
The Cosmopolis Literary Supplement

No. 26 • November 2003 ~ Published with Cosmopolis No. 44

Contents

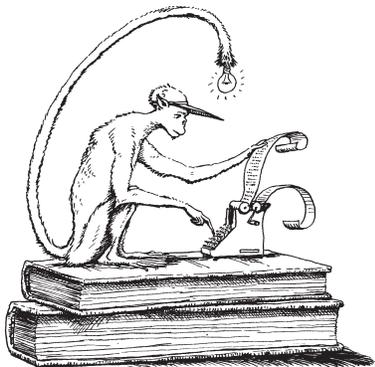
Dragonchaser
Chapters 25–27
by Tim Stretton
Page 2



Finister
Chapters 10–11
by Till Noever
Page 17



Letters
from discerning readers
Page 32



Editorial

Esteemed Readers:

In this issue, more of *Dragonchaser* and *Finister*, as well as a thank-you letter from Tim Stretton, and a promissory note from Alain Schremmer.

Tim is more voluble in his thanks for those praising us than I was. Good man! Needless to say, I endorse his comments wholeheartedly.

As for Alain's epistle: I appreciate the problem with reading printouts in bed. Been there. Avoiding that. However, I'd like to point out to him that it might really be worth the effort to spend more time with the *CLS*, even if loose leaves slip and slide and fly all over the place, and one never knows where to find the next page. After all, fiction—that is, good fiction, the story-telling kind, not the proselytizing or simply pretentious variety—is honest about its intentions; these being entertainment, and maybe, in the course of this, revelation of what is otherwise hidden behind the curtain of everydayness. And, let's face it, it does so better than 99% of the non-fiction drivel being published in the political, psychological and philosophical/religious areas today. Alas, I suspect that this has always been so.

About the future. As the VIE work draws to a close, which it will within the foreseeable future, so the *CLS*, like *Cosmopolis*, will become defunct. When *Dragonchaser* and *Finister* are over and done with—which will probably happen sometime between February and April 2004—then we are done with realistic long-term instalment type of writings, and I really have no idea where to go for the rest of the *CLS*'s lifetime. Suggestions are welcome. Story-type submissions for those days will be even more welcome! Don't tell me I didn't give you ample notice . . .

Happy reading.
Till Noever



Dragonchaser

by *Tim Stretton*

Chapter 25

Away from the docks the streets were quiet and Mirko secured the services of a covered rattlejack without difficulty.

"Do you know the residence of the Lady Catzendralle?"

The driver, with a dark saturnine face and a great beak of a nose, sniffed thoughtfully. "She lives at Darklings, the House Drall estate."

"Take me there—and smartly."

"This rattlejack knows but one speed, having but a single pacer to draw it. You may call it 'smartly', you may call it 'tardy', but our speed never varies."

Mirko sighed. He really could do without a philosopher at the reins, but the rattlejack trade seemed to attract them. The pacer set off at its regulation speed—which to Mirko was closer to 'tardy' than 'smartly'—and picked its way across the cobbles and into the low hills where many of the Electors made their estates, leaving the Old Town falling away behind.

Mirko had never realised that Catzendralle lived on the family estate, although as a genteel spinster relation it seemed an obvious enough arrangement. It occurred to him that she would probably be vexed to see him at her home; but then she should have given him sufficient information to obviate the need for the visit. He wasn't entirely sure of the terms on which they had parted, and this also made him unsure of his welcome. He had been on the verge of telling her his feelings, which had taken him rather by surprise, and if she had encouraged him he certainly would have done. But, as so often, when presented with a potential intimacy, she had withdrawn into irony and defensiveness. He wondered whether he was getting anywhere at all with her; or whether it really mattered.

He looked up as the houses started to thin out. A wood of high manzipar trees loomed on the left. "We're here," said the driver. "This is Darklings."

"I don't see any estate."

"That's why it's called Darklings. Do you think Koo-pondrall is keen to have every idle sightseer in Paladria riding a rattlejack past his house? That path in the woods leads you where you want to go. I take it you have an appointment?"

"Of a sort," said Mirko.

"I'll wait here. You won't be long if you don't have an appointment, and I could do with the fare for the return journey."

"Suit yourself," said Mirko, pressing a valut-piece into his hand. "Don't blame me if you're here all night."

"The fee is one valut twenty."

Mirko shrugged. "Consider the twenty minims deduction a loquacity tax," he said before striding off into the manzipar wood.

Darklings was set well into the wood. House Drall clearly valued its privacy. After some five minutes of stumbling along the gloomy path, Mirko found himself at a clearing in front of a building—or more accurately, a complex of buildings—adorned with fanciful towers and cupolas: Darklings. A wall of white marble surrounded the whole, with a single gate visible. In the absence of any other alternatives, Mirko stepped towards it, smoothing his attire as he did so. He was still in the clothes he had worn on the water this morning, by no means his smartest even when clean. Now, water-stained and smelling of smoke, even Mirko was conscious that he did not cut the most impressive figure.

Standing before the gates Mirko found himself confronted by a curious contraption. A large white placard read:

This is Darklings
The seat of House Drall
Please pull the tassel appropriate to your status

Affixed to the placard were several coloured ropes, each labelled to facilitate identification:

Peremptor or his Representative
Electors of Paladria or their Representatives
Persons of Gentility
Citizens and Free Men
Tradesmen calling by Appointment
Tradesmen, Other
Ruffians and Vagabonds

Mirko found this a curious system. While the job of Koopendrall's staff might be markedly simplified were Ruffians and Vagabonds to announce themselves in this way, it seemed to him that the truly villainous would in all probability have the guile to pull a different tassel. Mirko wondered which tassel represented his own status. He suppressed the strong temptation to pull 'ruffian' and settled after a short deliberation on 'Persons of Gentility'.

A bell of clear timbre rang quietly in the distance, and hesitant footsteps could be heard on the other side of the gate. "Who calls on House Drall at this hour?" came a querulous voice.

"A 'Person of Gentility', by definition. Kindly open the gate so we may discuss my business in greater detail."

A lock turned and the heavy gate swung back. Mirko saw a tall stooping figure of advanced years and exaggerated dignity; he had seen similar retainers at Formello; they seemed to be a necessary adjunct to the modish Elector.

"Please state your business, sir," said the functionary with a bow. "This statement should include a full explanation of your reasons for presenting yourself in disguise."

"Disguise?"

"Your apparel is by no means consistent with the status of gentility. I assume that you therefore adopt the habiliments of a dock worker for reasons of concealment."

"My name is Captain Mirko Ascalon, master of the galley *Sapphire Light*, owned by the Elector Bartazan of Bartazan House."

"Ah! All is now made clear. You should more correctly have pulled the red tassel marked 'Electors of Paladria and their Representatives' since your status derives from your employment rather than your person. You would be astonished how frequently visitors pull the wrong tassel."

Mirko smiled sympathetically. "A frustration and an inconvenience, to be sure. Now, may I gain admittance?"

"I can state with assurance that my Lord Dralenkoop is engaged this evening, while the Elector Koopendrall is conducting an evening reception for the Kestrel Hawk Breeders' Association. I will see if I can secure your invitation, although in truth I am not sanguine."

"You need not inconvenience yourself," said Mirko politely. "My business is with the Lady Catzendralle."

The functionary shook his head in puzzlement. "Lady Catzendralle? Are you certain? My Lady lives a quiet life and receives few visitors without an appointment; yet my schedule shows that you do not have one, sir."

"My invitation was of the sort which might be described as 'open': my Lady requested me to present myself at my own convenience, a time which is now upon us."

"Hmmm,"—this with a scratch of a thinly-covered pate—"this is somewhat irregular. You say that my Lady explicitly invited you to wait on her at home?"

"Indeed, there can be no conceivable misunderstanding on this score."

"Very well, very well. Guffoon, step here if you please!"

A servant smartly liveried in House Drall red and gold stepped forward, a proud dragon embroidered on his chest. "The Proper Guffoon at your service, sir!"

"Guffoon, please conduct Captain Ascalon to the apartments of my Lady Catzendralle with good haste. Do not be tempted by short-cuts or seeming expeditiousnesses."

"Naturally not, sir. Please follow me, Captain."

The Proper Guffoon set off with a brisk pace down a corridor with a vast vaulted ceiling. "The Lady Catzendralle, sir?"

Mirko wondered at the acuity of the Proper Guffoon's short-term memory. "Just so."

"House Drall protocol demands that I escort you through the Nexus Room at the centre of Darklings. However, my lady's apartments are on the periphery of the estate and would require us to double back upon ourselves. In all candour this represents tediousness and inconvenience for us both; no doubt you would prefer to step across through the gardens to take a more direct route."

This was accompanied with a smile of such astonishing vacuity that Mirko was taken aback. It seemed that House Drall had some difficulty in attracting servants of an appropriate calibre. He wondered why they did not employ slaves, as did the House of Bartazan.

"Very well," he said. "I am quite content to follow the most rapid route."

"Excellent!" said the Proper Guffoon with enthusiasm. "I am sure you will find the gardens to your taste."

Guffoon led them out into a discreetly lit parkland, broken up with shrubbery and benches. The effect was less formal and structured than Coverciano, but pleasantly relaxing nonetheless. Folk strolled in small groups and particularly in couples.

"This is the Public Gardens, sir, available for the recreation of all members of the household. If we step this way, we may take a short-cut through the family's Private Gardens."

Even Mirko found this idea lacking in punctilio; but since any adverse consequences would clearly be laid at the Proper Guffoon's door, he saw no reason to demur.

"Look out, sir!" called Guffoon as they approached the Private Gardens; a couple were engaged in adventurous act of outdoor intimacy and Guffoon was forced to step awkwardly over them. Mirko essayed a neater side-step. "Unsavoury," said Guffoon, "but these things will happen."

Producing a key, Guffoon unlocked the door to the Private Gardens and admitted Mirko. "Mind the ha-ha sir; it can take the unwary by surprise."

Mirko picked his way carefully forward; ending this eventful day sprawling with a sprained ankle among the ha-has was not an ideal outcome. He was distracted by a woman's throaty giggle in the near distance.

"Don't! Not here!" she laughed; a voice Mirko found somewhat familiar. "You'll have to catch me first!"

Out of the dark and straight into Mirko cannoned the figure: to his astonishment he saw it was Larien. Immediately behind her bounded a man who put an arm around her waist and bore her to the ground. Drallenkoop!

"Larien—what on—Larien!"

Larien looked up and struggled to her feet, brushing moss and twigs from her dress. "Mirko! I—what are you doing here—I don't—I can't—"

Drallenkoop raised himself from the ground with less embarrassment. "Captain Ascalon," he said with a bow. "Welcome to Darklings, although I don't recall inviting you."

Mirko was stunned into silence by this intimate scene between Larien and Drallenkoop. Larien herself was looking down at her shoes and clearly unwilling to make any further observations. Drallenkoop, on the other hand, appeared to be relishing the situation.

"You appear bewildered, captain. I will do what I can to resolve your perplexity."

"I—you—Larien—I hardly know where to start."

"Sit awhile," said Drallenkoop with a smile, gesturing towards a bench made of finely wrought iron. "We will not address at this instant the reasons for your presence in the House Drall Private Garden."

Mirko swallowed. "My apologies for intruding, Drallenkoop. I am a little—taken aback—to see the terms of intimacy between Larien and yourself, inasmuch as I had come to think of myself as enjoying a special relationship with her."

Drallenkoop suppressed a grin with an effort. "And so you did, captain. Larien, would you like to tell Ascalon the exact nature of your relationship?"

Larien turned a pleading eye to Drallenkoop. "Don't do this, Drallen. Can't we just leave it?"

"Oh no, indeed, that would be no fun at all, none whatsoever. And I am sure a man of Ascalon's stamp would prefer the painful truth to miserable evasions. Am I not right, captain?"

"I don't pretend to understand what you're talking about, Drallenkoop. In general I prefer truth to lies, but I don't expect to get it from either of you."

"Larien," said Drallenkoop in a gentle voice. "Are you not going to tell Ascalon that you were my mistress from the outset? That your intimacy existed only through my express instructions? No? Ah well, I appear to have done so anyway."

Mirko sat back on the bench with a sigh. Larien was looking in as opposite a direction as possible. "Is this true, Larien?" he asked.

Still looking away, she uttered a single sob, scarcely intelligible. "Yes."

"Why? What possible motive could you have?"

Larien sank to the ground, pulled her knees up to her face and rocked gently.

"It looks as if I'll have to tell you myself," said Drallenkoop, pacing slowly back and forth. "House Drall has good reason to hate and fear the House of Bartazan. It has long been to my father's advantage to have sources within Bartazan's household: I have no doubt he does the same with us. Larien has long been very dear to me, and almost as important, a key source of information inside Formello."

Mirko stared blankly up at Drallenkoop; things were still not making a lot of sense.

"I always paid you the compliment of treating you as a serious rival," Drallenkoop continued. "Bartazan's galleys had long been a joke on the water, crewed by buffoons like Cascais and Fenneker. The arrival of a

competent Garganet officer was always likely to bring about a material improvement, and naturally I instructed Larien to become as close to you as necessary to exercise an influence over your conduct. In this—” he glanced at the still mute and rocking Larien “—she proved less than wholly successful. Despite telling me weekly that you had contracted an overwhelming passion for her, she was unable to make you appreciate the calamity for Paladria that a victory for *Sapphire Light* would represent—and for you as well.”

“There was no ‘overwhelming passion,’” said Mirko in a thick voice.

Drallenkoop shrugged. “It’s all one. Larien proved somewhat ineffective; largely, I suspect, because she yielded her favours too easily for you to prize them.”

“Drallen!” shrieked Larien. “How can you say that! You—you were the one who told me to do whatever I needed to! You pimp, you hypocrite!”

Mirko looked at Drallenkoop out of one eye. “She would appear to have a point. You have prostituted your own mistress to win a galley-race that most observers would have backed you to win comfortably anyway.”

Drallenkoop shook his head. “You don’t understand Paladria. If there was one chance in a hundred that you would win, I had to choke it off. I was quite happy to sacrifice Larien for that; the consequences of Bartazan becoming Peremptor would be indescribably dire for my family.”

Mirko turned to Larien. “Do you have so little self-respect?”

“Mirko—I—you don’t understand. How I hate Bartazan—and I never ever expected to like you . . .”

Drallenkoop stepped across and bent over Larien, reaching down to tilt her chin up. Looking into her face, he said:

“Don’t try that one on Ascalon. I imagine he is too intelligent to fall for such hormonal drivel; but in case not, you might care to inform him how you characterised his lovemaking?”

Larien shrank back to lie flat on the ground. “Don’t! Don’t don’t don’t!”

“What were the words? They made something of an impact on me at the time. ‘Mechanical’, ‘perfunctory’, ‘inept’ all featured, as I remembered. ‘The tenderness and spontaneity of a clockwork toy’. How we laughed!”

From her supine position Larien sprang at Drallenkoop’s face. “I hate you! I gave you everything, and you won’t even leave me my dignity!”

Drallenkoop easily pinioned her wrists in one large strong hand. “You are overwrought,” he said, shaking his head. “You owe Ascalon nothing; indeed he has had what might be termed a ‘free ride’ on a rather smarter pacer than he might otherwise have commanded.”

With a sudden twist Larien broke free and dashed across to Mirko’s bench. She sank to her knees in front of him. “Please, Mirko! I’m sorry, I’m so sorry! I’ve been so stupid.”

Mirko stared at her in astonishment. “‘Sorry’? Do you really think that helps?”

“No—no, of course not. There’s nothing I can do to change the past. But you have to believe me when I say my feelings were real—in the end, anyway.”

Mirko continued to stare at her. Larien reached out and took his hand in both of hers.

“Mirko, we can go away from here tonight, we can forget any of this ever happened.”

Drallenkoop stepped smartly forward and dragged her away. “You don’t have to play up to him any more. Your use as a honey-trap is over.”

She span in a fury. “I’m not ‘playing up’. I should have seen you for the selfish, scheming, manipulative sneakbill you were long ago. You never cared about me; all you wanted was to win races and spite my uncle. Well, it’s taken me a long time, but I’ve woken up now.”

Drallenkoop tried to smile but ended up with a sneer. “It’s too late to play the abused innocent now, Larien. You wanted to spite Bartazan as much as I did; you never once protested about the things I asked you to do. Now, say goodbye to Ascalon, and go back to my apartments. Jaspian will prepare you a sleeping draught.”

Larien slowly pulled herself up to her full height. She wiped at her eyes with her sleeve. “I’m going home, Drallenkoop. I never want to see or speak to you again. Mirko, I know I’ve hurt you very deeply, but if you want to come with me . . .”

Mirko looked at her for a long silent moment. Her dignity and her reputation in ruins, she still looked beautiful and defiant. For a moment he toyed with the idea. Something that Catzen had said rang in his head: *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 your-*

self. Catzen had known all this, and she hadn't told him. Was she as duplicitous as Larien? She had shown herself adept at holding information back in the past. He didn't know where he stood with either of them. For a moment the contending forces in his heart cancelled themselves out. In a single second of clarity, he realised: *I love Catzen*. Repeating the notion to himself, he only grew in conviction.

"Larien," he said gently. "This can never happen. Never. I don't trust you and I can never care about you. Get away—from Darklings and from Paladria, if you'll follow my advice."

Larien looked at the ground, her eyes full in the moonlight. She bit her lip and turned without a word, running from the garden with quick light desperate steps.

Drallenkoop leaned against a bulbir tree staring ahead. With an effort he brought himself under control. "Well," he said dryly.

"I've nothing to say to you, Drallenkoop. I'll do my talking out on the water."

Drallenkoop permitted himself a crooked smile. "If that's how you want it," he said. "You won't win, and even if you did, you won't profit from it. If you think I'm untrustworthy, there is scarcely a credible description for Bartazan."

Mirko shrugged. "I'm not winning for Bartazan; I'm winning for me."

"Have it your own way. You've never beaten *Dragon-chaser* yet, and you'll not do so next week. Anyway, why are you at Darklings? Did you want to see me?"

"No. I was on my way to call upon the Lady Catzendralle."

Drallenkoop uttered a shriek of laughter. "Crazy Catzen? What conceivable reason could you have?"

"I am not about to make you my confidant, Drallenkoop."

"You have unusual taste in women. Cousin Catzen has a reputation for eccentricity; and is certainly not my idea of attractive."

"She has information I want. Let's just leave it at that."

Drallenkoop turned to the Proper Guffoon who had been seeking to evade notice in the shadows. "Guffoon, since I assume you were escorting Captain Ascalon to the Lady Catzendralle's apartments through my private gardens, kindly finish your errand. Then you may consider yourself discharged without a character. And if

you ever mention what you've seen tonight, rest assured I will kill you. You know that is neither bluff nor bravado."

Guffoon's head sank mournfully. Opposition was futile, and with a subdued gesture he beckoned Mirko to follow him. Drallenkoop remained, leaning against the manzipar tree and staring into the middle distance.



Chapter 26

Soon they reached the edge of the Private Garden; Guffoon unlocked the gate and ushered Mirko through. A series of white single-story villas were displayed before them surrounding a spacious white courtyard punctuated with tall green plants.

"Please wait here, sir," said the Proper Guffoon, "while I announce your presence to the Lady Catzendralle."

Mirko seated himself on an intricately carved wooden bench while Guffoon attempted to summon Catzendralle. The hour was not particularly late but there was no sign of movement within. Eventually Catzendralle issued from the villa in a state of some dishevelment, her hair hastily dragged into a shapeless bunch, a dark cloak thrown over what looked suspiciously like pyjamas.

"I'm sorry if I've woken you," said Mirko, rising hesitantly from his bench.

"What are you doing here? Have you taken leave of your senses?" Catzendralle hissed with a noticeable lack of cordiality.

"I needed to talk to you."

Catzendralle pursed her lips. "Your actions at least have the virtue of directness; but I am sure your business could have been transacted through our usual means."

"I felt otherwise," said Mirko with uncharacteristic heat. "Someone tried to burn *Sapphire Light* tonight; it was sheer luck that they got *Morvellos Devil* instead."

"This comes as no great surprise," said Catzendralle with a reflective nod. "I have been warning you all summer that you have been making enemies. The event is hardly worth disturbing my night's rest for—or the lunacy of presenting yourself at Darklings. What if Koopendrall or Drallenkoop had seen you?"

"Drallenkoop did," said Mirko flatly. "Once he managed to wrest his attention away from Larien."

"Ah."

"'Ah'? I assume you knew about them?"

"Come inside," she said. "We'll talk about the fire, and about Larien—if you insist on asking."

"Believe me, I do," said Mirko, following her inside the villa. At her invitation he seated himself on a simple couch, looking round at the unostentatious but clearly expensive furnishings.

"I did warn you about her, Mirko. I told you not to get too attached to her."

"As it turns out," said Mirko, "I didn't get too attached, although I only realised that tonight. But things would have been much simpler if you'd told me she was Drallenkoop's mistress. I suppose you couldn't, though, not without compromising House Drall's intelligence operation."

Catzendralle wordlessly placed a goblet of red wine on the occasional table at Mirko's side, and took a sip of her own wine.

"It isn't quite that simple," she said. "It isn't good practice to tell agents more than they need to know, and I couldn't afford to have Larien know that I was on to her. And part of me wanted you to decide for yourself that she wasn't for you," she continued, gazing downwards and looking at Mirko from under her eyelids.

Mirko found this ploy somewhat artificial and sighed. "We can talk about Larien later," he said with an effort. "For now, I want to know who tried to set light to my galley."

Catzendralle looked back up with a smile. "Someone who doesn't like you—which doesn't narrow the field immensely—and someone not very intelligent, which probably doesn't help much either. How difficult can it be to tell two galleys apart? They are painted different colours."

"*Morvellos Devil* was on our mooring; it was dark. The mistake was understandable."

"Maybe," said Catzendralle, "but someone will be very vexed indeed that their plan has failed."

"I was hoping you'd be able to tell me who 'someone' is."

"I understand you had a somewhat unfriendly communication from Covarc Remario."

"True. But why would he threaten if he was intending to act? He hadn't had time to see if his warning

would have any effect. If he'd been going to burn us, he'd have just done it."

Catzendralle sat down and crossed her legs. "That makes sense, but it doesn't get you any closer to the truth."

"I saw Corrando at the docks. He looked shocked and displeased when I told him it was *Morvellos Devil* on fire and not us."

"Corrando? You think Medina ordered this?"

"You were the one who pointed him out as a potential enemy in the first place."

Catzendralle ran a finger round the rim of her goblet. "I don't think it's Medina. He may have known what was going on, but I don't think he organised it."

"Why not? Are you holding out on me again?"

"Mirko, don't push this. It wasn't Medina."

"You have sources close to him, I take it? Can't you ask them?"

"It wouldn't do any good. Just take my word for it."

Mirko shrugged. "If that's how it has to be. But think about where it takes us. I discount the Fanarites and marginal malcontents like Cascais. That really only leaves your people."

Catzendralle's complexion lost a little of its flush. "My people?"

"House Drall. Don't tell me you don't run their intelligence work, or that House Drall doesn't have a prime motive for wanting *Sapphire Light* out of the Margariad."

Catzendralle looked over to a tapestry displaying a giant dragon in cloth-of-gold, her face expressionless. "How did we get here?" she asked quietly.

Mirko leaned forward. "Just tell me, Catzen. Tell me that your intelligence network tried to burn my galley."

"Don't, Mirko, don't. . . ." A tear ran down one cheek.

"I've seen enough hysterics and waterworks for one night, Catzen. I just want the truth now."

She blinked back her tears and wiped her face with the back of her hand. "If I'd wanted to burn *Sapphire Light*, it wouldn't be *Morvellos Devil* ablaze now," she said with a soft smile.

Mirko rose abruptly from the seat. "Catzen, the time for lies is over. Tell me the truth, and we'll take things from there."

Catzendralle stood too and put her hand on Mirko's forearm. "Sit down," she said. "You're right, there's no point in any more lies."

Mirko sat down wordlessly. He had no inclination to help her out. *Ten minutes ago I thought I loved you*, he said to himself.

"Your theory is not unreasonable," she said. "But it's based on one false assumption: that I would want to work for House Drall."

"And why should you not?"

"I have no cause to love Koopendrall, or his father before him," she said. "They spent most of my teenage years trying to marry me off to a series of unsuitable men. When I showed a mind of my own they made things as difficult for me as they could. I wouldn't work for them—but more pertinently, they would never imagine I have the capacities to be useful to them."

"So—who—?"

"Do remember me telling you about my uncle Addacatzen? The one who used to take me galley-racing?"

"Of course. Although you didn't tell me what happened to him."

Catzendralle looked away. "I see you found out anyway. It was one of the reasons I've worried about the risks you took and the enemies you've made: I could—and still can—see you ending up the same way."

"And Addacatzen had got involved in politics . . ."

"So have you, although you won't see it. The result of this year's Margariad is political."

Suddenly Mirko had a flash of insight. "And wasn't Addacatzen part of the same political gang as Medina?"

"Yes."

"So . . . are you working for Medina?"

Catzendralle nodded. "You know now enough to ruin me . . . to kill me, for that matter."

Mirko sighed. "Why would I want either your ruin or your death, Catzen?"

"I don't know . . . I just don't like you having the option."

"How did you come to work for Medina anyway?"

Catzen paused to set her thoughts in order. "When I was a teenager it became apparent that I had a talent for noticing things; for not being noticed myself; and a certain degree of what we might for want of a better term call intuition. After Addacatzen was killed, Medina asked me to undertake certain errands for him. Things went from there: he became Peremptor, and I got a freer and freer hand."

Mirko took a long sip of his wine. "If you're working for Medina, you can hardly let me win the Margariad, can you?"

Catzen looked into his face for a moment. "No."

"You might even set fire to my galley, and think you were acting for the best, if the alternative is to kill me."

"It isn't that simple any more. At the start, you were just another agent; you gave me useful information and I paid you. The arrangement was by no means unusual."

"And then?"

"Then I made the mistake of starting to like you. I worried that you were going to get yourself killed because you just didn't know the rules. Still I wasn't too concerned about helping you, because it was axiomatic that there was no way *Sapphire Light* could beat *Dragon-chaser*."

"Helping me? I hadn't noticed—that fiasco around Padizan aside."

Catzen set her jaw. "It wasn't a fiasco at all, even if it turned out somewhat different from my expectations. But if you think I haven't helped you apart from that: how about the mob in the street? Who do you think arranged your rescue from the Fanarites? Who saw to it that you'd be safe in the Peremptor's dungeons when the Fanarite lynch mob was after you? And secured your subsequent release? And who gave you the hint on how to get rid of Cascais?"

Mirko released his breath slowly. "You? Otherwise you wouldn't have raised the points . . ."

"Just so," Catzen nodded. "To start with I was just looking after an agent I'd invested considerable time in; then I began to feel it was personal—but it was too late by then."

"And now you're in a quandary, Catzen: you know that I really can win the Margariad, and if I do your man is out of a job."

Catzen folded her cloak more tightly around her legs. "You encapsulate the position exactly," she said quietly. "I assume you will not be swayed from your plans."

"You assume correctly," said Mirko crisply. "I have a commitment to the crew who will be free if we win."

"Only if you can trust Bartazan."

"He offers a better option than defeat. *Dragon-chaser*—or even *Excelsior*—may yet beat us; but we will not throw the race."

"I only ever did any of this because I wanted to," she said. "I will not hamper you now. If it means that much to you—then go ahead and win."

Mirko stood up and walked over to look out of the window and into the courtyard. "Thank you," he said. "There's something else as well."

"Yes?" came the voice from behind his shoulder.

"Last time we talked, you asked to keep my own counsel until I knew what I felt about Larien."

"A rather easier decision for you to make now that you know she's Drallenkoop's mistress."

"Yes and no," he said, still staring from the window. "When I saw her in his arms, do you know what I felt? Rage and shame at being played for a fool; astonishment that I hadn't realised what was happening; pain that someone I had feelings for had so abused my trust. But jealousy? Absolutely none. Do you know she offered—in front of Drallenkoop—to throw him over and come with me instead? She looked so proud and determined; but I knew I didn't love her, knew that I never had."

"And?" Catzen's voice was softer; Mirko could sense her at his shoulder.

He turned to face her. "You know the rest, Catzen. All the feelings you believe I had for Larien, I have for you . . ."

Catzen looked down at her feet with a nervous laugh. "I am hardly dressed for an interview of this nature."

Mirko sighed in exasperation. "You are evading me again."

"Mirko," she said, touching his arm. "You would not believe how often I have dreamed about this moment." She laughed again. "And I've never been in my pyjamas when it happened. But it scares me . . ."

"What is there to be scared of, Catzen?"

"I am not—as you may have noticed—a person designed for easy intimacy. My experiences of it in the past have not been ones I recall with pleasure. I am more worried about being hurt than keen to be loved."

Mirko gently took her in his arms. "And why do you think I would hurt you?"

"Can you guarantee not to get yourself killed?"

"Of course not; but neither can you, I suspect. You have to decide whether to trust me, Catzen."

She disengaged herself and walked to the other side of the room. "Yes," she said with a sad smile. "Trust is what it's all about."

"Why do you think you can't?"

"There are two big secrets in my life. One I've told you today, about Medina."

"You really might as well tell me the other," said Mirko with a smile.

"When I'm ready, I will," she said. "That's not today, with my heart racing and my head spinning. You might not feel the same way about me afterwards."

Mirko walked over towards her. "The sooner you tell me, the sooner you'll know."

"It's not that simple, Mirko. Can't you just be happy with you have for now?"

Mirko sighed. "I suppose so. But one day you will have to trust me; you can't keep me at a distance for ever."

"No," she said. "I can't, can I . . ." looking into his eyes and kissing him. "Come with me; I don't think I've shown you my chamber yet . . ."



Chapter 27

Mirko awoke the next morning satisfied that Larien's characterisations of his amorous potentials as 'mechanical', 'perfunctory' and the like were no more than malicious slanders. Catzen might have her reservations about intimacy, but to Mirko's admittedly subjective perceptions, once she overcame her inhibitions there was little to complain about.

"You can't afford to be found here," she said as she rolled out of bed, her pyjamas long since discarded. "Both Koopendrall and Bartazan might take some convincing that there was a legitimate reason for you staying here."

Mirko smiled. "I have to go, anyway. I need to make sure that no-one managed to set fire to *Sapphire Light*."

"I am going to speak to Medina straight away, to find out what he knows."

"You may want to get dressed first."

She aimed a mock swipe at him. "And don't take this the wrong way—but don't come back here."

Mirko laid back on the bed. "I didn't imagine you kept open house. You still have—reservations . . ."

Catzen pulled on a pair of breeches and a loose cotton blouse. "I have no reservations at all about you," she said. "But until I've told you the 'second secret' there is no real relationship, is there?"

"Only you can decide when—or if—you're going to tell me. It's your judgement that it's so important."

"Believe me, Mirko, it's important. You would never forgive me if I kept it back from you."

Mirko shrugged. "I won't pretend I understand, Catzen; but I'll let you handle this your way. You've been right so far."

She leaned over the bed and kissed him. "Thank you," she said. "I hope you won't regret it."

As soon as Catzen had departed Mirko dressed and left via the discreet gate she had directed him to. The sun was bright and warm, and he walked down the hill towards the Old Town rather than summoning a rattlejack, trusting to the walk to clear his head. The past two days had been packed with more events than he could readily assimilate: the astounding victory over *Spray*; the fire on the waterfront; Drallenkoop and Larien; and finally last night with Catzen. He remained convinced that his feelings for Catzen were more deeply rooted than they had been for Larien, but he did not pretend to himself that he knew how things would turn out. Catzen was still keeping a large part of herself screened off from him; but she had trusted him this far, and he was confident that sooner or later she would tell him the 'second secret'. He remained baffled at what could be more significant than admitting she worked for the Peremptor, which she had divulged almost casually. Too casually? He shook his head; either he trusted her or he didn't. But it wasn't easy to have this blind faith in another person's motives, especially when that someone was professionally manipulative. Maybe it wasn't just Catzen who was daunted by the idea of intimacy.

Mirko decided to check the Arba Docks before calling in at the Urmalest. *Morvellos Devil* still smoked in the daylight, the mast completely gone and the hull severely damaged. To all intents and purposes the galley was destroyed; it would probably be easier to build a new one from scratch than attempt to rebuild. Whatever course of action Lord Garlin decided upon, his galley would not be racing in this year's Margariad. Lammerkin would be stuck on thirteen Margariads for another year.

Lammerkin himself sat forlornly on the sea-wall, looking out at *Excelsior* and *Kestrel*, the only galleys choosing to practice this morning. The others remained moored, protected in most cases by armed

guards. Responding to a mournful wave from Lammerkin, Mirko walked over.

"This is your doing," said Lammerkin quietly.

"Hardly," said Mirko. "I didn't set the fire."

"Whoever did wanted to burn *Sapphire Light*, not *Morvellos Devil*."

"Probably," said Mirko with a shrug. "The blame lies with the arsonist, not the intended victim."

"This was my last chance," said Lammerkin. "Lord Garlin has made it clear that he is intending to appoint a younger master as soon as he can find one. My only hope was to race well this year, maybe force my way into the top three. That's all gone now."

"I'm sorry, Lammerkin. But surely a man with your record can secure another galley?"

"Not among the decent boats," he said sadly. "Merchants like Darizun, minor lords like Widderling; they can afford to outfit a galley and scrape together thirty-odd racing slaves; but it's a vanity for them, they can't afford the quality of slave necessary to keep with the pack. When race day comes around they usually withdraw rather than face humiliation. It's no end to a career for a man like me."

Mirko could think of no suitable response. Lammerkin sourly collected his thoughts and made his way back into the town. Mirko added one to his current list of enemies, despite the injustice of Lammerkin's feelings.

Over at *Sapphire Light* Florio presided over a group of the more trustworthy slaves: Damiano, Walisse and Jenx prominent among them. "Any news?" asked Mirko.

"Guess!" said Florio with a laugh. "The culprit has been apprehended."

"Rapid work!"

"It's our old friend Fenneker."

Mirko had to work to avoid his jaw dropping. "Fenneker! Could he not identify his own galley?"

"Seemingly not—especially as he was somewhat drunk at the time."

Mirko shook his head wonderingly. "For a fact, he has a grudge against both me and Bartazan. Who caught him?"

"Corrando's men had him in custody within a couple of hours. I can only assume that they had a tip-off."

"Did Fenneker plan and execute the act alone?"

Florio shook his head in bafflement. "I assume so: who would employ someone as unstable as Fenneker to carry out a daring and dangerous plan?"

Mirko had his doubts; Fenneker may have carried out the plan; but he must have had help. Maybe Fenneker was innocent, a convenient scapegoat to allow the true culprit to escape. He hoped that Catzen would be able to tell him later.

He turned as he heard the sound of marching feet. A small troop of militia in Bartazan Azure were stepping along the road in synchrony: at their side, on a lean pacer, rode Bartazan himself.

"Good morning, my lord!" called Mirko. Bartazan merely nodded as the troops arrayed themselves before *Sapphire Light*.

"You slaves can return to the Urmalest," he said. "My militia will guard the galley now. Well done—now get some sleep and be ready for training."

Mirko was almost impressed that Bartazan had at last realised that the crew would perform better if allowed adequate rest. He was not surprised that he did not trust the Peremptor's Constables to mount a safe watch, and indeed he would not have done so himself in the same situation.

Bartazan vaulted from his pacer and strode towards Mirko. He looked energetic, focused, confident: the proximity of the race—and the Election—seemed to be inspiring him.

"Ascalon! You and I must talk."

"I'm at your disposal; there'll be no training today."

"I don't know why you're smirking. You have some explaining to do."

Mirko was puzzled. "I know very little. The Constables have arrested Fenneker, who may or may not be the culprit."

Bartazan shook his head impatiently. "I'm more interested in what you were doing at House Drall last night."

Mirko's heart pounded. How could Bartazan know that already? And what legitimate excuse could he offer?

"I was paying a social call," he said, as confidently as he could.

"Really? While my galley was at risk of arson, at the estate of my chief rival?"

Mirko nodded. "That is correct, my lord. I had assured myself of *Sapphire Light*'s safety and left Florio to ensure that no unpleasant surprises occurred."

"Hmmm. No doubt you will wish to tell me the nature of your call at Darklings."

"It was a private matter, my lord, in no way connected with the Margariad."

"Am I to assume you are conducting an amour at Darklings?"

"I would not put the matter in quite such a way; however I was visiting a lady."

Bartazan kicked at a stone in exasperation. "Does it not occur to you that this behaviour is foolish in the extreme? What if Koopendrall, or Drallenkoop, had seen you? Were you not concerned by the inevitability that I would learn of your rashness?"

"No, my lord. My conscience was clear and I feared no adverse consequences."

Bartazan grunted. "I hope she was worth it—especially if it keeps you away from Larien."

"You need have no fears on that score, my lord. Your niece and I are not conducting any form of improper relationship."

"You are aware," said Bartazan with a brisk nod, "that I disbelieve virtually everything you say?"

Mirko made a noncommittal gesture. "There is very little I can do to alter that, my lord."

"Your security hangs on the fact that I believe that, despite everything, you can and will win the Margariad for me. Be assured that if you double-cross me, I will kill you."

Mirko smiled. "Your confidence is well-placed. The crew believe in me—and only me—and given a fair race I think we can beat *Dragonchaser*. This year she is winning on reputation rather than excellence."

"You are an assured customer, Ascalon. I will tell you an important piece of information."

"Go ahead."

"The Elector Mompesson has been nominated to the office of Secretary of Determinations."

Bartazan seemed to feel this news needed no further elaboration. Mirko merely raised his eyebrows.

"Mompesson," continued Bartazan, "for reasons we need not explore here, feels a keen interest in securing my election. The Secretary of Determinations is responsible for organising the Election; and in securing the post for one of my own supporters I have gained a certain advantage."

"I am at a loss as to understand why."

Bartazan permitted himself a thin smile. "Mompesson has set the date for the Election: one week from today, immediately on conclusion of the Margariad, on the waterfront. Every Elector will naturally be present

for the race, and no objection can be raised to holding the Election immediately.”

“And you feel that if we win the Margariad you will be acclaimed on the spot . . .”

“Just so.”

“This may be an indiscreet question: but do you have enough votes to be able to win anyway?”

Bartazan narrowed his eyes. “These calculations are carried out with great deliberation—in private. They are not the subject of casual gossip.”

Mirko rubbed his chin. “The matter is of no great consequence—to me, at least.”

“Exactly so, Captain. Your job is the same regardless. If it exhorts you to greater zeal, though: I need twenty-six votes to secure my election. Twenty-three are mine beyond a doubt; I reckon Medina’s tally at twenty-two, but with the five waverers more likely to back him than me. Do not let me down.”

Mirko smiled a crisp brittle smile. “I have undergone many trials in my commitment to make *Sapphire Light* the fastest galley on the water: I have been inconvenienced and my life has been threatened on more than one occasion. I would be loath to see those efforts go to waste. And naturally my crew look forward to their freedom.”

“No doubt they do, Captain, no doubt they do,” said Bartazan, returning Mirko’s smile. “The day of the Margariad will be an eventful one, make no mistake.”



Chapter 28

Mirko returned to his lodgings at the Waterside weary in mind and body. The previous night, with the fire and his prolonged exertions with Catzen, had afforded little opportunity for sleep. With a brief nod to Panduletta, he slipped up the stairs to his rooms and fell into an immediate dreamless sleep.

He awoke with a start, unaware of how long he had slept. The sun which streamed through his chamber window in the morning was long gone; but there were none of the sounds of revelry downstairs which he associated with the evening. Rubbing his eyes, he surmised it was mid or late afternoon, and after briefly washing himself from the ewer in his wash-closet, he made his way back downstairs, feeling much refreshed.

“You look much better,” said Panduletta with a smile. “Late night?”

Mirko chuckled. “You might say that,” he replied. “Did you hear about the fire?”

Panduletta poured herself a mug of ale and another for Mirko. “They say it was *Sapphire Light* should have been burned.”

“Apparently so,” said Mirko, drinking deep with relish from his mug. “They have arrested that lout Fenneker.”

Panduletta shook her head in wonderment. “A bad lot, through and through.”

Mirko laughed. “If I had any doubts as to his guilt, the complete botch he made of it would have dispelled them.”

“He’s waited a long time to get his revenge,” said Panduletta. “Do you think he was working by himself?”

Mirko looked at her suspiciously. The speculation was most apposite: what if she were an informant, for Medina or Bartazan or who knew who else? *What’s happening to me?* he thought. *What possible cause do I have to be suspicious of Panduletta?*

She seemed to divine something of his thoughts. “Maybe I shouldn’t be asking; it was somewhat indiscreet.”

Mirko shrugged. “I’m just a bit on edge—I’m sure you understand.”

With a smile to himself, Mirko realised that Catzen would probably approve of this almost paranoid suspicion. After all, the great houses must have informants all over the city. A dockside tavernmistress would hear all sorts of gossip, especially if she lodged a galley-master. Perhaps he was learning after all.

“I forgot to mention,” she said. “There’s a message for you.”

She reached behind the counter and pulled out a single sheet, folded in half and sealed with a complex mark. Mirko quickly broke the seal and read:

‘G’

Do not go out once you have read this. If you care for me, please believe me that you are in very real danger. Wait here and I will come for you this evening.

‘N’

Mirko could not resist a smile. Catzen could never resist the melodramatic, and the use of code initials

seemed overdone in the light of their recent intimacy. Still, that was Catzen . . .

"Let me guess," said Panduletta. "Your new lady friend."

Mirko affected not to understand. Panduletta was becoming very shrewd of late.

Mirko spent the remainder of the afternoon in his chambers studying his sea-charts. As an exercise in race-planning it was largely redundant; he had sailed every cable of the race route many times over, and while the winds and currents could always combine in surprising ways, there really was little he could learn from the charts. Nonetheless the charts with their annotations and current markings soothed his uneasiness. He was no espionage agent, and in truth had no real interest in which of the two undoubted rascals vying for election were ultimately successful. What he wanted was to be out on the water, with *Sapphire Light* responding to his will. He had commanded larger galleys in Garganet, but he had never felt as connected with a boat as he did with *Sapphire Light*. The crew were polished and drilled, they trusted his judgement and they wanted to row for him. Even Florio, cynical, suspicious and mistrustful, seemed to have realised that Mirko represented his best hope of freedom; and he had the makings of a truly excellent helm.

He stretched himself out on his bed and looked at the irregularly-finished ceiling, noticing for the first time a small bird's nest tucked away at the back of the eaves. He thought—for the first time since he had left Darklings—of Catzen. The topic was usually a fruitless one. He had at least clarified his own feelings for her, but he was little clearer about the strength of hers. Her assertions about the previous occasions on which she had rescued him from harm were not amenable to substantiation, although he was inclined to believe them; and he could scarcely apply to Medina for verification of her claim to run his intelligence network. But he realised that he did trust her; and he thought that soon she would decide that she trusted him. The question of the 'second secret' continued to pluck at his unconscious, but he was becoming adept at silencing its naggings.

He had no idea how long he had been staring into space when he heard a knock at his door. Twilight had begun to fall as he mused.

"Who is it?" he called.

"'N'—Panduletta sent me up."

"Come in," said Mirko, rising from his bed.

Catzen opened the door and walked slowly in, her boots echoing on the floorboards. Mirko realised with a shock that he was nervous. What if she regretted last night? Juvenile to worry about such things . . .

"Would you like to sit down?" he asked, running one hand through his hair.

Catzen smiled. "A mug of wine wouldn't go amiss either," she said as she settled into the couch.

"As it happens I have an unfinished flagon here," he said. "It's hardly the Waterside's best, I'm afraid. I tend to forget that I have money these days."

As she drank from the mug—crudely painted with a satyr performing an unmistakably lewd act upon a maiden in front of an audience of fawns, Mirko noticed with belated delicacy—he took the opportunity to inspect her more closely. He wondered how he could ever have thought her anything other than beautiful. She lacked Larien's now somewhat insipid perfection, admittedly, but her face attested to abundant strength and character. The lines around her eyes would prevent her passing for the first flush of womanhood, but they showed the experiences etched into her soul, the events which had made her the way she was. And since he liked her very much just as she was, those lines were part of her beauty. He would never previously have thought vulnerability among her attributes, but when he looked into her eyes he caught a hint of the woman behind the cynical practicality she normally showed the world. How had he fallen so completely in love with her and not noticed? He was not, he concluded, the most sensitive or acute of personalities.

His scrutiny presently became noticeable. "What are you looking at?" she asked suspiciously.

Mirko gave an embarrassed smile. "Since I'm not cross-eyed, I must be looking at you; not unreasonable in the circumstances."

Catzen pursed her lips. "Now is not the time for mooning about," she said. "I have had a somewhat eventful day that bears directly on both of our safeties."

He shifted uneasily in his chair. Catzen seemed ill-disposed to continue the previous night's familiarities.

"I'll tell you mine if you tell me yours," he said.

Catzen topped up her mug from the flagon on the table.

"I hardly know where to start. I take it you know that Fenneker was apprehended for the arson?"

"Yes, Florio told me."

"I doubt that you know he's died in the Peremptor's custody."

Mirko said nothing, which Catzen correctly interpreted as assent.

"I went to see Medina: not an easy thing to arrange this close to the Election, but you can imagine that he will always see me. I asked him outright about last night, and he told me that Fenneker was the guilty man. Then I asked if I could speak to Fenneker, only to learn he had gone mad and been clubbed down by his guards, with fatal consequences."

"It is wrong to take satisfaction in anyone's death, but . . ."

"As usual, you miss the important nuances."

Mirko raised his eyebrows. "Enlighten me, then . . ."

"I am accustomed to think of myself as the source of all of Medina's plots and plans. But Fenneker was arrested almost instantly, which can imply two things: he was framed extremely rapidly, or Medina knew of his involvement. Either of those eventualities would normally require my involvement; but I knew nothing."

"Hmmm . . ."

"Are you worried?"

"Not uncontrollably so."

"You always did have a somewhat negligent nose for danger," she said with a half-smile. "Why would Medina suddenly cut me out of a plot as important as this?"

Mirko, pre-occupied in looking at the curve of Catzen's cheek, could formulate no immediate cogent response.

"Doesn't it suggest a lack of trust?" she continued. "Medina has chosen to transact his confidential business through another party. That means my position is by no means as secure as I'd thought; and you would be surprised at the extent to which your safety depends on me."

"I wouldn't go that far," said Mirko with asperity. "I have commanded Garganet warcraft before. I can look after myself."

Catzen shook her head wonderingly. "Your perception of the political currents in this city are approximately those of an eight-year old child; and you don't seem to realise it. Medina has always represented a great threat to you from the moment you started to look like you could win the Margariad. Fanar knows I told him it was nonsense for long enough, but no-one in Pal-

adria sees you as anything but a potential race-winner now."

"Is now the time to tell you that Bartazan knows I was at Darklings last night?"

Catzen's head came up sharply. "This is not a poor attempt at humour?"

"I take it this is no laughing matter."

Catzen wrapped a stray tendril of hair around her finger. "In principle it's no great shock that Bartazan has sources inside Darklings. He certainly has not infiltrated the household itself. Neither can he know about Larien and Drallenkoop, so his source cannot be particularly well-placed. But if you were seen at my villa . . ."

"Relax. Drink your wine."

"Don't try and soothe me. Understand now that both of our lives are in danger."

"I've become very used to that possibility; and I think I've uncovered another secret agent."

Catzen laughed, a response Mirko did not find flattering, although it showed off her neat white teeth and brought a becoming colour to her cheeks.

"Go on then," she said.

"Panduletta was asking some very perceptive and well-informed questions about Fenneker and the fire. For a tavern-mistress and occasional brothel-keeper she seemed to know rather more than I'd expect."

Catzen rose from her seat and kissed Mirko's forehead. "Away from the galleys you really notice nothing at all, do you?"

Mirko frowned. "Thank you for the kiss, but I'm not clear as to the thrust of your remark."

"Since you became master of *Sapphire Light* you have given the slaves markedly more liberty, especially the two Garganets."

"And?"

"Do you really not know that Florio is conducting an amour with Panduletta?"

"But she has no teeth!"

Catzen looked away to avoid collapsing into giggles. "She has a few," she said eventually. "And she is a woman of considerable personal force. Add in Florio's enforced celibacy over the past few years and there is nothing in any way surprising about the matter."

"How long have you known?" asked Mirko incredulously.

"As long as it's been happening—about six weeks, if you're interested."

Mirko shook his head in wonderment. "I thought she was Bartazan's agent—or yours."

"If you must know, I approached her—through an intermediary, of course—and she turned me down. She thinks too highly of her honour to sell it."

"Unlike me," said Mirko ruefully, remembering the alacrity with which he had accepted 'N's valut when they were offered. "Who is Damiano sleeping with? The Lady Inuela?"

Catzen grinned. "Nothing quite so ambitious. He has been making do with the more expensive waterfront doxies—trading on both your name and your credit, if my sources are to be believed."

Mirko frowned. "You always tell me more than I can readily absorb, Catzen."

"Come and sit on the couch with me. The reason everything comes as such a surprise to you is because you think the world is as straightforward as you are. And yet you are conducting the most extraordinary and daring espionage campaign imaginable and you don't see it as remarkable."

"Are you going anywhere this evening?"

"I don't have to. Why?"

"Underneath this crippling naivety there must be some reason you like me. I'm intending to remind you what it is . . ."

The next day, after considerable blandishment from Catzen, Mirko moved his quarters from the Waterside to Formello. Bartazan, although somewhat surprised by this request for sanctuary, assented readily enough; he realised that to have his galley-master prey to footpads and assassins the week before the Margariad was a temptation to fate that he need not offer. *Sapphire Light's* crew remained immured within Urmalest, and Mirko made his way to the docks for practice escorted by troops from Bartazan's heavily armed militia.

Mirko found it somewhat demeaning to take such precautions—and Florio certainly looked askance when he arrived flanked by his escort each morning—but Catzen had been most insistent. "I can't tell you everyone that's after you," she said, "but I can speak with reasonable authority for Medina's operation. It is not improbable that he will try to kill you. Be sensible, if only to humour me."

The path of least resistance commended itself to Mirko; and after all Catzen was often right. Nonetheless, lodging at Formello was not without its petty irri-

tations. The family quarters tended towards the austere, and guest-chambers were even more spartan. Mirko ate with the more respectable servants, such as Kanspiris, and found both fare and company lacking in savour. On the positive side, though, at least such lowly surroundings spared him the embarrassment of encountering Larien, a circumstance he wished to avoid at almost any cost.

Events were not destined to bear out this hope. On the third night of his residence, he was interrupted in his chambers as he practised his rapier drills with a tilt-dolly he had cozened from the Captain of the Guards over dice the previous evening.

"Can I come in?" asked Larien's voice softly from the door.

"If you must," said Mirko, stamping and lunging at the dolly with full vigour.

"You might want to put that sword down," she said. "Otherwise you might run me through."

Mirko halted his evolutions and sheathed the rapier. "There are those who'd say you deserved it."

"Mirko, please; I've come to apologise and see if there's anything I can do to set things to rights."

Wiping his forehead with a cloth, he said: "I imagine this will be a short visit. 'I'm sorry' is two words, and there are no amends I require of you."

"At least look at me," said Larien in a beseeching tone.

Mirko flopped into his unyielding chair and glanced across at her. Her hair was polished to its brightest auburn sheen, drawn up to reveal her neck, only a few artless strands escaping. She had the wit, Mirko noticed, not to flaunt herself in any obviously coquetish fashion; her dress, though well-cut and of good fabric, made the imagination do more work than the eyes. Her deep blue eyes gained lustre from the tears which appeared to be held in check with difficulty.

"I'm listening," said Mirko levelly. "Since you invited yourself I imagine you have prepared a speech of some sort."

Larien bit her lip and looked at the ceiling. "You aren't going out of your way to make this easy; I suppose there's no reason you should. I just want you to know how terribly sorry I am for the way things have turned out. At first it didn't seem so bad; Drallen—Drallen asked me to make sure you noticed me, to try and make friends with you. That wasn't too difficult; you were nice to be friends with."

This was accompanied with a shy smile. Mirko remained stony-faced. "Drallen wanted me to tell him what you said, of course, whether you thought you could win, how you were getting on with my uncle, that sort of thing. I couldn't see any harm in that."

"All the time, I take it, you were sleeping with Drallenkoop?"

Larien wiped a single tear from her cheek. "Of course—I love—loved—him. I was only flirting with you at the start; I thought we both understood that."

Mirko said nothing.

"It started to become more difficult as *Sapphire Light's* results improved. You began to think you could win, and so did I. You were so unhappy at the start, whether you realised it or not; then I could see you growing in energy and confidence." She lowered her voice. "It was very exciting for me to be part of it."

"All you seemed to want to do was convince me either that I couldn't win or to throw the race if I could."

"What else could I do?" she asked plaintively. "My loyalty had to be to Drallen. If you could have accepted coming an honourable second everything would have been all right."

"There is no such thing as 'honourable second' in galley racing. And none of that would excuse your wantonness."

"'Wantonness!'" cried Larien with the first heat she had displayed. "It was sex, so what? If it had been a man doing it, no-one would have said anything about it."

"It wasn't 'just sex,'" said Mirko, "because you were implying there was some feeling on your part. I didn't imagine the feelings in question were for Drallenkoop!"

"Mirko! There were feelings! They were real, and they were for you!"

Mirko tilted his head to one side. "This is touching, if belated," he said with lips which barely moved. "No doubt it's convenient for you to think that now: Drallenkoop is disgusted with you anyway, and it stops you seeming a trollop in your own eyes."

Larien twisted her head away from Mirko's gaze. "The last time someone called me a trollop," she said quietly, "you fought a duel with him. Now you're saying it yourself."

Mirko shrugged. "Inisse was just picking a fight. It was never about you. Not everything is, you know."

"Can you forgive me?" she said, only barely under control.

"It's a matter of no consequence," he said brusquely. "If it makes you feel better to be forgiven, then yes, I forgive you."

Larien turned for the door. "I never thought you could be so graceless, Mirko," she said sadly.

"And I never thought you could be such a harlot. I assume that concludes your business."

Larien put her head in her hands and wept without reservation. "Goodbye, Mirko," she said, raising her head. "One day you will realise that I really did care about you."

She stepped into the corridor and began to walk away. Mirko felt a terrible mixture of pity and guilt. However she had hurt him, he could not do this. He felt low, mean, vindictive: not the person he believed himself to be.

"Larien."

She stopped and turned to look at him. "I do forgive you," he said. "Genuinely forgive you. You were foolish rather than wicked. I can't love you, Larien, if that's what you want; and I'd find it difficult enough to be friends. But I don't wish you ill. You will never be happy here; go and see your brother in Garganet. You can have a new life there, away from the poison of Formello and Darklings."

Larien stepped towards him, raised a hand to his face. "You are a good man, Mirko. I should never have gone along with what Drallen wanted, the snake. If we had met differently you could have loved me."

"Maybe, Larien, maybe."

She kissed his cheek and walked slowly down the corridor. Mirko stared pensively after her, and returned to his chamber. He poured himself a goblet of wine and settled down to his thoughts.



Finister

by *Till Noever*

Book Two

— 5 —

Ailin screamed as they carried her out of the cabin. Where was he? He must hear her!

A rough hand clamped over her mouth. Cruel hands jerked her arms back until she gasped in pain. As the ship heaved underneath her they dragged her to the side. She twisted her head and bit the hand. It jerked aside. Ailin screamed again. The man backhanded her across the face. They stumbled and slipped across the deck, and the waves continued to crash over the ship. They arrived at the railing. The two men gave a heave. She felt herself flying. A moment later there was a splash as the waters closed over her head.

She flailed and struggled, reached the surface in jerking strokes. Enough time for a gasp of air before water slammed down over her again. She was whirled around and around. Somehow she kept herself from opening her mouth and swallowing a fatal draught of brine. Her lungs were burning when there was another moment of respite. She gasped, sucked in the sweet air, and was pummeled again.

Why was she struggling? She was alone now. The ship was gone, as was Caitlan. She had never been quite so alone. The watery grave waiting for her below, sucking and prodding to get her down there forever.

No!

Her waterlogged dress was pulling her down, additionally sapping her strength. A last spark of rationality told her what to do. Another wave lifted her up. Another breath. She tore at buttons and ribbons, kicked and struggled. The garment sloughed away. Relief! The newfound mobility made her giddy; but another wave immediately reminded her that she was just a plaything of forces far greater than her own. She was turned over and swallowed a mouthful of brine. Convulsive coughs shook her; she submerged, struggled to the surface again, gasped for breath.

A sharp pain as she collided with . . . what? She flailed around. Her hands found solidity. She grasped. Her hands slipped off the object. She jerked and struggled as it floated away. Then, a freak eddy. Her hands grasped the firmness again. Her fingers found a hold. She heaved and jerked herself closer. Sharp edges rammed into her. Woman and tree-fragment crested a wave. Ailin groped with her free hand and found another hold. She pulled herself closer. The stump, a jagged fragment with a sturdy branch that acted as an outrigger, refused to roll under her weight. Ailin grasped tighter. A wave crashed down on her, threatening to tear her away from her lifeboat; but she held on, though her arms felt like they were being pulled out of their sockets and the muscles in her hands were cramping up.

Somehow she held on; to the stump; to life; to a desperate hope that, when this was all over, she would find the *Treece* right beside her—and Caitlan to pull her out and into his arms.

When the storm finally relented she felt her way around the spiky fragment. She found a place, in the fork between the outrigger branch and the trunk, where she could hook her arms around the stumps in such a fashion that she wasn't going to slip off, even if she became too weak or lost her hold. Underneath her, the warm waters of the ocean heaved in big, unhurried swells, carrying her along to she-knew-not-where. She didn't really care. She was alive; and that was more than she had any right to expect.

She wondered how Caitlan and the *Treece* had fared. They were probably a long way from her. There was no real hope that they would ever find her.

The thought of Caitlan gave her a deep pang of regret and longing. Surely, he must think her dead. He would be beside himself with grief. The thought of him like that was unbearable. The thought of losing him—because she was going to lose him, when she died; maybe not now, but soon—was even more unbearable. He was her chosen; the one few circes ever found. One to share the gift. One to be bonded to with ties stronger than anything men could devise. They'd had each other for less than three weeks before . . . this.

Three weeks was more than she'd ever dared to hope for. Maybe she should be grateful, rather than lament her impending demise. And grateful she was. But that didn't stop her from wanting more!

She heaved and managed to drag herself out of the water, until she straddled the trunk, with only her legs still in the water. The wind had died down; still she shivered in the light breeze. Her teeth chattered. She hugged herself and rubbed her arms and body to keep away the cold. Not that it would do her any harm. She was a circe, and circes did not suffer from common human ailments. It took severe injury to threaten their lives. But several days without drinking water under Caravella's glare here on the ocean would kill her just as much as any ordinary mortal. As would drowning, or any severe injury that left her unconscious and therefore unable to heal herself. There were limits to what she could do—and the Limpic Ocean would surely find those limits.

Ailin leaned forward, tried to find a position of less discomfort, and presently fell into a deep sleep of exhaustion.

She woke with Caravella rising and shining into her face. The ocean still heaved but the swells had decreased. The surface was calm; almost oily. Ailin righted herself with stiff joints and ran through a series of replenishing exercises. After a little while she felt better. She squinted around her, but, as expected saw nothing; only a vast wet expanse that must surely be more desolate even than the Talinic Plains.

The day wore on. Caravella beat down on her. She divested herself of her chemise and pulled it over her face to protect from Caravella's rays. After a while she put it on again. During the hottest period she dipped back into the water to cool herself off. Caravella passed its highest point and slanted down again. Ailin took off all garments and spread them across the spiky stumps of branches to dry. When night fell she put them on again, and thus spent a more comfortable night than the first.

Why was she bothering?

The answer, when it came to her, was simple. Because she was not dead—and because Caitlan also lived. She knew this, because she dangled her lover's charm from its chain and it flipped around until it pointed firmly into the west. So, he was alive. And—if he could—he *would* be coming for her. If the *Treece* was still afloat, of course. She surmised that it was, because Caitlan was still alive. And even if the ship was damaged; well, in the end he would find some way to get to her. This she knew. And that was why she hung onto

life. Because he would come. As long as he drew breath he would come.

The second night passed. A breeze sprung up which chilled the air, but it never built into anything more serious. The morning came with clear skies again. Ailin tested her lover's charm and kept facing the direction from which he would come.

Presently the wind ceased. The ocean lay still. The swells had died to barely noticeable undulations. The heat was oppressive.

And then Ailin saw the ship.

It must have approached from the east, but she had not seen it. Maybe a mile or so away from her it lay, becalmed, its sails hanging limp from the two masts. A sleek, fast vessel, such as she had seen on occasion in the Valley's ports. A Thalonican merchantman maybe.

Ailin estimated the distance between herself and the ship. Could she swim this far? She doubted it. What to do? Could she paddle her strange boat maybe? If she only got close enough so they could hear her . . .

Ailin thought for a moment, then slipped into the water. She hooked her arms around some stumps and used her feet as paddled, working them vigorously. The trunk set into motion with agonizing slowness. Maybe she *should* swim!

Ailin let go of her lifeboat and pushed away, making inexperienced but steady strokes that pushed her into the merchantman's direction. It was further than she'd thought and by the time she was within shouting distance the first fingers of a breeze flickered erratically over the waters. Ailin treaded water. On the side of the ship she saw figures leaning lazily, staring across the waters. She raised her hands, waved them about and shouted at the top of her voice. There was no reaction. The breeze was blowing in her face, picking up strength. The sails billowed.

Ailin screamed.

And they saw her.

There was hurried activity. Men rushed forth and back. She could hear their shouts echo across the water. The ship heaved to and turned toward her, picking up speed as the wind bellied the sails. The ship headed straight for her. At the last moment it veered aside slightly. A coil of rope arced across to her. She caught it with one hand, almost lost the grip as it tightened, grasped with her other hand and held on for dear life. The ship's speed increased, rushing her through the water. The rope was hauled in and Ailin with it. A

ladder fell from the side of the ship. The men on the other end of the rope contrived to get her next to it. She let go with one hand, grabbed for the ladder; nearly lost it, found it again, and wrapped her arm around it. She let go of the rope completely and used her other hand to get a solid hold on the ladder. Then, step by step, she pulled herself out of the water, and up the ladder; and hands were reaching out to pull her up the last few rungs and over the railing, and she stared into the astonished faces of a ring of sailors who looked at her as if they simply couldn't believe what they saw.

Ailin leaned against the side, panting, exhausted. Her saviors stood around her in a circle, keeping a fastidious distance. A motley crew of rough men, their skins weathered by exposure to the elements, their muscles bulging from the labors of sailor-dom, their garments careless and utilitarian. In the heat of these latitudes, many wore nothing on their upper torso, exposing their prominent pectorals. Some bulging bellies on those exempt from extended exercise. Most were barefoot. A thin man in a dirty, stained tunic, whom she suspected to be the cook.

Never trust a thin cook. Caitlan's words.

Suddenly, unbidden, she became aware of her own exposure. Nothing but a thin shift, covering her from chest to just below the hip, clinging to her wetly. She might as well be naked. Ailin made an effort to calm down her heavy breathing; which must surely be extremely suggestive. The eyes of the sailors feasted on her. Suddenly she wasn't too sure whether she was much better off on this deck than in the ocean.

"Back to your posts!" a voice roared. The men, taking their eyes of her with evident reluctance, began to disperse. A man pushed his way through the circle of gapers; distinguished from the rest by an air of definite authority. He halted a couple of steps in front of her and eyed her up and down. A barrel-chested individual somewhat shorter than herself. A brown-red face, with a skin the consistency of leather. Here, too, was ill-concealed lust. She stared at him, forcing him to look in her face rather than at her breasts.

"You're a woman," he said.

She considered the face. There was a reason why this man was the captain. If she did this right . . .

She bit back the snappy remark that lay on her tongue. Instead she smiled. "I wish to thank you. I didn't think I'd be so fortunate."

"Where are you from?" he asked roughly.

"Keaen."

His eyes widened. "Keaen, huh?" He grinned, exposing yellow teeth, some of which were either decayed or chipped. "The women are frisky there. I like it."

A man of simple tastes. She would have to modify his initial impression.

"I'm not that kind of woman," she said briskly.

"Are you not? Well . . ." He squinted at her. "Indeed, maybe you're not. Never heard of a Keaean whore shipwrecked off the coast of Finister."

"Finister?" she echoed.

The captain grinned again. He glanced around, saw that some of the crew were still loitering close by. He whipped around. "To your posts!" They hastened to comply. The captain turned back and pointed to the west. "See that line?" he said. "That's Finister. Yonder are the Teeth of Magog; and far away from those we want to keep if we're to make it home. Luckily the storm didn't catch us last night. Might've thrown us straight onto those rocks—and then what would happen to my share?" He guffawed. "Not to mention my life, eh?" He had that leering expression again, his thoughts diverting into undesirable direction.

"What ship were you on?"

"The *Treeca*."

"Never heard of it. What happened?"

"I had an . . . accident." She saw no reason to divulge the true circumstances of the affair.

He smirked. "You went overboard?" He shook his head.

"It happened during the storm," Ailin said.

The captain made a noise, expressing, she presumed, exasperation with all landlubbers who were stupid enough not to pay heed to the advice of those who knew better.

"The *Treeca*; where was it heading?"

"To Thalonica."

"Ah, well, that's our destination as well. So, you're in luck. Though, of course, having a woman on board a ship is *not* very lucky." He grimaced. "Maybe I should chuck you back in the water. A woman's nothing but trouble in a bunch of lads like this. Gives them ideas, you know."

He had a slight facial tick, which was getting stronger. Maybe, Ailin thought dryly, it was associated with deep thought.

"I would be grateful if you could take me to Thalonica," she told him.

"Ah, yes, I suppose you would be," he said. "But you know, we're not a free service. We're sailors, in the service of Merchant Toelpel, of Gaskar. A most important man indeed, and a stingy one at that; even if I say so myself, and hoping that he'll never know."

"Not from me," Ailin assured him.

He ignored the remark. "If he found out that we provided a service without the appropriate compensation . . . he might think that I'm not fit to be captain of the *Pandoor*." He hesitated, glancing at her expectantly. "So, you see, there is the matter of compensation for salvage and passage. I don't suppose you . . ."

He finally took note of the golden lover's charm around her neck. "Of course," he said, "such a trinket . . ." He stepped closer and reached out. Ailin attempted to retreat but there was nowhere to go to. She lifted her hand to cover the charm, but it was too late. The captain reached out and touched the pendant. The jolt threw him a couple of steps backward. He lost his balance and tumbled to the deck. He scrabbled and got himself up; glared at her accusingly, his dignity severely compromised.

"What is that?" He stared at the pendant. "Who are you?"

Ailin decided on a different tack. "Nobody to be trifled with," she snapped. In a more moderate tone: "How long will it take to get to Thalonica?"

The captain shrugged, still shocked, and thrown off guard by her sudden change of demeanor. "If we're not becalmed again . . . we should be there tomorrow night."

Ailin pushed herself away from the side of the ship and took one step closer to him. He backed away, keeping a good two paces between them. Good. She'd made her point. He understood that, just because she stood before him practically naked, this did not mean that she ought to be treated like a whore. She took another step. So did he.

"Captain," she said reasonably, "a day or two with a woman on board is not going to ruin your crew or your reputation as a savvy trader. Besides, I will do my best to insure that, in due course, there *will* be a recompense."

The captain gave her wily glance. "That's easy to say, but once you're out of sight you'll change your mind quickly enough. Then it's 'I have better things to do' and what happens to Wussel and his crew is the furthest thing from your mind. Such are the ways of men—and even more so of women."

Ailin took another step. Captain Wussel, if such was his name, continued to retreat. "And the ways of those who await my arrival are such that, should they find out that I have not been treated right, they will not take to it kindly—and, believe me, captain, the folks concerned have ways of making their displeasure known to all concerned."

She saw that he believed her. "So," she concluded, "your choices are limited. You can throw me back into the ocean—and become a murderer—or you can take me to Thalonica and hope that my word is good. Which it is—but you can't know that."

"We should have left you in there," he muttered, grimacing. He cogitated for a few moments, then came to a decision. "You can't walk around on my ship like that," he grumbled. "Come with me." He turned away and stalked off in the direction of the aft cabins. Ailin, suppressing a grin, and ignoring the curious stares from just about everybody who had the time and opportunity to look, followed him. He opened a warped door in the poop castle and stepped inside. "Stay here." Ailin composed herself to wait. Though she felt exposed in her wet chemise, the feeling was wearing off; especially when she told herself that their attention, and what they were paying attention *to*, also gave her a certain power; especially since, as she now believed, Captain Wussel would not allow them to touch her.

Presently, Wussel returned with a grubby woolen cape, which she placed around her shoulders. It smelled of stale sweat and probably hadn't been washed for months; maybe years. It covered her to well below the waist, but it wasn't going to be comfortable. So be it. No point complaining. She was alive. She was out of the water. She was going to Thalonica. She was going to find Caitlan—or he was going to find her. Life was looking much more promising than it had at dawn.

With the excitement wearing off, the thirst, which she had been suppressing, was coming to the fore again.

"Captain, I haven't eaten or drunk anything for almost two days."

He sized her up. "Can you cook?"

"Yes!"

He grimaced. "Cook had an accident," he grumbled. "A few days back. He's not . . . with us anymore. Oscar, the carpenter, couldn't cook if his life depended on it. He's doing it anyway, and the crew like it even less than I. Some swear he's trying to poison them all; in retaliation for everything unkind they've ever said about him. And there are a lot of unkind things that could be said about Oscar!"

He motioned for her to follow him. "You will cook for us until we get to Thalonica. That way you'll earn your keep, and my employers won't think worse of me. The galley is yours. Eat and drink what you need. I expect a full dinner for the crew at the change of the third watch." He grinned. "Oscar will be relieved. He'd rather saw old tika wood than stir a pot."

Captain Wussel was correct. Oscar, the lank carpenter, surrendered his filthy apron with a sigh of relief. "I wish you luck," he muttered as he fled the galley.

"The larder is yonder," Captain Wussel told her, pointing at a small door at the rear of the galley, a dingy affair in the port side of the poop castle, just large enough to accommodate a single stove with a chimney that vented to the side of the ship. A bench on the other side, a rack above, holding bowls and drinking cups. A ragtag assortment of cooking utensils; battered pots, a huge pan, large greasy spoons. Ailin's insides squirmed at the sight, but she made sure that the sentiment didn't reach her face.

"How many men on your ship?" she asked.

"Twenty-six, excluding myself." He laughed and pointed at a huge blackened, dented pot. "Just make sure that's full. And don't forget to bake bread. There's flour aplenty. And firewood—in the hold. I'll ask one of the men to fetch some for you." He motioned at the stove. "And now, get to it."

Captain Wussel disappeared. Ailin busied herself with getting to know the galley. She found a tap which, when turned, yielded water; possibly from a hidden overhead tank. She drank greedily. The hunk of bread in the corner look unappetizing. She didn't even want to think about the hands it had been through. She took a knife and cut off the outer layers; helped herself to the inside. She felt better as her aching stomach gratefully accepted the food.

After a while a sailor appeared and dropped an armload of wood beside the stove. He straightened and made as if to depart, then appeared to reconsider. Ailin remembered that she had discarded the cape and stood

exposed again. The sailor's eyes flicked forth and back between the door and her breasts.

"You want dinner?" she snapped at him.

"Huh?"

"Then how about another load, eh?"

He tore his eyes away from her and departed with a pout. Ailin returned her attention to the mess in the galley and her deadline. She raided the larder; discovered dried strips of daka meat, fruit, and beans; pickled vegetables and a small, covered, wax-lined vat of a indefinable substance that might be a condiment. Greatly daring she poked a finger into it and gingerly put it to her tongue. It had a sweet-salty taste that metamorphosed into a fire that sent tears to her eyes. Fire chutney! She'd heard of the stuff, produced in Orgond, on the northern shore of Lake Teela from a herb that only grew there. Despite her age, however, she'd never actually tasted it! Just as well . . .

Ailin ran for the tap. The water extinguished the burning sensation. Ailin decided that fire chutney was not and would never be for her.

The sailor returned with another armload and sullenly dumped it on top of the first. This time he didn't linger.

When the bell rang for the third watch, just before Caravella's setting, Ailin was ready. She had worked incessantly and had acquired an appreciation of the work of a ship's cook. It was, she decided, a full day's job, with little time to be laggard.

The pot was too heavy to lug out of the galley. Captain Wussel ordered a sailor to cart it to its customary place on the deck, where there was a rack for holding it. Ailin produced the bowls, filled them and handed them to the sailors filing past her, together with large chunk of the bread she'd baked. The captain had ordered her to fill one bowl with a measure of the fire chutney. The sailors helped themselves liberally by dipping their bread into the stuff and sucking it off as if it was honey. Ailin shuddered.

The dinner was an unmitigated success. Some of the sailors, coming for second helpings, felt compelled to express their appreciation; though, whether it was for the food or because they had a vain hope that it would lead to other things, she couldn't be sure. There was a glint in their eyes that told her that, had she been willing to indulge them, she could have counted on the undivided and panting attention of almost all of them.

The dinner ended. Night fell. Lanterns were lit. Ailin cleaned up the mess, and washed dishes and pots with water drawn by buckets from the ocean—a task which fell to another sailor, assigned by the captain. Here, too, were subtle and not-so-subtle suggestions, but by now she knew that she was basically off-limits, and that their lewd remarks, looks, and gestures were for show only.

When the work was done, the captain told her to sleep in the galley. She persuaded him to let her have a blanket and curled up in a corner of the filthy floor. She'd closed the door and around the latch she'd tied a rope, the other end of which she looped around one leg of the bench. She needed a good night's sleep and a locked door was a good start. Before she lay down she went out on deck and took out her lover's charm. The lanterns had been extinguished. She leaned on the side and let the pendant rotate freely. It swung, fixing on a position somewhere in what she estimated to be almost exactly due north. Which was strange, because she had seen Finister's coastline during the day, and, unless the *Treeca* had foundered, it should have been in a southerly direction, closer to Thalonica.

The thought made her heart heavy. Caitlan was alive, but what circumstances was he in? Had he been shipwrecked? How could she possibly find him? As a woman, and devoid of any means, she had virtually no prospect of leaving Thalonica to search for him. He must come to her—and circumstances could be such that he might not be able to do so for some time. What was she to do in the meantime? Pandrak's descriptions of Thalonica had not been comforting.

Ailin gave an annoyed twitch of her shoulders. She was a circe. She had been through difficult situations before. She would survive until Caitlan came for her. It was vexing that she, as a woman, had no other option; but this was the way it was. It might be different one day, but right now survival was the paramount issue, and she would face it with all her resourcefulness.

She went to sleep in the dingy galley, with the gurgle of the wake sounding through the wooden structure of the ship, and the swaying and rolling as it proceeded under billowed sails toward its destination.

It was still dark when a thumping on her door woke her. She got up and undid the rope. Captain Wussel was outside. "Breakfast at daybreak," he told her.

There were pressing matters to be attended to first. It wasn't easy to ask but . . . "Captain—how do you . . . you know, attend to your bodily functions. I haven't seen a latrine . . ."

Wussel guffawed. "Ha! The latrine is yonder," he pointed at the ocean. "It is full of water and almost as fancy as that used by the rich and important folk."

"You just . . ."

"That we do." He wagged his head. "Now, you being a woman and all—it makes it . . . complicated . . ." He grimaced. "There's a 'seat' in my cabin; at the side of the big poop window. Captain's privileges and all. Not having to do it like the ordinary men." He scratched his short, untidy beard. "I suppose you could use that one." He pointed a thumb over his shoulder. "Go now. I have business with navigation. Hurry up with it, and then get breakfast ready. The men won't appreciate it being late and all."

Ailin hastened to comply. She went to the captain's cabin, located the seat—a construction devised for accommodating the behind of a man, hanging out just far enough over the water to ensure that whatever fell down didn't hit the ship—and availed herself of the facility. It took a while, but when she finally relaxed, it was almost easy.

She hastened back to the kitchen and barely managed to finish the breakfast—which was a repast not unlike the previous night's dinner. The procedure for feeding also was the same.

The morning passed. Ailin stayed in the kitchen, attending to her duties and the sailor's half-day meal. She was about to take bread out of the oven when the creakings, groanings, and gurglings accompanying the ship's motion were disrupted by a snap, like the crack of a whip. Then there was a splintering sound, and a crash. A human voice screamed out in pain. Ailin, the bread forgotten, rushed out of the kitchen . . .

. . . to come upon a gruesome scene. A halyard holding a spar that acted as a structural support of some kind for the aft mast had torn. The halyard had snapped in half. One of the pieces, a jagged fragment had plummeted down, intercepting a sailor laggard in getting out of the way. The sharp end had impaled the man in the gut and pinned him on the deck at a grotesque angle. His mates had pulled the spear-like piece out of him, but he was clearly not going to live. His intestines spilled from the gaping hole in his belly. He lay still, paralyzed by the shock and on the thresh-

old of dying. The men stood around him in a circle and stared at their doomed comrade. Distant, not daring to touch him. Keeping away from death.

Ailin, without thinking pushed them aside. She knelt down by the sailor's side. He was a gruesome sight indeed, but nothing worse than what she'd seen at the battle for Castle Keaen. The stench of blood and excrement rising from the wound nauseated her, but it didn't matter.

She lifted her head. "Go away!" she ordered them.

They stood transfixed, neither able nor, for that matter, willing to forego the morbid titillation of seeing their former comrade die.

Ailin stood up. "Go away," she screamed.

It shook them.

"Go! All of you! *Now!*"

Whatever it was, the fury in her eyes, the edge in her voice; *something* made them move. As they turned away, Ailin redirected her attention to the sailor. She shook off her cape and, overcoming her revulsion, scooped up his intestines and put them back into the hole. She gripped the slippery edges of the skin-flaps and held them so they touched; *willed* them to join. They did, as she knew they would. She grabbed another handful and repeated the procedure. When the whole tear was mended she ran her hand along it and felt the healing flow from her and into the man. The skin knitted and became whole as she ran her hand over it. Inside, she knew, he was also mending. How this happened she did not know. She just knew that she could do it; had done it, many times.

He groaned. In his slack, bloodless face muscles twitched. A shuddering gasp as he drew breath. Ailin kept one hand on his chest for another few moments until she was sure that his heart would continue to beat. Then she lifted it and stood up . . .

. . . to look at the wide-eyed faces of the sailors and captain Wussel.

She knew the look: a mix of disbelief, wonder, awe, and terror.

In this instance mostly terror.

"A circe," she heard someone whisper.

"What's a circe?" another voice came.

"A freak," the first voice answered.

Ailin looked at captain Wussel. It was *his* reaction that mattered. He gaped at her with wide, incredulous eyes.

Ailin held up her bloody hands. "I've given you back the life of one of your sailors. That would count as a payment of sorts, would it not?"

Wussel exhaled sharply. "Who are you?"

"I am what I am," she said bleakly. "You've heard it," she added, nodding at the sailors, "a freak."

Something touched her right leg. She looked down, at the sailor whose life she'd just saved. He had levered himself up on one arm, his other hand reaching out to touch her. She hunkered down beside him. "You will be very thirsty soon. Drink lots of water, but eat no food for a day. If you do, you will experience much pain."

"Thank you," he whispered. His coarse face was weak, bewildered, and somehow . . . soft. His hand reached out and touched hers. She took it between hers and held it for a few moments. The touch relaxed him. Ailin looked up into the face of captain Wussel. "Keep this man rested and allow him all the water he asks for. Nothing else; just water. Tomorrow, feed him well, and by the day after he will be as strong as ever."

Wussel nodded mutely. Ailin got up and, without another word, headed back for the galley. The circle of sailors parted before her as they hastened to stop from being touched by her. *Strange*, Ailin thought bitterly; *it is the circe's touch that heals, yet men avoid it at all costs.*

Except Caitlan, of course.

She returned to the galley and cleaned the blood off herself. She remembered that the cape was still outside, but she didn't care. After this performance they wouldn't even dare to *think* of her as a woman. She dried her hands on the dirty apron and returned her attention to the bread—which was overcooked, but still edible. It took her longer than anticipated, but nobody grumbled. Nobody even *looked* at her: the usual reaction. If it weren't so sad it might have been laughable.

One day later, the *Pandoor* worked its way up the Gulf of Thalonica and presently arrived at the city. It was still dark, so the captain had the ship wait at anchor until morning. Ailin, the cape recovered and around her shoulders, warding off the slightly chilly breeze, stood at the side and studied the lights of Thalonica. Now that they were about to arrive her uncertainties surfaced with renewed vigor. What was she to do?

A sound behind her. She spun around. In the soft light of Janus she recognized the face of the sailor she'd saved. She had not seen him since that day. Fol-

lowing her orders—enforced by Wussel—his mates had kept him in his bunk and nursed him back to strength.

“Sheena,” he said, using the honorific used by Gaskarians when addressing women of high caste and wealth, “I wish to offer my services.”

“Your ‘services’?”

“The captain spoke to me. He wanted to know what it . . . was like . . . Then I asked him about you. He told me that you had no . . . means . . .”

She smiled. “Thank you, Kolya,” she said softly. The captain had told her the man’s name. “But . . . well, what I did for you . . . it is not something for which I expect . . . whatever. You must understand this. It is my gift. I expect no reward.”

Kolya nodded. In the darkness she could see the whites of his eyes. “Maybe,” he said, “but I owe you my life—and my father always said . . . ‘Kolya,’ he said, ‘for every deed there must be another.’ And so there must be something to balance what you’ve done. And if it be a matter of means, or of some help that I can give . . . then this I must do. Father would expect me to, and I promised him . . .”

Ailin sighed. “I don’t know *what* you could do. You’re a Gaskarian. What can you do here?”

“I can get you clothes,” he said simply. “And . . . and I know this isn’t . . . right . . . maybe for a woman like you . . . but I know a few . . . ladies here—and I’m sure they’d be willing to help.”

“Ladies?”

“Well, you know . . .”

Ailin chuckled. “It’s all right,” she said. “I understand. But why would they . . .”

“You’d have to do some . . . work . . .” he said haltingly.

Ailin shook her head. “Not that kind, Kolya.”

“I didn’t mean *that*,” he protested. “But there’s work. Menial stuff, mind you. But you’re a good cook . . .”

Ailin laughed. “My cooking hasn’t won any accolades yet,” she said.

“We liked it,” he said. He chuckled. “Well, after what we usually get, I suppose we’d like anything—so long it’s not Oscar cooking it!” He turned serious. “Sheena, if you don’t find any work and if you have no means, you will fare badly. I know I can get you started with something that will help you . . . survive . . . until someone comes looking for you.” He hesitated. “There *will* be someone, won’t there?”

“Yes,” she said confidently, “there will be.”

“Then let me help,” he begged. “Please.”

“Of course,” she said softly and reached for his hand. “Thank you, Kolya. You may have saved my life.”

“I don’t think so,” he replied. “But you saved mine.”

Kolya did as he’d promised. When the *Pandoor* had moored at the pier he got dispensation from Wussel and disappeared. Some time later he returned with a parcel of women’s clothes, which he presented to Ailin; much to the merriment of his mates, who sniggered behind his back.

Kolya didn’t seem to care. He might have, she thought, before he’d died and been resurrected. But not now. It wasn’t the first time she had seen the change in people when certain death was averted. Kolya, still a simple man, but now weighed down by a consciousness of something that he’d probably never even seriously considered, would never be the same again—and the mockery of his mates didn’t matter to him. Already he was distant from them, separated by insights and vistas they couldn’t even begin to grasp. When he returned to Gaskar he would almost certainly leave the *Pandoor*; maybe never again set foot on another ship. Whatever became of him, only time would tell. But it would not be more of what he had been; that much she knew.

The clothes fitted well enough; a one-piece super-tunic, the top colored a bright yellow, the bottom of a gray cloth. Someone very thoughtful had also added short chemise, an—unexpected—pair of thin loin pants, and a piece of garment the purpose of which she could not fathom. She turned it this way and that, inspecting it from all angles. Made of thin daka wool, woven so sparsely that it was almost a mesh, it had two straps like a sleeveless tunic, but it was so short that it would barely cover her below her breasts. It was half-open, six woven strings evidently designed to be tied together to close it around her . . .

And then she figured it out. Amazing! She slipped her arms into the straps, brought the two pieces across her breasts and tied the strings together at the front at the front. It was an unusual feeling. Confining but not uncomfortable. Interesting, too. She wondered what Caitlan would say—and *do*—when he found out about this thing. She grinned to herself. It would be . . . interesting.

Ailin was pleased and told Kolya so. He confided in her that they had been chosen by one of the females he

'knew' around here, after he'd explained Ailin's size and build—much, she suspected, to his own embarrassment. It couldn't be easy for a man like him to be talking about such excruciatingly female matters. That he had, was further evidence of the change she perceived in him.

Ailin smiled. Again she thought of her lover. He also had changed. Of course, there had been a much more complex personality, waiting to be explored; something she'd known the first time she laid eyes on him in Cedrea. The gentle core under the warrior's mask. There was much more of it visible now.

Was she making him into a man he didn't want to be?

Ailin smiled. Exposure to her was changing him, no doubt. But he was also changing her. A lot of his outlook had rubbed off on her; here, too, because, like himself, she was receptive to it—and because she wanted it.

And so we change each other, she thought. And we both become better for it. Or so she hoped.

"What have you decided, sheena?" Kolya asked her.

"I will take you up on your offer," she said.

He smiled happily.

Ailin took her leave of Captain Wussel and presently left the ship in Kolya's company. As she did, she could feel the gazes of the sailors on her back.

The streets of Thalonica around the harbor area were squalid and narrow. Much like Keaen's or Sacra-el's, she thought. The light of day revealed what night mercifully hid; but at the same time she wouldn't have wanted to walk these streets at night.

Kolya was a comforting presence beside her. "I have told them that I owe you much. They will look after you."

"What do they owe *you*?" Ailin wondered.

Kolya grinned. "I do them favors. I bring them things. I come back to see them, rather than shopping around. They know me. It's good to be known. Even in a whorehouse."

Ailin laughed. "Kolya, you surprise me." She saw that he was pleased.

"This must have been expensive!" she said. "How. . ."

He raised a hand. "Don't worry. I got it at a good price. I *am* a Gaskarian, you know!"

"But. . ."

"But nothing, sheena," he said firmly. "It was just the money I'd usually spend on whoring. I figured that, just this time, with me being alive. . . thanks to you. . ." He laughed. A sailor's laugh. "I can whore around the next time. That'll be soon enough. At least I'm still around to do it!"

They entered yet another alley and arrived at a three-storey edifice, distinguished from its dingy-looking neighbors only by a sign over the door, which read '*House of Joys*'. Ailin paused and considered the facade. She looked down the street, saw another sign over a door two buildings away. That one read '*Pink Palace*'. From a window on the second floor a face peered down at them.

"I suppose it can get rather busy around here," Ailin remarked.

"It does," Kolya confirmed. "Thalonica is a busy port."

At that moment a sailor, instantly recognizable by his characteristic swagger, emerged from the door of the *House of Joys*, glanced at them, eyed Ailin up and down as if considering a second helping, decided against it, and ambled off down the alley.

"You will have some. . . offers," Kolya noted. "This is unavoidable."

"I'll handle it," Ailin assured him.

They went inside, into a murky parlor, where several girls lounged, awaiting attention by whomever happened to enter. They assumed prepared poses when they saw them, but when they noted who it was, they relaxed again. Curious eyes raked over Ailin, sizing up her potential as competition—or maybe a co-worker. Kolya elicited softer looks. Evidently he was well-liked. Ailin was pleased at this. She would have done her best to save him no matter who or what he was, but knowing that he was a good man added to the sense of purpose that adhered to a healing.

"Come." Ailin smiled at the women and followed Kolya through a door, down a narrow corridor and into a doorless room where they came upon a woman at the border of middle age, with a wily pair of almost black eyes, and dressed in an outfit not unlike the one Ailin wore; though this one was colored in two different shades of red, with frills at the neck. Ailin surreptitiously studied the woman's chest area and decided that she, too, wore one of the strange breast-support garments. The woman was about her own build, and Ailin

decided that it was she who had made the purchases for Kolya.

The woman's next words confirmed her suspicion. "Your judgment was good," she said to Kolya. He grinned. "My mother always said I had an eye for shapes."

The matron raised an eyebrow. "Your mother also told you that you'd be rich one day. I haven't seen much of that!" She turned to Ailin. "I'm Bearna. Kolya tells me you need help. Well, we all need help around here, so don't expect miracles. But if you're willing to work . . ."

Ailin glanced at Kolya. "He told you . . ."

Bearna chortled. "You're not in the market for that?" She eyed Ailin for another few intense moments. Her face turned thoughtful. "No," she said slowly, "I suppose you're not. Well, whoever you are, *whatever* you are . . . there's work to be done here. Menial work—but then again, we're all menial here. You'll get no pay, but you'll be boarded and fed. That's all I can offer."

"That's all I need," Ailin said.

"Good," Bearna said. "If you want money you'll have to find other means. Like," and her gaze traveled to Ailin's neck, "selling whatever it is you wear on that chain."

Ailin shook her head. Bearna eyed her knowingly. "A fond memory? A lover's trinket? Well, the day comes when the memories fade and the lovers with it. Cash in the hand is better than the memory of a lusty night. Mind my words." She chuckled and glanced at Kolya. "We'll look after her. Don't you worry."

He stepped closer to Ailin. She smiled at him. "Thank you," she said softly. "Thank *you*, sheena," he said earnestly. "I'll never forget you." He turned and left.

"'Sheena'? Did he call you 'sheena'?" Bearna said, staring at Ailin. "Who are you? Where do you come from? What are you doing in a place like this? In circumstances like this?"

Ailin shrugged. "Just a voyager; waiting to meet her companion."

"Companion, eh? Who might that be?"

"Someone who's looking for me."

"Looking, eh? Hmf. You might be waiting a long time. Finister is big. Thalonica is big. How's he going to know where you are? If he's still looking . . ."

Ailin smiled. "What would you like me to do here?"

Bearna studied her for another moment, then became businesslike. "There's cleaning to do. There are errands to run. I also hear you can cook. We don't have a regular cook, but maybe we could do with one. After all, my girls need sustenance; especially when business is frisky."

"So, there's a full day's work for you! Whatever time you have left is yours to dispose of as you wish." She hesitated. "As long as you don't decide to go into business by yourself. I should not like that. If you want to do business do it through me! Is that clear?"

Ailin grinned. "I will not 'do business,'" she said.

Bearna snorted. "Not now, that's for sure. But we'll see how you feel about it in a while. You will need cash, you know."

Ailin sighed inwardly. The woman was right. If she wanted to stay put, waiting for Caitlan, she would need some means to pay her way.

"Where do I sleep?" she asked Bearna.

The woman went to her door and motioned for Ailin to follow. She showed her the kitchen and, a bit further down the corridor, a small storage room with a tiny window facing out to the back of the brothel. It was cluttered with junk of all sorts and also doubled as a larder of sorts. "You can put the food somewhere else," Bearna told Ailin, "and if you clean out the junk you'll probably find enough space to stretch out."

Ailin nodded. "I'll start right away."

"That's what I like to hear." Bearna turned away.

"Just one more thing," Ailin said.

Bearna stopped. "What?"

Ailin looked down on herself. "You . . . wouldn't happen to have something . . . old? Something I could wear while I'm doing this? I don't want to get this dirty. It might have to last me for a while."

Bearna raised an ironic eyebrow. "Fastidious, aren't we?"

Ailin raised her chin and looked at the woman. Bearna stared back. She saw something she had missed so far, and dropped her gaze. Ailin thought she knew what it was; not so much a quality derived from her being a circe, but rather from her age. Ordinary mortals knew it, but they didn't know *what* they knew. Still, it was there, and Bearna had sensed it.

Presently, Bearna turned away. "I'll find you something," she muttered and left.

Days passed. Ailin settled into a routine of sorts. Her chores were simple, yet kept her busy for most of the day. The whores in the *House of Joys* got used to her, though for some unfathomable reason there remained a distance between them and her. Maybe it was because she simply wasn't one of theirs, nor even a Thalonican.

The city and life around here occasioned hundreds of moments when she realized just what it meant to be in a place that she really didn't know at all. The language was the same as in Keaen and Tergan; as were many of the customs. But the little things of everydayness, quirks of habit or speech, implied assumptions, value judgments, niceties of social interaction—all these things were so much the same, and yet so different. She had to be constantly on guard; even more so than she was used to from her clandestine existence as a circe in the society of Keaen and Tergan.

The first few days were novelty and, in a way, exciting. Then the novelty wore off and it became stress and vexation. At the end of a week Ailin was back to a point where she had been maybe a hundred years ago, when she first had to learn to exist among ordinary folks, live a normal life, and still hide her true nature.

The chores became a routine. The days came and went. The chances of doing something active to meet Caitlan remained remote.

On the first day of her stay, in her newly-prepared cubicle, in the light of a lantern, Ailin had devised a way to track Caitlan's progress. She took off the pendant and let it dangle freely from her hand until it pointed in Caitlan's general direction. She lowered it close to the floor, peered across the top of the pendant onto the boards and, as well and accurately as she could, scratched a line indicating the direction of his current position into the wood. Every evening she repeated the procedure. Her reasoning was that, as he came closer, she would know, because the pendant would point into a different direction. She'd gotten the idea from Pandrak's explanation of the locator's action, and how Rutger, the magice, would know where to find the treasure if only he could get a good second 'line of location', as Pandrak had termed it. In a similar manner, she reasoned, if she stayed put, Caitlan, using his own charm, would be able to get a good idea of *her* location. Which was, Ailin thought, an excellent reason not to move. If she did, it would make it that much harder for him to follow.

Evening after evening she checked his progress; only to be dismayed to find that he appeared not to have moved at all. Ailin bit down on her disappointment and told herself to be patient. He was alive; that much the lover's token told her. If he was alive he would come. And she would be patient and wait. It was easy to wait when you had time. And circes had time . . .

On the tenth day of her stay she thought to discern a slight deviation of the charm's direction from her original mark. She dared not hope, but, with trembling hands, replaced the token under her chemise.

On the next day she still could not be sure. She told herself not to despair and stuck to her chores.

Another week passed. Bit by bit Ailin had opportunity to explore the nearby districts of Thalonica. A city not without charm, she decided. Much like any other large city she'd known. Harbor towns had a particular character about them. Something about the layout, the pace, the fundamental rhythms of their being. Maybe it was the smells wafting across from the wharves; the faint, all-pervasive reek of decay and caulking, and an undefinable air of the coming and going of ships and people, and the exotic bustle that came with it.

She discovered that, despite the implicit competition, the relationship between the whores at the *House of Joys* and the adjacent *Pink Palace*, was one of mutual cooperation and aid. During peak periods the two places even referred clients. Bearna's reasoning, as she explained it to Ailin, was that a customer promptly serviced would surely return to the same place again, and that, in the long run, the referral scheme evened out.

Ailin found herself spending occasional hours at the *Pink Palace*, where, oddly enough, the whores seemed to be far more willing not to regard her as much as a stranger in their midst. She made the acquaintance of the janitor and cook, a certain Felicia; a worn-out, but remarkable woman, who'd had her share of grief, but doted on her son—whom Ailin never saw, but whom she knew to be a thief—and her one remaining daughter, who also worked at the *Pink Palace*. One day, as she helped her in the kitchen, Felicia told Ailin her story. Ailin was shocked. By now she'd been informed about the, to her bizarre, social structure in this city, but Felicia's tale was sordid beyond belief. Ailin found herself in awe of the bowed woman. Her persistence and fierce determination bespoke an amazing strength. And there was something else, too. Ailin didn't know what it

was, but she sensed that Felicia was more than just . . . ordinary. Her suspicions were confirmed when Felicia, during one of their conversations, suddenly turned to her and, quite out of context said: "Your warrior. He will come."

Ailin had kept many things to herself, including the details of who she was waiting for. That Felicia should know . . .

"When he does," she said after a moment, "you'll meet him."

Felicia shook her head. "I will be gone," she said, matter-of-factly.

The remark and the tone in which it was uttered gave Ailin a chill.

"Don't say that," she said softly.

"I will be gone," Felicia stated. She placed a hand on Ailin's. The hand was clammy and bony. "But my son will live," she said.

Ailin enquired no further.

More days passed. Ailin was overjoyed to note that Caitlan was indeed moving. The deviation from the original line was definite. She scratched a new line, indicating the new direction.

Hope.

Then, a few days later, disaster. One of the whores from the *Pink Palace* came screaming into the *House of Joys*. From her incoherent ramblings Ailin deduced that someone had been killed. She dropped what she was doing and rushed to the *Pink Palace*—only to find a scene of horror in the kitchen. Ailin pushed her way through the crowd, to where the bodies of Felicia and her daughter Audile lay on the crude kitchen table, their faces bespeaking of a horror too great to be apprehended. Their bodies exhibited no wounds or evidence of how they'd died.

One look told Ailin that all her skills could not help these two women. Maybe if she'd been here earlier . . .

Futile 'ifs'. It was too late. Felicia had been right.

Someone came and covered the bodies with sheets. Ailin turned to go, when a young man burst through the crowd. He lifted the sheets and regarded the bodies. His face was a rictus of grief. He turned around—and looked straight at her.

"I couldn't save them," she said softly. "I'm sorry, but it was too late."

He looked puzzled, tore his gaze away from her to face the matron.

"A man, you say? What did he look like?" he asked in an empty voice that concealed his grief.

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

The man glanced at his dead mother and sister, went over to their corpses, and kissed their cold, pale faces. Then he pulled the sheets back over them again.

"Please bury them for me," he whispered.

Oweena, the matron, nodded.

"Thank you." He glanced at Ailin again, his face a mix of perplexity and carefully concealed anger and despair. Then he turned away and pushed his way out.

The matron looked after him. "Good luck, Fliz," Ailin heard her whisper.

Ailin took one last look at the bodies and discreetly disappeared. She returned to the *House of Joys* and continued with her chores, trying to keep her mind off the gruesome memory of the two dead women. Who would have done this? What monster would murder two innocent and helpless women? For what? And why wasn't there a wound on either of them? Ailin struggled with a notion that refused to congeal into anything articulate. But she was left with a curious feeling that she should *know*.

In the evening of that day she scratched another line into the floor boards. This one angled significantly from the last one she'd drawn. Caitlan was definitely moving.

Closer to her?

Hope.

— 6 —

They emerged into the open and, after a cautious scan of the surrounding countryside, headed back south; keeping well away from the actual road.

It slowed them down, but still they made good time. Caitlan was pleased to note that the Thalonican thief and his Gaskarian lover-to-be were not the complaining kind. Though their behinds must have ached from the ride they said nothing.

As for himself, he didn't feel a thing. Even if he had, it wouldn't have mattered. Nothing did but that Ailin was alive. Somehow she had survived the ocean; just as he had. And somewhere in Thalonica she

waited; her own lover's charm telling her that he was coming.

Despite his elation—his still disbelieving joy and relief at knowing that she lived—the thought of Ailin in Thalonica troubled him. What humiliations had she been subjected to? From what Pandrak and Fliz had told him, it wasn't the kind of place you'd want to be if you weren't rich or privileged. An observation that applied to the Valley and its states as well—but on Finister the inequities were even more glaring. Caitlan's imagination supplied agonizing details of what Ailin might have had to suffer.

But she lived . . . she lived . . . she lived!

By late afternoon they arrived at the charred ruins of Wainstay Station. Already people were busy rebuilding it. Grim men, armed to the teeth with cross-bows, lances and swords surrounded the site. Behind the station a large, shallow grave was being filled in. The visitors were greeted with an indifference that bordered on hostility. Fliz and Nerys went off to find people they'd known, and returned with the grim news that almost nobody in the caravan that had brought them here had survived. Despite the circumstances they decided that it would be best to overnight at the station. The reasoning was that this was the last place the nomads would attack for the time being. They had achieved their aim—whatever it was—and razed the place; sated whatever urge had driven them to do this ghastly deed.

The three companions found themselves a quiet place among the others around a large a camp-fire, and bedded down for the night.

"I wonder if it's wise to take the road tomorrow," Caitlan wondered. "I get the feeling that the nomads may have it staked out. To move along there without protection would seem unwise."

"What else can we do?" Fliz asked.

"I have seen maps," Caitlan replied. "We could cross the steppe; pass to the west of the Telloor Mountains. It's not much further; on horseback we should make it to Thalonica by nightfall. We can keep to the open, where we can see anybody coming from a long distance away."

The suggestion was discussed and accepted. Caitlan sensed the apprehension in both his companions, but again they did not complain. Inexperienced they might be—especially Nerys—but they were tough. The only reason why they'd survived as long as they had.

Or maybe that wasn't all! There was something about Fliz; something that Caitlan did not quite understand. He remembered seeing him last night when he had attacked the thugs. Moving like lightning. Almost too quick for the eyes to follow. And he'd robbed a magice! This ordinary-looking thief was not ordinary at all.

They left Wainstay before daybreak. They turned south-west, keeping their distance from the mountains, and sticking to the steppe. The day was hot and the ride hard. The horses sweated and had to stop numerous times to cool down and drink. Mercifully, here, too, the steppe was criss-crossed by many small rivulets which provided convenient refreshment.

By late afternoon they reached the southern foothills and turned east. It was well after darkfall that they finally saw the lights of Thalonica in the distance. When he saw the lights Caitlan's heart beat so hard that he thought it must surely burst.

He was coming.

Ailin could hardly contain herself. Over the last few days her lover's charm had rotated through a half circle. Now it pointed almost exactly due west! He must be so close!

She left her dingy cubicle, passed through the kitchen and went down the corridor to the lobby.

"Where are you going?"

Ailin turned. Bearna stood in the door of her 'office'. "Out," Ailin said.

"You look happy," Bearna noted.

Ailin grinned, her heart bouncing. "I am." She stepped closer to Bearna. "Tomorrow. I think that tomorrow I shall leave." She paused. "Thank you for everything you've done."

Bearna's face creased into a smile. She chuckled. "I don't know why, but for some reason I believe you."

Ailin nodded. "Because this is the way it's going to be."

Bearna cast her a thoughtful glance. "You're an odd one, Ailin. You're so young, yet sometimes . . . sometimes I feel like you already know so much more than I ever will."

Ailin hugged the matron. "Be well."

Bearna gave her an affectionate squeeze and released her. "My, you *are* happy tonight."

Ailin smiled and turned away, heading for the lobby. She intended to wait for him at the door. Still not moving; now less than ever.

She waved at Heena and Goldie, the only two women currently available and waiting for clients, and opened the door. She found it blocked by the large figure of a sailor. He wore a leather jerkin and breeches. He reeked of pold. Ailin backed away to allow him to enter. To her consternation he didn't proceed to the waiting duo but turned to her. He grinned. "You," he said and grabbed her arm.

"Please!" Ailin squirmed. "I'm not . . ."

"Hey!" he growled, his hand an iron clamp on her arm. His mouth broadened into a grin. "Hey," he repeated. "I *like* you."

Heena and Goldie approached. The sailor waved them aside. "Git! I want this one. Get me a room!"

Bearna entered the lobby. "Not her!" she said firmly. "She's not available."

The sailor turned to her. "Mind your own business," he grunted, still holding onto Ailin.

"It *is* my business," Bearna snapped, hands on hips, "and you get out of here! Now!"

With an almost off-handed gesture, the sailor flung Ailin into a corner and advanced on Bearna. "No whorehouse queen tells me what to do!" he muttered.

Bearna backed away. He took a quick step and grabbed the front of her dress; pulled her to him. "I come here for service," he said, articulating his words carefully in the manner of one intoxicated but trying to cover up the fact. "I expect service—and when I get nothing but griping and whining I don't *like* it!" He shook her. The dress ripped at the front. The sailor peered down at her exposed breasts and grinned. "A bit past it, aren't you?" he sneered. His free hand grabbed Bearna's neck and shook her.

Ailin had collected herself up from the floor. Her back was aching from where the man had slammed her into the wall. Ailin paused, took a deep breath, and willed herself to ignore the pain and to heal whatever needed to be healed.

"No woman tells *me* what to do!" the sailor shouted and threw Bearna against the closest wall. The impact was sickening. Bearna's eyes pointed in opposite directions; she slid to the floor and lay there unmoving. The sailor picked her up by the neck. "And that's for talking back at your betters!" he shouted and slammed her into the wall again. From the corridor came Heena, holding

a large wicked looking knife from the kitchen, screeching in anger. She launched herself at the sailor, who grabbed the arm that held the knife and twisted it until Heena dropped it. He backhanded her across the side of her face, throwing her across one of the chairs.

Ailin, without thinking, lunged for the knife on the floor. The sailor whipped around. Ailin, closing her mind to the horror of what she was doing, and pretending that she was just practicing with Caitlan, extended her arm and lunged. Too fast for him. He saw it coming, but his intoxicated reflexes were too sluggish. The knife plunged through his leather jerkin and into his belly. Ailin felt a brief resistance as it penetrated; then a yielding; then her hand, still pushed forward by her momentum, plunged into the gash. She gagged, let go of the knife and pulled her bloody hand out of the warm, sticky mess.

The sailor gaped at her. Ailin, sickened to the core, tore her gaze away. She moved Bearna away from the wall, felt behind her head, touched the soft, jagged edges where the skull had been shattered.

Behind Ailin a crash as the sailor's body hit the floor. She didn't look around. Her whole being was focused on Bearna, as she tried to mend the damaged head and the internal, invisible hurts. It wasn't easy. Head-wounds were the hardest to fix. There were things even a circe couldn't do. Sometimes when such people were revived they were not who they had been. Ailin hoped that this was not such a case.

Behind her, a last rattling gasp from the sailor signaled his demise. He would have been easy to heal, but she would not even *think* of seeing to him until Bearna was back with them.

Ailin felt the cracked skull mend under her touch. It would retain some irregularity, but it would be whole. She ran her hand over Bearna's body. Presently the woman's heart fluttered, and finally resumed a regular beat.

"Please," Ailin whispered. Behind her she felt the presence of at least one person. She turned around; saw Goldie.

"How's Heena?"

"Sore." Goldie looked over Ailin's shoulder at Bearna's pale face. "Will she be alright?"

Ailin hoped that the woman had no idea what was really going on here. "I hope so," she said. As if in response, Bearna moaned and stirred. Ailin bent down. "Bearna?"

"What happened?" Bearna croaked.

"He threw you against the wall," Ailin said.

"I know that!" Bearna snapped weakly. Definitely the old Bearna. Ailin looked around at Goldie. "I think the answer is 'yes,'" she said, much relieved.

"Did you get him?" Bearna whispered.

"Of course," Goldie said scornfully.

"Is he dead?"

"Yes."

"Good. Who killed him?"

"Ailin."

"Ailin?" Bearna's eyes fixed on her; thoughtfully.

Ailin got up. She could still save the man. No matter who or what he was, she could still save him. Bearna reached out and took a firm hold of Ailin's hand. She had a strange look in her face. "Closer," she whispered. Ailin bent down. Bearna brought her face close to Ailin's ear. "I know who you are," she whispered.

Ailin jerked back. Bearna winked at her. "Your secret is our secret."

"What secret?" Goldie asked. Goldie had the hearing acuity of a dog.

"That she's been trained by a soldier in the arts of combat, of course," Bearna snapped.

Ailin's gasped. "How . . ."

Bearna's eyes widened in surprise. Then she grinned and winked at Goldie. "Now don't you go telling anybody else about this. Women aren't supposed to know about these things."

"I won't!" Goldie promised.

Ailin made as if to get up again. Bearna grasped her arm and pulled her back down. "The things I find out about you just as you're about to leave!" she hissed. She turned her head to look at the sailor's corpse. She glanced back at Ailin. "You could save him?" she asked.

Ailin nodded.

Bearna sighed. "Listen, girl," she said. "Maybe you think you *have* to save him. But think of this; you save him and one day he will do the same thing again. I know the kind, Ailin. Some of them simply cannot be redeemed. One day that man will take a girl and murder her. Maybe he already has."

"Bearna, I . . ."

Bearna let go of Ailin's arm. "Do what you must. But remember that a life is not the same as a life."

Ailin stood up and took a deep breath.

She looked at Bearna, who, with Goldie's help, was getting up to stand on unsteady legs.

Heena, nursing her sore back.

Ailin remembered Bearna, smashed against the wall. She contemplated the bloody corpse on the floor.

She remembered the men who had raped her, so many years ago.

She nodded softly and turned away. Again she hesitated. Then she left the lobby, to go and wash his blood off her hands.

"I know this place," Fliz told Nerys as they followed Caitlan, who continued down the alley holding the medallion before him as he followed its directions.

They passed by the *Pink Palace*. "This is where they died," he said. Her arms around his tightened. Fliz swallowed. His chest felt hollow; an ineffable sadness washed over him. Only a few days ago . . .

And now they were back again! Would he ever be able to leave this place for good?

Caitlan halted two doors further down. " *'House of Joys'*," Nerys read the sign.

"It's that part of town," Fliz said dryly. He saw Nerys give him a quick sideways glance. There were, he realized, a lot of things he would have to tell her. About himself mainly. And soon; before she found out in other ways. If this thing between them was going to be more than a passing infatuation he had to start it by coming clean.

Caitlan carefully placed the chain with the lover's charm around his neck, stood still for a few moments, and rapped on the door. It opened almost instantly. Framed by the light, Fliz saw a beautiful woman of haunting familiarity.

The woman and the big man stood in complete silence. Beside Fliz, Nerys let out a small pent-up breath.

Caitlan opened his arms. The woman stepped forward. He picked her up like a child and lifted her high. She wrapped her arms around his neck and her legs around his waist and buried her face in the crook of his neck . . .

. . . and they just stood there like that, in complete silence, oblivious to everything and everybody—and for an eerie moment it looked to Fliz as if there weren't two people, but one—who had been torn apart and was now whole again.



Letters

Sir,

Your request for letters in *CLS 23* has had the most pleasing results imaginable: the vanities of the contributing authors are gratified; and Bruce Downing, John Carr, Jay Lefkowitz and Lyall Simmons are revealed as persons of generous sympathies and nice discrimination. I thank those who have praised my work — while regretting that they are not millionaire philanthropists intending to start a publishing house — and assure them that their approbation is reward second only to the bittersweet joy of creating the stories in the first place.

Serialising a novel in the *CLS* is rather like launching a message in a bottle; eventually, long after the act of creation is over and life has moved on, responses trickle in from around the globe. I am fortunate that both the bottle labelled 'The Zael Inheritance' and the one marked 'Dragonchaser' have found their way to friendly shores.

Sincerely,
Tim Stretton
 Bosham
 England

To the Editor,

Here, to show all that I have at least *looked* at the *CLS*, is a quote from the introduction in my latest unpublishable textbook:

"The paper I sent to the Monthly was rejected on the basis of two reviews, one concluding that it was exceedingly controversial and the other that it was absolutely trivial. It left me *very* sore."

As for *reading* the *CLS*, here is my problem. I can only read in bed and sheaves of loose xerox paper are hard to read in bed. But I am working on a binding system. So, real soon now . . .

Best regards,
 Alain Schremmer

