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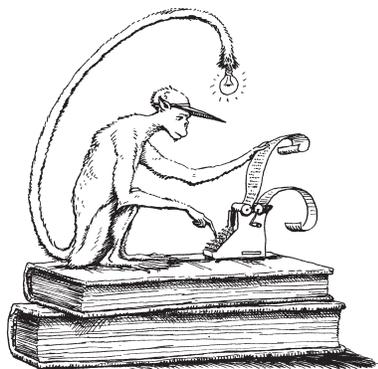
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Editorial

Esteemed Readers:

Here, to keep you tided over to next year, the 2003 Christmas edition of the *CLS*. You may not be able to rely on the weather forecast—or, even less, on the media, but, for as long as it exists, the *CLS* at least will continue to remain one of the few things in life that comes ‘free’, and without any hidden agendas or sales pitches.

I wish you all a good holiday season; and here’s to hoping that for you it will be a holiday and a period of respite and recovery.

There’s an old Chinese saying: *The finest clothes turn to rags*. Some interpret this to be an expression of pessimism, but I’d like to suggest that it’s really telling us that we should beware of becoming too besotted with our finery, and instead focus our attention on those elements of life not *necessarily* subject to such attrition or decay. From where I stand I can see only two: human relationships and character.

Best wishes to you all.
Till Noever



Dragonchaser

by Tim Stretton

Chapter 29

A febrile atmosphere pervaded Paladria; the two greatest events in the calendar, the Margariad and the Election, were taking place on the same day; and no-one in the city could fail to understand that the events were connected. The Peremptor's Constables were seen in greater than usual force, and Bartazan of Bartazan House made sure that he was visible in all parts of the city.

Mirko found the tenor of events oppressive, and spent as much time as possible on the water; either drilling *Sapphire Light* or, when the crew showed signs of tiredness, taking a small craft around the course with Florio and Damiano. He had not seen Larien since she had visited his chambers, and Catzendralle was also keeping herself out of the way, contenting herself with communicating by ciphered letter. It was the calm before the storm.

Drallenkoop, meanwhile, conducted himself with ostentatious confidence, drilling his crew no more than necessary, and whipping the populace to a pitch of hysteria. Mirko was in no doubt from his observations that *Dragonchaser* remained the most popular galley among the crowds, and the bookmakers still had her as a clear favourite ahead of *Excelsior* and *Sapphire Light*, who vied for second place. Mirko noticed that Covarc Remario was no longer accepting bets on *Sapphire Light*, however, and derived a certain satisfaction.

Bartazan, meanwhile, became calmer as the day of reckoning approached. He was positively genial with Mirko, a new facet of his character which Mirko found deeply suspicious. "Why should I worry?" he asked over a goblet of rich Estrian wine in his reception chamber. "I have the best galley-master and the votes of twenty-four Electors already in the bag."

"Twenty-four is two fewer than you need," observed Mirko superfluously. "You still need me to win."

"And who says you won't? Remario is no longer taking bets on us. Drallenkoop is overconfident, and

Dragonchaser's performances have lacked the crispness of last year."

"We still haven't beaten them in a race that matters."

"Such modesty is unlike you, Ascalon. I take a keen interest in galleys, and many professional seamen give me their opinions. Good judges think you will win."

"And if we don't?" asked Mirko, unsure why he was allowing the conversation to go here.

Bartazan chuckled. "Let's not consider such irksome possibilities," he said. "I am a man with a powerful destiny; and defeat for *Sapphire Light* would not allow its fulfilment. A wise-woman once told me I should be Peremptor . . ."

Mirko looked at him in surprise. "Old Craft nonsense! You can't believe it, and it's hardly safe to admit to hearing such drivel."

Bartazan swirled his wine around his goblet. "It was many years ago now; the wise-woman is long dead, and the other things she told me have all come to pass. The Old Craft is gone from the surface of Paladria, and best that it should have done. But never think that it is buried deep. The Paladrians are a superstitious people, and the Old Craft is deep in their soul. You should realise that."

"How so?"

Bartazan poured himself another goblet of wine. "I made it my business to find out how you got Cascais off my boat."

"Ah."

"Don't worry. In the circumstances you were justified—Florio is clearly a superior helm—and the method was ingenious. I won't pretend I'm not intrigued by how you found out a secret buried so deep even his father and I didn't know it."

"A galley-master—especially a rising one—commands considerable prestige," said Mirko easily. "There are always people eager to do me a favour."

Bartazan studied him through clear eyes. "Just make sure the price isn't too high," he said. "I happen to know you are not among the Peremptor's favourites."

Mirko shrugged. "I take that as a tribute to my unswerving professionalism."

Bartazan raised his goblet high. "Here's to professionalism."

That afternoon Mirko drilled the crew one final time before the race. Tomorrow was set aside for rest; and when the sun rose after that, it would be race day. In

the late afternoon sun Mirko felt a quiet assurance as *Sapphire Light* made its way around the Margariad course. Florio had grown in competence with every day; Mirko hoped not to have to thread the needle through The Sorcerers, but tucked away in his mind was a feeling that should it prove necessary, Florio could do it. The Quartermen, Damiano, Walisse, Larze and Ketchelon, all had smoothly functioning Quarters, able to go up and down through the Tempos without jarring or loss of speed. *Dragonchaser* remained, as always, the boat to beat, but Mirko doubted that her crew was any smoother—or more highly motivated, with freedom at stake—than *Sapphire Light's*.

Barring unforeseen incidents—always a leap of faith in Paladria—and given a clean run, Mirko felt that *Sapphire Light* would beat *Dragonchaser* and all comers. He shivered: why did that idea frighten him? Granted, it would put Bartazan in Coverciano; but he was little if any worse than Medina: no, what worried him was the fear of dashed expectation. He had worked harder than he had ever done in his life to turn a crew of dispirited slaves into a crew so polished and confident that they had beaten a Garganet naval vessel; he had risked his life, and his very different relationships with both Catzendralle and Larien, to get *Sapphire Light* to the position where she might seriously contemplate victory. But what if, after all that, it did not happen on the day? What if *Dragonchaser* or *Excelsior* were faster, or someone made a better job of arson next time? He would lose his bonus, of course, and Bartazan had threatened dire consequences in the event of defeat; but his unease was rather more fundamental, he realised. He had invested, for half a year, much of his self-esteem in making *Sapphire Light* the galley he wanted it to be. Now he stood on the verge of achieving it, and he realised how much it meant to him, and correspondingly how much it would hurt to lose it. Stealthily he had allowed himself to hope. It was the hope which was so terrifying.

Practice finished and *Sapphire Light* was moored tight to the dock. A group of Bartazan's militia stood by; the galley's safety while she was docked was their responsibility and they took it seriously. Mirko doubted that Medina would risk another arson attempt, but prudence cost nothing.

The crew marched back to Urmalest in crisp formation, a far cry from the rabble they had been at the beginning of the summer. Mirko leaped onto a barrel as the crew went through its programme of stretches.

"Men!" he called. "That was our last practice: we are as good now as we will ever be. In two days' time the Margariad will be over."

"And we'll be free men!" called Ortazek.

"That is contingent," said Florio dryly.

"Contingent upon us winning," said Mirko in a firm voice. "And you should believe me when I say we have nothing to fear. *Dragonchaser* has become lazy and uncompetitive; *Excelsior* does not truly believe she can win. Our destiny is in our own hands!"

"And will Bartazan really release us?" asked Walisse.

"He has no reason not to. The way the Election has shaped up, there is no doubt in my mind that if we win he will be Peremptor. He'll be magnanimous to those who helped put him there."

There was none of the grumbling that had formerly accompanied talk of Bartazan's success. The crew had no reason to love the Elector, but for better or worse they had accepted that their destinies and his were linked.

"There is no more preparation we can do. Rest tonight, eat well tomorrow. And don't think I don't know that some of you have slipped out of Urmalest at night; well, I want none of it this time."

Florio and Damiano grinned discreetly at each other. He doubted they would follow the prohibition, but it hardly seemed worth causing conflict over. They were both extremely reliable men, fully committed to victory. A good galley-master knew when to turn a blind eye.

"Does that apply to you, captain?" shouted Jenx.

"I can assure you I'll be tucked up at Formello."

"With Larien, I'll wager," muttered Jenx in an undertone so penetrating that no-one could fail to hear.

"A wager you would lose, Jenx. The Lady Larien . . . will be keeping her own company."

From the crew came a laugh which mixed scepticism and affection. Mirko knew that the crew firmly believed that he was conducting a daring amour with Larien; and in the way of seamen, thought better of him for the fact.

The truth was very different as Mirko rode back to Formello on Boodle, who had partly recovered from the clumsy attempt to hamstring her. A cold cheerless chamber overlooking the gloomy wood was where he must spend the night. He had not seen Larien since their emotional interview in this chamber, a fact for

which he was grateful. Catzen was keeping out his way; despite her frequent ciphered letters he sensed she was withdrawing back into herself. She still had not taken the decision to commit herself to Mirko; that much was clear. With the race so close, he was happy to let the matter rest until it was over. At that point, everything would be resolved.



Chapter 30

Rising early the next morning, Mirko found that there was a distinct tang of autumn in the air for the first time. By tradition, the Margariad marked the end of summer, and autumn was running through its dress rehearsal exactly on schedule. Mirko had no real plans for the day, but already Formello, its walls brooding and its arrow-slits leering, had an oppressive feel. Bartazan was staying at his town house and Mirko was in no humour to linger around the castle.

He decided to ride down into town, and saddled up a somewhat skittish Boodle. Before he realised it, he found himself in the Old Town. It was a while since he stopped off at the Waterside, and he wanted to see Panduletta before the race. Afterwards, who knew, he might need to make his escape too quickly to have time for goodbyes.

The front door of the tavern was barred on the inside, a most unusual circumstance. It was early for drinking, but there were normally a good quantity of whelks available for breakfast. He wandered round into the rear courtyard, and found no signs of life. This was unparalleled.

"Panduletta!" he shouted. "Open up! It's Mirko!"

There was silence and he called out again. Faint sounds of movement could be heard within.

"Who is it?"

Mirko frowned. "It's me! Ascalon!"

There was a heavy sound of the bars being drawn back. One of the serving girls, Cambyryna, wrapped a shawl around her shoulders and ran into the courtyard.

"Captain," she said in visible distress, "there's been a terrible assault!"

Mirko's heart pounded. "Panduletta?"

"No, it's Florio!"

Mirko's heart sank as his stomach rose to meet it. "Florio! Is he . . ."

"My mistress has sent for the apothecary—but it looks grim."

"Take me to them," said Mirko briskly. "There's not a moment to lose."

Cambyryna escorted Mirko up the stairs to Panduletta's private quarters.

"Is it the apothecary?" called Panduletta from within.

"No, mistress, it's Captain Ascalon."

Panduletta rushed across the room. "Mirko!" she cried, throwing her arms around him. "He's going to die!"

"Sit down," said Mirko, leading her back into the room to a plush burgundy couch. "Let's wait for the apothecary. Can you tell me what happened?"

Panduletta tried to compose herself. "He . . . he was coming to see me—before the race, you know. We are—"

"I know," said Mirko gently. "It doesn't matter. Just tell me what happened."

"They were waiting for him on the waterfront. When they saw him they fell upon him without warning, the dogs!"

"Who?"

"Florio said it was the Peremptor's Constables but that can't be right. They must have rescued him and he was confused."

Mirko said nothing. Everything was beginning to take shape, and there was no reason at all to believe the Peremptor's Constables were not the culprits.

"Four of them attacked him in the street," she said. "He didn't stand a chance, but he managed to force them back and made it to the door. Once he was inside they went away. I was going to call the Constables but Florio wouldn't let me."

Very wise, thought Mirko. "So he could walk when got here?"

Panduletta nodded. "He had been beaten around the head, and both of his arms were cut where he had tried to defend himself. I thought he was alright, although there was a lot of blood; and then he collapsed, and he hasn't woken up again. I called the apothecary, he came and looked grave, and now he's gone to prepare a tincture."

"Can I see him?" asked Mirko. Panduletta's complexion was the colour and texture of egg-shells. She took him into the inner chamber.

Florio lay under Panduletta's coverlet. A bandage which had once been white wrapped his head, now stained with blood. Bandages also covered both arms, one of which was in a sling. Mirko concluded that the chances of him helming *Sapphire Light* tomorrow were minimal.

"Florio?" he whispered. "Can you hear me? It's Mirko." But there was no response.

"What does the apothecary say?" he asked Panduletta.

"The apothecary says," another figure, long of leg and brisk of voice, boomed as he entered the room, "that his chances are much better if you stand aside and let me do my job."

Mirko surveyed the figure. "I take it you are the apothecary?"

The man rubbed his hands in evident satisfaction. "That I am, the Erudite Mario at your service, elixirs for every occasion, love-philtres a speciality. I'll perform a discounted consultation later for such a distinguished galley-master."

Mirko looked sideways at the Erudite Mario with distaste. Tall and bald, with a lower lip and stomach equally prominent, and a leer of self-satisfied self-centredness, Mario did not fill him with complete confidence. "You would please me more by attending to Florio first."

Mario bobbed his head. "Of course, of course. Head injuries are always tricky, very tricky. Luckily I have my Number Three tincture, which normally works to good effect. Sometimes it brings on a calenture, by nature of its ingredients," he beamed, "but this rarely proves fatal, very rarely, hmmm."

Mirko gave Panduletta a surreptitious side-glance to which she responded with a shrug.

"While you are applying the tincture," said Mirko, "perhaps you could tell me the extent of Florio's injuries."

"One head injury, probably caused by a club or similar," he said. "Deep cuts to the arms, inflicted with a light blade; and a broken collar bone. Minor—in the circumstances—contusions. Unless the head injuries are worse than they look, and as long as the cuts avoid infection, the prognosis is good."

Mirko nodded. "He won't be on your galley for a while, though," continued Mario thoughtfully. "The collar-bone alone will take weeks to heal."

"I had gathered that," said Mirko with some heat. "I have seen broken bones before."

"Now, now," said Mario with a smile. "I understand your frustration, but let's not take out on the good apothecary, eh?"

Mirko held up a placatory hand. "My apologies, sir. Cambyryna, please would you fetch me paper and a stylus?"

Cambyryna went downstairs while Mario carried on administering his salves and remedies. Mirko doubted that they would prove efficacious—Mario had all the hallmarks of a charlatan—but consoled himself with the thought that the remedies were unlikely to do any harm either.

When Cambyryna returned Mirko excused himself and went into Panduletta's private chamber to write a number of sensitive letters: to Catzendralle, in the hope that she might be able to offer useful advice; to Bartazan, with some trepidation; to Damiano so that nautical questions might be addressed with urgency. A final letter was addressed to Lammerkin, erstwhile master of *Morvellos Devil*. A series of runners was dispatched to deliver the correspondence on the instant.

Damiano, located at the nearby Urmalest, was the first to arrive, and Mirko swiftly briefed him on events. Damiano shook his head in woe and wonderment.

"Astonishing that someone should want us to lose so badly!" he said.

"Many people are keen to avoid the prospect of Bartazan in Coverciano. We can take it as a back-handed compliment that someone thought the best way of stopping us was to try and kill our helm."

"They might as well have done," said Damiano gloomily. "With a broken collar-bone Florio is in no position to advance our campaign. And I'd thought I'd be on my way home tomorrow."

Mirko raised his eyebrows. "I thought you were his friend? You fall some way short of empathising with his sufferings."

Damiano smiled ruefully. "A cool temperament is not a crime. If Florio had not sneaked out to see Panduletta last night, none of this would have happened."

"None of this finds us a new helm."

"What do you intend to do?" asked Damiano, hope in his eyes that Mirko had one last trick to pull off which would get them out of the corner.

But Mirko merely shook his head. “Have you helmed?” he asked.

At this point the discussion was interrupted by loud shouts and curses. Mirko surmised, correctly, that Bartazan had arrived; not an interview he was relishing. The Elector stormed into the parlour where Mirko and Damiano were talking.

Bartazan was red and sweating. “Ascalon! You have much to explain!”

Mirko frowned. “I thought my summary covered the important points. Florio is seriously inconvenienced. Abandon any hopes of him taking the helm tomorrow.”

“Now is not the time for flippancy, Ascalon. I want to know how one of my more valuable slaves was wandering the streets two days before the Margariad; and what steps you propose to take to retrieve the situation. And not in front of a slave,” he finished with a glower at Damiano.

Damiano rose and made to leave.

“A moment, Damiano,” said Mirko. “Your counsel may be valuable.”

“An Elector does not transact confidential business in front of his galley slaves!” said Bartazan, reddening still further. “Ascalon, you do not realise how very dangerous I can be.”

“In the circumstances,” said Damiano with a bow to Bartazan, “I think matters would proceed more expeditiously without my counsel. Besides, I would like to look in on Florio.”

“Now,” said Bartazan, pacing the room with an alarming surfeit of nervous energy. “Why was Florio parading through the streets of this low part of town?”

“Would the answer really help you, my lord? What’s done is done; Florio acted imprudently and we should leave the matter there. The important thing, as you imply, is that we take the most appropriate steps.”

“And these are?” said Bartazan with an access of calm. He folded his arms and stood a foot in front of Mirko.

“I am using my contacts in the galley-racing community to secure a replacement helm.”

“I take it you have not yet been successful?”

“This is hardly a situation where instant results are feasible.”

“It should come as no surprise to you that Paladria is not awash with unemployed Margariad-quality helms.

Those helmsmen currently disengaged are generally so through their own incapacity.”

“Such as Cascais . . .”

“I was thinking of men such as Nexinger—the Iron Snail has achieved a rare distinction in being sacked from the helm of three galleys this season—and Essikant.”

“Essikant—widely and justly known as ‘Old Addle-Pate’ owed his brief spell of fame solely to your imprisonment of *Fanar’s Glory’s* first-choice helm.”

“It is hardly just to include Cascais in this company.”

Mirko controlled himself with an effort. “We have trodden this path many times, my lord. Cascais is short of the quality necessary to helm a race-winning galley. I take it Nool Vavar’s vote is again uncertain.”

Bartazan’s face darkened. “By no means! Nool Vavar is well satisfied with the post I have offered him in my new administration. I merely suggest Cascais’ name as a man who is familiar with *Sapphire Light* and her crew.”

“The suggestion lacks the remotest approach to merit,” snapped Mirko, giving vent to his asperity. “For a start, you forget the circumstances under which he departed the galley: they are unlikely to make him look favourably on a return. More importantly, the crew know him for an incompetent: they do not trust him and they will not row well for him. My ‘desperation solution’ is better than that.”

“Outline, if you will,” said Bartazan icily, “the nature of your ‘desperation solution.’”

“Why, I will simply take the helm myself. I am qualified and trained in helmsmanship—if admittedly a little rusty—and I am as familiar with the waters as anyone. I have no great flair for the craft, but I feel sure I could perform better than Cascais.”

“This would leave vacant the position of overseer.”

“There is no alternative to appointing Damiano, a Garganet naval officer who commands respect among the crew. Admittedly, I would need to blood a new Quarterman, which I would prefer to avoid, but it will at least get us to the start line.”

Bartazan shook his head in wonderment. “Your negligence of status is staggering! First you appoint a slave as helmsman, an idea of barely credible lunacy—and see where it’s got us—and now you propose to have the slaves overseen by another slave! Where is the respect for degree and place essential to the smooth functioning of galley and city alike?”

"Garganet crews operate on a somewhat more egalitarian basis," said Mirko, "and these are principles I have adopted—with some success—on *Sapphire Light*. The situation will not develop into the rabble you suggest."

"Unacceptable!" said Bartazan firmly. "I will send Cascais tomorrow morning and all will be well. You would do well to return to Formello, since my town house Whitecroft cannot accommodate you. Alternatively you may mess in Urmalest tonight."

"My plans are not fixed," said Mirko. "I may return to Formello, with your leave."

Bartazan sat heavily on Panduletta's best couch. "I take it you realise this assault was no accident; and the involvement of the Peremptor's Constables was no coincidence."

"This aspect of the affair had not escaped me. Medina is determined to damage our performance."

"Just so," said Bartazan. "In the circumstances, the idea of you wandering the streets like Florio is surpassingly foolish. You are not go anywhere without an armed escort."

Mirko nodded his head and Bartazan left, little mollified if at all by the interview.

On Bartazan's exit, Cambyryna came in with a letter. "This came while you were engaged with the Elector," she said with a shy smile.

"Thank you," said Mirko, looking at the envelope and seeing with disappointment that it was not Catzen-dralle's handwriting. Impatiently he ripped it open.

Sir,

You do me a great honour by offering the post of helm aboard *Sapphire Light* to whichever of my helm Hellence or myself feels disposed to accept it. This offer would carry more sincerity if the proximity of the Margariad were somewhat more remote.

Regrettably neither Hellence nor I feel able to accept your generous offer. To nurture resentment is an ignoble characteristic, and I will therefore cite the advanced age and weariness after a long season's racing as the reason for our unwillingness to accept the engagement; rather than any potential animosity arising your meddling in politics you fail to understand, which led to the destruction of my own galley. It would be equally churlish to have reached the conclusion that I would prefer any galley on the water to win the Margariad before *Sapphire Light*. I will not, therefore, give utterance to such sentiments.

I remain your obedient servant,
Lammerkin, formerly of *Morvellos Devil*.

Mirko made to screw the letter up, thought better of it, and handed it to Cambyryna. "Please take this through to Damiano," he said.

"Not good news, sir?"

"No indeed, although by no means unexpected."

Cambyryna bobbed and left the room.

Mirko sat down with a frown. He had never really expected either of the *Morvellos Devil* officers to be prepared to help; their resentment at him was unjustified but obscurely understandable. It created an unfortunate situation; there really were no other competent helms at liberty; he recoiled from using men like the Iron Snail or Old Addle-Pate; and Cascais by any reckoning was little better than nothing. Whatever Bartazan said, he was going to have to take the helm himself, or withdraw *Sapphire Light* altogether. In the circumstances he thought Bartazan would accede; although it would not be wise to linger in Paladria if the gamble were unsuccessful.



Chapter 31

Perhaps Catzen would have ideas, he thought. As if the thought of her had conjured her existence, he caught her level tones in the outer room. He snatched the door open.

"Catzen!" he called. "We have much to discuss."

Catzen-dralle gave a half-smile. "I am not accustomed to being addressed by my familiar name in a dockside tavern," she said. "Nonetheless, I agree with your assessment."

Mirko looked at her more closely. He thought she looked terrible, her normally sanguine complexion pale and wan, the lines around her eyes incised more deeply than ever. He doubted that this was a suitable opening conversational gambit, and merely beckoned her into Panduletta's parlour with a sideways twist of his head.

Catzen sat on the couch formerly occupied by Bartazan and rested her head in her hands. "I'm sorry," she said. "I have not been sleeping well."

"I imagine stress is the inevitable lot of the intelligencer," he said. "Can I get you anything?"

She shook her head. "We need to act, not talk," she said. "Your life is in immediate danger—more immediate than I had imagined. The best thing for you is to take a galley out of Paladria this morning; but since I suspect you won't, at the very least you need to disappear until tomorrow morning."

Mirko pursed his lips. "I'm not leaving now; but I can square my consequence with a diplomatic disappearance—if it really is as necessary as you say."

"Trust me. It is. I am all too familiar with what Medina is planning."

Mirko walked across to the window and looked out across the bay.

"This is not the time for vague hints and evasions and 'my sources tell me', Catzen. You have to start being open with me; about everything."

Catzen looked away and played with the mermaid ring on her finger. "'Everything' is a big word, Mirko. People who ask to know everything usually regret it."

"For Fanar's sake, Catzen, this is not the time for games! I have been remarkably patient while you have arranged my life behind the scenes, getting me out of trouble that you'd got me into in the first place; telling me just enough that I'd do what you wanted but not enough to work things out for myself. You're completely incapable of being open or straightforward about anything."

"Is that what you really think?" asked Catzen quietly, still looking down. "I don't go to bed with just anyone, you know."

Mirko sighed in exasperation. "Even then you kept telling me it wasn't for real, that there were things you needed to tell me that you didn't trust me to hear. That's not my idea of an open or straightforward relationship."

"It wasn't like that!" cried Catzen. "It's not that I don't trust you—it's because I don't want to lose you," she said, dropping her voice. "I couldn't bear to tell you everything, for you to know everything about me—and for it to repel you. I'm not good at closeness, Mirko, and I've spent so much time getting close to you that I couldn't cope with losing it."

"Why should you repel me, Catzen? Don't you think that because I care about you, I won't reject you?"

She got up and walked across to the window and laid her head on Mirko's shoulder. "You don't know what I have to tell you," she said. "Don't make me."

Mirko stared ahead at the Morvellos lighthouse in the distance. Nothing would be easier than to put his arms around her and tell her everything was alright; but it would be easy for the wrong reasons, and it wouldn't solve anything. This needed to be resolved before the race.

He put his hands on her arms and turned her to face him. "It won't do, Catzen. It's now or never."

She looked unblinkingly into his eyes for an eternal second; Mirko held her gaze. She looked out to sea for a moment and nodded to herself.

"Then it's now," she said. "But remember, you wanted this."

Mirko nodded. "How could I forget?"

"It would be best if we did this somewhere else," she said. "I wasn't exaggerating about the danger. Medina—or more specifically, Corrando—will kill you if he finds you. And if he finds me with you, he'll kill me too."

"This isn't another stall?" asked Mirko.

She shook her head. "We have to go. If you have any instructions for your crew, now is the time to convey them."

Mirko nodded, went out to speak to Damiano. "If I don't come back for the race, you're in charge," he concluded.

"With no master and no helm," said Damiano wryly. "The chances for glory do not appear promising."

"Better hope I come back, then," said Mirko. "And Damiano—be careful. Get into Urmalest and stay there."

Catzen was looking out to sea when Mirko returned. "Let's go," he said buckling on his rapier. "Where are we going?"

Catzen led the way downstairs. "Coverciano," she said with an unexpected chuckle.

"That would not seem to be the best place to avoid Medina's men."

"I can hardly take you to Darklings, for any number of reasons; and the road to Formello is most certainly watched. Medina doesn't yet realise I am no longer in his service, either."

Mirko was somewhat dubious about this scheme, but Catzen had gained an access of energy and confidence.

"We will have to share my galumpher, I'm afraid," she said, leaping into the front saddle. "You will have to take the rear end."

The galumpher—a much larger animal than a lady would normally ride—appeared relatively docile, a relief to Mirko who was uncomfortable on anything sturdier than a pacer. His knowledge of beast-craft was minimal; he was able to assess that all six of the creature's legs were of equal length and approximately equal girth; it appeared well-fed and cared for; and after all, the road to Coverciano was short.

If it had not been for the constant worry that Corrado's men would come upon them, Mirko would have enjoyed the pleasant ride up the coastal road towards Coverciano. Corrado would not attempt an outrage in so public a place; the disappearance of a troublesome and unconnected foreigner might attract little attention, but not that of an Elector's cousin.

Coverciano soon loomed ahead, tranquil and relaxing. Catzen rode up to the gates and displayed an intricately-wrought trinket. The guard bowed and opened the gates. They were inside.

"What now?" asked Mirko.

"Have you forgotten my secret garden?" she said. She called over a groom and the galumpher was led away. "Let's walk," she said. "It's not far. Try not to look so obviously shifty. Medina will not be strolling the grounds—he is far too busy."

"Packing?" said Mirko with a smile.

Catzen laughed, for the first time he could remember in weeks. "Medina is not expecting to leave."

They found themselves in the Orange Grove, and Catzen led them into the maze. Mirko walked past the entrance to the Secret Garden until Catzen gently pulled his sleeve back. The stepped through the concealed entrance. Mirko immediately felt a sense of calmness, and he felt Catzen relax beside him.

She took his hand and led him to a nearby seat swinging gently from a manzipar tree. "I always dreamed of telling you everything," she said. "And I always wanted it to be here. Forgive me for stage managing events a little," she smiled.

"You seem much happier here," he replied.

"This is my favourite place in the world," she said. "It cannot be found by accident. It is so beautiful, and only I can come here—and now you, of course."

"Autumn is coming to the Secret Garden," said Mirko. "The leaves are starting to fall."

"They will be gone tomorrow," she said. "You remember that the Garden is subject to a spell of maintenance."

Mirko watched a leaf spiral down from a high branch to land at Catzen's feet. He leant forward to pick it up and gave it to her. "What will happen if you take it out of the garden? Will the maintenance spell still remove it?"

Catzen reached out for the leaf. "I don't know," she said. "I've never tried it. It is so fragile—like feelings. We never know whether they will still be there tomorrow either."

"It depends on the feelings," said Mirko. "They can be delicate, tender, beyond naming or description: yet they may endure far longer than coarser, grosser passions. Sometimes the more you believe in them, the stronger they become."

She took his hand again and looked long into his face. "I said I would trust you, and I will," she said. "How much do you know about the Old Craft?"

Mirko gave a puzzled look. "Very little. I was surprised to learn that this garden existed—although of course everyone knows about the Morvellos Lighthouse."

"There are two kinds of Old Craft," she said. "The kind everyone thinks about when the Old Craft is mentioned is Operant. That's the kind of craft that affects the physical world around us. It maintains the Secret Garden, lights the Morvellos Lighthouse; and of course it was Operant Craft that destroyed East Gammerling all those long centuries ago. Men decided that it could not safely be tolerated in our world, and they destroyed it utterly—or at least prevented its open use."

Mirko said nothing. It was so like Catzen to give a history lesson to avoid talking about anything to do with her emotions.

"The other kind of Old Craft is known as Voyeurant. Voyeurant Craft does not affect the physical world; it can only observe it. The commonest form of that is called 'clairvoyance', the ability to see events occurring outside of the field of vision. Less common is precognition, the ability to foretell future events; and postcognition, which can see the past: hindsight with eyes.

"Facility in the Old Craft cannot be taught; a small number of people have a latent gift, which can be developed by diligence. Without the Latency, no amount of study will avail. The proscription of the Old Craft could not, of course, proscribe Latency itself. As

many people could develop the Old Craft today as in the days of the Witch-Kings of Gammerling.

"Latency in Voyeurant outnumbers Operant by as much as twenty to one; while Voyeurant is similarly preponderant among female Latents. Operant Latency is much more likely to be found among men. Vavar Cascais believed—utterly without foundation—that he was a Latent Operant. His innocence of the gift—or curse if you prefer—would not have saved him from burning, of course, which was why it was so easy for you to blackmail him."

Mirko turned his head to look at her. "I'm beginning to form a suspicion as to how you know so much about this—about everything, in fact. This isn't just assiduous research and good sources, is it?"

Catzen swallowed and reached out to touch Mirko's face. "No it isn't," she said. "I have—or had—a fully developed Voyeurant Latency. I have practised the Old Craft, and it's death on the pyre for me if anyone ever finds out."

She continued to rest her hand against his cheek; Mirko couldn't feel it, couldn't feel anything. Catzen was a witch, outlawed by death across the centuries.

"Mirko," she said softly. "Mirko, say something, please say something."

"I don't know what to say, Catzen. I didn't know what the second secret was; I suppose I thought you had killed someone. But this . . ."

She took her hand away. "I knew it," she whispered to herself. "Even he couldn't take this, whatever he said about his feelings . . ."

"Catzen . . . it's just such a shock."

She nodded, tears running down both cheeks. "I know you won't denounce me to the authorities," she said with a watery laugh. "If only because the authorities will kill you if they find you. But I was always more worried about losing you than being found out anyway."

"Catzen . . ."

"You don't have to keep saying my name every time I pause," she said.

"Sorry—I—"

"You gave me an ultimatum this morning," said Catzen. "It was unfair of you to, and now I'm going to be unfair to you. 'Now or never'. If you still want me, you have to say so now; otherwise I walk out of here and you won't see me again. But if you want—us—then it really is now or never."

Mirko looked at her and smiled. "There's nothing to think about, Catzen: it's now."

He took in her arms and kissed her; she resisted momentarily and then buried her head in his neck. Mirko sighed; it really wasn't that bad. Whatever she was, whatever unusual abilities she might possess, she was still Catzen. She had thrown away her career and her objectivity to be with him, and all that had held her back was the fear—understandable enough—that he might reject her because of the Old Craft. But he had looked into his heart and found that he didn't care about any of it. So what?

"It doesn't matter, Catzen," he said. "It simply doesn't matter. Come on, tell me all about it. How terrible it must have been for you to keep it secret all these years."

She kissed him again. "You can't imagine how much I've wanted to tell you," she said. "I wish I'd told you sooner."

Mirko gave a modest shrug. "I am right sometimes."

"It was the craft, of course, that launched me on espionage. It waxes with a woman's fertility, so it is strongest when she is young, and gradually becomes weaker. My uncle Addacatzen knew, I think, that I had a Latency, and I began to find things out for him and Medina. I am certain that Medina never knew the source of my information, but I was so good at finding things out that he made more and more use of me until I was the centre of his intelligencers. I helped to keep him in Coverciano."

Mirko gently stroked her hand, but now she was in full flow it was as if he wasn't there.

"When I was about twenty-five I noticed that the clairvoyant effects I had achieved with ease were becoming more difficult; I had to concentrate longer and harder to see, and it took me longer to recover afterwards. By the time a woman reaches her change, the Latency is gone, and it is a long decline to reach that point. I realised that I was starting to lose my gift. From that point I made sure that I recruited good informants, and worked like any other intelligencer; although occasionally I would use the gift to check that my agents were as I thought them."

"Did you use 'the gift' on me?" asked Mirko sharply.

She smiled dryly. "Occasionally. I first became aware of you when you rescued the mermaid on the beach; I thought there was a decency about you I could use; I'm sorry if that sounds callous. You know my feel-

ings did not remain so exploitative or impersonal. When you were captured by the Fanarites and no-one could find you, I searched in my own way.”

“And saved my life,” said Mirko.

“As it happens,” she said. “But once I began to fall for you, I hardly thought it ethical to use the gift; and who knows, I might have found out something I didn’t want to know. They say eavesdroppers hear no good of themselves; well, clairvoyants see no good of themselves either.”

“I can see that the gift was a great excitement to you, but I am sure not everyone with a latency ends up in espionage,” said Mirko questioningly.

“When I was much younger, sixteen or so,” she said, “I had the latency, in a very attenuated form, for precognition. I couldn’t see events with anything like the clarity of my main gift, but I was able to develop something stronger than an intuition for certain future events. Koopendrall was most eager to marry me off at that age; I was well-connected and more attractive than you might believe. I was introduced to potential suitors and experienced a strong foreboding against them all. Koopendrall was understandably impatient with what he saw as my excessive maidenly modesty.”

“Might he not have been right?” asked Mirko gently.

“These were by and large vile men,” she said, “and every normal feeling would have revolted against them—but my repulsion was much, much more. And none of the men I rejected have turned into anything worthwhile. My sister’s husband Sottimbix, whom I rejected, is corrupt and loathsome beyond belief. As I grew older, this part of the gift waned, although I had a foreboding about my uncle Addacatzen’s death which he ignored to his cost,” she concluded.

“Do you still have these presentiments when you meet men?” asked Mirko with a smile.

“I know no more than anyone else now,” she said. “I just have to use my judgement as you do. Even my main gift comes hard now. If you think I look a wreck this morning, it’s because I’ve been trying to piece together what happened to Florio.”

“You don’t look a wreck.”

She smiled wanly. “My face has sunken in; it’s the colour of parchment: I would like to think I don’t look like this all the time. After a couple of hours’ sleep I’ll be much better.”

“And what did you find out?” asked Mirko, setting sympathy aside for a while.

“What I should have guessed long ago: Corrando is the most duplicitous snake on the planet, a woe-fish in human form. I always knew he was unscrupulous, but I never understood the depths of his hypocrisy and villainy.”

“For some reason I don’t find myself uncontrollably surprised.”

“He has risen high in Medina’s counsels; this I well knew. What I did not know was that Medina had begun to stop trusting me—or at least believed that Corrando was better suited to his more unsavoury operations. So he arranged for Fenneker to set light to *Sapphire Light* (so he thought) and for his subsequent ‘accidental’ death. And as we now know, it was men loyal to him among the Peremptor’s Constables who set upon poor Florio.”

Mirko shook his head wonderingly. “A wicked, wicked man.”

Catzen gave a sour smile. “So much was taken as read, although I should have been alert to it earlier. What sets him apart is that he’s also working for Bartazan . . .”

“What!”

“He is Bartazan’s confidential agent in Coverciano.”

Mirko thought back to the mysterious figure in Bartazan’s chamber when he had been snooping there for Catzen. The height, the voice, the build—all fitted Corrando.

“But why try to destroy *Sapphire Light*? Why try to kill Florio? Surely these harm Bartazan. Or were they botched deliberately?”

“Oh, no indeed,” said Catzen. “He is subtler than you think. He has worked for Medina and Bartazan with diligence and enterprise. He cannot lose: whichever man becomes Peremptor will owe him favours and loyalty. He doesn’t care which one wins.”

“You have to admire his clear-sightedness,” said Mirko. “Such a scheme would never have occurred to me.”

Catzen leant her head on his shoulder. “Of course it wouldn’t, dear Mirko,” she said. “You always get defensive when I tell you about your decency and integrity, as if they mark you out as some country hick—but they are the things I first loved about you.”

Mirko kissed her slowly and softly on the lips. “Maybe I can get used to being decent and honest,” he said with a half-smile.

She stood up and took his hand. “There is a summer-house at the back of the garden. It has a bed and

linen, all maintained by the same Old Craft spell. I am going to lie on the bed for two hours and sleep, otherwise I will collapse; but then I will wake up, and I'll still lie on the bed," she said with a twinkle flashing through the tiredness of her eyes.

They went into the little wooden summer-house, which had barely enough room for a bed, a table and four chairs. Catzen went immediately to the bed and lay down, asleep almost before she finished stretching herself out. Mirko sat on the side of the bed and watched her breathe; her face relaxed and all of a sudden she looked much younger, the maiden who Koopendrall had so assiduously tried to marry off. What a strange and difficult life she must have had, singled out by the Latency, valued by her family only as a bargaining counter for an advantageous marriage. Was it any wonder she was so unsettled by affection and emotion when she had been forced to insulate herself so securely against the world? Catzen would not always be an easy or immediately rewarding person to love, he suspected; but as he saw through her suddenly-young face into her soul, he knew that he could never forsake her.

He lay down on the bed and stretched out next to her, nestling into an embrace. In her sleep she shaped herself to fit Mirko, and he watched her breathe in and out, in and out, until their rhythms grew to match and he too slipped into a deep and dreamless sleep.

Mirko was woken by the sun, declining in the afternoon, slipping gently through the summerhouse window. Catzen stirred as he awoke and looked at him smiling.

"I didn't dream this?" she asked. "I told you about the Old Craft, and you didn't mind?"

Mirko kissed her on the forehead. "No, I didn't mind. I judge people by what they do, not what they are."

"We have a number of important practical questions to resolve," she said, "such as who steers *Sapphire Light* tomorrow, and how you stay alive to reach the start line."

Mirko nodded.

"But those can wait," she said. "I've waited a long time for this," and she put her hand on the back of his neck and pulled him down towards her.

"Have you forgotten that we've done this before?" asked Mirko when she paused to breathe.

"That didn't count," she said. "I always thought you would go your own way when you found out about the Old Craft. But this—this is something special. . ."

Mirko found himself in no mood to disagree, and committed himself to the moment with complete abandon.

Night had fallen before Catzen announced that she was hungry. "Fortunately," she said, "this magical summerhouse contains a magical larder. I take it that eating Old Craft-produced food isn't objectionable to you?"

"In the circumstances," said Mirko, "I can hardly make any meaningful protest. In the first place I have worked up a tremendous appetite; and in the second, I am beginning to revise my adverse opinion of the Old Craft, my little witch. . ."

She rose from the bed, wrapped her cloak around her and padded back with a tray of bread, cheese and wine. "The garden's creator didn't mean to spoil us," she said. "But this will do just nicely."

"Catzen," he said as they ate, "what am I going to do about *Sapphire Light's* helm?"

"I understood that Bartazan had managed to secure Cascais' services," she said with a twinkle in her eye.

"Exactly," said Mirko. "But it will be me Bartazan blames when we lose."

"Luckily I have a better candidate," she said. "You will agree with me in the end."

"And?"

"I'll do it."

"Do what?"

"Helm *Sapphire Light* tomorrow. I never thought to race the Margariad, but lots of dreams seem to be coming true at the moment."

"Ah, Catzen, just because I—"

"Oh, I'm not asking for special favours," she said with an earnest smile. "I really am the best you'll get. I can do this."

"Catzen, have you ever helmed a galley?"

"Don't you listen to me? I can remember every word you've ever said to me. Women are more attentive to these things. I used to helm Addacatzen's galley *Sunrise*."

"It's one thing taking the helm on a leisurely practice round a calm bay; quite another to steer a race galley."

"I even helmed *Dragonchaser* once; Drallenkoop had a fistula and I turned up to take practice one day. Drallenkoop was furious when he found out, and Koopen-

drall was little better. But the crew were very complimentary afterwards. And Addacatzen said I was an excellent helm.”

“You don’t think he was being polite to his niece? Or that it’s relevant that this was fifteen years ago?”

Catzen frowned and scowled. “Be honest, it’s because I’m a woman, isn’t it? Why can’t a woman helm a galley every bit as well as a man?”

“Has a woman ever helmed in the Margariad?”

“Not as such, but this is a chance for us to rewrite history. I know these waters, Mirko! Trust me—I have to be better than Cascais.”

Mirko looked long and hard into her eyes. He loved her; but he had invested his whole being into *Sapphire Light* this summer, and he couldn’t afford to be influenced by sentiment, however tender. On the other hand, Catzen had proved herself extremely competent at everything she claimed she could do; vainglory was not one of her weaknesses.

He nodded. “Don’t let me down, Catzen.”

Catzen bit back a smile with difficulty. “You are supposed to say ‘I will still love you whatever happens.’”

“As I will, Catzen; but I’d prefer to love you with a winner’s laurel round your neck.”



Chapter 32

Mirko was awake before the dawn, conscious that, in so many ways, this was a day of destiny. He realised, although with surprisingly little apprehension, that he could very well end it dead; while in itself an unappealing prospect, it undoubtedly lent savour to the mundane events of the day. Somewhere, Bartazan would be choosing his attire, apprehension sapping at his energies; the prospect of Cascais helming his galley could hardly be increasing his confidence. In Coverciano, Medina would be surveying his apartments, wondering if it was for the last time; although no doubt deriving some satisfaction from the tribulations afflicting *Sapphire Light*. Corrando too, would be looking at the day with an appraising eye. One way or another, he would expect to end it Lieutenant of the Peremptor’s Constables, whatever the outcome of the Election. Larien would be there, somewhere, too. Would she still want

to see *Dragonchaser* come home at the head of the field? Or was her breach with Drallenkoop insuperable? It no longer mattered to him, but he realised that he hoped things worked out for her; she had been foolish rather than wicked.

He turned at the sound of Catzen moving around the room. She kissed him. “Are you awake?” she asked. Mirko kissed her back in answer.

“We should be ready to go,” she said. “We are safe here, but we have to get down to the docks somehow. Corrando will still kill you if he catches you. I’ll go and get the galumph.”

Mirko occupied himself with a few lunges with his rapier, followed by a breakfast of modest quantity. He started to feel more confident. Who cared what Bartazan and Medina, Corrando and Larien, were thinking? He had Catzen at his side, and he had a race to win.

“What are you smiling at?” asked Catzen, as she slipped back into the summerhouse in the breaking dawn.

“Nothing,” said Mirko. “I am just considering the potential outcomes for today.”

Catzen smoothed a stray hair off her forehead, a characteristic nervous gesture.

“Don’t worry, Catzen,” he said. “Things will work out.”

The air was crisp and chill, with a distinct autumnal tang, as Catzen led the galumph on foot through the grounds of the palace. Mirko looked up at the sky. A lifetime watching the weather told him that it wasn’t going to be a factor today; breezy maybe, but no chance of a storm, and dry for the spectators. Around Coverciano servants moved sleepily about their business. The outcome of the Election was of no concern to these folk; it was the more exalted ones who had cause to fear a change of regime. Maybe some of the stable lads nursed hopes that a hated overseer would be replaced if Bartazan came to power, but indifference was the prevailing tenor.

The morning guard strolled languidly around the walls, looking little more concerned by events. If I were Peremptor, thought Mirko, I would introduce rather more urgency into my guards. For now, though, this indolence served them very well.

“Good morning, madam,” said the guard on the gate. “You’re out and about early.”

"Good morning," said Catzen. "This is a busy day, you know. An Election, a race—and I want to get a good seat, you know."

The guard laughed. "Just so. I'll be here all day; still we can see part of the course from the Walls—most of the run to the finish."

Catzen smiled politely.

"You'll be expecting your cousin to win, no doubt? I've ten valut on *Dragonchaser* myself, so don't tell me I'm wrong."

Mirko, who had been watching the exchange in silence, could not suppress a snort.

The guard turned to Mirko. "And who might you be? And what do you know, anyway, that my lady doesn't?"

"Take no notice of him," said Catzen with a flush. "The man knows nothing of galleys, and will most likely back *Kestrel* or *Morvellos Devil*."

The guard continued to scrutinise Mirko suspiciously. "Your face looks familiar, fellow. Turn to face me."

Mirko shuffled around while keeping his face partly averted; not an act calculated to defuse mistrust.

"I'm sorry, my lady," said the guard, "but I don't quite the looks of this fellow. Will you oblige me by waiting a few moments?"

Mirko shot Catzen an apologetic glance. "We're in something of a hurry," said Catzen, using a 'grand lady' mode of address he had not seen from her before.

Mirko's attempt at a benign smile managed to be simultaneously vacuous and sinister; a considerable achievement, but not one calculated to smooth their exit from the palace.

"Ortem!" called the guard back into his hut. "See if you can find Corrando! He wanted to know if there were any suspicious movements."

Mirko's heart sank at the mention of Corrando; while it was conceivable he could be bought or otherwise suborned, he preferred not to make the attempt. He looked sideways at Catzen, who shrugged. It was signal enough. He brought his knee up into the guard's groin; the man pitched forward and Mirko struck him behind the ear with the pommel of his rapier.

He lay still and Mirko stepped inside to deal with his colleague Ortem. But Ortem was too quick. "Help! Help! Murder! Mayhem! Help!"

Mirko cursed; he kicked at the man's kneecap; there was no honour in killing him just for doing his job. A sturdy chop to the throat proved sufficient to incapaci-

tate him for a while, but the damage was done. The clatter of boots nearby, the brazen call of alarms, told him that the alarm had been raised.

Catzen was on the rear saddle of the galumph. "Jump on!" she cried. "Ride for your life! Ride for the gate."

Mirko wondered why he got to guide the galumph, his skills being largely unsuited for the purpose; but he supposed Catzen had her reasons. He bellowed at the beast in attempt to prompt it into action; the galumph began to gather speed, and behind him Catzen performed a complex manoeuvre to face backwards in her saddle. From the saddlebag she unclipped a bow, and slung a quarrel of arrows over her shoulder. That was why she was sitting at the back.

The guards were still somewhat disorganised in their pursuit. Had they thought to shut the outer gate immediately, Mirko and Catzen would have been trapped inside; as it was, before the call "Lower the gates!" went up, the galumph was almost through; and although Catzen had to duck as the grille came down, the gate was negotiated with room to spare.

Catzen crowed with laughter as those pursuers who had thought to mount their own galumphs were brought up short; for the gate designed to keep her and Mirko in had only detained the pursuers; Corrando chief among them, bellowing most furiously at the hapless underlings.

"Where to?" cried Mirko. "Darklings?"

Catzen shook her head. "Wrong direction—we need to get down to the docks, where there are people."

"The Waterside!"

Catzen nodded emphatically. "And quickly!"

Behind them, the guards had raised the gate. Looking round, Mirko quickly counted six pursuers, Corrando at their head. Catzen wordlessly pulled her bow back, awaiting the moment they should come within range.

The galumph clattered down the hill, the sea to their left, the sun rising on the horizon behind them. Mirko could hear the galumphs of the pursuers gaining on them. "Can't you slow them down?" said Mirko.

"No point in shooting at them yet—I'd only waste arrows and we don't have that many."

The road to the Old Town stretched out before them, the buildings like scale models below them; at the rate the Guards were gaining, all too far away.

"Faster!" said Catzen tersely. Mirko did not dignify the remark with a response. Did she think he was dawdling deliberately? He heard the thrum of the bow behind him, and a cry of pain; one of the Guards crashed to the road, throwing up a cloud of dust. Corrado shouted something indeterminate which Mirko did not feel compelled to stop and listen to.

"They won't shoot at us," said Catzen, turning her head. "A dead Elector's cousin might be too difficult to explain. They'd much prefer to murder us in secret."

"Reassuring," said Mirko dryly.

"It ought to be; that reluctance is keeping us alive."

The bow thrummed again. Catzen swore softly. "Can't you ride that more smoothly?" she asked irritably. "I need a steady base to shoot from."

"I can trot if you'd prefer a less challenging environment."

Catzen said nothing but merely loosed another unsuccessful arrow.

"Mirko! They're getting very close!"

Mirko risked turning his head to look behind; the result was not encouraging. He kicked at the galumphers' sides but there was no answering surge; the creature was already at the meagre limits of its capacity. Why could Catzen, who appeared not to be short of funds, not have invested in a mount capable of several speeds, including 'rapid'? The populated heart of the Old Town lay well ahead; at this rate they would be over-run.

"I've no choice," said Catzen. "I'm going to have to shoot Corrado—for which there will be a price later . . ."

"Later is later," said Mirko edgily. "It's now we need to worry about. Haven't you been shooting at him before?"

Catzen shook her head. "There was no need if we could get away. But I don't think we can. Slow down, rise steady."

Mirko reined in the galumphers. Catzen raised herself in her stirrups to stand tall. Corrado, at the head of the pursuers, seemed heedless of his danger. At this distance it would take a remarkable shot to bring him down.

But Catzen was a remarkable shot. Her face expressionless, her windblown hair framing her features, she let go an easy shot with seemingly no force. Mirko could not follow the arrow's flight, but then he saw the arrow protruding from Corrado's shoulder. With his

good arm he fought to bring his galumphers under control, but he was thrown into the dirt, landing heavily on the arrow and shoulder with a cry of rage and pain. The other four Guards reined in indecisively.

"Now! Go! Go! Go!" cried Catzen. "We are nearly there!"

Two Guards pulled Corrado into a sitting position. The other two, in response to a curse from Corrado, set off again in pursuit, the low early morning sun casting shadows of vast length in the direction of Mirko and Catzen. But long as the shadows were, they could not bridge the gap between pursued and pursuers. Quickly they lost heart, and Mirko was able to enter the populated streets of the Old Town with something like dignity.

"Make for the Waterside," said Catzen. "We can wait there until the crowds thicken; we'll be safe enough until after the race, at least."

Mirko dismounted in the patrons' yard at the Waterside; never had the dingy old tavern looked so homely. He reached out a hand and helped Catzen down; she looked taut and strained but otherwise composed.

"Panduletta!" he called. "Open up, it's Mirko!"

It was Cambyryna who pulled back the shutters and let them in.

"Good morrow, sir. The mistress gave orders you was to be taken straight to her if you showed up. She didn't say anything about your lady friend."

Mirko took Catzen by the hand. "The Lady Catzen-dralle goes everywhere I do. Take us to Panduletta."

They were conducted up the narrow winding staircase to Panduletta's private chambers, where Florio was sitting propped up in her bed, bandages around his head and shoulders, but a weak smile on his face.

"Florio!" cried Mirko. "You seem to be alive."

Florio shrugged, then winced at the effect this had on his shoulder. "I believe so."

"You're no use to me like that, though. You were supposed to be helming a galley today."

Florio looked down. "I'm sorry I sneaked out, for what it's worth. On this one occasion, at least, you were right."

Panduletta broke in. "Can't the two of you stop bickering? You are both so—so Garganet, all prickliness and pride."

"Sorry," said Mirko. "I've been somewhat pre-occupied."

Florio gave Catzen an appraising glance. "So it would seem."

Mirko controlled a flush. "That wasn't what I meant; although may I introduce you to your replacement, the Lady Catzendralle."

"'Replacement'?"

"Someone has to steer today. My lady has come through a rigorous selection process."

Florio muttered something unintelligible, only the words "in your bed" being generally audible.

"I beg your pardon, Florio?"

"Nothing. My wits have been somewhat addled by that unutterable quack Mario's Number 3 tincture. Do you know what he makes it from?"

"I'm not sure I want to," said Mirko.

"Well, I'm telling you anyway: goat-shit."

"I thought there was a smell in here," said Catzen. "Perhaps some fresh air would benefit us all."

Florio looked at her with distaste. "Don't you wreck my galley today."

Mirko smiled. "*Your* galley? If you aren't careful you'll be identifying with the cause next."

"Don't flatter yourself, Ascalon. If you win—if she can steer—I'm a free man this evening. That's worth a bump on the head."

"I can't imagine," said Mirko, "that the Lord Bartazan—or Peremptor, under this scenario—will automatically release non-participant crew members."

Florio looked dumbstruck. "He must! I am part of the team."

"Quite frankly, Florio," said Catzen, "I think you will be very fortunate to see any slaveries remitted today, participant or not. I don't think Bartazan will be very interested in details tonight."

"We have a deal," said Mirko with a frown. "He fought hard enough against the concession, which makes me believe he's sincere in it. That deal is that 'the slaves' will be freed—and that includes you, Florio. We won't race without that assurance."

Florio gave a weak smile. "I don't know whether that's noble principle or teary sentimentality."

Catzen's face flushed red. "It's an utterly stupid idea to antagonise Bartazan over something so trivial," she snapped at Florio, "but it's exactly the sort of pig-headed perverse self-defeating decency that Mirko always shows. And that's why I love him!"

Florio tried half-heartedly to suppress a sneer. "If we don't win, today, *my lady*, I hope you drown. All

Ascalon needs is some nectar-whelped Electorbitch telling him he's wonderful and noble and too good for this cruel world. I wasn't over-fond of Larien, but at least she—"

"Florio, that is more than enough," said Mirko in a surprisingly level tone. "You know nothing about Catzen, and I won't allow you to speak to her that way!"

"Mirko, it's not worth worrying about. Florio is naturally concerned that I will show his helmsmanship up by my own élan."

Panduletta held up her hands. "Stop this, all of you! Mario said that Florio was to get rest, not argument. How will he feel when he makes his morning call and finds him wrangling?"

"Sorry," said Mirko.

"My apologies," said Catzen. "I am your guest, mistress Panduletta, and I display coarse and unbecoming manners."

Panduletta bowed but Mirko suspected she had no great love for Catzen.

Catzen wandered over to the window and looked out. The sun was rising in the sky. "Look, Mirko!" she cried, all animosities forgotten. "You can see all the galleys on their jetties. Don't they make a fine sight?"

Mirko walked across to join her at the window. In accordance with race tradition, the galleys were all arrayed in colourful new sails. *Sapphire Light* floated proud, her hull freshly painted in Azure chequer, a sail of deepest indigo with the sapphire emblem of the House of Bartazan in the centre. Adjacent was the scarlet sail of *Dragonchaser* with its rampant dragon emblazoned. *Excelsior's* purple sail made a fine contrast with the brilliant white of *Fanar's Glory*, while the yellow and orange striping of *Kestrel* was surely too bold for most tastes.

Catzen's large brown eyes were alight. "You cannot imagine how long this has been a dream for me. So many Margariads I have watched, cheering for *Sunrise* or—sorry—*Dragonchaser*. I always hoped that one day I might sail on one of those proud galleys. And here I am!"

Florio snorted. "Vavar Cascais could have said much the same—in fact, he probably did. Love of the galleys doesn't make a helm."

"That's enough, Florio," said Mirko. "Catzendralle is the helm we have today—solely as a result of your own folly and negligence. Your best contribution is to keep

your thoughts to yourself, especially as you have no encouragement to offer.”

Panduletta frowned. “Can’t you at least wish them good luck, Florio?” she said. “You and Mirko have been through a lot together.”

Mirko raised his hands in a placatory gesture. “I’d be frustrated too if I’d missed out on the race, and with everything having gone so well too.”

Florio looked at him sourly. “I may have been unnecessarily churlish,” he said. “I have a vested interest in you winning, and I’ve no doubt that the Lady Catzen-dralle will prove a superior helm to witch-boy Cascais.”

Mirko glanced across to Catzen who had flushed and bitten her lip at the mention of ‘witch-boy’.

“Shall we go?” she asked in a brittle tone. “I would rather like to mingle with the crowds before the race. We’ll be safe enough from Corrando’s men now there are people on the street.”

Mirko nodded. He could well understand her discomfort at Florio’s allusion even though it hadn’t been directed at her.

“Florio, trust me. I’ll be back with your cancelled indenture papers after the race.”

“Since that depends on Bartazan’s magnanimity, forgive me a degree of scepticism. Just race well; we can’t have a bunch of Paladrians beating a Garganet.”

Mirko smiled and stretched out his hand. Florio’s reference to him as a Garganet indicated—too subtly for anyone else to notice—that he had disregarded the matter of the court-martial which had stripped Mirko of his Garganet citizenship.

Florio leaned forward, wincing at the pain in his shoulder, and shook Mirko’s outstretched hand. “Fair winds, sea-friend.”

“Fair winds.”

Mirko smiled. “Goodbye, Panduletta. All being well, I’ll see you after the race.”

Panduletta gave him a quick embrace, with a perfunctory curtsy for Catzen. Catzen replied with what Florio would have called an ‘Electorbitch nod’ as she left the room.



Finister

by *Till Noever*

Book Three

— 1 —

Rutger left the Teeshan caravansary with a tingle of unease that soon matured into a feeling of looming disaster. Master Wert himself had told him of the calamity that had befallen this caravan and Wainstay Station. A pigeon had brought the news only hours after the event had transpired. Someone had been able to get off just this one message.

Did he know if any of the members of his caravan had survived? No, but he would know soon enough. A small contingent of heavily armed men were heading out there to guard the reconstruction and take whatever toll they could on the nomads. Wert had sworn that this atrocity would not go unavenged, and he had every intention to do what was required to see his threat through.

"They are devils!" he shouted, his face mottled. "But this time they will regret it! What talion I shall exact! When I'm done with them they'll think that Possa Jennikov was a kind man. They'll rue the day they dared to try and ruin me!" It appeared, Rutger thought, that Master Wert's apoplectic state was due mainly—if not solely—to what he perceived as his own damaged interests. Not that Rutger himself cared much about the victims, but one would have thought that Wert cared at least peripherally about those entrusting themselves to his care.

Rutger reflected on his options, pivoted on heels, and returned to Master Wert's office. The guard tried to stop him from barging in. Rutger issued a sharp command, uttered with the careful inflection that brooked no dispute from minds as small as this one. The guard visibly shrunk into himself as Rutger opened the door.

Master Wert looked up. "What is it now?" he snapped.

"When are your men leaving?"

"They should have been gone by now—but they needed more ammunition for the crossbows!" He threw

his hands up in the air. "Can you believe it? I'm surrounded by incompetence! Is it any wonder that the nomads have become bold?"

"I wish to accompany them," Rutger stated.

Master Wert squinted at him. "You do, eh? What do you want out there? And why the hurry? And what are you good for anyway? This isn't going to be a joyride, you know!"

"I'm better than three of your best men together," Rutger said, using again a carefully modulated cadence, which instantly convinced Wert that what he spoke was nothing but the limpid truth.

Wert shrugged. "I'll give you a horse and a weapon. Kill me some nomads and you can keep them."

Rutger inclined his head. "Just as you say."

The ride was hard, long, and uneventful. Whatever motivation had driven the nomads to first attack Possa Jennikov's caravan, and then to sack the station, had obviously dissipated. The contingent reached the wreck of Wainstay Station at nightfall. A sorry band of guards, caravan hands, and a few of Jennikov's surviving passengers was there to receive them. The leader of the contingent rounded them up and told them that what was done was done. A fire was lit from useless pieces of timber, and some semblance of order restored.

Rutger couldn't have cared less about all this. He was looking for the thief and the woman said to be accompanying him. He enquired of the surviving passengers; obtained responses that may or may not have been relevant. Nobody seemed to remember the two. He went to the pile of bodies that had been heaped to the north end of the former station, where, on the following day, a mass-grave would be dug. In the darkness, his only light a burning piece of timber, he studied the faces of the dead, but found nobody he recognized—which meant nothing. Fliz could be buried underneath those lying open to Rutger's inspection. He would have to investigate further in the morning. He contemplated initiating a detailed search at this very moment, but he knew that, magice though he was, he would not be able to get these people to help him.

He bedded down for the night, but was drafted for a watch in the early hours in the morning. He spent the time listening to the sounds of the sleepers and the steppe winds, his mind exploring the consequences of *not* finding Fliz among the dead. Was it probable—or even possible—that the thief had figured out the cor-

rect sequence of buttons to push, discovered the locator's basic purpose, and decided to follow its call?

Impossible. The Thalonican was a personage of unusual talent; that much Rutger had established. Fliz had stolen from a magice; he could read and write; but that he should even come close to divining the purpose of the locator was inconceivable.

Still . . .

Daylight came and people started heaving the corpses into the mass-grave. When it was done Rutger knew that Fliz had, again, evaded him. Rutger made a decision. He knew, at least approximately, where the target of his search was located. A long distance away, somewhere in the Galatadian Ranges, in the southern reaches of the Great Northern Desert. Rutger carried a map that should at least get him close. The search for Fliz had become futile; the man's spoor ended at Wainstay station. There were only three ways he could have gone: north to Port Ish, west to Gaskar, or south, back to Thalonica. He hadn't done the latter. If he had gone north then he knew nothing of the locator's purpose. If Rutger followed Fliz, he might or might not find him. In any case he would lose a lot of time. On the other hand, if Fliz had gone west then proceeding in that direction would serve a dual purpose, in bringing Rutger closer to his goal and the thief at the same time.

Rutger located a good horse. He bribed one of the guards into surrendering it, a saddle and provisions, and headed off along the long road to Gaskar. He would deal with the dangers along the track if and when he came upon them. He was, after all, a magice.

Those dangers became apparent only hours after he left Wainstay. Rutger's horse had fallen into an easy rhythm; the road, a broad, only slightly rutted, track lay draped over the gentle undulations of the steppe. Hypher, fask, tinsal, and tufts of tussock patterned the surface in a layer of bleached purple, yellow, red, and green. The wind blew from the vast plains of the continent, carrying little moisture, and drying away the perspiration generated by Caravella's heat almost as soon as it had formed. A recipe for rapid dehydration. Rutger spared a brief thought for the good fortune which had the steppes riddled with small springs whose origins were a mystery, given that such little moisture fell from above. The grasses, accordingly, dug their roots deep into the arid soil, and drank from the sources they found down there.

The road wound around a small hillock. Prompted by a sensation he knew too well to ignore, Rutger drew up the horse. Too late. A troop of riders, clad in red, loosely flowing kaftans, their heads wrapped with white cloth. Belts held curved knives and short swords. The nomads rode without saddles or stirrups. Colorful blankets were strapped to the horses' backs, on which sat the riders. The reins were fashioned from equally colorful materials.

The troop halted with the precision of a single individual. Rutger counted fourteen. Too many to control at once. He would have to focus on the leader. As Rutger and nomads stood still, surveying each other, his mind reached out and brushed theirs; found the dominant one, associated it with the individual leading the troop, and insinuated itself into the man's thoughts and emotions. He encountered resistance; drew back immediately; tried again, working his way around the defenses; pushing tiny tendrils into open gaps, injecting imperceptible amounts of foreign thoughts and emotions. The fact that, as yet, there had been no need to take physical action made it easier than Rutger had expected. It allowed him the full focus of his mind on the quarry.

Rutger's horse took a step. He brought it under control immediately, but the moment was gone; the connection had been broken. Rutger peered at the troop to see if his machinations had been effective. The leader made a quick gesture and nudged his horse forward, in Rutger's direction. The others remained in place; though their hands crept surreptitiously toward their weapons.

The leader rode up and stopped a few paces from the magice. Rutger said nothing; did not even acknowledge the man's presence with either gesture or nod. His mind reached out again and found . . . indifference.

Rutger bit back a smile. It was exactly what he had aimed to achieve. Now he added just a trace of magnanimity. Not too much to clash with the nomad's natural disposition toward killing, but enough to suggest that in this instance the very effort of doing so was excessive and pointless; that therefore Rutger should be allowed to proceed unmolested.

The nomad leader stared at Rutger, his eyes unfocused and vacant. He knew something was not in line with what he would have understood as 'ordinary', but Rutger's insinuations were too subtle to grapple with; elusive wraiths of the nomad's mind, hovering just

beyond the veil of what he could comprehend, yet powerful enough to make him do things he would not otherwise have contemplated.

So he regarded Rutger for another few moments with an expression of bewildered puzzlement; then, without a word, spun around the horse and rode back to his troop. A curt command wafted across to where Rutger waited, still in his watchful, yet impassive, stance. He saw one of the men open his mouth as if to say something, then, bethinking himself, turn away in disgust; but not without raking his glance over Rutger—who felt just the slightest trace of unease. But nothing happened; the moment passed; the troop set into motion, again as one man, and without deigning Rutger a single glance, filed past him on their way to wherever. Rutger sat motionless, a tight control on his animal, whose muscles twitched and jerked in its desire to move out of the way of the passing nomads. He held it that way until the troop had crested the next undulation and disappeared beyond it. Then he allowed himself a brief sigh of relief. He patted his animal and continued on his way west. The encounter had gone well enough. He had, of course, never been in any real danger. After all, he possessed weapons that could have killed twice their number before they could lay a hand on him. But using these weapons always implied a measure of danger. They attracted attention, and that was the last thing he wanted. The fiasco in Thalonica was disturbing, and he had only barely escaped without anybody actually *seeing* him. Unless one counted the thief, of course. Always the thief . . .

By nightfall Deep Gully was nowhere in sight. Rutger, somewhat reluctantly, decided to camp beside a small spring in a shallow ditch. He ate his meager rations and drank from the spring, then used the blanket which acted as a padding for the saddle, to cover himself for the night. He slept fitfully, his every sense alert to anything that might pose a threat. In the event, it proved to be an unnecessary worry. In the morning he was not rested; but he had been taught to combat the effects of fatigue and could have gone without sleep for a week, should this have proven necessary. He went through his conditioning exercises and presently remounted and continued on his way even before Caravella had cleared the horizon. He arrived at Deep Gully station, a complex arranged not unlike Wainstay, by late morning. As a traveler from the east he was subjected to some questioning. He did not discourage this, though

he could have. Sometimes there were other, occasionally more efficient, information extraction methods than direct mind exploration, which usually required a considerable effort. Sometimes just talking was definitely more effective.

Tyssel, the next small town along the Bay Road, as the locals called it, was a good day's ride away.

"Better start early in the morning," a middle-aged hostler with a scabrous face and a bulbous nose told him. "If your horse is fresh you can make it by nightfall. That's if the nomads don't get you, of course!" He guffawed at his feeble jest and looked around at the other faces along the bar counter.

Rutger issued a thin smile. "That is my fervent wish," he said dryly.

The hostler made a raspy sound and took a drag on his pipe, in which he burned a weed whose sicklish-sweet reek Rutger found revolting, but which nobody else appeared to mind. It had a mildly intoxicating effect on the smoker; opening his mind so that it was almost effortless to discern the person's dominant thoughts.

"What is this stuff?" he asked the hostler, pointing at the pipe.

The man grinned. "Want some?" he asked. His hand went into a pocket in his stained pantaloons and came out with a small cloth bag.

"Pertweed," a voice behind Rutger supplied. "The nomads sell it to us."

Rutger swung around to look at the speaker. "The nomads?"

"We've been trying to figure out what it is," the man nodded, "but they sell it to us dry and shredded and we can't tell."

"You trade with the nomads?"

"Only their whelps. Adults wouldn't come close to us. Only reason why they'd want to is to cut our throats. I guess the whelps are allowed to do it so they get to know the enemy." He grinned. "Know what I mean?"

"Why do you let them?"

"What? Get to know us?" The man shrugged. "What's the difference? They won't find out anything we don't want them to. Besides, where else would we get pertweed?" A logic so inane that Rutger found himself unable to formulate a reply. Despite this, however, he decided to give himself and the horse a rest.

He departed Deep Gully before dawn and arrived at Tyssel just before Caravella set behind the undulations of the ubiquitous steppe. During the last few hours of his trek the tang of the ocean had added itself to the all-pervading redolence of dust, grass, and hypher flowers. When he arrived in Tyssel the characteristic smells of wharves and human habitation finally overpowered the scents of the steppe. He left the horse at a stable near the eastern entrance to the town and set about to find himself a place for the night.

The town itself, organized around a central marketplace and the tiny harbor, was unremarkable, except for the statue of a man in a flowing cloak, whose arm pointed imperiously at an unknown destination. Rutger, enquiring of the keeper of the inn where he took residence, learned that the monument represented the explorer, Tyssel, after whom the town was named. What was the significance of the pointing hand? He innkeeper scratched his bald head and confessed that knowledge of such matters had been lost in antiquity. Of course, people speculated; some saying that the gesture signified nothing but a grand admonition to go forth and conquer the world; others being more inclined to suggest that if one followed the pointing finger one would eventually arrive at a great treasure. Of course, as the innkeeper, not noticing Rutger's suddenly vitalized interest, pointed out, nobody had ever bothered to follow this idea to its logical conclusion.

"Which would be?" Rutger enquired.

The innkeeper grimaced. "Foetzel, the scribe, worked it out. Following Tyssel's finger you'd have over three hundred miles of Finister to search. From the steppe, across the Galatadians, and then the desert beyond. Three hundred miles of doing what? Going carefully, one step at a time, looking for signs that there might be treasure buried there somewhere? You could spend your life and more doing this, and by the time you're done your back will be bent like a sickle from all that staring down at your feet! We're practical folk around here. Tyssel was a great man, and a great little town this is, but who'd want to go out on a fool's errand like that?" He chuckled. "And who says the treasure is even on Finister? It could be in the water for all we know! A lot of good that would do us!"

Rutger nodded sympathetically. The innkeeper returned to his chores, shaking his head at the folly of even contemplating such an enterprise. Rutger left the inn and went to the central square where he pondered

the monument. Lacking his locator he could not be sure, of course; but his instincts told him that the statue was pointing right where he was heading.

Amazing. Even more so because this was the first time he'd even heard of this monument. The records held no reference to it. No magice had any idea that it existed, here, in a small, insignificant town where steppe met ocean. Of course, there was Yeolus' statue in Gaskar . . .

Rutger's step faltered when he understood the significance of his discovery. For the two monuments together, lying as it were, quite close to the location in question, supplied exactly the same information as his locator. And it was there for all to see; and to follow, if they were so inclined.

Why? Why should the ancients have left such marks? If, as he had been taught, such secrets were only to be entrusted to the magices, then why . . . this? It just took one enquiring mind to wonder about the connection between the monuments of Yeolus and Tyssel . . .

Rutger returned to the inn and located the keeper. "This man, Foetzel," he enquired. "He still lives?"

"Foetzel?" The innkeeper laughed. "Foetzel is long gone—but, Lueger—that's his son—still plies the trade, and does the scribing for the rest of us ignoramuses."

"Where would I find him?"

"You need scribing done? You look like a man who might know some of it himself!"

Rutger shrugged. "Some things I cannot do."

The innkeeper nodded as if he understood. Rutger wondered what it was he *thought* he understood. He was tempted to probe, but didn't. Following the innkeeper's directions Rutger soon located Lueger, who lived above the store where he practiced his trade, and traded in candles, scribing tools, maps and a diversity of other paraphernalia. The store was closed, but persistent rapping soon occasioned a shout from above. Rutger, looking up, saw a silhouette in the darkness. His mind reached out and identified Lueger.

"I have something to ask you," he called up. He supplemented the statement with a tendril of thought suggesting to Lueger that it would be beneficial and profitable to cooperate. Lueger repaired himself downstairs and unlocked the door.

"What do you want?"

Rutger left the store with a map under his arm. This was the map Foetzel himself had used to determine just exactly where it was Tyssel was pointing, and how much of Finister one would have to walk in order to search for the putative treasure. He took it up to his room and compared it to his own. He copied the location line from Foetzel's map to his own and found that it intersected the line from Nameless Keep almost exactly where his, Rutger's, second line did; the one he'd drawn in Thalonica.

The difference between the intersections represented, Rutger guessed, maybe three to four miles in actual distance. A considerable error, which he must narrow down. But the Thalonican line could be in error. There, he had oriented the map using directions of the captain of the vessel that had brought him there. These directions might not have been as accurate as he had hoped. If, Rutger told himself, he repeated the procedure in Gaskar, he might end up with a definite decision on which of the estimates was the more accurate.

Rutger thought of his lost locator. All this effort would have been unnecessary if it hadn't been for that blighted thief! Where was *he* now? Dead or alive? If he had indeed been at Wainstay, how had he gotten away? Had he survived whatever came afterward? For all Rutger knew his locator could now be in the hands of some barbarian nomad, or lie forgotten in some ditch, to be covered by dirt and plants, and never to be found again.

Rutger dismissed the matter from his mind. He would have to make do with the means he had.

He left Tyssel the next day. He made good time, arrived in the small settlement of Acquith before nightfall, found a stable for the horse, an inn for himself, and presently had a restful night. On the next day he saw the first elevations that were more than just random undulation in the steppe. The road passed between the end of the low range and the ocean. That night Rutger found shelter at Golden Beach Station, which derived its name from the deep-yellow sands of the beach adjacent to it. The next day saw him set out on the last lap—to arrive in Gaskar at nightfall. He found an inn and rested more peacefully than he had in many days. On the following day he made enquiries about the best way to get to his goal, somewhere in the western Galatadians. He located the local jammer agencies, and purchased a berth on the next jammer train into the ranges. Questions about his purpose he averted by the most

subtle of manipulations of the minds of those he dealt with. As far as they were concerned he had legitimate business there; though, if questioned, none of them would have been able to say just what exactly that business was. What Rutger could not influence though was the timing of the next train. Eight days of waiting! Rutger briefly contemplated other alternatives, but rejected them. The Galatadian Ranges bordered on the northern desert, and much of the way there went through arid, utterly inhospitable country. To risk the trip on his own would have been utter folly. He persisted with his inquiries about alternatives. Apparently there were none. The two jammer companies had a definite monopoly and represented the only realistic method of crossing the arid regions between Gaskar, the mines, and the ranges. Only a few merchants were wealthy enough to afford their own personal jammer; reserved for the transport of themselves and their business associates to the mines in which they had shares—or maybe just for an excursion to the much vaunted beauties of the remarkable oasis that was the Galatadian Valley, a verdant, lush miracle protected by the surrounding mountains from the vicissitudes of the desert. These personal vehicles—which attracted the popular appellation 'slut liners'—were smaller and faster than the lumbering giants of the jammer lines, designed for comfort as much as utility. Rutger, realizing that this alternative was not open to him, composed himself to patience.

He procured a map of Gaskar from a scribe's den. On the map he located Yeolus' statue. In consultation with the scribe he established the cardinal directions relative to this point, using certain landmarks of the city as fixation points. He trekked up the hill to the statue and, using his newly acquired information, drew another line following Yeolus' pointing arm. Its intersection with the marker-line from Skele was very close to the line he'd drawn in Tyssel. Meaning that this was probably the correct place. He had now determined the position of his goal to within as much precision as he could expect without the locator. The accomplishment gave him little comfort. He was disturbed at the final confirmation of his discovery that the location of this thing that could change the world was effectively an open secret; protected only by the fact that nobody had made the necessary connections, drawn the right conclusions, or had had sufficient persistence to follow the track to its logical conclusion.

Why would the founders have done something like this? It flew in the face of everything else he knew about them.

Eight days to wait . . .

— 2 —

“What’s this?” Caitlan stopped undoing the buttons on Ailin’s blouse.

She laughed softly and nibbled his ear. “It’s called a ‘halter,’” she whispered. “You figure out why.” Her hand slid lower and started to work on his breeches, tugging impatiently to loosen the belt; which, she noticed, wasn’t the only problem! Caitlan slipped the blouse over her head, forcing her to lift her arms. She wrapped them around his neck, and pulled herself up high enough to kiss him deeply. It had been far too long!

His fingers found and undid the strings that held the halter together at the front. The garment fell apart. His hands cupped and caressed her breasts. She made a small sound of pleasure against his mouth. His hands slipped around her back and under her buttocks. With their mouths still hungrily exploring each other, he picked her up and gently deposited them both on the bed. As they lay side by side, her hands went to his breeches and tugged and pulled; found something hindering the task. His mouth twisted into a smile against hers. She ran her tongue over his lips and chuckled.

“I think I need some help,” she breathed.

He helped her.

“That’s better,” she whispered. She kissed him again, hard and deep. He moaned softly, rolled on his back and pulled her on top of him. And then he was inside her—and she lost all thought and just surrendered herself . . . to him; to both of them; to the moment; to their love.

“I thought you were dead.”

They lay, facing each other, in the dim light of the lantern; on a bed in a tiny room in the *House of Joys*; One of the two rooms on the second floor Bearna had declared as off-limits to everyone but their guests. For this night at least.

Ailin ran her finger along the scar on his face. “I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I thought you knew.” She brought her face to his and kissed him.

“Don’t be,” he said softly. “I *should* have known. Truth is, I never even considered it. When they . . .” His voice cracked.

She pulled herself closer; fitted her body to the contours of his; felt him responding; ran a hand down his back until it came to rest on his buttocks, and pulled herself even closer.

“My,” she whispered—feeling her own response to his need spreading in a warm, moist fire between her legs. He said nothing, but pulled her face to his and kissed her hungrily. “I never want to be without you,” he said simply.

“I never want to be without you,” she replied, meaning it with all her being. She wanted to be one with him—not just in those moments when the barriers came down, but always.

Of course, if they *were* one being, they could never do . . . this. So maybe it wasn’t such a bad thing. As long as they were together . . .

No more thought! Her lips found his and she kissed him deeply as he entered her, and then it was just a blinding light and a soothing fire that enveloped her whole being and left her dazed with the wonder of it all.

In an adjacent room, separated from Caitlan and Ailin by a mortared stone wall, Fliz closed the door behind them and let go of Nerys’ hand.

“I’m sorry,” he said, “but I had to tell them that we’re . . . together.”

Nerys put a hand on his mouth. “We are.” She was nervous, but, given the circumstances, she was calmer than he. No wonder; she wouldn’t have to open up with the little grubby secrets of her past.

She looked around the tiny room. A bed, four walls, a door, a window. That was it. “I’ve never been in one of . . . these,” she said. She regarded Fliz again. “The . . . matron. She called you by name.”

Fliz grimaced and sat down on the bed. It had been hastily made up with fresh linen, just for them.

Fliz sighed. “Please,” he said, “sit down. There are things . . . Things I must tell you.”

“You don’t have to . . .”

“Yes I do,” he said firmly. He looked up at her standing in front of him. “Before we . . . before you . . .” He shook his head and made a vexed sound, eyes averted to the floor.

Nerys knelt down in front of him. A hand touched his cheek. "Whatever we do . . ."

Fliz shook his head. "Just listen! Please?"

Nerys nodded slowly and sat herself beside him. She held onto his left hand as Fliz began.

Haltingly at first, but then warming to this act of honesty, he told her. Everything. Everything he knew to tell. The pieces he'd left out a couple of nights ago on the steppe. About who and what he was. His dreams. His nightmares. About the whores in the *Pink Palace* next door. About Y'liaan. Especially about Y'liaan. About why he was there on the Endless Beach the night he found Nerys.

He resisted the temptation to make things better or more noble than they were. It wouldn't do. She'd find out soon enough, and then . . .

No. Not this way.

Nerys sat beside him. He knew she was looking at him, but he kept his eyes averted. Shame? Embarrassment? What did he have to be ashamed about? What else could he have done? A lot, maybe. Not that it had occurred to him before, but, yes, the truth was that he, like everybody else, had made choices, and that not all of them were good ones. There was a lot of muck in the bottom of his soul. Unpleasant stuff, which, when stirred up, reeked of cowardice and weakness.

To his surprise Nerys held onto his hand, and didn't even let go when he told her about Y'liaan. Which, he thought, was quite amazing. He glanced at her then, looking for a reaction; maybe disapproval. After all, it couldn't be easy. But what he saw was . . . what? Acceptance? How could she just . . . accept?

Nerys' mouth twitched. "I didn't think you were flawless," she said. "I love you—but I know it's not going to be easy."

He stared at her; speechless. She touched his cheek again in a soft caress. "But," she added, "you have honored me with truth." She leaned forward and kissed him lightly.

"I must do the same," she said, very seriously.

"You don't have to . . ."

"Sshh," she put a hand on his mouth. "Yes, I do. We must know each other. We are so . . . different . . . The only way we can be together is if we know each other . . ."

Fliz nodded. "All this outpouring," he said dryly, "could make for a long night. Maybe we should lie down."

A shadow flickered across her face, but disappeared almost immediately. They lay down facing each other. Fliz put an arm around her, and presently she relaxed and began talking. Telling him things she'd never told anybody; maybe not even herself. But he was a mirror and she was seeing herself as clearly as she maybe never had before.

Occasionally she cried; for places irretrievably lost, people forever estranged, memories of things that could never be again. And when she did, he hugged her; and then she calmed down again, and then she talked some more . . .

Goldie watched with an open mouth as the big man picked up Ailin—who was a good deal bigger and bushtier than herself—lifted her like a child, and they just stood there and hugged each other in an eerie kind of silence that seemed to go on and on, and it was as if the world simply didn't exist for them.

Goldie was instantly jealous. Now there was a man she wouldn't mind having doing things to her. This one she would *enjoy*. Despite his size there was something . . . gentle . . . about him. Like in the way he hugged Ailin now, his eyes closed, and . . .

Damn! Why couldn't she get a man like that? Goldie grimaced. Life was unfair. Always had been, and always would be . . .

And then her eyes wandered past the two blocking the door and beyond, watching from the alley, she saw . . . Fliz.

Fliz?

Goldie craned her neck. Fliz and . . . a woman? More a girl, really. Pretty. Beautiful even.

Fliz, eh? The Willet mascot from the *Pink Palace*. The one who'd never made it . . . if she were to believe the girls from next door. But who did? Despite all the cooperation, they were a tight-lipped bunch when it came to certain things. Goldie would have bet a week's pay that Fliz had gotten it many a time. Especially with that little twerp, Y'liaan. And now, look at *that!* Fliz and *who?* How did a Willet thief get hold of a number like that one? She was no professional; that much was certain. What was he doing with her—or, more to the point, what was she doing with him?

The silence was broken when the big man set Ailin down. She held onto his hand as she turned to Bearna. "This is Caitlan," she said. The joy in her voice—it was

almost like she was singing!—made Goldie nauseous. What a smug slut!

Bearna stepped forward and eyed Caitlan up and down. “Took your time,” she said to him.

The big man looked guilty, but Goldie saw Ailin squeeze his hand. It wiped the somberness right off his face.

Phew! To have such power over a man like that! What wouldn’t she give? Who was this Ailin anyway? It had been weeks and she *still* hadn’t figured it out. But the woman from another continent certainly had her way with men—even if she had to gut them! Whatever Ailin was, she was formidable. Not someone to cross. Goldie made a note of it: Do not cross Ailin!

She redirected her attention to Fliz and the girl. Caitlan stepped aside to let them in. Bearna’s eyes widened. “Fliz? What are *you* doing here?”

At Bearna’s exclamation the girl with Fliz—definitely a beauty, more beauty than anybody had a right to, and with something in her bearing that said ‘nobility’—gave him a sideways glance. A mix of ‘well, listen to this’ and ‘is there something I ought to know?’ Goldie’s antennae quivered, picking up traces of the subtle vibrations flowing between the two. Like that, was it? She looked closer; saw all the signs. Standing close. Hands twitching, wanting to touch, but not in front of these strangers. Things that wanted to be said, but weren’t, except in their postures. Fliz’s uncertain glance at his companion. And there was the fact that Fliz looked unusually well groomed; not just for a thief, but for Fliz. He lacked the short, unruly beard he’d had for as long as Goldie could remember, and his hair had been trimmed by a more skilled wielder of scissors than his mother—peace be on her grave.

For the first time the big man, Caitlan, spoke. “These are my friends,” he said, and the way he said it Goldie knew that he meant it. Again she felt a stab of jealousy. He was a friend of Fliz’s? And this haughty tramp?

Fliz indicated his companion. “This is . . . Lis.” The young woman smiled at Bearna and everybody else. Somewhat tentatively and uncertain, Goldie thought.

Bearna stepped back and motioned. “Come in.” To Ailin she said, “I think your friends are tired. We’ll . . . vacate a couple of rooms.”

“Bearna . . .” Ailin began.

Bearna waved her objection aside. “It’s the least I can do.” Goldie took this to be in reference to Ailin’s resolute action in dealing with the violent—now very much

dead and disposed-of—sailor, who had slammed the matron into the wall; and what a miracle it was that she wasn’t only alive, but incredibly healthy and vigorous, recovering so quickly that the blotch on the floor where they’d scrubbed away the blood hadn’t even properly dried yet!

Fliz opened his mouth to say something, but shut it again. Another uncertain glance at his companion. Interesting! The Willet and the . . . what? Another unwanted invader from The Valley? But, no; there was something subtly different; something vaguely . . .

. . . Gaskarian maybe? Goldie’d had her share of Gaskarians, some of whom were merchants, visiting Thalonica with their families, sampling the local wares, and never mind the wives! Goldie had caught glimpses of the wives, the sons and daughters. It wasn’t surprising, really, that most Gaskarians referred to them as ‘sluts’. There was something arrogant about them; an air of I’m-better-than-you. Goldie thought to detect that same air in ‘Lis’—or whatever her real name was. Which made everything even more puzzling; because how did a Gaskarian merchant slut get to be so chummy with a Thalonican thief—and a Willet at that? Goldie sensed a delicious mystery here, and she was eager to explore it further. The potential for gossip was beyond anything she’d known for a long time. The furtive air adhering to Fliz and his companion further fueled Goldie’s speculations. They were leery of something, that much was certain.

What? Or *who*?

The astunos?

Goldie discarded the idea. Fliz, thief though he was, had connection in the astunologia. Pretty high-up connections she guessed. He’d been arrested several times; and what happened? Nothing. The only conclusion was that, unless he paid some exorbitant bribes, Fliz probably knew something *very* embarrassing about somebody that counted.

And now he was worried. Which made Goldie wonder what he’d been up to. Him and that superior Gaskarian slut.

Bearna ordered two rooms on the second floor—their best!—to be vacated, tidied, and fresh linen put on the beds.

Fliz and the Gaskarian in a bed, eh? Neither looked entirely comfortable with that. Or maybe . . . they just hadn’t done it yet.

Speculations, speculations. If only she knew!

Bearna turned to Goldie, interrupting her ruminations. "You and Heena go home. You've been through enough for today. Go get some rest. I'll send the surplus to the Palace."

Goldie opened her mouth to protest, but shut it again. Bearna wasn't the woman you argued with. Bearna deferred to no one. Except Ailin maybe. Odd, that. She always had, in a way; from the day Ailin arrived, basically as a beggar, and even then giving herself airs and unwilling to contribute her share to the business of *House of Joys*. And now, after what happened earlier . . . when Goldie caught Bearna glancing at Ailin it was almost with . . . what? Reverence maybe? Why? Because Ailin had just gutted some guy like he was a blowfish? Was *that* what it took to gain Bearna's respect?

"Don't worry," Bearna said, "you'll get your share for the night."

Goldie's mouth fell open. The world was beginning to make no sense at all.

Bearna had turned away. Goldie stared after her, then shrugged and left the *House of Joys*, intending to go straight home. She passed the *Pink Palace*. The door opened, and out stepped a sailor. The door closed behind him. Goldie, arrested by a thought, hesitated; then turned back and knocked on the *Pink Palace* door. Raisa, one of the senior employees, opened it. She saw Goldie and opened it further to let her in.

"What's up? You're done early!"

Goldie didn't answer immediately but looked around. Peata and Tinny lounged on one of the sofas, chatting to each other. Goldie knew for a fact that both of them vastly preferred games with each other to those with their male clients. But life was tough and you couldn't be choosy. Peata waved at Goldie.

Freak! Confine your hands to your customers — and your girlfriend! Goldie had occasionally wondered what it would be like, but of course she'd *never* . . .

She smiled sweetly and waved back. Tinny gave her an indifferent twitch of the head. Tinny didn't like Goldie much, and felt no need to make much of a secret of it.

Well, freak, guess what!

Goldie returned her attention to Raisa. "Bearna decided that business was a bit slow."

Raisa raised an astonished eyebrow. "Sending you home? Amazing!"

Goldie shrugged. "I guess." She hesitated. "Is Y'liaan working tonight?"

"She's busy." Raisa grimaced. "She's . . . a bit distracted," she said confidentially. "Fliz hasn't shown his face for two days. Nobody's seen or heard of him."

Goldie was about to let out that Fliz had just shown his mysteriously absent face again, but controlled herself. She wasn't going to give Raisa the pleasure of telling Y'liaan what Goldie would rather communicate herself. What was the use of a good bit of gossip if it was diluted by vicarious transmission? Goldie felt a surge of anticipatory pleasure. The evening was definitely not over yet!

She made small talk with Raisa, and occasionally Peata. When Y'liaan finally came to see her client out, Goldie was primed to a action.

Y'liaan closed the door behind the man and turned around.

"Goldie? What are you doing here?" she asked curiously.

A knock on the door. "Busy night," Raisa said and went to open it. Outside stood an upper-level Floater, his garments giving away his standing.

"Come in," Raisa said, in a tone which told Goldie that the man was a regular of sorts. Probably a well-paying one. He stepped inside; his eyes fell on Peata and Tinny. A grin spread over his face. The two women got up from the sofa; hooked their arms under his and led him away, chatting as if they'd known each other for a long time. Goldie stared after them.

"He always comes for them," Raisa commented dryly. "That's the way he likes it."

"What's going on at the House?" Y'liaan asked Goldie. "You're off early today!"

Goldie thought this to be a good time to spread her news; now that Y'liaan was present to hear them.

"We have visitors," she said.

Raisa frowned. "You say that as if it was something unusual."

"These ones are," Goldie affirmed. "For one, there's Fliz."

"Fliz?" Y'liaan exclaimed. "Why didn't he . . ."

This was too delicious for words! "He didn't come alone," Goldie said, weighing her words with significance.

Y'liaan froze.

"Ha came in the company of two others," Goldie amplified. "There's a big fellow, who looks like he

could tackle the city's astunos all by himself—and win!" She winked at them.

"Who else?" Y'liaan asked.

"A woman, too." Now she had their full attention. "Gaskarian, I think."

"She's with the big man," Raisa said.

Goldie grimaced. "I don't think so. The big fellow . . . he's come for Ailin . . ."

"She was with *Fliz*?" Y'liaan exclaimed.

Goldie thought she put up a good show of being the reluctant bearer of bad news. "I think so."

Y'liaan's face became a mask. Raisa cast a glance in her direction. She shook her head. "A Gaskarian? Are you sure?"

Goldie nodded. The more she thought about it, the more certain she was.

"A merchant slut," she confirmed.

Y'liaan stood in an attitude of frozen disbelief. She tore herself out of it and shook her head. "I don't believe it," she muttered.

Goldie shrugged. "They . . ." She hesitated artfully. Gossip was best delivered with careful timing and in the correct quantity. Done correctly this could ratchet the listeners into paroxysms of feverish expectancy. Goldie just loved it when she achieved that particular effect. It seemed that this might well be an occasion where she was doing all the right things to achieve it.

"They *what*?" Y'liaan snapped.

Goldie jerked. Maybe she was pushing the girl too far.

"Bearna cleared two rooms," she said. "One of them was for Fliz and the Gaskarian."

Y'liaan's head jutted forward. Her face assumed a predatory mien. "What?!" she hissed.

"I'm sorry . . ."

"You lie!" Y'liaan shouted. Her fists clenched. She stepped closer to Goldie, who backed away. "I'm not!" she insisted. "You can check it out yourself, if you don't believe me."

Raisa stepped between Y'liaan and Goldie. "Now, don't you get yourself upset," she said to Y'liaan. "It's probably all just a misunderstanding. We all know that you and Fliz . . ."

Y'liaan halted her progress and eyed Goldie malevolently from the other side of Raisa. The older woman turned to Goldie. "I think you should leave," she said, in a distinctly unfriendly manner. Goldie was perturbed to realize that her intention to work these two into a

fever pitch of interest had backfired. She hesitated. Y'liaan and Raisa glared at her. Goldie shrugged and, without another word, spun around on her heel and made for the door.

"I'm sure she's wrong," Raisa said when Goldie was gone.

Y'liaan was not mollified. She'd known something was out of joint a couple of mornings ago, when Fliz hadn't shown his face at the Palace. And now . . . now she knew! How long had this been going on? How long had he known this . . . Gaskarian?

But this just *couldn't* be! Fliz was a man of many talents, but wooing Gaskarian merchant sluts was not among them. Why, they were more arrogant than a Wearer's favorite breeders!

Everything in her itched to go next door and find out for sure. Just as many things prevented her from doing so. Because—though she couldn't be!—if Goldie had told the truth, then . . .

She looked at Raisa pleadingly. "Please . . . could you find out? I daren't go."

Raisa hugged her. "I will. But not now, or Oweena will flay me alive when she gets back. But I'll do it later; I promise."

"Thanks." Y'liaan wiped tears from here eyes. "He wouldn't do this."

She didn't like the look on Raisa's face. "He wouldn't," she repeated.

Raisa put an arm around her shoulder and guided her to the sofa where she made her sit down and sat down beside her. "It is my experience," she said gently, "that men do incomprehensible things. Even simple men. And Fliz isn't a simple man. He's a very unusual one—even though he *is* just a Willet. His mother was a very unusual woman; though she was old and bent and broken. But she had something about her. You know, like that Ailin woman at the House."

Y'liaan sighed. "She always said that someone was going to come for her."

Raisa nodded. "So she did. And now it looks like she was right." She shook her head. "She's an odd one."

But Y'liaan didn't care about Ailin. Who gave a damn about her anyway? Y'liaan just wanted to know about Fliz. Why hadn't he come to see her? He must know that she was frantic with worry for him being away that long! How could he be so thoughtless?

A rap on the door. Y'liaan jerked upright. Maybe it was Fliz! Maybe . . .

Raisa went to open the door.

Not Fliz but a client. Raisa gave Y'liaan a commiserating look. Listlessly, Y'liaan dragged herself off the sofa and went to meet the newcomer.

It was when she was lying under him, as he was frantically, mechanically pumping away, that she had the first inklings of an idea. Fragments of memory came together, assembled into an image that made sense.

Duke Corran's men combing the town for a Gaskarian slut who didn't want to be a breeder. Rumors that she had escaped off a ship.

Her and Fliz in their hideaway along Endless Beach.

What if the slut had swum ashore that same night?

Fliz taking her home, and then . . .

Where had he gone after that? Back to the beach? Why would he?

What if he had?—for whatever reason . . .

. . . found the Gaskarian and . . .

. . . and what?

Where had they been for the last . . . Y'liaan counted . . . four . . . yes, it had been four . . . days? Had they . . .?

With a grunt of satisfaction the client collapsed on top of her. Y'liaan contrived to simulate at least a modicum of enthusiasm, moaning and sighing—though more from vexation than anything else.

Had they?

Gaskarian slut!

"Hey! What are you doing?"

"Get off me!"

"I'm not done yet!"

Y'liaan snorted contemptuously. "Yes, you are."

She rolled him off her and got herself out of the bed. He lay there, looking ridiculous; like they all looked when they'd finished what they'd paid for.

Y'liaan turned away, wrapped a thin gown around her and left the room. She went to the combination washroom-latrine where she rinsed his leftovers off and out of her as well as she could. For a moment she sat, pondering her next steps. Her ruminations were interrupted by Tinny, who came in, stark naked, and planted herself on the latrine seat next to Y'liaan.

"Makes you sick, doesn't it?" she commented.

Y'liaan nodded mutely.

Tinny, who was older than her and had been in this business for much longer, patted her on the shoulder.

"It's a living," she said. "Cash for service. You recline; they heave. You clean yourself; they stay filthy. They want to pay for something they could do with their hands? Why not, eh? It may be dirty, but at least it's honest. More than you can say for most of the peddlers in the market. Or the astunos for that matter."

Y'liaan said nothing. She got up and returned to the room, where the client had managed to dress himself. He stood there, looking stupid; maybe embarrassed. Without a word Y'liaan preceded him down the stairs and to the lobby where Raisa saw him out. Paila and Gwyn were there, too, awaiting more business. Y'liaan ignored them. "I'm leaving," she told Raisa.

Raisa raised an eyebrow. "Oweena will not . . ."

"Oweena be damned!" Y'liaan snapped. "I've got things to do! *Now!*"

Raisa opened her mouth to say something, but shut it.

Just as well. Y'liaan would have tackled even Oweena right now. If anybody got in her way, let them watch out!

Y'liaan returned to her room, dressed herself, and left the *Pink Palace* through the back entrance. She didn't feel like answering any stupid questions. Only one thing was on her mind now. She had finally figured out how the Gaskarian slut had befuddled her Fliz; using him to hide from Duke Corran, when she could . . .

What was wrong with the woman anyway? Why would she do something as stupid as that? Y'liaan would have given anything—including, she confessed to herself, Fliz's, admittedly delightful, attentions—to become a breeder. It would be an escape from the squalor and the degradation of her life. To be a Wearer's breeder; that would be something else again. She would bear male children until she could bear no more; become revered, decorated, spoiled, rich. Was the Gaskarian slut simply stupid, or just so arrogant that she thought she was too good for this?

Whatever, Y'liaan would make sure that she wasn't going to beguile Fliz any further. But she also had to make sure that Fliz was out of the way when they picked her up. Fliz was a Willet and if he was associated with the slut he would suffer grievously. Nothing could be done to protect him then.

But how was she going to get him away?

Timing was everything.

On the other hand . . .

Y'liaan paused. A new thought had entered her head. Revenge on the slut would be sweet, but maybe there was something else to be gained. The Gaskarian's location would surely be worth *something* to Corran! Maybe . . . maybe there was a way out of her situation here! She might not be fit to become a breeder, but there were alternatives. She could, of course, hold out for a reward . . .

Y'liaan dismissed the thought. Her parents would claim most of it, leaving her in much the same predicament she was in now. No, she needed something more durable. A position at the Duke's mansion maybe? It was a prestigious place to work. Corran's estate occupied a large fenced-in area at the eastern outskirts of Thalonica; incorporating a vast parkland, tended by innumerable gardeners. The place was guarded by the Duke's private soldiers. All his employees resided in a small village at the periphery of the estate, where, so it was rumored, they had a better life than most Thalonicans. If she managed to get into Corran's service she could live there, too. Maybe be joined with another employee. Just give her a decent chance and she would get herself a good man quicker than you could count the Duke's *silk* collection; which was rumored to be enormous—maybe a hundred! To work in the service of such a man . . . Even if she could not be a breeder, it was still more than she'd ever hoped to achieve.

Of course, she reminded herself, her connection to Fliz would have to be severed. Which was regrettable . . .

'Regrettable'?

Well, yes—but, if the truth be told, not much more. Y'liaan reminded herself that it took two to be beguiled. Fliz was no innocent, that much was certain. If the Gaskarian slut had succeeded, it was due as much to her wiles as to his willingness to be seduced into helping her—and maybe even . . .

Y'liaan shook her head.

Unlikely. She might have tempted him; maybe even suggested a liaison, in order to achieve her aims. But she'd never consider it, of course. Fliz was doomed to be disappointed. A woman who had rejected Duke Corran would hardly consent to—wouldn't even *consider!*—bedding a Willet thief!

Y'liaan paused as she mulled over the complexities of the situation. What was she to do?

Decisions, decisions.

She'd have to be careful about this. Very careful.

The candle was flickering. The light cast dancing shadows over Nerys' sleeping face. Fliz studied the contours of her brow, her nose, her mouth; the way the light caressed her cheeks, revealing tiny imperfections of shape that the bright light of the day hid from view. Her eyes were closed, her features relaxed, her breathing regular and shallow. Fliz, watching her like that, finally knew what he should have known several days ago when he decided to help this woman.

Well, what do you know! Was that the way it happened?

A Gaskarian, of all people; and a merchant girl to boot. Not your average merchant girl, mind you. Definitely not. But then, he wasn't just a normal Willet thief either. If there was something like 'normal' here. All that aside, Fliz finally admitted to himself that he had fallen in love with this girl. Really fallen in love.

What a strange notion! Not the idea that he *could* fall in love, of course. That could happen to anybody. Being a Willet didn't stop anyone from becoming infatuated—though most chose to divert their attentions and interests toward the safe alternative, that being their own sex. It wasn't something that Fliz had ever seriously contemplated, but the fact was that amorous feelings toward females were inherently dangerous. Ardor was acceptable since it could be controlled with power of will—though, Fliz admitted ruefully, he had not been entirely successful at it. His occasional encounters with the whores at the *Pink Palace*, and, more recently, with Y'liaan, evidenced his inability to remain entirely in control of his urges. Of course, there had been the element of danger, which, as he well knew, had actually been an incentive to pursue them.

But this here . . .

Nerys' sleeping face, so close to his own, resting on an arm that was slowly becoming numb, invoked feelings that had nothing to do with mere ardor. She touched something that nobody else had touched. And it had nothing to do with her beauty; though that may have been an initial trigger. It was just . . . Nerys. A contingency beyond his ken, beyond his power to control or manage.

Fliz sighed. The enchantment of the moment was suddenly marred by the stray memory of issues unresolved. The magice, Rutger. Y'liaan. How to get out of Thalonica. *Where* to go. Tomorrow he and Caitlan would procure a map of Finister; maybe from Volcar,

who would know where to find such things. On the map they would draw two lines, and where these lines met, there Caitlan would have to go—and, Fliz suspected, Nerys and himself as well. They had nowhere else to go. Besides, it seemed like an adventure worthwhile joining. Of course, it might be dangerous. *Would* be. But, as the situation stood, there was nothing they could do that didn't involve exposure to unknowns and perils.

Unresolved matters . . .

Y'liaan . . .

Nerys had taken it very well. Unbelievably so. How often could you tell a girl who had just developed a romantic attachment to you that you had, only moments before you met her, been involved in serious sexual exercises with another? But Nerys, apparently, had taken it in her stride. Even if her hand had loosened her grip of his just a fraction, only to tighten again resolutely, as if to tell him that this, too, was something she could take.

A remarkable girl.

And now he had to attend to some unfinished business. The sooner this was dealt with the better. Then, tomorrow, they could all concentrate on figuring out what to do next—and how to deal with the issue of the magice, who must surely still be avidly searching for them.

With infinite care he extricated his arm from under Nerys. He almost woke her in the process and had to suspend his efforts several times in order to let her drift back off to sleep. When he had disentangled himself he draped a thin blanket over her still form and snuck out of the room. He went downstairs. In the lobby he found the matron, Bearna, snoozing on a chair. Fliz could have left without her ever knowing, but instead he hesitated. He made a deliberate noise which woke the woman. Her eyes snapped open and focused on Fliz.

"What are you doing here? I thought you'd be . . ." Her mouth twitched.

"Everybody else is," he said. "I have to . . ." He grimaced. "If Nerys wakes and comes looking for me—could you please let her know that I've gone to deal with some . . . well, matters that have to be dealt with."

Bearna eyed him shrewdly. He suspected that she knew exactly what matters he was referring to. His occasional dalliances with Y'liaan were not exactly a secret; not to the whores of the *Pink Palace* anyway, and,

by implication, not to Bearna either. Stuff filtered through.

"Can't it wait?" Bearna asked.

"No."

"I see," Bearna said thoughtfully. "Well, do what you have to do. I'll tell your friends."

"I hope to be back before they waken."

Bearna grinned. "Nerys might, but I doubt that Ailin and her big man are going to be up so soon."

Fliz chuckled. She was probably right. Those two had a lot of catching up to do.

He nodded at Bearna and left the *House of Joys*, went over to the *Pink Palace*, and rapped on the door. Raisa, one of the senior women, opened. Her eyes went round with surprise when she saw him. But she didn't smile, which Fliz took to be an ominous sign. It made him instantly uneasy.

"Hello, Raisa," he said quietly.

"Fliz?" Her face became a mask hiding her thoughts. "What are you doing here? Where have you been?"

Fliz shrugged. "Things . . . happened. After Felicia and Audile . . ."

Raisa's face softened. It seemed that whatever else was going on was not so serious as to diminish her sympathy for his loss.

"Oweena made sure they were buried properly," she said softly.

Fliz sighed. "I'm sorry I . . . ran like that. But I just couldn't . . ."

Raisa stepped into the street, closer to him. Her temporary guardedness seemed to have abated, at least for the moment. "We all understood that," she said gently.

Fliz nodded. "Thank you. I hope I'll make up for it one day."

Raisa studied him quietly. The mask hadn't crept back, but she was clearly thinking about other things than the dead women. Fliz divined the contents of her thoughts.

"Where's Y'liaan?" he asked.

"She left," Raisa said. She hesitated. Fliz waited.

"She wasn't very happy."

Fliz exhaled sharply. He really hadn't wanted it to happen this way.

"Who told her?"

"Goldie. Who else?" A measure of contempt there. Not that it would have stopped her from listening to everything Goldie would have had to report, but nobody

who knew anything about Goldie had any illusions about her proclivities.

Damn! He should have known.

And done *what* about it? Come here earlier and averted whatever was going on in Y'liaan's head right now? Foregone the last few hours with Nerys? Missed the opportunity for the two of them to get closer; to bridge the gulf between their pasts?

Hardly.

"Where'd she go?"

"She didn't say. Just that she had 'things to do'."

Somehow, that disturbed Fliz. A disquieting train of thought surfaced yet again. Something he'd dismissed earlier, on another occasion; but now, under the circumstances. . .

"What exactly did Goldie say?" he enquired.

Raisa hesitated.

"Please!"

Raisa relented. "Her exact words I cannot recall. But they implied that you were in. . . an undesirably close. . . association with a Gaskarian merchant sl. . ." Raisa bit back the last bit.

Fliz exhaled sharply. "And Y'liaan?"

Raisa eyed him curiously. "Is it true? What Goldie told us?"

Fliz grimaced. "It's a long story. The last few days have been—how shall I say it—the word 'interesting' does not do it justice."

Maybe it was something in his face. Whatever it was, it moderated Raisa's aversion to him, created no doubt by the perceived injustice perpetrated on Y'liaan. Fliz shrugged helplessly. "You know how it feels, to be pushed around by forces you can't control?"

Raisa's mouth twitched. "She must be quite something."

"That's only a part of it." He shook his head. "I need to find Y'liaan. I have to speak with her. Explain myself."

"I doubt she'll want explanations," Raisa remarked dryly.

"She wants blood, huh?"

"Something like that."

"Damn!—How long ago did she leave?"

"Quite a while. It was the earlier part of the night."

"Thank you." Fliz departed the premises, feeling Raisa's eyes on his back as he did. He hurried straight for Y'liaan's home, and snuck into the back yard. A soft rap on her window elicited no response. Fliz hadn't

expected any. He left and walked the dark, now almost completely deserted streets of Thalonica. Only a few scurrying shadows; some sailors returning to their ships from a night's entertainment in bars, brothels, or both; a couple of astuno patrols—which Fliz carefully avoided. Astunos would not look favorably on a known thief sneaking around at such a late hour. There were too few people to be robbed, and the astunos would presume that he was out for more sinister purposes.

Fliz kept to the dark nooks of the streets and alleys; allowing his talent to conceal him as he pondered the future. What would be going on Y'liaan's mind? What would she have been thinking when Goldie, that gossip-monger, had told her lurid version of whatever had transpired in the *House of Joys*? On the other hand, she wouldn't have needed to spice the tale very much. Fliz showing up with Nerys would have been enough under even the most ordinary of circumstances. Nerys was the kind that stood out as extraordinary in any situation—possibly even in her home environment in Gaskar. Goldie would have drawn her own conclusions; some of them probably close enough to the mark to be uncomfortable. And Y'liaan. . .

Fliz stopped as if he'd run into a solid wall.

He knew.

Nerys opened her eyes to find Fliz gone. She jerked upright and looked around; remembered where she was, what had transpired. And now he was gone.

Nerys sat still for a few moments, collecting her thoughts. Maybe he was just. . .

No.

Nerys rose, tied on the sandals she'd taken off earlier, and left the room. She tip-toed down the corridor and down the stairs. In the lobby the matron, Bearna, sat, nodding on a chair. Nerys hesitated. Had she been there all night? How did this place run? Nerys had no conception of the logistics of running a brothel.

She approached Bearna, who opened her eyes. A kindly face, Nerys thought. Hiding it under a brisk manner and equally no-nonsense words, but a good woman nevertheless. A woman who had seen things; experienced emotions unfathomable to casual inspection; possibly beyond anybody's conception.

Bearna smiled reassuringly. "If you're looking for Fliz. . . he had some urgent business. He says he'll be back as soon as he's dealt with. . ." She shrugged. "He wasn't specific."

Nerys sat down heavily.

"Fliz knows what he's doing," Bearna told her.

Nerys nodded heavily. "He probably does. But sometimes things go wrong. I don't. . ." She sighed. From what he'd told her last night he *did* know what he was doing. Only that what he was doing now wasn't so much dangerous as . . . troublesome. He'd gone to see Y'liaan. To finish what had to be finished.

Nerys was glad he'd told her about Y'liaan. Without making it seem anything else than it was. She knew he was trying to be honest with her—as he was going to be as honest as he could with Y'liaan. And that, if she was as he'd described her, would not be easy.

Bearna's head snapped around as, outside the door, the heavy footsteps of several persons suddenly halted. An imperious rap on the door. Bearna rose. Nerys could see that she was undecided. She took a hesitant step toward the door—which suddenly splintered under the impact of a heavy object. Another crash. The door fell inward. A heavy-set man, in what Nerys instantly recognized as the blue-and-yellow uniform of Duke Corran's personal guard, burst into the lobby, followed by several others. The man's eyes swept over Bearna and moved on to Nerys; froze there.

The pointed. "You!"

Bearna leaped at him. "Run!" she shouted to Nerys.

The man shook off Bearna like a toy doll. "Get her!" he shouted to his men. Before she could tear herself out of her shock they were upon her; two of them gripped her by the arms and physically heaved her out through the front door.

Nerys screamed.

In their room, Caitlan jerked upright, throwing Ailin off him. A flickering candle still burned in its holder on the far wall. There were noises. The splintering of wood. Without thinking, Caitlan jumped off the bed and slipped into his breeches. Faintly, a woman shouting. A man's voice, imperious and peremptory.

"Be careful," Ailin called after him.

"I'll try," he said as he ran out of the room and down the corridor.

A woman screamed. Caitlan vaulted over the banister; hit the ground floor with a resounding impact. He came up from the crouch, to face a troop of six uniformed men. Two of them were bundling Nerys out of the door. The remainder had drawn their weapons, ready to face the unexpected intruder.

Caitlan weighed his chances. He could take them. Possibly. Besides, he didn't know who they were. The uniforms gave him pause. He was in a strange city, ignorant of many of its circumstances. A tactical victory now might be turn out to be a grave strategic error. If these men had official capacity, killing or maiming them might result in disastrous consequences. Besides, they looked competent enough to give him serious trouble.

Unbidden, Ailin's last words came back to him. Caitlan relaxed his muscles and held up his hands, indicating that he wasn't going to make trouble. Nerys screamed again. Caitlan tensed, but fought it down with an effort of will. Not now! Not here! The men retreated out the door; covering each other; leery of the threat they instinctively knew he was. Presently, they disappeared into the night.

Caitlan went over to Bearna. "Where's Fliz?"

Bearna was still shaking from her experience. Caitlan put an arm around her; felt her calm down somewhat. Footsteps on the stairs. Faces of some of the women working here. Ailin pushed them aside as she hurried down. She paused; an expression of utter relief settling on her features when she saw him. She approached them, gave Caitlan a tiny private smile, and hugged Bearna. Caitlan stood by and watched, feeling desperate and utterly useless.

"Fliz?" he asked again.

Bearna looked up. "He left. He had . . . business."

So, they hadn't gotten Fliz. That was something.

"Who were these men?"

"They belong to Duke Corran."

"They do this with impunity?" Caitlan asked astonished.

"Corran is a Wearer of the highest rank," Bearna pointed out, as if that explained everything.

Caitlan frowned.

"Why do they want Nerys?" Bearna asked, bewildered. "They came; they saw her; they knew her. What. . ." Bearna's eyes widened. "She's *that* Gaskarian? Corran's breeder?"

"She's *nobody's* breeder!" Caitlan snapped at Bearna. Ailin's eyes, round with surprise, fixed on his face. "She's a woman!" he heard himself say, wondering what made him so irate. "Just like you. A human being; owned by no one!"

Bearna shrank back from him. Under normal circumstances Caitlan might have felt sorry for behaving

like this, but somehow he didn't. It appeared that Fliz's uncomplimentary assessment of Thalonican attitudes toward the bizarre Wearers' creed and their apparent acceptance of this repulsive doctrine was entirely accurate. This woman, Bearna, she should know better!

He turned away, forcing himself to calm down. He regarded the splintered door. They had just walked in here, taken the girl, and walked out, as if it were their natural right to do this. Even the Keaen's corps, in the days of its glory and power, would not have dared to act in such a way. What kind of people tolerated this?

A touch on his arm. Caitlan's mood toggled from livid fury to tenderness. He glanced at Ailin. She eyed him curiously. "I didn't know you felt like this," she said softly.

He didn't either. "I have to help her," he said. "Wherever they've taken her . . ."

"Taken *whom*?" Fliz stood in the door frame.

Caitlan hesitated. There was no easy way to say this. "Nerys."

Fliz stood frozen for a breath or two.

"I'm going to kill her." Fliz's voice was cold and distant. He turned as if to go, but Caitlan was quicker. He took one quick step. His hand snapped out, and closed around Fliz's arm. Fliz wrenched to get himself free, but Caitlan's grip was like a vice.

"Kill who?" Caitlan snapped.

Fliz glared at him in anger. "Let me go!"

"Who?"

"Y'liaan. She betrayed us. I'm sure of it."

Caitlan didn't contradict him. He didn't know who 'Y'liaan' was. It didn't matter anyway. The important thing now was to find out where Nerys was and what they could do to help her.

He shook his head. "Nothing gets accomplished under a cloud of anger."

Fliz tried to stare him down. Caitlan was amazed by the power behind those eyes; an aspect of the thief he'd not seen or suspected before. Fliz, Caitlan realized yet again, was a formidable individual; his qualities hidden under a carefully crafted mask.

But Caitlan also had a will; and a grip that Fliz could not match.

"First we think and we plan," Caitlan said. "Then we act. In this manner we will succeed."

Fliz took a deep breath. His muscles untensed. Caitlan wasn't fooled; his grip didn't waver. Fliz, noting the

futility of his efforts, nodded. "We think. Then we act."

"Promise that we will do this together."

"Why?"

"Because I should have prevented this."

"You couldn't have known."

"I should have been prepared. I was remiss."

Fliz considered him for a breath or two. "We will do this together. I promise."

Caitlan released his hold. Fliz rubbed his sore arm. "You have a grip of steel."

Caitlan turned to look at Ailin.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, just loud enough for him to hear.

He embraced her. "Don't ever say that," he said into her ear.

"I . . ."

"No, you didn't," he whispered. Ignoring the bystanders he kissed her. "*My* choices," he said.

She gave him a tiny smile. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For being careful."

"Corran's estate is at the eastern outskirts," Fliz said darkly. "That's where they'll take her. That's where Corran is going to do his worst."

Caitlan was still dubious about Fliz's basic assumption that Corran would try to heal his injured pride by inflicting torture and pain upon the girl. On the other hand, considering the circumstances . . . Who knew what was going on in such a man's head? Caitlan remembered that he had believed he knew how the magices would act. And look what had happened! The memory was sobering. It behooved him to suspend his notions of what was likely and believable, in favor of Fliz's judgment.

"We must act quickly." The tremor in Fliz's voice betrayed his thinly concealed panic.

"What can we do?" Caitlan enquired. "We can expect no help."

Fliz sighed. "There is only one way." He made a quick gesture. "Hear me out, Caitlan. Please."

Caitlan nodded.

"I'm a thief," Fliz said. "The best. For a number of reasons—one of which is that I have a . . . well, a talent."

He stood up . . .

. . . and disappeared . . .

A few moments later his voice came from behind them. Caitlan's head snapped around.

"This is what I mean," Fliz said softly.

Caitlan's thoughts were in turmoil.

A wild talent! Like Armist. But how . . .

Fliz came around the table and sat down. "If I don't want to be seen, I will not be seen," he said; stating the fact without bragging.

Caitlan nodded. "You . . . discovered . . . this yourself?"

Fliz nodded. "It took me many years to figure out just exactly what it was—but in the end I did."

Caitlan saw where this was heading. He glanced at Ailin, sitting beside him at the table. The three of them had closeted themselves in the room where the whores ate their meals and rested from their exertions.

"There isn't much I can do," Caitlan said, "except maybe to provide a diversion—which should aid your efforts." He pursed his lips as he thought. "And then there's the little matter of what you're going to do once you've located Nerys. Assuming that you succeed in extricating her from whatever situation she happens to be in—she does not, I presume, share your . . . talent."

Fliz nodded gloomily; looked at the ceiling as if it might provide an answer. "I have not the faintest idea what to do. But I know that I must do this. I cannot not do it."

"I know," Caitlan said sympathetically. "It appears that the diversion will have to be impressive—and well timed."

Fliz's eyes met Caitlan's. "I am going to destroy Corran," he said, in a voice brittle with loathing. "What I need to know is if you would help me."

"Destroy him?" Caitlan asked. "What can . . ."

"What can I do?" Fliz interrupted. "I can go wherever I wish to go, and there's nothing anybody can do about it. I've known this for a long time. I have not considered it seriously because I had a life here; a mother and a sister; commitments; no motivation to be anything more than a thief of the street. But now . . ."

"How to you propose to 'destroy' Corran?" Caitlan repeated. "You're not a killer, Fliz. Don't take revenge to that point. It's not a good thing." And he thought back to a night in a wild storm, when, wracked with grief, he'd dragged seven men to the side of a ship and dropped them into the sea. The image would remain with him for the rest of his days.

"I'm not going to kill him," Fliz assured him. "I said 'destroy', and that's what I meant." He leaned back in his chair. "The Wearers believe that their value to their imagined deity on the other side of Caravella is determined by three factors. The first is the ratio of male to female offspring. The second is the length of a Wearer's beard at the time of his death. The third is his collection of silks."

"Silks?" Caitlan asked.

"The skins of a rare aerial creature, found only in the Galatadian Ranges, in the north of Finister. Their creed allows Wearers to spend at most twelve days of every year in the ranges. There they hunt for silks. If fortunate they return with one or two. They skin them and consume the flesh, which is said to invigorate and bestow potency. They burn the remains, and inhale the smoke, which is supposed to reveal Pastor to them. The skins they bring back to Thalonica. They mount them on a tiny frame and add them to their collection—which is usually kept in a safe place somewhere on their estate."

Fliz paused. "I may not be able to influence Corran's procreational activities—but I can destroy his silks; and I believe that I could relieve him of his beard. Either contingency—and certainly both of them combined!—will effectively destroy Corran as a man and a Wearer. His men will cease to obey him. He'll be laughed out of his own estate and be declared a Floater; maybe even a Willet." Fliz grinned ferally. "An appropriate reversal of fortune, don't you think? And possibly distracting enough to help me get out of the estate—*with* Nerys." His face fell; became suffused with doubt and despair. "If she lives," he whispered. His eyes regarded Caitlan with a desperate plea. "Please tell me that she lives."

Caitlan glanced at Ailin. His throat was constricted and he found it hard to speak. "Don't ever stop believing that she does."

Ailin's hand reached out and came to rest on Caitlan's. He took a deep breath. "What would you have me do?"

Fliz told him.

When he was done Caitlan smiled grimly. Fliz would have made an excellent strategist. From such material great military leaders were made. A perfect integration of large and small scale planning. Corran would rue the day he decided to send his men to pick up Nerys.

Caitlan glanced at Ailin, who had listened to Fliz's proposal with astonishment. "From now on," he said,

"keep reminding me on a regular basis that I don't ever want Fliz on the wrong side of me." He nodded at the thief. "Let us do this thing; and let us do it now. There is not much night left to do it in." He stood up. Fliz did the same and clasped Caitlan's hand. His eyes were moist. "Thank you."

"Thank me when this is over and we're all back safe."

Fliz left the room. Caitlan embraced Ailin. "I have to do this," he whispered.

"I know. Just come back."

Corran's estate, bounded by a low plank fence, serving as a reminder more than a deterrent, stretched before Caitlan. The few visible lights of Thalonica lay to their left. Janus rode high, casting a silvery glow across the low forest of tassel trees, pines, haptas, leelacs, and thirt bushes, which crowded this side of the estate. Somewhere behind there lay the mansion and, at a discreet distance and behind a barrier of trees, so that the residents need not look upon it, the village housing Corran's labor force.

Caitlan, hiding in the shadow of a tall pine, peered up and down the ribbon of road that circled the entire estate. So far, he thought, so good. Fliz would be well inside the estate by now. Their timing was based on supposition and assumptions that might or might not turn out to be valid. But, Caitlan told himself, it was an informed guesswork.

Caitlan wet a finger and held it up. The breeze from the Thalonican Gulf was steady and unwavering, and blew directly into the direction of the main mansion. Caitlan nodded, satisfied. Seeing nobody, he proceeded with his collection of dry twigs, heaping them around the base of a dense, tinder-try hapta bush. This was the last of three similar constructs, the others located at a short jogging distance from his current position; ready for use.

Caitlan froze and ceased his activities. He crept back to stand behind the pine tree and peered around it. In the distance, silhouetted against the lighter background of the road, appeared a single figure. A large dog, straining at a leash, accompanied him. One of the patrols Fliz had warned him about. Caitlan shook his head at the foolishness of it all. A single individual on patrol, even if accompanied by a dog, was an easy target for an ambush. Caitlan concluded that Corran's system was more a matter of ritual deterrent than a true

expectation of illicit invasion of his estate. An opinion Fliz had confirmed. "The Wearers are at rivalry with each other; but they do have rules and structures. Open attacks on each other are rare. It would disrupt their tacit arrangements—most of which are directed to getting the most out of those who serve their purposes; that being the Floaters and Willets inhabiting Thalonica."

Caitlan considered the protection afforded to him by the breeze and decided that it was sufficient. He was downwind. Unless the dog caught his scent on the ground it was unlikely detect him. Still . . .

Caitlan drew his dirk and pressed himself against the tree, waiting.

The pair came closer. The man was whistling tunelessly; the dog panting softly. The pair passed Caitlan's position. As if alerted by an instinct that went beyond mere sensory perception the dog hesitated. The guard tugged on the leash. The dog persisted with its surveillance of the woods.

The patrolman was a large individual. Not quite Caitlan's size, but close. In Janus' dim light Caitlan saw that he was wearing the uniform of Corran's house.

The guard started moving again. There was no time for careful evaluation of the new plan. Caitlan made a choice. He lifted the arm with the dirk and threw it with full force. The guard heard something and froze. The dog whipped around with a snarl. The dirk struck the man in the left thigh; low enough to maim, but not enough to kill. The man gave an exclamation of pain and dropped the leash as he clutched his thigh and collapsed on the ground.

Now Caitlan had eyes only for the dog—which came at him with a fearsome bark and a snarl that would have terrified many a man. But Caitlan had expected it. His whole being was focused on the hurtling animal. It reached him in the span of an exhalation. Caitlan put out his right arm. As he knew it would, the dog leapt for it. Caitlan jerked it back, stepped aside and, as the dog attempted to twist in mid-air after the elusive target, smashed his left fist onto its nose. The dog yelped, hit the ground, rolled over, gained its footing, and whipped around to face him again. Caitlan stepped back. The dog leaped. Caitlan brought up a vicious right elbow, intercepting the head in mid-flight. A crack, as the animal's jaw broke under the impact. It collapsed on the ground, howling in pain. Caitlan, his elbow numb from the blow, dropped himself on top of

the animal, wrapped his left arm around its throat. He gripped the snout with his right hand and gave a terrible heave. Vertebrae snapped. The dog lay still. Caitlan leaped up and surveyed the road. The guard lay on the ground, whimpering and holding his hip. Caitlan ran over to him. The man looked up; his hand jerked to his belt. Caitlan's foot came down on the hand and pinned it to the ground. His right hand found the *keit* point at the man's neck. His fingers applied a sudden pressure. The guard went limp. Caitlan dragged him off the roadway and into the undergrowth, where he divested him of the uniform. It was rather tight on himself, but he didn't think that, in confusion that would follow, anybody would pay attention to the fit of a uniform.

He inspected the man's wound and carefully extracted his dirk. There was a flow of blood, but nothing that suggested rupture of major blood vessels. Good! Caitlan tore his own tunic into strips and applied them as a tight bandage around the man's hips. That done, he dragged the limp body to the opposite side of the road, where he should be out of harm's way once Caitlan started the fire.

When he was done with this Caitlan considered his position. He'd lost track of time. How far would Fliz have proceeded? Was it time yet?

Patience!

Fliz entered the estate through the main gate. It was the obvious place, since while there were guards everywhere, there wasn't a dog in sight. Dogs were harder to fool than people: Fliz could make himself invisible, but canines smelled him anyway.

The main gate was framed by an ornate arch, wrought from iron and copper. The gate itself was a single unit, which swung on six hinges, and was moved by an intricate system of levers, powered by a single man who operated a crank in a small edifice on one side of the gate. The whole system was devoid of practicality and certainly provided no particular protection from anything or anybody. But it contributed to Corran's reputation as a man of innovation and quirky schemes; an image which he carefully cultivated among his peers.

Even at this late hour, the long path from the gate to the mansion was lit by flickering torches, situated at regular intervals along both sides. Like every night, seven guards patrolled at the gate, while an unknown

number circulated around the nearby grounds and the mansion.

Fliz sidled up to the gate, flattened himself against one of the massive wrought iron tripods which acted as lateral supports for the gate assembly.

Dogs?

No dogs in sight.

Good.

The gate was closed, but that hardly made a difference. Beside the main gate there was a small side passage used by the guards. Though it also could be locked by a smaller picket gate, it wasn't. Even as Fliz watched, a pair of guards passed through it to relieve the two on the outside; who in turn used the same passage to pass into the grounds—with Fliz so close behind that he could have relieved them of their weapons without them being any the wiser.

He moved away from then as soon as he was inside and, paralleling the main path, proceeded toward the mansion; which, despite the late hour, evidenced signs of activity; bright lights behind some windows; an occasional moving shadow cast onto the drapes of another.

Fliz arrived at the mansion without undue complications. He saw a couple of guards with dogs patrolling off in the far shadows, but they stayed away from the main path. Intruders, so the logic went, were not likely to hide in plain sight and the light, but were to be expected in the furtive concealment of the darkness. All of which suited Fliz rather well. It was always a pleasure to take advantage of people's erroneous assumptions.

He sidled up to the main entrance: a wide, ornate door, flanked by two carved stone pillars. The door was made from imported tika wood; hard as steel and black with age. To work the wood into such polished ornate shape must have required the use, abuse, and frequent re-sharpening of many good wood-working tools.

The two guards flanking the door didn't see Fliz—who hesitated, undecided whether to take this or another way into the mansion. The front, he suspected was best. The servants' entrances lay on the other side and might well be guarded by dogs as well.

Realizing that he was tensing up and therefore risking his cover—which required a measure of mental control and was readily destroyed by the loss of control engendered by emotions such as anxiety—Fliz forced

himself to relax. But how to get inside? No side-entrances here.

Fliz slid away and picked up some rocks. He returned to the main entrance and hid behind one of the pillars. He lobbed the rocks into the darkness. The guards jerked to attention. Fliz waited. The guards relaxed again. He threw two rocks together, off to another side. The guards, now seriously disturbed, stepped forward to peer into the darkness, attempting to locate the source of the sounds.

"What do you think?" one of them asked the other.

"It's probably nothing."

"It didn't sound like 'nothing'!" the other objected.

"What could it possibly be?" the first said negligently.

"I don't know!"

"You're jumpy!"

'Jumpy' didn't agree. "I'm going to check it out."

The other muttered something unintelligible. "All right," he said then. "If nothing, it'll relieve the tedium of my sore feet." The two moved away to investigate. Fliz slid to the door, depressed the handle and heaved. It opened on well-lubricated hinges. Fliz slipped inside and closed it again.

He turned and looked around. He stood in an open space so wide that he had never conceived of it existing inside a building. Massive bent tika beams arched from supporting columns at the side to meet under a cupola above. The floor was made of tiles of polished stone. On pedestals along the sweeping walls stood small wooden statues, depicting Wearers in poses ranging from contemplation to supplication, all facing a single statue, made from a white stone, in the middle of the entrance hall: the figure of a man, standing in an attitude of benevolent contemplation. His beard was arranged in complex ringlets, loops and twists, and depicted as reaching down to the base of the pedestal, where it curled into yet more loops.

Pastor, the Wearer's silly deity. The statues along the sides no doubt represented Corran's long line of ancestors. A lineage, Fliz told himself, which was going to come to a sudden and calamitous end on this very night.

He eyed the double flight of sweeping steps leading up from the opposite end of the hall and into realms invisible from here.

Guards? In here?

He didn't think so. The place was a sanctum. He doubted that Corran made it a habit to soil it with the presence of his inferiors. Even the breeders and his offspring were allocated to other wings of the mansion.

Where to go?

Where was Nerys?

Corran thoughtfully fondled his beard where it was attached to his face. The remainder, twisted together in an elaborate plait, was curled up in a bag, which was integrated into his shirt at the height of his stomach. Nerys found the beard revolting; almost as much as her jailer, a man of sixty or so, who eyed her with a curious mix of disfavor and expectancy.

"You fail to appreciate your situation," he said, the words coming out as if he found it hard to speak to her at all.

Speaking to a woman! she thought scornfully. That he did so at all was the first surprise after the shock of her sudden abduction. For why should he debase himself in such a fashion? That he was reasoning with her was, in itself, an incomprehensible mystery.

Presently she found out why—and when she did it took her all her willpower not to laugh into his face.

"You still have the chance to turn your fate around," Corran told her. "Still you can become my foremost breeder woman. I offer this only once—and only because your HI is what it is. If you yield . . . I will ignore the humiliation you've caused me. If you don't . . ."

"What if I don't?" Nerys snapped. She rose from her chair and glared at Corran.

"How can you not?" He was genuinely puzzled. "How can you not desire this? My glory will also be yours—and when I'm gone . . . when I've joined Pastor . . . you will be wealthy. Even you. Despite the grief you've caused me. Give me more sons, and I will give you a life in comfort and security—as will my eldest son, who will inherit my estate after me and who is bound by my word."

"And I'll look like a painted clown from the carnival," she hissed. "And I'll have to tolerate . . . you . . . lying on me. Inside me. Spreading your . . . filthy seed . . ." Words failed her. She was so angry! This presumptuous, pathetic creature nauseated her. How dare he? Who did he think he was? Nothing but an aging, superstitious, degenerate buffoon.

Corran's face was a study in complete bewilderment. Nerys suddenly understood that not only had nobody ever spoken to him in this fashion, but that he could not even conceive that anybody—least of all a woman—actually *could* utter such words.

Well, this one did!

And this one, she suddenly knew, had not acted very wisely. Because, as she watched his face change from pathetic incomprehension and a near-desperate plea to a cold anger, she knew that it was, after all, over.

Corran rose. His face, mottled with fury at the humiliation she had just added to her other crimes, distorted into a grimace of hatred. He took a quick step toward her. Nerys backed away nimbly, keeping the chair between them. Corran, with unsuspected agility and strength, picked up the chair and threw it aside. It crashed into a small table. Nerys fled to the door. Corran ran after her. As her hand closed on the handle he was upon her. He grabbed her tunic and jerked. Its thin fabric tore, leaving him holding a just a piece. Nerys jerked on the handle. The door opened and she fled into the hallway beyond. With a roar of anger Corran came after her. Nerys ran, down the hallway, around a corner, down another hallway. Where was she going? She didn't know or care. She came to a T-junction and took the left branch. As she did, she thought she felt . . . a presence. Something brushing against her. She jerked aside and ran on. Behind her, Corran's rushing footsteps. Then, a clatter; a curse; a crash. She looked around. Corran lay sprawled on the ground. Nerys gasped . . .

. . . for there, from one moment to another, appearing out of thin air, was Fliz.

He grinned at her, but immediately redirected his attention to Corran, who, though still dazed, was trying to get up. Fliz kned him in the back. With a moan of pain Corran slumped back to the ground. Fliz took a grip of one of the duke's hands and jerked it onto his back in a debilitating grip. He pulled a knife from his belt and got his knee off Corran's back.

"Up with you," he grated. He looked at Nerys.

"Fliz?" she whispered. "Fliz?"

He made a quick motion with his head. "Stay away. Just in case he chooses to do something idiotic."

"You came," she said, still not believing it.

"Of course," he said offhandedly, but she heard the tremor in his voice. His eyes were moist. He gave Cor-

ran's wrist a vicious twist. "And now we go and have a look at your treasures, shall we?"

Corran arched his back and winced under Fliz's grip.

"Where are they?"

"What . . ."

Fliz shook his head. The hand holding the knife reached around Corran and pulled the beard out of its pouch. It fell in a long loop to almost reach the ground. Fliz jerked. Corran doubled over in order to avoid the pain and Fliz forced him to his knees. He motioned to Nerys. "Help me." She stepped closer and he gave her his knife. He kicked the beard until it lay flat on the floor. He placed a foot about halfway along the length of it, and another at the end.

"Cut it; about . . . there."

Nerys bent down. Corran uttered a moan of despair. Nerys hacked. Corran lost several feet off the end of his beard. The Wearer uttered a despairing cry. Fliz brought down his elbow. "Quiet!"

Corran fell silent, gasping for air with the pain.

"The treasures," Fliz grated.

Corran shook his head. Fliz shrugged. "Let's do it again."

"No!" Corran gasped.

"Yes," Fliz said mercilessly.

"What do you want?"

"I want to look at your treasures," Fliz said reasonably. "You can understand that, can't you?"

"Who sent you?"

"Never mind that," Fliz said brusquely. "Are you going to show us or not?"

"I can't . . ."

Fliz forced Corran's head lower and placed his foot onto the beard again. "You're losing Pastor's favor fast," he said. "At your age you'll never get it back either."

"Shouldn't we leave?" Nerys whispered in Fliz's ear.

He nodded. "I'm trying to make sure that we can," he assured her. He twisted Corran's wrist. "Well?"

"I'll show you," the duke hissed.

"Good." Fliz jerked him upright. "Cut off another piece," he said to Nerys. Nerys eyed the woven braid of hair. She shuddered at the very thought of having to touch it.

"Please! No!" Corran twisted in Fliz's grip.

"Do it," Fliz told her. "Just so he knows that we mean it."

"Why don't you just kill me?" Corran gasped.

Fliz grinned. "I might. But before I do I'll cut your beard off right . . . there." His free hand made a cutting motion near Corran's face. The duke's eyes rolled away in horror.

Nerys overcame her revulsion. She grasped the end of Corran's beard and severed another half foot with one determined cut. "That's for having to have my hair hacked off because of you," she told him. She glanced at Fliz, who looked vaguely guilty, but not too much so.

"Let's go," he told Corran, who directed them down the hallway, at the end of which they came to a grandly decorated door.

Fliz tried the handle, which failed to give. Beside it, an elongated hole suggested the need for a key.

Fliz nodded at Nerys who reached for the beard. Corran squirmed away from her. "The keys?" Fliz enquired.

Corran hesitated. Fliz raised the knife. Corran indicated the pouch at his belt. Fliz retrieved a small, intricate iron key. He fitted it into the hole and turned it. He tried the handle, which yielded. The door swung open. Fliz pushed Corran forward, into the sanctum. Nerys stepped in behind them—and froze when she saw the contents of the room. Illuminated by a row of candles in holders along the sides, the walls glittered with gilded ornaments and decorations. In the center stood a raised platform, over which was draped an ornate rug, woven from red, blue and golden thread. On it stood a tier of artfully carved racks, each of which held a number of tiny frames. Over each of these were stretched diaphanous layers of . . . what? Nerys stepped closer to inspect the almost transparent objects. As she did so she finally knew . . .

Silks!

She looked at them in wonder.

Silks?

This was Corran's treasure? A collection of dried animal skins? His guarantee of admission into Pastor's paradise? To be buried with him when he died, to be taken to Pastor as a sacrifice; or, as the more cynical merchants of Gaskar would interpret it, as his entry fee.

Nerys looked around. Corran was watching them both with a mix of horror and incomprehension. Fliz held out his hand. Nerys gave him the knife.

Fliz jerked his head at the candles flickering in their holders. Nerys took a moment to understand. Then she knew. She went over to the wall, stood up on the tips of

her toes, and picked one of the candles from its support.

Fliz saw her hesitate.

"May I?" she asked Fliz. He nodded and made a quick gesture. The knife flickered. Corran screamed as Fliz severed his beard; leaving only a few sad short fragments. The duke jerked to get himself free. Fliz twisted his wrist. Corran jerked and twitched. Fliz responded. Something cracked. Corran arched backward, gasping for air with the pain and shouting no more.

Fliz watched as Nerys took the candle to the platform and held it to the ornate cloth. It caught alight almost instantly. Thick black smoke rose as the flames licked upward.

Corran, faced with the ultimate calamity, watched in mute horror. Fliz picked up the fragment of Corran's beard and threw it into the kicking flames. It curled up and shriveled and presently was gone—as were the silks, which exploded with little popping sounds and then just . . . disappeared.

Fliz let go of Corran, who collapsed at the foot of his shrine, whimpering and moaning, as his life disintegrated before his eyes.

Fliz wasted no more thought on Duke Corran. He took Nerys' hand. "Come."

She stopped him. He looked at her and saw that she was regarding him with luminous eyes. She stepped forward, wrapped her arms around him and kissed him. "That's just in case we don't make it out of here," she whispered and kissed him again.

"And if we do . . ." She grinned. "You just wait."

They both laughed. "Let's go," he said and they ran out of there.

Ahead of them a scatter of agitated voices. They stopped; ducked into a doorway; waited. Footsteps, muffled by the heavy carpets covering the floors, passed nearby. Men's voices. Fliz heard the word 'fire'. He grinned. Caitlan had timed it well. He took Nerys' hand and stepped into the hallway again. The next branch was clear. Fliz hesitated. To their right lay the main entrance. The only way he knew. Anywhere else, and they might get lost in this labyrinth.

The heavy steps of several men to their left. The decision was made. They ran. The entrance hall opened before them. Fliz pulled Nerys back. He

looked back. The carpeted hallways. The stone floor in the entrance hall.

Why not? He extracted a burning candle from a nearby holder and carefully lowered it to the carpet. Wax dripped as he inclined it. He held the flame to the fabric. It caught alight, spreading rapidly down the hallway. Fliz took Nerys' hand as they headed for the black tika door—which swung open.

Fliz jerked Nerys aside, behind the opening leaf. Two guards entered; looked around. Their eyes fell on Nerys, widened with surprise. Fliz, once more hidden from everybody's view, slid around to their back and gave them a shove, which propelled them into the entrance hall. They lost their balance and fell. Fliz leaped on them, rapped the grip of the knife over the head of the first and rammed his knee into the back of the second as that one tried to get up.

Nerys gaped at him. "Go!" he shouted. She tore herself out of her paralysis and moved toward the door and out into the night—only to run into an immovable object dressed in the uniform of Corran's guard. Big hands grasped her arms. Nerys twisted and fought. When it availed her none she tried to bite the hands that held her.

"Easy!"

Nerys froze. She looked up, into Caitlan's grinning face. He let go of her and chuckled. "I bet Corran didn't enjoy having you around very much!"

Nerys took a couple of deep breaths. She felt Fliz's arm around her. "What now?" he asked Caitlan.

Caitlan shrugged and pointed. The horizon was a solid wall of flame. "I think they're too busy to bother with us," he said dryly.

Nerys stared at the flames leaping into the clear night sky. She turned and saw yet more flames, licking from the windows of Corran's mansion. She felt Fliz's arm around her shoulder.

Was this terrible night really over?

Now, belatedly, she felt herself begin to shiver and shake uncontrollably.

"I'll take her," Caitlan said; and she felt herself lifted up like a child and cradled in a big pair of arms. And when she thought back to it later, she could not remember what happened then, but somehow they took her out of there, as she shook and shook, and the big man carried her, and somewhere there was Fliz's voice, which kept her company and saw her through . . .

. . . until she woke the next morning in a bed in the *House of Joys*, and Caravella shone into the window and promised a new day and a new beginning.

And there was Fliz, sitting at the side of the bed. Nerys pulled him down to her and kissed him, to be met with a most satisfying response . . .



Letters

To The Editor,

I have now read a number of chapters of a novel whose name shall remain undisclosed. It is even worse than I had feared.

I don't mean the novel but the reading thereof off a computer screen albeit an Apple Cinema. The more so that I liked very much what I read.

My attempt at printing the novel sequentially failed miserably.

There has to be a better way in this day and age of "on demand" publishing. I am still a paper addict and I wish all paper addicted readers of the *CLS* would come out of the closet and hail "Long life to paper!"

I am not suggesting a paper edition of the *CLS* but a paper edition of each novel serialized in *CLS*. I, for one, would be quite ready to exchange some paper money for some fiction on paper. I cannot believe that it could be that expensive that I wouldn't remain far ahead of the game.

Regards,

Alain Schremmer

Till,

My old computer had problems with downloading the PDF files of *Cosmopolis* and the *CLS*. However, I lately installed a new system which handles the aforementioned downloading and printing tasks admirably.

I have, then, just completed downloading and printing all of the back issues of *CLS*. (Even printing all the material on both sides, this has been time-consuming. Plus, I separated the stories by, well, stories instead of arranging them in the volumes in which they first appeared.) In so doing, I noticed (No. 23) a complaint (plea?) regarding letters.

So all this is by way of saying that the *CLS* is an amazing body of work—dense, interesting and decidedly 'Vancian'. Thanks for producing (and continuing to produce) such good stuff. Thanks too to all the other authors. They should definitely be able to find publishers, and *CLS* deserves to continue. Indefinitely.

Best,

Cliff Abrams

