of your business," he replied. "Can you not bet on *Sapphire Light* against other bookmakers — Federico, perhaps?"

Remario grimaced. "Federico, keen to secure a greater share of the market, is not keen to accept my bet. The expedient you suggest is closed to me."

Mirko shrugged. "Can you not use a trusted intermediary?"

Remario clucked impatiently. "I did not intercept you to ask for a solution. I merely warn you in a spirit of friendly counsel that unscrupulous persons may adopt unscrupulous courses."

"Fortunate, in that case," said Mirko with a nonchalance he did not feel, "that we are all persons of high scruple here."

He turned his back on the trio and walked back towards the tavern, his shoulders tense in anticipation of the sword thrusting at him. But neither Remario nor his henchmen moved, and Mirko made his way unmo-  
lested to the sanctuary of the inn.



## Chapter 24

Mirko's initial inclination to give the crew the next day off was tempered by the bleary eyes and pale complexions which presented themselves before him at roll-call at Urmalest the next morning. He could understand and forgive Florio and Damiano, who had been drinking at the Waterside at his expense; Jenx could be excused on the grounds of reaction to yesterday's dose of *falcx*. But the remainder of the crew, in slave quarters, could have had no legitimate access to alcohol. In the circumstances, it was necessary to make an example, and *Sapphire Light* took to the water for a morning of what was intended to be strenuous practice.

The sun was unusually bright for the late season, and the glare reflected off the calm sea to the discomfort of those members of the crew nursing sore heads. The practice drills were perfunctory, and after an hour Mirko gave up and brought the crew back, on an impulse circling via the Morvellos. The other galleys out on the water were conducting inshore drills, with

the exception of *Excelsior*, far away over towards the Sorcerers. As *Sapphire Light* approached the Morvellos, however, Mirko noticed *Morvellos Devil* practising her approaches to the lighthouse. It was an inevitable consequence of yesterday's exploits, he supposed, that other galley-masters might now want to determine a new optimum route around the rocks.

*Morvellos Devil* was experimenting with a line which even Mirko felt was rash. Several mermaids disported themselves on the rocks, taking seemingly no interest in either *Sapphire Light* or *Morvellos Devil*. There were no voices in Mirko's head today, and scant recognition from the mermaids.

The master of *Morvellos Devil*, Lammerkin, caught sight of *Sapphire Light* and saluted Mirko airily. She had just completed a perilously close pass of the rocks and Lammerkin seemed somewhat pleased with himself. The wind was blowing from the west and *Sapphire Light*'s Azure lateen sail billowed. Jenx and Florio were both of the opinion that a storm would soon arrive, and for a fact the sky had begun to darken ominously. Mirko signalled Jenx to beat Seven and *Sapphire Light* moved away from *Morvellos Devil*, which appeared intent on one more pass of the rocks.

*Morvellos Devil* raised her tempo to Eight to pass the largely uninterested crew of *Sapphire Light*, before adopting her previous course close to the rocks. *Insanity!* thought Mirko, with the wind freshening and pushing the galley closer to the rocks, and the course by no means an advisable one at the best of times. It was hard to judge, but *Morvellos Devil* seemed to be approaching even closer to the rocks than *Sapphire Light* had done yesterday.

She appeared to have executed the manoeuvre successfully when an erratic gust of wind filled the lateen, pushing her towards the rocks. There was a terrible grinding sound; this was not a glancing blow of the oars; *Morvellos Devil* had hit the rocks with her hull — and at speed.

Mirko jumped from the observation platform to the overseer's cockpit. "Port side only! Port wheel, port wheel!" he called. "Jenx! Make Nine!" He knew there was a limit to what *Sapphire Light* could do, especially if *Morvellos Devil*'s crew were chained; but he could not leave her to sink.

Meanwhile *Morvellos Devil* was backing furiously in an attempt to wedge herself off the rocks. Lammerkin was screeching madly but there was little evidence of con-

structive thought; if *Morvellos Devil* were holed she might well be better off on the rocks until *Sapphire Light* could reach her. Mirko had no way of communicating this information, and merely instructed the crew to make tempo Ten. *Morvellos Devil* appeared to have recovered a semblance of discipline, making a strong pull off the rocks and into the wind, with Lammerkin having sufficient presence of mind to order the lateen reefed.

Soon *Sapphire Light* was close enough to hail. "Lammerkin! Hold your position! Hold your position! We will tow you off!"

"We're sinking!" called Lammerkin.

Mirko found this credible; already there was a distinct list to *Morvellos Devil's* hull. Ortazek and Larze threw stout ropes across the gaps and made *Morvellos Devil* fast to *Sapphire Light's* stern. To return *Morvellos Devil* safely to the docks was not going to be an easy procedure: if her crew could row in synchrony with *Sapphire Light*, the effort would be much eased; but if they panicked at the thought of rowing a sinking vessel, all was lost.

"Florio," said Mirko. "Jump across to *Morvellos Devil* and take over. If she looks like she's going to sink, cut her adrift: I'm not having her take us down with her. But most of all, make sure she rows with us."

Florio gave a curt nod and leapt with practised agility across the gap between the boats. Lammerkin and Florio between them soon managed to restore some sort of order—at the very least crewmen were not running up and down the gangways—and *Morvellos Devil* began to add her strength to *Sapphire Light's*.

In the circumstances tempo Four was the greatest Mirko felt able to sustain, but some kind of running repairs aboard *Morvellos Devil* had arrested her gradual tilting and, while she sat low and crooked in the water, she no longer appeared to be in immediate danger of sinking. Mirko caught sight of Florio leaping about with great energy, followed by two or three crewmen; they had stripped the furlled lateen from the mast and appeared to have constructed some kind of improvised plug for the hole below the waterline.

The Arba Docks hove into view; it looked like the *Morvellos Devil* was going to get home without sinking. Florio leaped back across the gap.

"The plug has slowed down the leak, but she's badly holed. Our berth is nearer—tow her to ours and we'll take hers."

Mirko nodded; it would be ironic if *Morvellos Devil* were to sink within sight of the shore. *Sapphire Light* towed her to the berth earmarked for herself, unfastened the tow-rope. Dock hands who had been observing events from the shore quickly made *Morvellos Devil* fast to the jetty and helped the crew ashore, while *Sapphire Light* continued to the berth used by *Morvellos Devil* in happier times.

By the time *Sapphire Light* was made fast and Mirko had disembarked, Lammerkin was waiting. "Ascalon!" he said. "Thank you—your officers and crew saved us." He shook Mirko's hand with gusto.

Mirko shook his head ruefully. "What were you thinking of, Lammerkin? The *Morvellos* deserve more respect than that."

"You weren't saying that yesterday," said Lammerkin mildly.

Mirko grinned. Lammerkin was right; the difference between reckless foolhardiness and brilliant audacity was immeasurably slight. He could hardly ask if Lammerkin had been called in by the mermaids, although if they had done so they had done him no favours.

"Come on, let's go and have a drink while the galleywrights get to work on *Morvellos Devil*. You won't be going out again today and neither will I."

Lammerkin readily assented to this proposition, and the pair soon found themselves ensconced at the Waterside. Not normally the most expansive of men, Lammerkin was today in a voluble mood. *Morvellos Devil* had twice finished second in the Margariad—the last time two years ago with Lammerkin as master—and his observations were often to the point.

"Your best chance of beating *Dragonchaser* is the fact that she has never been under real pressure until this year. Drallenkoop has won three years running by ever-increasing margins. You saw how rattled crew and master were in the Sorcerers, when *Excelsior* ran her close. Drallenkoop is a brilliant helm, none better at the spectacular turn; he knows with almost instinctive skill the best line for both the Sorcerers and the *Morvellos*. But those turns are much easier when you have a clear run. *Dragonchaser's* real strength is the speed of her crew over flat water: she hits the turns ahead. A fast boat will always beat a good helm."

Mirko sipped at his third mug of Widdershins and nodded. "What do you do if one boat has the fastest crew and the best helm?"

"It very rarely happens. Drallenkoop may like to think he's the best helm, but he isn't: young Gambar Inisse of *Fanar's Glory* is better, but his crew is too slow for it to do him any good. Oh, Drallenkoop has the potential, and his turn through the Sorcerers to win the Margariad three years ago was breathtaking; but he's had so little competition recently that he hasn't maintained that standard. Drallenkoop is a great galley-master, but not for his helming: it's for getting every last iota out of his crew. You have something of the same, but your crew isn't as good."

Mirko normally found this kind of conversation uninteresting, but today he was in the mood to hear more about the great race he had set his sights on winning.

"How many Margariads have you raced, Lammerkin?"

"Ha! This will be my fourteenth, with two second places and two fourths to my credit. *Morvellos Devil* is a sound enough boat, but Lord Garlin cannot afford slaves good enough to challenge the very best boats. This year I thought we had a decent chance of second, but *Excelsior* has come on better than expected, and of course *Sapphire Light* has surpassed all expectations. I'll be happy with third; and worse than fourth and Garlin will be looking for a new master next year. You may not think it to look at me, but I could have been a great galley-master with a little luck. I have always had Helence at my helm; and we've both become more cautious with the years. The mighty galley-masters of my youth are all gone now, but the truth is I was never good enough to step into the breach. Drallenkoop aside, none of today's masters are anything like the quality we used to see."

Mirko laughed. "Men always think they follow an age of heroes; their own deeds they think are not worth accounting—but the next generation will look at them in awe. There will be lads in the crowd this year who look at some marvellous manoeuvre—maybe even one you pull off—and their hearts will be fired to take to the galleys themselves."

"No, no, no. If you'd ever seen Addacatzen or Barvilun, you'd know the meaning of a great master."

"Addacatzen I've heard of."

"Ah yes, he was the skipper of *Griselda* and latterly *Sunrise*. His galleys didn't have the sheer speed of *Dragonchaser*, but Addacatzen understood racing. In a crowded fleet he could always find the gap, and his

lateen was always angled to the wind. A mystery he only won the race three times."

"Why was that?"

"House Drall—well, I'm sure you know all the stories about House Drall. They can hardly take an active part in politics in the city, not with their history. As a result much of their energy goes into the galleys instead. Addacatzen was a very popular galley-master, the Drallenkoop of his day, if you like. Rather unwisely, he allowed his name to be associated with a political faction—our Peremptor Medina was one of the coming men, too, and they were part of the same affinity. Anyway, Addacatzen ended up in a gutter with his throat cut. A galley-master can be an influential man, and there were plenty of people who worried about his influence. If only he'd stuck to the racing. . . ."

Mirko smiled uneasily. "People have said the same to me. Between ourselves, I've been bribed and threatened to race badly."

"Ha! A successful galley-master will always make enemies, although as long as he knows his place he's usually safe enough. Drallenkoop, for instance: he's made it clear his ambitions are limited to the water. No one will touch him."

"The fact that at the moment he stands between Paladria and 'Peremptor Bartazan' wouldn't be in any way a factor?"

Lammerkin permitted himself a small smile. "For a fact, there aren't too many people would be keen to see Bartazan elected. No doubt that's why you're attracting so much hostility. But I'm sure Bartazan will look after you."

Mirko looked down into his mug. The exact nature of the 'looking after' Bartazan might bestow was a permanent if low-level concern. Catzendralle, as ever, had been right to suggest he had few friends whichever way the Margariad turned out.

Lammerkin called for another jug of Widdershins, but before Panduletta could bring it, Florio burst into the tavern.

"Mirko! Quickly! There's a fire at the docks! They say *Sapphire Light* is ablaze!"

Mirko and Lammerkin jumped to their feet. "Call the Constables!" cried Lammerkin. "Not a moment to lose!"

Mirko rushed out into the street, his head spinning. Galleys didn't just 'catch fire'. Remario's threat flashed into his head: *I warn you in a spirit of friendly counsel that unscrupulous persons may adopt unscrupulous courses.*

Remario himself might soon be learning the meaning of the word 'unscrupulous'.

The pall of smoke against the clear night sky was plainly visible. Whatever was ablaze, the flames must have taken hold with alacrity. Mirko cursed; this close to the race the chances of constructing an alternative galley were negligible. If *Sapphire Light* could not be saved, the Margariad was lost. Under such circumstances, the probability of securing his salary arrears from Bartazan were not promising; and his use as an agent to Catzendralle would also be at an end. He set his mouth. Whatever it took, he would find out who had crossed him.

As he neared the Arba Docks the crowds began to thicken. There was nothing like a calamity to bring folk out on to the streets. Ill-favoured faces turned in vexation as he tried to force his way through.

"What's your hurry, fellow?" grunted one loutish person.

"My galley's on fire!" cried Mirko in despair.

"It's Ascalon!" went up the cry. "Make way there for Captain Ascalon!"

Although the night was clear, the smoke made it difficult for to see in detail what was happening. Gouts of flame twenty feet high leapt into the air, tendrils of fire snaking out erratically as they were caught by the sea-breeze. Dockhands ambled around ineffectually with buckets of sea-water, tossing them in the vague direction of the flames, to no effect.

"Come on there!" called Mirko in desperation. "Show some urgency! There's a galley on fire! Florio, to the barracks—get the crew here!"

Florio dashed back into the crowd; in the other direction strode Mengippu, *Dragonchaser's* overseer, and a sturdy band of her crew.

"Mengippu!" called Mirko in relief. "Thank Fanar you're here—we might save *Sapphire Light* yet!"

Mengippu allowed a wondering glance to settle on Mirko. "Are you insane, Ascalon? We berth next to you—do think we're risking the flames spreading? Men—cast off and away!"

Mirko looked on astonishment as *Dragonchaser's* virtually complete crew rushed into the smoke—not to extinguish the blaze, but to move *Dragonchaser* out of the way. This was Paladrian galley-racing.

With a curse Mirko plunged into the smoke behind them; if no-one else would lift a finger, he at least would fight to the end. He rushed past *Dragonchaser's*

berth to the adjacent mooring with its legend *Private—Sapphire Light, of Bartazan House*. He stopped with a caw of laughter and recognition, choking on smoke as he did so.

The flames gained in intensity as they ignited the tightly furled lateen sail at the top of the mast; the varnished fabric went up like kindling. With it went the galley's hopes of racing again this year, for there was no chance at all that the blaze could be extinguished.

"Ascalon!" shouted a voice in his ear. "Get back—there's nothing you can do now."

Mirko turned and saw Corrando, an officer of the Peremptor's Constables with whom he was all too familiar. Nodding he allowed Corrando to escort him back down the jetty.

Corrando leaned against the sea-wall. "A bad business."

Mirko assented with a weary nod. "Passions run high in this game, it seems."

"You don't see any way it could have been accidental, then?"

"Galleys are made of wood; wood can catch fire easily enough. But on a deserted jetty late at night? No, I think we can assume a deliberate act here."

Corrando nodded and smoothed his uniform. "We have spoken often enough for you to avoid offence at my observation that you have a fair quota of enemies."

Mirko rubbed his chin. "Where should we begin? As you well know, Gambar Inisse and the Fanarites have shown a marked animosity in the past, although their Hierophant claims that is all in the past now. Then again, both Fenneker and Cascas left *Sapphire Light* in ways that to a petty or vindictive mind require a counterblow. You might also be interested in a conversation I had with Covarc Remario yesterday, and no doubt a little ingenuity might come up with further candidates, some closer to Coverciano than others."

Corrando frowned. "The latter point is clearly misconceived. The Peremptor dispenses justice, rather than dispensing with it."

"A subtle distinction," said Mirko with a slight inclination of his head.

"The dispensation of justice, by its nature, has subjectivities and quirks of perception. To fail to act for this reason would lead to paralysis and indecision; and eventually the collapse of law."

"I am sure you have more pressing calls, Corrando, than to debate the abstractions of statecraft with galley-masters."

Corrando laughed and bowed. "Indeed I have, Captain: such as discovering immediately and with full rigour the persons who have criminally enflamed your galley."

He turned and made to walk away.

"Corrando! If you are about to conduct such an investigation, you should start with the essential facts correct. It's not *Sapphire Light* that's on fire: it's *Morvellos Devil*, with whom we exchanged berths this afternoon."

Even in the orange reflections of the blazing galley, the draining of Corrando's complexion was all too apparent to Mirko. "Good luck with your investigations, sir."

He ran over to where Florio was approaching with *Sapphire Light*'s crew. "It's not us that's on fire—it's *Morvellos Devil*. Remember, we lent them our berth."

Florio laughed. "Something of a wasted journey, then."

Mirko remembered his earlier scorn for Mengippu and smiled. "Certainly not. Someone wanted to see us on fire tonight. Find *Sapphire Light*, get the crew aboard, and make for the open sea. I wouldn't like to see any more 'accidents' tonight."

Florio grinned. "Aye aye! Are you not coming yourself?"

"I have some investigations to make ashore—and I trust Corrando about as far as I can see him in this smoke. I'll be back at the barracks tomorrow morning: training for tomorrow is cancelled!"

He sprang off into the crowd. He had a feeling that Catzendralle would be able to shed some light on this mysterious affair—if she could persuaded to tell all she knew.



# Finister

by *Till Noever*

## Book Two

— 2 —

Caitlan woke in darkness, surrounded by a clammy stench. His eyes snapped open. His body jerked to rise. A pain lanced through his right arm and into his shoulder. He exhaled and relaxed his muscles. Beneath him he felt . . . straw? It was rough against his skin.

Skin? He touched himself and found that he was naked. He turned his head. The thought he saw the indistinct rectangle of a door.

Where was he? That awful smell: like the reek of marine putrescence mixed with the exudations of human bodies and the stale tang of cold fire places. Caitlan rolled over on his good side and forced himself up. He felt around and realized that he had lain on a low straw pallet. Where? It looked like a hut of sorts.

He massaged his sore arm; felt a bruise where the wooden club had impacted on muscle and bone. He felt it gingerly. It was just a bruise. He moved the arm; felt a pain shoot right up to his shoulder and winced. He tried to flex the fingers of his right hand, one by one. Satisfied that there had been no grave damage he gently massaged the hand, the bruise, his sore shoulder. It was painful but it had to be done. He couldn't afford to be lame. He had to travel.

He *would* not be lame!

Ailin's gift . . .

Memories hit him like a club. His stomach lurched. A wave of nausea. Then, another wave—of pain, sorrow, and guilt. A hot feeling behind his eyes. Caitlan shook himself and took several deep breaths. His hand touched his chest. He felt the pendant.

He closed his eyes and exhaled; shook off the memories.

Not now. Later maybe; when he had the time to grieve.

He bent under the low door-frame and stepped out; found himself outside a rough hut, set in an approximate circle of several other huts like it; all surrounded

by a wall of trees. On the outside the rank smell was weaker. Gratefully, Caitlan drew in the fresh air. Janus was rising above the tree-tops: the night was well-advanced. He peered at the huts. The inhabitants appeared to be asleep. An extremely primitive folk, to judge from their dwellings. Fishermen, he guessed. It would explain the smell.

Caitlan looked around furtively. Nothing moved. He stepped behind the hut he'd been in and, in the darkness, relieved himself. He stepped back into the circle. Where were his clothes? Following a hunch—and holding his breath—he ducked back into the hut and groped around in the darkness. His probing hands encountered unknown objects. Then, familiar textures. He picked up his clothes, his belt . . . his hand probed frantically; felt the knife and the pouch. He backed out of the hut again. He rubbed the stiff leather breeches until they had become supple enough to wear, then put them on. The tunic was dry and he pulled it over his head. He felt better now. Not that he was prudish, but there was something about being naked that left him feeling . . . exposed.

He stood there, wondering what to do now. Finally, knowing that there was nothing he *could* do, he sat down, his back against the straw wall of the hut, and stared into the darkness, massaging his sore arm and waiting for the morning, when he would find out who had brought him here.

The crack of a twig. He woke with his customary suddenness. He opened his eyes and saw that he was surrounded by a ring of curious faces. Strange faces. Flat and pale. Vestigial noses; nostrils turned forward. Heavy epicanthic folds left only slits were the eyes were. Sparse white hair covered their heads. The men's faces, like the women's, were devoid of any trace of beard or eyebrows. From the lower parts of the scrawny, pale bodies of both sexes hung flaccid potbellies. The women's breasts were drooping conical bags. Their ages were impossible to determine. To Caitlan they all looked the same. Ornate loincloths, woven with great precision and coming in a rainbow of bright colors, were the only garments.

The onlookers regarded Caitlan with a frank curiosity that was unnerving and touching at the same time. He heaved himself up and stood towering over them. It must have, he realized, taken a great many of them to carry him from the beach to the village.

One of the men stepped forward and peered up into Caitlan's face. He opened his mouth, exposing cracked brown teeth and a number of gaps. He croaked a short sequence of unintelligible staccato sounds and pointed at himself. Caitlan emulated the gesture. "Caitlan."

A chitter of excited laughter swept through the onlookers. A tiny youngster though, riding in his mother's arms, decided that he wasn't amused and took the opportunity to roar his disapproval. The mother lifted a pendulous breast and stuffed the nipple into the infant's mouth. With a sidelong glance at Caitlan he began to suck as if his life depended on it; which, Caitlan reflected, it did. The other children were just curious tiny faces poking through the legs of their elders.

The man in front of Caitlan repeated the syllables of Caitlan's name. He made it sound like "Cah-loon". Caitlan smiled to signal his approval of the attempt. The man grinned back. A smile evidently had the same significance it had everywhere else. They stood there for another few moments, staring at each other. Then, as if on a secret signal, the company resolved, and went about its daily business. The man in front of Caitlan gestured. Caitlan followed and presently faced the daunting task of bringing himself to consume food which looked revolting and smelled nauseating; a stew of indefinable pieces of vegetable origin, from which wafted an overpowering odor of fish and sea tang. Caitlan, who was hungry and did not want to offend his hosts, forced himself to eat the vile stuff. He almost vomited it up a couple of times, but by some miracle managed to avert the worst.

This ordeal over he had the run of the village. The children trailed him at a safe distance. A woman signaled to him as he walked past her hut. He went over, only to have her touch his wounded arm. There was something in the gesture of this strange, grotesque, and yet somehow . . . beautiful . . . creature that triggered a memory . . .

He extricated himself from the woman's attentions and left the village; heading for the beach where he suspected they'd found him. He waved at the throng of his followers. They fell behind, and presently returned to a more interesting game than watching a strange man do incomprehensible things. Caitlan heaved a sigh of relief and plodded on. He located a quiet spot in the fask and lay down.

Ailin's image came to him—he could see her leaning over him when she'd saved his life in Sacrael. "*Don't you ever do that to me again!*"

It hit him then. More now than ever before.

For a while there he couldn't breathe with the pain in his chest. He sat up and looked out over the gray-green ocean. And then, for the first time since he'd become a man, he cried.

Later, his emotions temporarily spent, he opened the pouch at his belt and extracted the locator. He half expected it to be cracked and battered, but found it whole. Sand and dirt had worked their way into the pouch, but the material had not been scratched. He wiped off the detritus and pushed the buttons in the sequence Pandrak had taught him. The little rectangle lit up, the arrow pointed. Amazing! Caitlan pushed another sequence. The arrow rotated to point in a new direction; not far from the old, but the rotation was definite. Rutger, wherever he was, had not yet located the mysterious treasure.

Urgency tugged at Caitlan, but he knew that he had to rest; for a day at least. He touched his sore arm—found that the pain was receding, as was the swelling.

Ailin's gift . . . How could he bear the thought of centuries without her?

Caitlan forced himself to regain a measure of self-control. How could he function if he allowed himself to be distracted by such notions? They must be pushed into the background. One day there would be a time. But not now. What was done was done. Now, above all, he had to survive and find the magic!

Caitlan spent the day trying to communicate with the villagers. After some effort and lots of listening, he finally realized that the guttural, primitive sounds they made were really nothing but his own words—though much shortened and simplified. Armed with that insight he acquired a rudimentary understanding of what his hosts were trying to tell him. He found them to be a strange and unsettling, but incredibly gentle, people; with a sense of humor such as he had only found in children. This, he decided, was essentially the truth: they were like adult children. Gentle. Children who somehow had made their niche in this corner of Finister and had remained here, mostly unmolested, for what may have been centuries.

They had no name for themselves as a community—and individuals knew each other by odd

appellations that appeared to have no rhyme or reason for existing. Some sounded like distorted version of names he knew; others might have been exclamations like 'hey, you!' turned into names.

Their art and their passion was weaving. The wool they derived from their dakas, of which they kept several small herds. Their dyes they derived from ground rocks and plants, which they processed in wooden vats and containers. Caitlan, always thinking ahead, and anticipating the voyage which he must soon undertake, considered their weaving skills. An idea formed in his head. He felt uncomfortable about asking them for yet more than the hospitality they'd already accorded to him; but his need was great and he needed weapons. The knife at his belt was a puny affair, which gave him small comfort.

The people—and this is what he decided to call them: just 'the People'—appeared delighted when he made his request and, with drawings in the dirt and much talk, he got them to fabricate several slings. Two larger ones, for long-distance projectiles; and two smaller ones which could be used for close-up combat.

They didn't ask about the purpose of the strange objects he asked them to make, though they must have wondered. Or did they? Maybe they were just happy to make something novel they hadn't attempted before. Like a child when confronted with a new toy.

Caitlan never showed them what the slings were for. He didn't quite know why not, but it just felt wrong. Instead he pretended that they were ornaments. He wrapped them around his neck and tied them around his waist in the manner of a belt, as if it was the most natural and obvious thing that one would do such a thing. The People sniggered and chortled at his odd habits; but it was a benign merriment, and Caitlan laughed with them, relieved that they had not divined the slings' true purpose.

He left them on the third day. They gave him a ornately woven sack filled with knobs of the strange floury vegetable they used in all their cooking, and which he'd never seen before. There was also a blanket they'd woven in an amazing spurt of concentrated activity. The blanket was almost black, with an irregular yellow spiral pattern. What it meant, he had no idea. Maybe it didn't mean anything; this was the most likely explanation.

The whole village had come to see him off. There was much chattering and clapping of hands, but finally,

resolutely, he turned away. The children ran after him for a while until they tired of the sport and returned home to their pots and the vile cooking—which Caitlan, despite all attempts, had never been able to find anything but utterly revolting. He waved to the People, and they waved back until they were out of sight. Then he turned his steps west and accelerated his pace.

After a solid day's walk with only short stops, he made camp beside a small brook. He built a fire, over which he roasted some of the knobs of whatever-it-was. They were bland to the point of being tasteless, but, after a hard day's march they tasted almost good. Caitlan extinguished the fire, wrapped himself in the blanket, and went into a light sleep.

The steppe was quiet. Caitlan wondered if people lived here. He had not seen a human being since he left the village, but that meant nothing. What kind of folk might they be? In the grass, on the flat plain, under the stars and Janus, he lay, and again it was as if she were with him; as if she'd never gone. But then came the emptiness; and then he felt so alone that it almost frightened him. How could he have become so close to one human being? So dependent that her loss was like he'd lost half of himself?

The stars provided no answer or comfort.

In the morning he practiced with the slings. When he was done, Caravella was high up in the sky. He made himself another simple meal, drank his fill of water from the brook and, after consulting the locator, continued on his way. Caravella shone down from a clear sky and the day was getting hot. Caitlan was grateful that the steppe was green and groundwater plentiful. As long as he had water he would live.

It was in the late afternoon when he saw the first tassel trees. He'd heard about them from Pandrak, but to see them was something else. They had no trunks; and to call them 'trees' was a misnomer. Each tree consisted of a thick bundle of narrow, spear-like leaves growing from the ground to the height of several men. At the end of the leaves thin stalks branched off into what looked like miniature trees. From the end of each of these branches, suspended from a thin stalk, hung a clump of fluffy vegetable fibers; the 'tassles' which gave the trees their name.

This was a copse of them, growing in a rough circle around the top of a small hillock. Caitlan soon saw the

reason for the grouping. A spring among the rocks on the top of the hill provided a steady flow of moisture. The trees had arranged themselves as close to the rocks as possible in order to take advantage of the water.

Caitlan considered the location and decided that it was a good place to stay for the night. He made camp, spent another hour practicing with the slings, and finally, satisfied that his right arm was functioning properly again, decided to call it quits for the night. He prepared another dull meal and extinguished the fire before going to sleep. As he rolled over on his side Ailin's pendant fell to one side. He pulled it out and regarded it in the light of the dying day. He put it back into his tunic and lay back, struggling to find sleep.

He woke, alert and ready. Janus rode high in the sky. Caitlan prepared to leap up—but decided otherwise when he saw the ring of figures around him. Dimly illuminated but Janus' glow he also discerned that several of them held short lances, which were aimed at his chest. Too many. Slowly, so as not to provoke them, he rose into a crouch. When nothing happened he dared to stand up—just as slowly. Behind the men, through the shadows of the tassel trees, he discerned horses.

One of the men stepped forward cautiously and extracted Caitlan's knife from its sheath. Caitlan offered no resistance. The man signaled him to turn around. Caitlan complied. Hands grabbed his arms, forced his hands behind his back, and tied them together. A rope was attached to his neck. Hands inspected his belt and found the pouch and the slings. The belt was detached. Someone opened the pouch and extracted the locator. He fondled it briefly then threw it away. The slings, which had been looped over the belt, occasioned more interest and were passed from hand to hand.

Throughout the procedure no word had been spoken. But now one of the men stepped close to Caitlan and looked up into his face. He, too, was small compared to the former weaponsmaster. But then again, most people were.

"What is your name?" The words were spoken in a slurred accent, with a lilt that was strange to him; but they were intelligible and clear enough.

"Caitlan."

"Where are you from?"

"The Valley."

"We don't know such a place."

"It is on the other side of the ocean."

The man nodded, as if he'd expected the explanation.

"What do you do here?"

"I am a traveler," Caitlan told him. "I travel to Thalonica."

"The big village," the man said. "You are far from the big village." He motioned to the man who held the other end of the rope that was tied around Caitlan's neck. "You will come," he said to Caitlan. The man gave a jerk. Caitlan had no option but to follow. The men returned to their horses. Caitlan's rope was tied to the saddle of one and, as the group of a dozen or so horsemen rode off, he had to run to keep from falling. His tied hands didn't help with his attempts to keep balance in the darkness, running over the rough ground. He stumbled a few times, but caught himself.

Presently the journey ended. Ahead, a clutter of low conical shapes, which on closer approach turned out to be tents. The group rode into the circle of dwellings and halted. Caitlan's rope was untied from the horse, he was led into a tent, pushed to the ground, had his feet tied together, and joined by a rope with the hands in such a fashion that he could barely even wriggle around. Then they left him in the darkness, wondering what he'd gotten into.

Caitlan's joints were getting stiff from his cramped position when three men entered the tent. They undid the ropes, leaving only his hands tied, and pushed him out of the tent; across the open space and into another tent, where five men were sitting cross-legged on mats. A small fire burned here, casting flickering lights upon the faces of his captors; the first time he'd seen them as more than silhouettes or vaguely glimpsed outlines.

One man pushed Caitlan into a kneeling position. "Bow," he hissed.

Caitlan considered his options—and shook his head.

Someone kned him in the back. "Bow!" A sharp pain shot up his back.

Caitlan, sick in his heart, injured in his soul, tormented by his irreversible loss, finally snapped. Without thinking he dropped his legs from under him, rolled on his back, spun around, and delivered a kick at the man closest to him. His right foot impacted in the middle of the chest; he felt the breastbone cave in. The man lurched backwards with a grunt, landed in the fabric wall of the tent and lay still, wheezing painfully.

The other two drew knives and prepared to adjust the situation. Caitlan waited until they were close enough, then delivered a vertical *keii* kick at the closest wrist holding a knife. The wrist snapped. The man gave a hoarse ejaculation. His wrist hung limp. The other, momentarily stunned, reacted too late. Caitlan dove at his legs, toppled him, rolled back again and kicked at the man's temple. He, too, lay still. Caitlan rolled around again and gained the momentum to stand. He turned to the men on the mats, who had watched without moving. Even now, they appeared to be bemused rather than alarmed.

Into the tent burst several men. Sharp spears pointed at Caitlan. One lifted his and made as if to jab. Caitlan's eyes were on him, his muscles tensed to spring into action—futilely or not. At that moment he truly didn't care whether he lived or died.

From the corner of his eyes he saw one of the three elders make a brief gesture. The men at the tent entrance froze. Caitlan glanced sideways. The man in the center of the group gestured again; a motion of complete authority and confidence.

"Take them." The voice was quiet, yet bespoke of strength and power.

Caitlan stood still as, reluctantly, but without any sign of resistance, the men he'd just felled were carried out of the tent by their comrades.

Another gesture from the elder. One man stepped forward, a knife in his hand. Caitlan tensed, but forced himself to calm. The man moved behind him and cut the ropes tying his hands. Caitlan massaged his sore wrists as the men filed out, leaving him alone with the elders. The man in the center of the group, an individual with a hooked nose, a high forehead, long white hair, and a face wrinkled and cragged from age and exposure to the elements, regarded Caitlan in silence; totally unconcerned at the presence of a man who had, in the span of a few breaths and with his hands tied behind his back, incapacitated three of their warriors.

"You are not a traveler," the elder in the middle said. "You are a warrior," he added. A pause. "You hunt."

Caitlan nodded slowly.

"I hunt," he said.

"And you grieve," the elder on his left added. "Therefore you do not care if you live or die."

Caitlan stared at the elder. He shrugged. "It is all the same."

The elder shook his head. "It is not. Life is life. Death is death." He regarded Caitlan shrewdly. "Are you warrior enough to know who your grief is for?"

Caitlan nodded. The elder's eyes crinkled at the corners, adding a few more lines to the already craggy face. "So certain."

"Yes," Caitlan said. "I grieve for my loss. But my loss is nothing compared to what *she* lost when she died."

The elder chuckled. "So you do know the difference."

Caitlan grinned ruefully.

"Who do you hunt?" asked the elder in the middle.

"A man," Caitlan said. "A dangerous man."

The elder on Caitlan's right held up the slings they'd taken off him. "What are these?"

Caitlan hesitated. But he knew that he needed their goodwill—and lies would destroy that prospect. These men would know if he lied. That much was certain.

"You live on the steppe?" he asked them. "You move from place to place?"

"We are Jitanoo," the elder said. "We roam the grasslands, and all the grasslands are our home."

"But you are not the only ones," Caitlan guessed. "There are others—not all of them your friends."

"There are others," the elder admitted.

"Your men fight," Caitlan said, "and some die."

"Not as quickly as they would at your hands," the elder in the center said wryly. "We are fortunate that the others do not have warriors like you."

"How do your men fight?" Caitlan asked. "What manner of weapons do they use?"

"We fight on horses. We use spears and swords."

Caitlan nodded. It made sense. Bows required special wood. Strips of tika were ideal, compounded with a layer of noquo. The only wood apart from tassel trees he'd seen on Finister so far were pines. Their straight branches made for great spear shafts, but lousy bows. Importing weapons from somewhere else was probably not an option for these people. And, Caitlan thought, pride probably also played a part.

"I thought so," he said. "But spears have a limited range—and they're scarce. By the time you can use your swords, the enemy's so close that injury is almost inevitable. A wasteful way to fight a battle on the plains."

The elder on Caitlan's right held up the slings. "The idiots of the village by the sea made these," he asserted.

"They did," Caitlan said. "They found me stranded on the beach. They nursed me back to strength. They made these. They are good people."

"They stink," the elder said; without rancor or judgment; a mere statement of fact.

"They are good people," Caitlan nonetheless felt compelled to say.

"Why did they make these?"

"What would you say," Caitlan asked, "if I could show you a way to wage battle with far less losses to yourselves?"

He had their attention now. The benign old faces had turned alert; the relaxed lassitude, the serenity, had given way to something else. Caitlan could not define it, but he knew that these men were not just leaders of peace. They commanded warriors—and he had just offered them something that might make all the difference to the very survival of their group.

They were *listening*.

Caitlan held out his hand. The elder placed the slings into it.

"Tomorrow, at daybreak," Caitlan told him, "I will show you how. In return I ask for my freedom and a horse."

The elder in the center nodded. "Deliver what you promise and it will be so."

It seemed like all the men of the tribe had gathered here; regarding him with suspicion, despite the incomprehensible behavior of their elders. Had the huge stranger not maimed three of their finest? How could they allow him to roam free, as if he were an honored guest? Caitlan had a measure of sympathy for such sentiments. On the other hand, it was they who had taken the offensive when they took him prisoner. The elders, however, for inscrutable reasons of their own, had chosen to think differently. Much to his advantage.

Caitlan stood there, one of the larger slings in his hand. He made a point of looking around the ground, walked over to pick up a jagged rock about half the size of his hand. He placed it the sling's pocket, reached out, swung. The rock swished through the air. Once. And again. When it was at the right place in the swing Caitlan released the tasseled end of the sling. The rock arced toward a straggly pine-tree about sixty paces away and shattered the upper half of the scrawny trunk.

From the crowd came a gasp. Caitlan turned around. The three elders, standing at the front of the circle, nodded approvingly. Caitlan suppressed a grin. He could have hit the stump from three times that distance, but it had taken him years to perfect his skill. He didn't have much time. These people would have to be taught in *days*. Sixty paces was as far as he'd go.

"You will teach us," one of the elders said.

"You will need slings," Caitlan told him.

"The women will make them."

Caitlan lifted his. "This is a *good* sling," he said. "Better than anything I've ever used."

"The idiots made it," the elder said.

"Exactly," Caitlan.

"You want us to ask them to make them for us?" The concept appeared difficult to grasp, even for the elder.

"Trade," Caitlan suggested. He could see that it was a novel notion.

For a moment he had misgivings. Was it really such a good idea to expose the People to outside influences? Who was he to make such decisions? Did he even have the *right*?

He told himself that he didn't have any choice. Because of his need to survive and accomplish his mission, he had been placed into a position where he might be changing the face of entire cultures. The People's skills would be discovered. They needed protection. This tribe seemed like a good candidate.

"You make excellent vessels," he said, nodding at the tents, from which hung suspended skins of water. Before them were arrayed elaborately carved containers for all kinds of things; grains, meats, salt, liquids. "Theirs," he said, "are leaky and primitive. But their skills at weaving know few equals. When two peoples have something the others need, trade is an equal exchange of useful things. You also have an interest in protecting them. Your enemies will eventually figure out what new weapon you're using. If your slings are better than theirs you will retain at least some of your advantage." He whirled the sling around his hand. "Meanwhile, your women can make some of leather. I will show them how to do this. Leather is not as good as weave, but it will serve the purpose."

The elders stared at him as they came to terms with the concepts he'd placed before them.

"I will test your men and select seven of their best to train. When they can do this," he pointed at the shattered tree, "my work is done."

He regarded the elders. "Are we agreed?"  
 "We are agreed."

He started with them on the following morning: twenty-six Jitanoo warriors with hastily contrived, three-foot long, slings. Caitlan took them well out of range of the camp and gave them a talk on basic safety. Learning sling-shooting was a dangerous exercise; best practiced alone. The potential for calamity with twenty-six inexperienced trainees was enormous. Still, Caitlan needed to sort out his squad of seven. One by one he put the twenty-six through the basic drills. Load; initiate swing; follow through with three vertical loops; release at the bottom of the trajectory.

"You did it differently yesterday," one of them objected.

"How?"

"You swung like this." He demonstrated.

An observant individual! Caitlan's technique was to swing in the opposite direction and release the missile at the top of the trajectory. It was more difficult, but once it was perfected it was also more lethal, especially at closer distances.

"What's your name?" Caitlan asked the young Jitanoo.

"Fancho."

"Very well, Fancho. You have just gotten yourself selected." Fancho tried not to show it, but Caitlan could see that he was pleased—and proud. The others regarded Fancho with hooded glances that spoke of envy and a grudging respect. Caitlan understood that he had increased the man's status significantly. It appeared that being singled out in such a fashion was an important tool for advancement. He began to understand why his contingent was so eager. It wasn't just that they wanted to learn the new weapon; they were actively competing for status; and he, Caitlan, stranger though he was, represented their means to achieving it. He knew that, from now on, everybody's attention would be doubled.

Good. He could make use of this snippet of insight into the Jitanoo's social idiosyncrasies.

By the end of the morning he had selected the seven he wanted. All of them hid their pride at his choice, but they couldn't really conceal it. The remaining nineteen departed with sullen faces. Caitlan proceeded to indoctrinate his pupils in the techniques of this deceptively simple weapon.

Astonishing, he thought, that they had not invented it themselves. The slingshot was such an obvious device. An observant child could invent it. Yet neither the Jitanoo, nor any other of the plains people, seemed to have done it.

*How easily we miss that which is right in front of us.*

By nightfall the men were exhausted. Caitlan ordered them to get a long night's sleep. They laughed, taking his advice to be jocular. They were going to strut their importance that night; maybe brag to the girls. Obliquely, of course, but going to brag they were. Imbibe some tipo, a vile intoxicating beverage that had given Caitlan an instant headache after a few mouthfuls.

Caitlan stopped them. "Until I have finished with your training," he told them, "you will do as I say. And I say that you will sleep all night; because a tired warrior is a useless warrior. Tomorrow you will rise with Caravella and you will train until she sets. Tomorrow night you will sleep again. And so the day after, and the day after, and so on . . . until you know what I want you to know."

They muttered; looked at him, ready for defiance. Then, one by one, they fell silent.

"Look at me," Caitlan snapped.

They did.

"The fate of your people may depend on you," he said—because he knew that would get through to them. "If you fail me you fail them."

He turned to Fancho. "Fancho, I appoint you leader. That means you're responsible for everything they do. I also expect you to enforce any orders that I may issue. You may, if you wish, appoint one deputy to assist you."

He grimaced. "Now—I want you to have a good meal, and no tipo! I want you to discuss what you have learned today. Then, sleep. At the first light of day you will gather here and, as a group, run ten times in a wide circle around the camp as fast as you can. Then we start training."

He turned away and left them standing, looking at his retreating back.

He proceeded to the tent which had been assigned to him. It belonged to one of the men he'd maimed on the night of his capture.

He ducked through the flap and found the man, Oparin, and his family—spouse, three teenage sons and one daughter, maybe ten, one grandmother, one grandfather—already present. The man, whose wrist was broken, sat dejected in a corner. The rest of the family

eyed Caitlan with barely concealed apprehension. No hostility here. No rancor. Only a respect that bordered on fear. Caitlan's ruthless action last night, this much he understood, was not something to resent. It was something they admired; even though he was a stranger. The elders had explained it to him in a few brief words. "Captives submit. You did not. You therefore are not a captive. But you have taken three men from us. They will live, but they will never be true fighters again. And so, before you can leave, you must return something."

Caitlan now felt bad about having injured this man, but he knew that he'd had little choice. Besides, they had brought it upon themselves. The truth was that they had captured him; deprived him of his freedom. He was merely doing what had to be done to regain it. People made choices. They had made theirs. Caitlan, his. It was a simple as that.

Caitlan went over to the man and sat down beside him. The woman spooned stew from a pot into a bowl and handed it to Caitlan; who thanked her and then proceeded to slurp it from the vessel. The Jitanoo did not use utensils for eating.

When he was done he unwrapped the bandages and inspected the man's wrist. It was swollen and hot; yellow, red, and purple. Caitlan made the man lie down on his back and rest the wrist flat on the ground. He did not know much about bones, but he knew enough to understand that his probing fingers encountered badly mangled bones. There was little anybody could do.

And yet . . .

Caitlan thought of Ailin's gift. How much of that was his, and his alone? How much could *he* in turn bestow upon others what she'd given to him on that night when they had become one?

The Circe's Gift.

Ailin had touched him and given him his life. Maybe he could . . .

He didn't know how, but what was the harm in trying?

He did as he had seen her do and laid his right palm over the man's battered wrist.

Was there something?—Or was he just imagining things?

Caitlan left the hand there for a few moments. Then he withdrew it. The last thing he wanted was to add to his already strange reputation among these people. He carefully re-wrapped the wrist and made the man sit

up again. The man said nothing, but regarded Caitlan with a strange expression. There was still a goodly measure of fear. But there was something else, too.

Caitlan excused himself, took a blanket and left the tent. He could not bring himself to sleep inside with all these other people around, looking at him like some freak to be feared. He was just an ordinary man. He knew how to do a lot of things others didn't—but he also did *not* know a lot of things others *did*. This also was a simple fact.

He lay down behind the tent and rolled himself in the blanket. Sleep came with difficulty, but eventually it came.

It took him six days. Six days from daybreak to nightfall—but when he was done his seven pupils could hit a target the size of a human hand at sixty paces three out of four times. The scrawny trees around the camp were mostly splinters from the batterings they had taken. The place looked like a storm had pounded it.

Caitlan was satisfied. His charges were proud. Their eyes shone. Fanchio especially had visibly grown in stature during the last few days. Caitlan had had an inkling that there was a budding leader here. He had not been disappointed.

The group gave the elders and the rest of the tribe a demonstration of their newly acquired skills on the morning of the seventh day. The elders were impressed; as was everybody else. The elders bowed to Caitlan; an unexpected gesture that he found embarrassing.

"You are a hunter," one of them affirmed. "But you are also a teacher. You have given more than you have taken. The Jitanoo will forever be in your debt."

Caitlan waved it aside. "We had a deal," he said. "Tomorrow I leave."

The elder nodded. "So it shall be."

Caitlan turned to his charges. "Tonight you may celebrate. Enjoy your tipo." He turned away.

Fanchio came running after him. "Caitlan, do you not want to be with us?"

Caitlan smiled. "I am honored that you ask me this. But tonight I rest. Tomorrow I must continue my journey." He turned away, but stopped and looked at Fanchio. "You have done very well. Now you have to teach the others. When you do, remember how hard it was for you. Remember what you had to undergo in

order to learn. And remember to mix severity with compassion.”

Fancho nodded. “I will. Thank you. You are a stranger and you brought us grief; but you’ve also rewarded us.”

Caitlan clapped Fancho on the shoulder and grinned. “Go. Watch the girls.”

Fancho laughed. “Their parents are watching them.”

Caitlan laughed with him. “That is the way of parents.”

He turned away and proceeded to the tent. There he found Oparin; alone. Something, Caitlan thought, was different about him. Then he saw: the bandage was gone. Caitlan inspected the hand. The swelling was gone. He held the wrist and asked Oparin to move his fingers. They twitched, already back under partial control.

Caitlan nodded. “You heal well,” he said and released the hand. Oparin looked at him with an inscrutable expression, but said nothing. Caitlan smiled thinly, took a blanket, and left the tent. He would have to find a place somewhat further away. His boys would be frisky tonight, and he *did* want to sleep.

At daybreak the Jitanoo presented him with a saddled, fully-provisioned horse.

“There is one more favor I wish to ask,” he said.

“Ask,” one of the elders nodded.

“I have to return to the place where you captured me.”

The elder raised a questioning eyebrow.

“Your men took something from me at that place and left it there,” Caitlan said. “I need it. It tells me where to find the man I hunt.”

“Ahh.” The elder motioned to Fancho. “Help him.” Fancho ran to get himself a mount.

“Thank you,” Caitlan told the elders.

“We are still in your debt.”

“In due course the other tribes will figure out what your new weapon is,” Caitlan reminded him. “It usually is that way in warfare. Advantages in weaponry have a limited life span. I advise you not to use the slings until you have practiced the art of their use to perfection. Remember to keep the enemy at a distance. Do not use the slings when mounted. Aim becomes poor. Much effort is wasted.”

He mounted his horse; a sturdy animal, with a quality of liveliness that instantly appealed to him. The

Jitanoo had chosen well. It would carry him swiftly and far.

Fancho returned. Caitlan waved at the tribe and followed Fancho in a northerly direction. Less than half an hour’s ride took them to the tassel tree copse. Caitlan dismounted and began searching for the locator. He found it under a tassel tree and waved to Fancho.

Fancho came over. “You have it?”

Caitlan pushed the buttons on the locator in the required sequence. The arrow appeared. Caitlan pointed in that direction, roughly southwest. “This is where I go.”

Fancho clasped his hand. “Farewell Caitlan.”

“Teach your people well,” Caitlan replied.

Fancho mounted and rode off. Caitlan stood and looked around him. The episode with the Jitanoo had cost him several days. But he now had a horse; so maybe it wasn’t all bad. He placed the locator into the pouch at his belt. He touched Ailin’s token under his tunic; felt a wave of love and sadness wash over him. He looked back to the east where her body was buried in the waters of the ocean. Then, resolutely, he mounted his horse and rode off to find Rutger.

— 3 —

Caitlan rode west, following the instructions given to him by the elders.

“When you see the tops of the Kaylan Divide, turn south west. Keep them to your right, just above the horizon.” The elder drew a sketch in the dirt. “Beyond this, the Western Kaylan, and on your left the southern mountains.” He traced Caitlan’s path. “Here is the road the caravans take. Follow it and it will lead you to your goal, which is . . . here.” He made a cross.

Caitlan studied the map. “Can I not cross those mountains?” he wondered. “The way seems more direct.”

“You can,” the elder said dryly, “but you might not live. Those hills are the haunts of the Laiteen. The Jitanoo are peaceful, but, like most of the tribes of the southern steppe, the Laiteen are not like that. They will not capture, but kill you. Avoid them at all costs. You are a great warrior, but you won’t survive them. You’ll know them, even at a distance—because they wear the red of blood. Recently, they have begun to invade lands that used to be ours to roam.” He pointed at the sling hanging from Caitlan’s belt. “That is why

we need this; why your coming may have saved the Jitanoo; why we are in your debt forever.”

Caitlan shrugged it off. “So, I find the road, and I follow it to Thalonica. That is your counsel?”

“It is. Follow the road, but keep off it. Be ever alert. A camp fire at night may mean your death.”

“I’ll remember that,” Caitlan said.

There followed endless days on horseback. An animal that was a wonder of stamina, bred for the steppe through many generations. Stronger and more durable even than his roan, now in some stable in Keaen, awaiting his return.

Would he return? Not so long ago he would have replied in the affirmative. Now he wasn’t so sure. Nor was he sure that he cared. When his task was done and Rutger was . . . dead—that being the only obvious solution—when that was done, what was there for him? Returning to Keaen without Ailin was a prospect too dreary to contemplate. How could he live with that?

How could he have become so attached to one human being? How could it be that the certainty of never seeing her again was worse than anything he could have ever imagined—leaving nothing but a dismal void that drained every emotion out of him.

The days passed. The steppe undulated around him; a brown-green expanse, dotted with patches of color where hypher and fask were in bloom; an occasional patch of brown-and-gray soil, where, for some reason unknown to Caitlan, nothing grew; the wind mostly in his face, blowing across Finister’s endless plains. Caitlan kept a wary watch for the slightest movement on the steppe. For the most he kept to the lower lying areas, even thought this added to the distance. It also hid him from anybody but those too close to evade. At night he ate the rations the Jitanoo had provided: dry strips of daka meat; an equally dry, but nutritious bread made from the husks of one of the kinds of grasses that covered the land; a variety of fask, he surmised, but with much larger seeds. He chose his campsites carefully, selecting places which afforded him an unobstructed view of the land around, and, at the same time, provided concealment. He adjusted his sleep to the patterns of the traveler; light, alert, punctuated by periodic spontaneous awakenings.

Finally he saw the tops of the Kaylan Divide rise from the steppe. He did as he was told and kept the ranges to his right. After two more days another range

rose in the distance. Caitlan resisted the temptation to urge the horse to greater speed. The most important thing was to arrive! The arrow on his locator, when set to indicate Rutger’s whereabouts, had begun to swing around and point ever more to the south. Thalonica. The location of the object of the search lay north. Caitlan added up the days since he’d left the Isle. He’d lost count, but it must have been more than twenty. Rutger had had quite a head start. Something had held him up. Whatever it was, it was working to his, Caitlan’s, advantage.

Evening approached. Caitlan found a suitable site and dismounted. As he did he happened to catch a glimpse of a motion, far off in the north. Caitlan pulled the horse into cover and continued to scan the countryside, now bathed in Caravella’s evening colors.

There it was again. Not just in one place. Caitlan did not wait to confirm what his gut instincts told him. He remounted the horse and kicked it into motion. He entered a depression, charged through it, and emerged on the other side. Looking around he saw his worst fears confirmed. A row of riders, maybe thirty, maybe more, raced in pursuit. Their garb was the red of blood.

Caitlan knew that his mount wouldn’t outlast the pursuit. He looked ahead, chose a rocky outcrop on a nearby hillock, and urged the horse toward it. He dismounted, took out his sling and started collecting ammunition. By the time he had accumulated a respectable pile of suitable rocks, the riders were well within distance. Caitlan placed the first rock into the sling, whirled it over his head, and let go. A ranging shot at the extreme of his reach. It hit a horse, which bolted and went wild, finally throwing its rider.

The others came into range. Another rock arced across. A horse lost a rider. Another rock, another hit. The next one missed. Caitlan hissed a curse and whirled again. One attacker lost his head; literally. Another was hit in the chest. Caitlan swung, let go, and decapitated the man closest to him. The charge halted. Caitlan didn’t. The attackers, having lost six of their men, finally realized the seriousness of the situation and retreated into a safe distance. On the way, Caitlan picked off another two. Still far too many to go. All they had to do was wait until it got dark. Then they had him.

He saw them spread out to circle his position; keeping a respectful distance. Caitlan knew better than to waste his effort and ammunition.

His position looked grim. This was one situation he wouldn't get out of. He wracked his brains but no solutions offered themselves. He considered sneaking out of here; leaving the horse as a decoy. But these men knew the steppe. They'd find him.

From his left, a shout. One of his attackers rose in the saddle and pointed. Caitlan's head snapped around. From the east came a group of five riders. They halted their headlong charge and dismounted. Caitlan squinted, not believing his eyes. The dismounted men stood still; started whirling their slings. The line of attackers nearest to the new arrivals suffered four more losses. Caitlan nodded approvingly. The remainder of his attackers rallied to help their beleaguered comrades. Caitlan picked up some of his rocks, stuffed them into his saddle bag and remounted the horse. He charged down the hillock, in the direction of the developing melee. He fitted a stone into the sling. Close enough for moving shots! He whirled and let go. Another attacker went down. As did four more when his pupils let go of their second volley.

The outcome of the battle was a foregone conclusion. The attackers never came to grips with their foes; they were decimated before they even got into spear-throwing range. The remainder, a pitiful leftover of the original group, finally decided to call it quits and wheeled around.

"Don't let them get away!" Caitlan shouted.

The Jitanoo remounted and charged after their enemies. Caitlan looked after them, and he couldn't help the pride he felt at that moment. They'd done everything he'd taught them. That and better.

The Jitanoo returned. Fancho, who was leading them, dismounted and stood before Caitlan.

"Did you get them?" Caitlan asked.

"Of course," Fancho said, not without pride.

"Good." Caitlan looked at the group. "What are you doing here?"

Fancho grinned. "The elders commanded us to see you safely to your destination."

Caitlan was moved. "I thank you." He paused. "You fought well. I am proud of you all."

Fancho bowed slightly. "You taught us," he said simply; as if that explained everything.

"But now you go home," Caitlan told him.

Fancho's face fell. The others looked similarly crestfallen.

Caitlan clapped Fancho on the shoulder. "I appreciate the elders' concerns. But the Jitanoo need you to teach them; not to die trying to protect me." He nodded at a corpse lying nearby. "Besides, you have now repaid me in full. Therefore *I* command you to return home—and instruct your warriors, and make sure that I have not taught you in vain."

"But can we not follow you for just a few more days?"

Caitlan shook his head. "Every day further away from your camp is a day lost to you." He put his hands on Fancho's shoulder, looked him in the eye; glanced around at the four faces behind Fancho. "If I die, I die. But I am only one man. Back in the camp are the lives of your women, your children, your elders." He straightened. "I thank you. Now go!"

Fancho nodded mutely and signaled to his fellow warriors.

"Farewell Caitlan."

"Farewell."

The five rode off at speed, disappearing into the darkness and leaving Caitlan alone in the steppe; surrounded by the corpses of men who surely would have been among the pride of their tribe, and who would never return home again. Whatever their dispositions, no matter how much they'd threatened his life, it was a tragedy and a waste.

He stopped by one of the corpses. In the dying light he contemplated the man's thin, blood-red kaftan. Attesting to a bloody disposition? Caitlan wondered. How large was this tribe? If it was the size of the Jitanoo, they had lost a significant number of their warriors and would have to lie low. If it was one of the larger tribes they would be lusting for revenge. Such a massacre would surely be assumed to have been the work of an ambush. From a rival tribe? From their other enemies, the caravaners, perhaps? The enmity between the caravans and the nomadic tribes was fierce and ancient.

Caitlan dismissed futile speculation. One thing was certain: it would be wise to get away from here as soon as possible. Tonight he would ride. Time, he sensed, was running out.

Caravella rising found him resting against a rock, the horse grazing nearby. Caitlan wasted no time but set off again, keeping a doubly watchful eye on the countryside around him. To his left, the southern mountains showed their rounded heads. The road was near. Maybe

today and another day's ride. He studied the locator's arrow. He made a quick calculation and decided that, as of this morning, Rutger had begun to move. The arrow pointed westerly. Thalonica lay further south; that much he was certain of.

Urgency tugged, but again he resisted it. If Rutger was on the move he would be taking the road. This would actually bring him closer! Maybe fate was on his side.

Caitlan rode on, unmolested. Once he thought to discern a movement far off in the south, but the heat gave the air the appearance of water and he could not be sure. He chose his camp for the night under a copse of trees. The land at the northern end of the southern mountains was completely flat and his usual strategy was doomed to fail. He slept fitfully, jerking awake at the slightest rustle. Realizing the futility of trying he started to move again well before daybreak.

Caitlan came upon the road toward the middle of the day. Following the Jitanoo elders' advice, he kept away from the track itself; paralleled it at some distance, keeping to the edge of the thickening undergrowth. He checked his locator, thought that it had moved again. Rutger was close. With any luck he'd catch up with him tomorrow.

Caitlan restrained his urgency. Night fell. Caitlan, looking for a suitable resting place, suddenly spotted a column of smoke rising from some distance ahead.

Caitlan frowned. Nomads? Who else would dare light fires?

But neither would nomads. Not here. They camped in the open steppe. Whoever was doing this was not nomad. They also felt secure enough to brazenly advertise their presence.

Caitlan hesitated. Instinct told him to stay where he was and mind his own business. Curiosity taunted him to go and investigate. Curiosity won. He hobbled the horse and snuck off into the night. By the time he reached the camp site it was pitch dark. Sneaking was a slow and laborious affair. He stopped behind a tree at the periphery of the clearing, in the center of which a fire had been lit. What he saw was not pleasant. Four dangerous and competent looking thugs were playing an ancient game with a hapless pair of victims.

Caitlan saw where this was going. The man was going to be killed. The younger woman was going to be raped and probably also killed. The whole sickening scene needed no explanation.

As Caitlan watched, one of the men dragged the woman aside, while the others stationed themselves around her companion, waiting for him to respond to their taunts and place his manhood and pride above his fear of dying. Caitlan sighed and groped for the pair of short slings tucked under his belt. He couldn't afford close combat with these men. He didn't know their competence, and he really couldn't afford to be injured. As events developed around the fire Caitlan found two suitably sized rocks and fit them into his slings. Presently, there was an altercation between the woman's companion and his three guards. Caitlan nodded appreciatively as the deceptively small man moved with blinding speed, tumbled one of the thugs into the fire, turned on another, kned him in the groin—only to be felled by a blow on his head.

Caitlan could wait no longer. He stepped out of the woods. His foot stood on a dry branch, which cracked loudly, attracting everybody's instant attention. Caitlan began to whirl the slings. It was a tricky thing, this, and he'd never been very good at doing two at a time; but he would only get one shot and this was it.

The man with the sore testicles began to straighten. His companion stared at Caitlan across the fire. Off to Caitlan's left a thug lay moaning and whimpering, holding his burned face with equally burned hands.

Caitlan let go of the left projectile—and knew that it wasn't right. Still, the effect was satisfactory enough. It caught one thug just above a buttock; he jerked up, lost his balance and fell into the fire. As he screamed and scrambled to get out, Caitlan let go of the right sling.

He didn't even bother to look where the missile went; he knew it would find the mark. He stepped around the fire. The small man had risen from his prone position above the intended victim. His breeches had been undone and hampered him as she lunged to get to his sword. Caitlan drew his knife and threw it. The thug collapsed in an untidy heap. The last man had drawn his sword and was using it to get himself into an upright position. Caitlan stepped closer. The thug lifted his weapon. Far too slowly. Caitlan grabbed the man's wrist and broke it. Then he broke his neck and dropped the corpse.

Everything stood still. The only sound was the moaning from the burned man on the other side of the fire.

The woman scrambled up and, ignoring Caitlan, stumbled over to the prone body of her companion. Her tears left no doubt that he was more than just a 'companion'. Caitlan stood and watched as the man regained consciousness. There was a lump in his throat. He'd been just in time.

The man's eyes opened and looked at the woman; at Caitlan.

"Who are you?" he whispered.

The young woman turned her head. Caitlan hunkered down beside them. "My name," he said, "is Caitlan."

— 4 —

The wounded man had stopped whimpering. Nerys wondered if he was dead. Not that she cared. She was tending to Fliz, washing the tear in his scalp. The big stranger, Caitlan, had inspected it and pronounced it not life threatening. Nerys wasn't so sure, but she wasn't going to argue with the stranger either. He didn't seem the kind of man you'd argue with.

"Do you feel dizzy?" he had asked Fliz.

"A little."

"Whatever you do, don't let him go to sleep," Caitlan had told her. "If it means keeping him awake all night then so be it."

With that, too, she hadn't argued.

Now, with the corpses dragged into the undergrowth and out of sight, they sat around the fire; Nerys tending to Fliz, who was clearly bewildered by her attention as much as the blow on his head and their sudden rescue.

Caitlan excused himself. "I'm going to get my horse."

He vanished into the thicket.

Fliz stared after him. Nerys touched his cheek. "Fliz?"

He turned his head slowly.

"I know I haven't been very . . . nice," she began, "but . . ."

"What do you mean?" he said.

"Fliz, I . . ." Nerys made a vexed noise. "Why is this so complicated?" she fretted.

"What's complicated?" he asked.

Nerys grimaced. "Oh, whatever . . ." She put her face close to his and kissed him; found a response; kissed him harder.

When she surfaced for breath . . . "That," she said.

He grinned. "What's complicated?"

"Oh — you know!" she said.

He turned serious. "You don't have to do this."

"Do what? Kiss you? Of course I don't have to!"

"Well then . . ."

"Well then *nothing*. I'm doing it because I *want* to. Get it?"

He stared at her. "But you . . ."

"I - want - to," she said slowly. "Did that blow damage your head so much that you don't understand a simple sentence?"

"No, but . . ."

"Then shut up," she said and kissed him again. She noted with satisfaction that his sore head wasn't interfering with his response. Which probably meant that he was going to be just fine.

A crack in the thicket. Nerys and Fliz jerked apart. Caitlan emerged onto the campsite. He tied up the horse and hunkered down again. "I think we'd better extinguish the fire," he said.

Nerys decided that, again, she wasn't going to contradict him.

Fliz looked at Caitlan. "Where are you headed?"

"Thalonica," the stranger said. "I think."

"You don't know?"

The stranger extracted an object from a pouch at his belt. Nerys felt Fliz stiffen at her side. The stranger, unaware of the reaction did something with the object and studied it carefully. He frowned and tapped it. He stood up and looked at them. He cocked his head, frowned again, stepped to the other side of the fire, keeping his eyes on the object in his big hand. Nerys strained to see what it was, but she couldn't be sure . . . though it looked like . . .

A subtle change had come over Caitlan. A tension. When he moved this time it was with the sleekness of a predator. Like he did when he killed those men.

He came around the fire, took a quick step that brought him to Fliz's side. Fliz shrank back.

Caitlan stared at them. Then he shook his head, as if dismissing a pesky notion, and hunkered down. He held out his hand to display the object it held. Nerys gasped when she saw what it was.

"Give it to me," he said to Fliz.

Fliz hesitated.

Caitlan held out a hand. "Now."

Fliz extracted the device from his tunic. Caitlan took it gingerly. "Where did you get this?" he whispered.

"I stole it," Fliz admitted.

"Where? From whom?"

"In Thalonica; from a very dangerous man."

"How do you know he's dangerous?"

"Believe me," Fliz said, "I know."

"I do believe you," Caitlan said, "I just want to know how you were able to steal it. Nobody should have been able to steal *anything* from this man."

"I did," Fliz said simply.

"You're a thief," Caitlan said matter-of-factly.

"The best," Fliz said, not without pride.

"You must be," Caitlan said dryly. He paused. "Where is this man now?"

"I don't know," Fliz admitted. "The last time I saw him, it was in Thalonica—but I fear he may be following us. He has done terrible things." Fliz's voice trailed off. Nerys hugged his arm, wanting to let him know that she was here. She felt a responding squeeze. The sensation made her feel incredibly good.

Caitlan nodded slowly. "I hunt this man," he said. "I hunted him for . . . this", he held up the device, "which is a terribly dangerous thing." He paused. "Let us extinguish this fire. No point in telling the nomads we're here. Then, I think, we should get to know each other." He looked at them both, and in his eyes Nerys saw something terribly sad and mournful, and somehow she knew beyond a doubt that, next to Fliz, here was one other human being whom she could trust. A dangerous man, to be sure; but also a just man—who would die defending his friends, and think nothing of it.

She squeezed Fliz's arm again. He glanced at her. His eyes told her that he, too, had sensed it.

Fliz nodded at Caitlan. "I am not allowed to sleep anyway. Might as well talk the night away."

Nerys finished told her tale. She exhaled and leaned against Fliz. Caitlan was a dark shape in Janus' light filtering through the trees. "So, you see," she said, "I'm a waif. I have nowhere to go."

"Then you'll have to go with me, I suppose," Fliz said lightly, but she detected an undertone of anxiety.

"That is what I want," she said simply.

He squeezed her arm.

"My turn," he said.

She'd nodded off. Fliz's voice had surrounded her with a cocoon of comfort, and she had gladly taken advantage of it. Whatever she missed . . . well, she would find out later. They had all the time in the world.

But Caitlan's tale roused her from her sleep; and when the new day broke she had never been quite as awake as she was now. What tragedy. What evil. What sacrifice. As the light of day highlighted Caitlan's face, she saw him in a new light; and though she sensed that his story was deliberately incomplete, that something important had been left out, it was as wondrous a tale as she'd ever heard. Her eyes were still hot from crying.

Caitlan smiled at her. He reached into the neck of his tunic and pulled out a small golden pendant. He pulled the chain over his head and held it up to the light. "This," he said softly, sadly "is her token. It's all I have left."

The small medallion swung to and fro on the chain, then flipped to face away from Caitlan. It oscillated briefly, and hung still. Nerys watched, fascinated.

"She loved you very much," she said softly—and then realized that Caitlan wasn't listening to her. He was staring at the medallion, his face frozen in an attitude of bewilderment and shock.

His head turned slowly to look at them both. His eyes returned to the medallion. He exhaled sharply and, eyes still fixed on his lover's token, stood up. He looked up at the sky, squinted into the sun, looked back at the medallion. When he faced them again his countenance was a mixture of hope and utter disbelief.

Fliz pushed himself off the ground. Nerys hastened to assist him.

"What's the matter?" Fliz asked.

Caitlan took a deep breath. He carefully placed the pendant around his neck, closed his eyes, and stood in that attitude for a few breaths.

"She lives!" he said, his voice cracking like a dry twig. He opened his eyes.

Then Nerys understood. The medallion . . . It had pointed . . . where? South! Toward Thalonica. The ship, however, had foundered at the eastern tip of Finister.

"The one you thought dead is in Thalonica?" she asked.

Caitlan nodded. "She lives," he said softly. His eyes were moist. His voice was brittle with emotion.

"But *we* cannot go back there," Fliz objected. "Corran's still hunting for Nerys. We cannot risk that."

"I must," Caitlan said simply. "She has waited for long enough."

Nerys took Fliz's arm. "I don't look anything like the woman Corran's searching for. You said so yourself."

"But . . ."

She put a finger on his mouth. "Our chances out here are even less than they are in Thalonica. What are we going to do? Where are we going to go? The nomads will have our hides within the day. In Thalonica we have a chance. Maybe we can take a ship to Caitlan's home. It sounds like a good place to be."

Caitlan chuckled. "Right now it may be on the edge of revolution," he said dryly. "But, yes, from what I've heard of Thalonica and Gaskar . . . it looks like the Valley's not such a bad place after all." He grimaced apologetically. "I have to go."

"The magice . . ." Fliz began.

"You've done very well against him," Caitlan noted dryly. "I could do with your help."

Fliz nodded. He glanced at Nerys.

"He's right," she said. "Besides, he will think that we have left. The last thing he'll expect would be our return."

Fliz grimaced. "What must be, must be," he said. He shook his head. To Caitlan he said: "I wish there was a better way—but since there isn't, let's not waste time."

Caitlan nodded his approval. "It looks like you can have your pick of the horses."



## Letters

Dear Till,

Having just finished the latest *Literary Supplement*, and having read your short but pithy editorial, I thought I'd write and let you know how much I enjoyed the latest *Literary Supplement* of *Cosmopolis*. Kudos, on a job well done.

I don't know why your readership is so silent. Bang the drum, constant readers! I've been meaning to write and tell you what a great job you and your predecessors have done, but I never quite got around to it. . . I expect I'm not alone.

Frankly, I welcome each new issue; for comparisons sake, you'd have to pay me to read the latest issues of *F&SF* or Asimov's rag.

Having edited over 20 original anthologies and worked as a roving editor for Tor and Bean Books, I believe I can say with some authority that I find your offerings better than 80% of what's available on the news stands today. Of course, that is if I could find anything 'new' that I actually wanted to read besides the offerings of a few old favorites and the occasional new Jack Vance novel.

To be a bit more specific, I am reading with great pleasure your own *Finister* and eagerly awaiting the next installment. I haven't felt that way about serial sf since the 60's! Also, I am also very much enjoying Tim Stretton's latest, *Dragonchaser*. Great work, Tim.

There is certainly a Vancian spirit to most of what appears in the *Cosmopolis Literary Supplement*. I thought *The Zael Inheritance* was the closest in style and 'attitude' to a Jack Vance story, yet. Excellent yarn. If I were an agent, I'd be out twisting arms to get it into publication.

Finally, where's Zack France? Inquiring minds want to know. Also, we want to read the rest of his wonderful romp, "Planet of Retribution."

Keep up the great work!

*John F. Carr*

Editor/Writer

To the Editor,

*CLS* is worthwhile, entertaining and a pleasure to read. Presenting literature based on the style of Vance in a wonderful concept.

Pity more readers don't have the courage to submit. I include myself in this sad group, but I hope to try and remedy the situation in the near future.

Please keep up the great work and thanks.

*Jay Lefkowitz*

Brooklyn, NY

USA

Dear Till,

May I express my amazement and somewhat concerned puzzlement at the lack of response to your desire for feedback for the *CLS*? I find it hard to believe there are no appreciative readers out there, indeed I've only held back myself in anticipation of dozens of other missives expressing the usual paeans of praise for the excellent writing regularly served up to eager readers across the planet. Please take heart! *Cosmopolis* itself is sometimes an optional extra (it can get a little introspective at times although I did enjoy the interview with JV in the latest issue) but the *Literary Supplement*, never! It's always reverently printed out and takes pride of place alongside previous instalments of the same publication. I particularly enjoy the scope and breadth of *Finister*, I find the range and originality of the ideas rare and refreshing, and this is from a reader who has read an awful lot of science fiction and fantasy in his time. Please be encouraged. There's at least one fan out here in e-world who enjoys the whole publication! The only thing he would enjoy more is news of a book publication. Any possibilities?

Sincerely,

*Lyall Simmons*

New Zealand

