
The Cosmopolis Literary Supplement

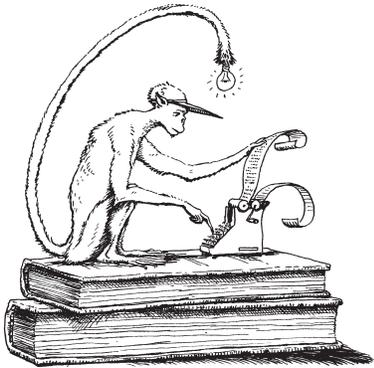
No. 28 • January 2004 ~ Published with Cosmopolis No. 46

Contents

Dragonchaser
Chapters 33–34
by Tim Stretton
Page 2



Finister
Chapters 14–15
by Till Noever
Page 13



Editorial

Dear Readers:

In this issue, the penultimate installment of *Dragonchaser. Finister* hasn't got that much more to go either. Soon we will be doing 'last' things. I'll be saying a few words about that in an upcoming issue of *Cosmopolis*. My suspicion is that the *CLS* will end with the last installment of *Finister*. There isn't any more material for single issues—unless someone comes out of the woodwork with unexpected treasures!—and I've run out of 'Vancean' materials to publish. Besides, we couldn't possibly start another serialization, and hope to finish it before the end of the VIE.

I will be away on vacation and out of the reach of e-mail or a computer for a substantial part of February, and so the next *CLS* may be delayed by a month. Any excuse to stretch it out a bit . . .

Happy reading
Till Noever



Dragonchaser

by *Tim Stretton*

Chapter 33

There were still several hours before the race; the streets were already thronging with crowds in a carnival atmosphere, and the booths of the local traders—especially those selling hot food—were under siege. Mirko was well-known on the waterfront and managed to circumvent the queues, an approach with which Catzen did not appear entirely comfortable.

Mirko laughed as he handed her a portion of honey-glazed chestnuts in a snapple-fish shell. “You see nothing wrong in engaging in espionage, but you object to me jumping the queue to secure your luncheon?”

Catzen smiled as she swept a stray lock of hair away from her eyes. “I admit it does seem perverse. The espionage has a purpose in the world of high-statecraft, however misguided it may have been; but queue-jumping is just ill-mannered. As Florio so delicately said, I’m an Electorbitch by upbringing, and we take these things seriously.”

Mirko shook his head in perplexity. There was no fathoming the curious morality of the Electors, who thought nothing of locking a man in a private dungeon and forgetting him, but recoiled at the violation of lunchtime etiquette.

“What are you laughing at?” asked Catzen with a frown.

“I don’t really know. You, Electors, I can’t say.”

“I don’t see that I’ve said anything risible.”

“Catzen, don’t be so prickly! We are close enough that I can laugh at you sometimes?”

She put one arm around his neck, carefully balancing the chestnuts with the other. “Of course; I’m just not used to it. I had forgotten what it felt like . . .”

Mirko ruffled her hair. “Watch out!” cried Catzen. “Don’t spill the chestnuts, not after you have abused etiquette so grossly to secure them.”

He turned at the sound of a footsteps behind them. “A charming scene,” said a man with a chill smile and an arm in a sling; Corrando.

Mirko’s hand dropped to his rapier-hilt; Corrando raised his good arm in mock alarm. “The gallant Captain Ascalon would not skewer a disabled man, surely?” he said.

Catzen carefully set down the chestnuts on the wall with a deliberation that wrenched in some indefinable way at Mirko’s heart.

“Mirko will not kill you,” she said, “although Fanar knows he ought to.”

Corrando bowed. “My Lady Catzendralle, you have a harsh and bloody ethic. I wonder whether your new friend is acquainted with how you have deployed it in the past? The Captain is renowned for his high moral tone: I wonder what he would make of certain of your past escapades.”

“I know everything I need to about Catzendralle’s past,” said Mirko, “namely, what she has seen fit to tell me. Since I trust her, this is surely sufficient.”

Corrando merely smiled. “My lady is no innocent, and you engage with her at your own risk. Still, since you were her agent, you must expect a degree of—ambivalence—in her make-up.”

“Say whatever you have to say, Corrando,” said Catzen. “I am no longer in Medina’s employ, although I may have forgotten to tender my resignation formally. And of course, if *Sapphire Light* wins today, you will find yourself in a similar situation.”

Corrando gave a glacial smile. “Maybe the laudanum the apothecary has tendered for my shoulder has warped my judgement, but I am giving you a warning. The pair of you have done me a personal injury today; it is not the sort of thing I forget. I am not the kind of man to subordinate my long-term aims in pursuit of a petty vengeance; but one day, when the time is right, I will settle with the pair of you. If you don’t win today, I need only watch: Medina will have you both killed without a second thought; but if you do win—well, I will not be completely powerless then, either. Don’t expect Bartazan to protect you.”

Mirko’s returned smile was equally bleak. “I never expected any different, Corrando.”

With an ironic bow, Corrando took his leave. Catzen looked at Mirko with an unreadable expression. “That is not a good enemy to have,” she said. “He is a man who will be on the winning side no matter what. Our situation is by no means secure.”

"Then let's just enjoy today," he said, picking up the shell of chestnuts and handing them back to Catzen. "We should be getting to Urmalest."

They made their way through increasingly crowded streets. Mirko was widely recognised. "Good on you, Ascalon!", "I've three valut on you today!", "Look out for *Dragonchaser!*!"

Mirko's back was sore from the pounding of hands from well-wishers by the time he reached Urmalest. The gates opened at his approach, and Damiano ushered them inside.

"I'm glad to see you, Mirko," he said. "There was a rumour the Peremptor had laid a warrant against you."

"I believe he neglected that formality," said Mirko with a wry smile, "but nonetheless he was eager to remove me from the race; but as you see, I am here. Can you rustle up a couple of sets of Azure?"

"A couple?" asked Damiano with a questioning glance at Catzendralle. "You are not planning on taking your new lady friend as a passenger?"

"Of course not," said Mirko with a pleasant smile; Damiano relaxed. "Her name is the Lady Catzendralle, of House Drall, and she is our helm today. As such she will need a uniform."

"You are joking, of course."

"My remark contained neither humour nor falsehood. Meet your new helm."

"Mirko! This is idiocy! The crew won't row for a woman, and Bartazan won't—"

They were interrupted by a roar from behind them. "Bartazan won't what?" cried the Elector himself. "I asked to be informed the moment you arrived at Urmalest; I leave important political considerations to speak to you; and I find you contending with your one reliable Quartermaster; and for reasons beyond my comprehension in consort with one of the Elector Koopendral's kinswomen."

"I notice," said Damiano, as Catzen curtsied to Bartazan, "that you have brought Cascais with you."

Cascais gave a sheepish grin and looked nervously from Damiano to Mirko, neither of whom acknowledged him.

Bartazan scowled and mopped his forehead in the rising heat. His heavy Azure robes were not ideally suited to the conditions. "I imagined you might have difficulty in securing a competent helm after our conversation yesterday and the unfortunate accident befall-

ing Florio; consequently I am most grateful that young Cascais has agreed to put the past behind him and resume his former condition."

Damiano simply shook his head; Catzen stared absently into space.

"My Lord, Cascais, I am grateful to you both," said Mirko calmly. "I am sorry that either of you should have been put to unnecessary inconvenience; however, the position of helm is already filled to my satisfaction, and I see no reason to alter my dispositions at this late stage."

Bartazan blinked heavily; Cascais studied his lacy cuffs with great care.

"May I ask who is more suitable for the office than an Elector's son of exemplary character and directly relevant experience?" asked Bartazan.

Mirko wondered exactly how Cascais might be said to possess an exemplary character since all five persons present knew he had been caught practising the capital crimes of the Old Craft; but this was not the time to pursue such enquiries.

"I believe the Lady Catzendralle is little if any inferior in birth or breeding to the Noble Cascais; and while her experience of the galleys is less topical, this is surely outweighed by her competence at the discipline."

Bartazan looked at Mirko in utter astonishment. The term 'dumbfounded' had never had literal application in Mirko's experience, but on this occasion Bartazan seemed to have lost all power of speech. After staring silently into Mirko's face for perhaps ten seconds, he uttered a curious staccato cachinnating laugh.

"You are joking, of course."

Damiano contented himself with a covert smile.

"No, my lord. The Lady Catzendralle will be at the helm this afternoon."

Bartazan reddened to an extent which caused Mirko to feel an imminent apoplexy threatened. "You are aware that the Lady is intimately related to both the Elector Koopendral—by any measure an enemy of mine—and his son Drallenkoop, who skips *Dragonchaser* this afternoon?"

"My research would have been negligent not to have uncovered these facts, my lord."

Bartazan nodded slowly. Mirko noticed that Damiano was trying not to laugh. Catzen was expressionless and wandered a few feet away; Cascais had found a loose

thread in his cuff and was pre-occupied in worrying at it.

“So,” continued Bartazan in his forensic analysis, “these facts did not lead you to disqualify her candidature?”

“No, my lord. You will remember from yesterday’s conversation that the list of immediately available candidates was not extensive. I had become friendly with my lady and she assured me that she did not regard her connections as germane.”

“Hmm . . . and you took her word for this?”

“Her views coincided with my own judgment. The choice appeared to lie between her, Cascais, or various helms unemployed for good reason. I chose the one candidate not tarnished by previous failure or manifest incapacity.”

“By this token,” growled Bartazan, again losing patience, “I might have taken the role myself, since my experience and instances of failure both equate to zero.”

“My lord! Had I known you were interested in the position, I can guarantee I would have interviewed you.”

Bartazan’s head snapped back. “Guards!” he called. Four heavily-armed retainers stepped forward. “This renegade scoundrel’s insolence grows too much to bear. Take him to the waterside immediately; drown him well, and then beat him soundly.”

Mirko forbore from pointing out the major illogicality of this approach. The guards looked uncertain, then moved hesitantly forward. Catzen sprang into the narrowing gap.

“Mirko!” she said. “What can you be thinking of to taunt an Elector this way? I didn’t agree to be your helm so that you could goad Bartazan! I want to win the Margariad, and I won’t do that with you floating in the docks!”

Bartazan held up his hand and the guards stopped their advance.

“Noble Elector,” said Catzen, stepping close to Bartazan. “Our Houses have not enjoyed the most cordial relations over the years; but can you not set this aside for the afternoon? My dearest wish has been to race the Margariad; this I place higher than loyalty to a House which you must be aware has not treated me well.”

Bartazan rubbed his chin. “My lady,” he said. “Your somewhat anomalous status within House Drall is not, of course, unknown to me; and I confess there would be

a certain amusement value in putting one over on Koo-pendral in this way. But the joke would be on me if the ineptitude of your performance cost me the race and the Election.”

“My lord,” said Catzen with her eyes alight, “believe me when I tell you that my uncle Addacatzen said I was the best helm of my age, man or woman, he had ever seen. I am a little rusty but I believe I am more than a match for Cascais—and so does Captain Ascalon.”

Bartazan turned to look at Mirko with an unwavering stare. “Do you seriously contend that the Lady Catzendralle will helm more competently than the Noble Cascais?”

“Yes, my lord. It is that simple.”

“Damiano!” barked Bartazan. “I am not accustomed to seeking counsel from slaves: nonetheless, do you have an observation?”

“The crew will not row if Cascais is at the helm. I am not sure how they will respond to the Lady Catzendralle, but if Ascalon asks it, they’ll do it—I think.”

Bartazan’s eyes narrowed. “Once again, you leave me no option. Lady Catzendralle, welcome aboard *Sapphire Light*. Ascalon, do not let me down. I understand that the Peremptor has taken a dislike to you: if he is still Peremptor at sundown, then it will be a race as to which of us finds you first. Do you understand?”

“Yes, my lord.”

Bartazan adjusted his furred hat on his head, turned with slightly hurried dignity and swept from the barracks. Mirko remembered at last to exhale. Cascais skipped behind Bartazan, addressing a series of comments which the Elector found it politic to ignore.

“Well, my lady,” said Damiano, “you are a cool one, and no mistake. If you can steer as well, we might be in with a chance.”

Catzen merely inclined her head and winked. “Shall we meet the crew, Damiano?”

“Step this way, my lady!”

The crew was assembled on the sandy courtyard of Urmalest, some sprawling on the ground, others tense and alert. Mirko was conscious that a major test awaited; it was by no means certain that they would accept a female helm, especially when she was Drallenkoop’s cousin.

“Damiano!” he called. “Where are those liveries?”

Walisse appeared with the spare garments, shirts patterned in Azure chequer; most conspicuously the uniform of the House of Bartazan.

"You expect me to wear that?" asked Catzen in surprise. "Azure chequer—and at least two sizes too big for me?"

Mirko pulled off his own travel-stained white shirt and slipped on the Azure version. "How badly do you want to helm *Sapphire Light*—which is after all Bartazan's galley? Think of it as a prerequisite for the role."

Catzen gave her head a rueful shake. "I suppose I could hardly have gone back to Darklings after this anyway; Azure chequer will hardly exacerbate my already grave offences against the House."

"Good," said Mirko with a smile of satisfaction. "What are you waiting for?"

"You expect me to change in front of the crew?" she asked with some asperity. "You have become indifferent to the sight of my breasts all too rapidly if you are so willing to expose them to the world."

"Catzen! I—There is a stores hut over there."

With a raised eyebrow and a look of scorn, Catzen swept away to the hut, emerging shortly thereafter in little better humour. The Azure chequer hung loosely from her frame, the sleeves rolled back upon themselves to allow her hands free movements. Mirko managed to control his expression, but Damiano found himself beset by a smirk which earned him a questioning look from Catzen.

"I think we should introduce you to the crew," said Mirko hastily; harmony would not be advanced by a quarrel between his helm and First Quartermaster over the fit of Catzen's clothes.

He leapt to the stage at the front of the courtyard, extending his hand to Catzen and hauling her aloft.

"Gentlemen!" he called. "If Fanar is with us, we will all be free men by the end of today. Most unusually in human affairs, your fates lie in your own hands; row with the skill, vigour and passion you have shown in recent weeks, and all will be well."

There was some half-hearted applause from the crew.

"You have all trusted me so far, and events have gone according to plan. You must continue to trust me for a few more hours. Is there any man here who does not trust my judgement? Speak now!"

Thirty-three faces looked back at him. None demurred.

"You will be aware of the misfortune which has befallen our friend and colleague Florio; his injuries, while no longer life-threatening, clearly debar his participation in today's race. It has therefore been necessary to secure another helm; and I am very glad to introduce you to the Lady Catzendralle, who has been kind enough to help us in this regard."

Catzen smiled and bobbed her head; her hair swung with becoming grace.

Silence met the announcement. After a pause, Jenx called out: "She's a woman!"

"I am glad to see that *falcx* has not addled your wits any more than strictly necessary, Jenx. Do you have further insights?"

"How can she helm?"

"In broadly the same way as a man—she pulls the helm bar in the direction she intends the galley to travel."

Jenx scratched at his close-cropped head. "Much remains to be understood."

"Indeed it does, Jenx, and an explanation would take us well beyond the start of the race. Let me ask you: would you rather race under the Lady Catzendralle—for whom I vouch personally—or Vavar Cascais, who even now is the preferred choice of the Elector Bartazan?"

Mirko had hoped this would clinch the matter with a universal roar of acclamation, but instead the crew began to mutter among themselves. Eventually one of the older hands, Querency, asked tentatively:

"My lady, did you once helm the galley *Sunrise* of that great master, Addacatzen?"

"Only in practice," said Catzen primly. "But the sea remains the sea, whether practice or race."

"I remember you, for I rowed with Addacatzen before Koopendrall sold me to Bartazan. You were a fine young girl, and had a great talent."

Catzen permitted herself a modest inclination of the head.

"Give us the Lady!" called out Querency. "Shipmates, this is the helm for us! No to Cascais! Hail the Lady Catzendralle!"

Querency was not, in Mirko's opinion, one of the more energetic or dynamic rowers; nonetheless he carried an indubitable air of authority among the crew, and

slowly they picked up the chant: “Catzendralle! Catzendralle! Catzendralle!”

Catzen held her head high; Mirko sighed with relief; they had accepted her, for whatever capricious and subjective reasons. He realised with a start that he still didn’t know if she could helm or not; her only testimonials came from herself, a circumstance which admitted of potential bias. But it was too late to worry about that now.



Chapter 34

The journey from Urmalest to the docks—no more than two hundred yards—was one that would live in Mirko’s memory for years. The crew formed up into a column, all resplendent in newly-donned Azure chequer; and at their head marched Mirko and Catzen. She had transcended the ill-fit of her uniform, and to Mirko’s admittedly subjective gaze she was the most thrilling and beautiful figure in the universe. The sun brought out the gold in her hair, and excitement and tension made her eyes sparkle like stars shining out of the blackest night.

The route was lined with supporters of Bartazan, the Azure banners making a second sea to either side of them. Rousing cheers followed them every step of the way; Catzen surreptitiously squeezed his hand: “We can do this. We really are going to win! Thank you for trusting me.”

Mirko felt it would be inappropriate to mention that her prime recommendation for the job was not being Cascais; she was a woman of many unusual talents, and it was by no means out of the question that being able to helm a racing galley was among them.

Eventually the crowds melted away as Peremptor’s Guards delineated the area set aside for the competitors on the waterfront. As the *Sapphire Light* procession entered the arena, the herald apprised the crowd of events.

“Here, citizens, we have the officers and crew of that noble galley, *Sapphire Light*, outfitted by the munificent Elector Bartazan of Bartazan House. How proudly they march in their Azure livery. *Sapphire Light* is captained and overseen by the illustrious flower of the Gar-

ganet navy, Mirko Ascalon; while in a late change her helm will be taken by the Lady Catzendralle of House Drall. How refreshing to see house rivalries set aside in the pursuit of galley-racing excellence! Let’s hear your appreciation for *Sapphire Light*!”

The crowd buzzed rather than roared; clearly the presence of Catzen crowded out every other sensation.

Drallenkoop, who already had his crew aboard *Dragonchaser*, sauntered across. His outfit of red breeches and a gold shirt, while in keeping with the colours of House Drall, seemed to Mirko to slant towards vulgarity. The gold cap, topped with a long red strut-cock plume, also appeared to place aesthetics before utility.

Mirko bowed. He could think of nothing to say which would not be either fatuous or provocative; possibly both.

Drallenkoop appeared to feel no such constraints.

“Cousin Catzendralle! I had heard of your bizarre folly, and imagined it a feverish rumour. You seriously intend to take the helm of Bartazan’s galley?”

Catzen stared unblinkingly back. “You see me here in Azure. Is there any other explanation?”

“You realise the consequences if Bartazan wins?”

Catzen allowed herself a slow smile. “You acknowledge the possibility? I consider that an important psychological advantage. I myself am not contemplating defeat.”

Drallenkoop shook his head. “Catzendralle, this really is a game to you . . . but it’s not a game, is it? Where is the amusement of seeing Bartazan Peremptor? Come now, leave this aside and Ascalon without a helm. My father will be delighted! What good work you have done.”

Catzen put a finger under Drallenkoop’s chin. “You prostituted Larien to try and keep *Sapphire Light* from winning; and told yourself you were doing it for House Drall. Let me tell you, Drallenkoop, you are a coward and a bully, a self-deluding braggart. Today you’re going to face a galley which hasn’t talked itself into defeat before the race starts. And believe me, after what I’ve suffered from House Drall, from your father and from you, beating you will be the greatest moment of my life. See you at the finish.”

Drallenkoop’s eyes narrowed. “Don’t ever think of returning to Darklings. I am planning to stable the goats in your quarters tonight. You are cast off from House Drall forever.”

Catzen gave a bitter smile. "In truth I've been cast off for a good many years now. If you'll excuse me, I have a galley to prepare."

She turned with measured haste and made her way to where the Quartermen were settling the crew into their berths.

Drallenkoop spoke quietly to Mirko. "I do hope you know what you're doing, Ascalon. There aren't many men who've come off better from making a bargain with my cousin."

"We'll see, Drallenkoop; maybe at the finish, maybe before."

Drallenkoop shrugged. "You've dug your own grave with your prick," he said. "You aren't the first and you won't be the last."

Mirko walked away towards *Sapphire Light*, leaving Drallenkoop to conduct his business as he chose. He looked up into the Electors' stand: Bartazan had taken his seat and exuded a relaxed gravity; next to him the Lady Inuela looked bored and distraught; and with a shock he saw next to her Larien, her face completely expressionless. She had been unwise at best, certainly duplicitous, but she was clearly suffering for her actions. He was glad they had parted on terms as good as was reasonable. That part of his life was past.

With a rueful smile he set his shoulders and climbed aboard *Sapphire Light*. He formed an immediately favourable impression of the crew's morale, and Catzen gave him a grin of relaxed focus. He stepped into overseer's cockpit and quickly checked on Jenx; although the *falcx* he habitually took made it easier for him to keep the rhythm, an overdose would promote sluggishness or even somnolence. All appeared to be well and he called out:

"Jenx, beat Four if you please! Beat Four."

Jenx beat the required tempo and *Sapphire Light* edged slowly towards the start line. The wind, no more than a fresh breeze, bellied the big lateen sail: it would be behind them in the long initial pull up to the Morvellos lighthouse; and as the current would be with them too, the first leg of the race would take place at speed. The pull back down towards the Hanspar would be opposite: into the wind and against the current. Weaker galleys such as *Kestrel* would be certain to drop out of contention at this point. Conditions would get slightly easier from here; although the next leg from the Hanspar to The Sorcerers was against the current, the wind would be coming across the port bow until

they reached The Sorcerers themselves. In the endless tactical discussions with Florio and Damiano at the Waterside, they had agreed that only serious contenders would remain at the head of the field at this stage: *Dragonchaser* for certain, *Excelsior* on recent form, and possibly *Fanar's Glory* if she were having a good day. Mirko had felt even then that he would have to go around The Sorcerers in first place to entertain serious hopes of winning; and with a helm as rusty as Catzen this surely remained a necessity.

The herald was running through the list of competitors for one final time, and Mirko gave an encouraging smile to Catzen who waved back with every appearance of confidence. *Sapphire Light* was sandwiched between *Fanar's Glory*—never a proximity Mirko relished—and the Mandry-Arvaluz galley *Sparkle*, whose performances to date marked her out as inconsequential.

In the Electors' stand Mompesson let fall a giant red flag; the herald sounded loud and long his horn; and the Margariad was underway.

"Jenx! Beat Seven! Beat Seven!" called Mirko, shining up to the observation platform. "Catzen, easy does it!"

Sapphire Light moved easily ahead at the comfortable Seven rhythm. Several galleys were tempted by the thought of early glory and a following wind, and set unsustainably high tempos. *Jamminaldo* streaked to the fore, and *Kestrel* made a brave start. Mirko noticed that *Dragonchaser*, on the far right of the field, started more conservatively, and the silver and lilac sail of *Excelsior* also tucked into the crowd. *Sparkle* fouled her oars immediately on the start, and Catzen instinctively made use of the extra space to make some sea-room and increase the gap between herself and *Fanar's Glory*: Mirko was still not sure if she intended to race seriously, or if Inisse were still intent on settling scores with the Bartazan galley.

Jamminaldo and *Kestrel* streaked ahead, the cheers of the crowd still audible from the shore. *Sapphire Light*, still beating Seven, was tucked into the middle of the pack.

"Keep us clear, Catzen!" called Mirko. He could not afford to be trapped among the slower boats if *Dragonchaser* or *Excelsior* attempted to break from the front of the field. *Dragonchaser* in particular had adopted a worrying position, with clear sea on the shore-side, making it easy for her to adopt a higher tempo and streak away

if she chose. *Excelsior* was alongside *Sapphire Light*, with *Fanar's Glory* tracking her wake.

Mirko relaxed as the boats settled into a rhythm along the straight. *Pull-pull-pull*. The effort was easy and unforced. He instructed Catzen to manoeuvre *Sapphire Light* to the side of the field and gradually she moved across. Mirko did not have time consciously to evaluate Catzen's performance, but unconsciously he realised she was performing extremely well. The crowded jostling at the start of the race was always an unsettling time for a helm.

Mirko felt the wind flapping his collar from behind; it was perhaps freshening slightly. *Sapphire Light* sat fairly flat in the water; it was rare inside the bay at this time of year for choppiness or significant waves. The Morvellos lighthouse was approaching, and Mirko had to decide whether to try and overtake more galleys before or tuck in. *Jamminaldo* and *Kestrel* remained at the head of the field, but he knew they were not serious rivals; neither had a crew with enough strength and stamina for the latter stages of the race. *Dragonchaser*, still wide on the right of the field, would not be able to take a tight line around the lighthouse, but unencumbered by baulking vessels might still attempt to slip away; while *Excelsior* remained in the pack, and could not pass *Sapphire Light* without a lengthy and unwelcome detour.

There was a risk in sticking with the pack that he could lose contact with *Dragonchaser* if she made a determined break; but it would be wasteful of effort to try and thread through the densely-packed field—not to mention risking a collision—as they went around the Morvellos. *Dragonchaser* had gained an early advantage through adopting a more flexible position, making good use of her favourable start draw; first blood to her. Mirko made his decision.

"Jenx! Go to Six, go to Six! Catzen, hold position 'til we're round the lighthouse! Easy now!"

Mirko was a little uncomfortable with this cautious strategy, but he still had to see how Catzen would deal with a challenging turn, and the sudden breakaway was not Drallenkoop's usual technique: he trusted to the superior conditioning and stamina of his crew to ease away gradually from the field. He considered for a moment taking a tight inside line around the Morvellos as he had to beat *Spray*; but he was coming round the rock from the opposite direction under different tidal conditions. And looking across to the rocks, he saw

only a single mermaid watching events, and she did not seem disposed to call to him this time. The mermaid sensed his gaze and turned her head to look at him; Mirko raised his hand in salute, but the mermaid did not respond. He could not tell if it was the same one he had rescued all those months ago. Maybe the mermaids felt their debt was paid now.

Sapphire Light approached the rocks at a cautious tempo. The House Tichanet galley *Negrillon* was ahead and slightly wide of them, with *Excelsior* pressing behind, having got the better of *Fanar's Glory*. *Dragonchaser* remained ahead and wide, but to Mirko's relief appeared to be saving her boldness for the more taxing phases of the race to come. He nodded in satisfaction.

"Easy, Catzen! Take it easy, just get us round!"

Catzen swung the helm in a long lazy arc; she even had time to smile as *Sapphire Light* curved round the lighthouse. *Negrillon* ahead of them was unable to execute so economical a turn, and Catzen positioned *Sapphire Light* to go through the gap, looking expectantly at Mirko.

"Jenx! Beat Eight! Beat Eight!" *Pull-pull-pull-pull*. *Sapphire Light* eased through the gap, waves skipping up over the bow as they came around into the current. This was where the race proper began: in fourth place, just behind *Dragonchaser*, with *Excelsior* and *Fanar's Glory* to the rear; the wind in their faces and the current contending with them. This was what the year had been all about.

As the leading galleys started to pull into the wind, there was an appreciable slackening of velocity. *Kestrel*, in particular, seemed almost to go backwards; her moment of glory was over. *Jamminaldo*, the galley of House Sey, appeared to be having difficulty in maintaining a consistent line, buffeted by the wind. *Dragonchaser's* scarlet sail was forced back against her mast, but Drallenkoop chose this moment to increase the tempo to Eight; Mirko knew if she got away in the run down to the Hanspar, the race was lost.

"Come on now!" he roared. "Quartermen! Keep the rhythm! Damiano, your men are ragged!"

There were grim faces as the crew dug deep into their reserves of energy. "Keep *Dragonchaser* in sight!" he called. "Catzen, in behind her!"

Catzen shot a weary glance up to the observation platform; tucking in behind a lead boat as a shield from a headwind was basic helmscraft, although Mirko reflected it was a tactic Cascais had never mastered.

"Jenx! Down to Seven! Beat Seven!" he called. Less effort was needed to remain in *Dragonchaser's* wake, and it was better to conserve energy for when he was ready for a serious assault. Catzen instinctively understood the strategy and positioned *Sapphire Light* with *Dragonchaser* between her and the wind.

As the two galleys pitched into the seas being churned increasingly by the freshening wind, Mirko noticed that Drallenkoop was making no attempt to force *Sapphire Light* into the wind; instead he was taking the straightest route and allowing anyone to tuck in behind them who cared to. It could hardly be because he was afraid of *Jamminaldo*, which was rapidly losing ground; instead it bespoke a potentially fatal overconfidence, a feeling that no other galley could live with her straight-line speed or, more tellingly, her crispness around the turns. Time would tell if he was right.

Looking round, Mirko saw that Raidis had adopted an identical tactic in *Excelsior*, using *Sapphire Light* as a windshield. In ideal circumstances Mirko would have tried to flush her out by taking a more indirect course, but with *Dragonchaser* ready to steal a potentially race-winning advantage he could not afford the risk. *Excelsior* would reach the Hanspar the freshest of the three boats, but at the cost of being behind both of her main rivals, and potentially out of touch should a decisive breakaway occur.

Mirko felt relatively satisfied as the long haul to the Hanspar unfolded. *Jamminaldo* had disintegrated completely; *Dragonchaser*, *Sapphire Light* and *Excelsior* all passed her without disruption of their rhythms. *Sapphire Light* seemed comfortable behind *Dragonchaser*, staying in contact without excessive exertion. *Dragonchaser* clearly had something in reserve, but *Sapphire Light* could say the same; Drallenkoop had to decide whether to gamble on a potentially decisive increase of tempo, or to pull away gradually, or to attempt to gain a greater advantage around either the Hanspar or The Sorcerers. Mirko thought he knew how Drallenkoop's mind worked; he would try to make his superiority around the turns work in his favour. He jumped down from the observation platform and briefly shared his thoughts with Catzen, who nodded. She had done marvellously well so far; for someone who had not helmed in years, she had a rare, instinctive gift.

"Jenx! Be ready, Hanspar coming!"

Dragonchaser hit the approach to the rock, with its unpredictable current, with a small but definite advan-

tage. Drallenkoop swung the helm in a practised arc; the turn was crisp and sharp; flawless, in fact.

"Jenx! Keep Seven! Catzen. . ." he realised there was nothing he could say to her; either she'd get the turn right or she wouldn't. She didn't need his advice.

Catzen smiled quietly to herself as the turn arrived; she nodded her head and hauled the helm with a snap; *Sapphire Light* flowed into the turn, speeding away as she moved out of the adverse current, straightening up and following *Dragonchaser*. Her turn had been no better than Drallenkoop's; but it had been no worse, and they were still in contention.

Mirko caught Catzen's eye; they were sparkling with scarcely containable excitement, and her cheeks were flushed from a mixture of adrenaline and the sea-wind.

"Mirko!" she called. "Give me speed! Let's hit them!"

Mirko grinned. This was exactly his intention.

"Jenx! Go to Ten! Go to Ten!" he cried in a great voice. To move up two tempos was a risk, but nothing less would get them past *Dragonchaser*. If the move failed, the race was lost; but to go into The Sorcerers behind was defeat too.

"Catzen! Prepare to pass to port!"

Catzen nodded, then swung the helm to starboard. Mirko cursed: either this was sheer wilfulness, or a tendency to confuse left and right had manifested itself under pressure.

As *Sapphire Light* began to move to starboard, *Dragonchaser* tracked the move, steering in the same direction to block the sea-room.

"Got you!" cried Catzen, immediately wrenching the helm as far to port as possible. At tempo Ten, *Sapphire Light* responded instantly; Drallenkoop was taken by surprise and only belatedly started to straighten up.

"Go! Go! Go!" screamed Catzen at the crew. "Ten! Ten!"

Dragonchaser tried to move back into the gap. Mirko could see Drallenkoop shouting at his overseer, trying to wring a tempo increase out of the crew; but it was too late. Mirko could feel the blood coursing through his veins and a lump in his throat. He looked at Catzen, and he couldn't tell if his eyes were moist from the whipping wind or the emotion; her manoeuvre was brilliantly conceived and executed, an act of real genius; he had been right to trust her. He gave a great whoop of exultation: the madness of racing was on him again.

"Come on!" bellowed Mirko. "This is it, boys! This is where we win it! Keep the rhythm there, Walisse! Larze, your Quarter can keep Ten! Come on, man!"

Mirko knew full well that the tempo was not sustainable for more than a couple of minutes; and there was the most challenging turn of all to come, and a long run into the finish. He could slacken the pace and consolidate the lead; or he could keep pushing. Common sense dictated easing back; but on the other hand, two more minutes of this would break *Dragonchaser*, unused to being passed or outpaced. He looked down at Catzen, who seemed to understand the dilemma. She straightened her right arm, pointing ahead: more, more.

Jenx looked back expectantly, awaiting the command to come down to Nine or even Eight. "Maintain Tempo Ten, Jenx!"

Jenx nodded and grinned: he was not having to row. Mirko jumped down from the observation platform and ran forward to Damiano. "Can they keep this going?" he asked.

Damiano gasped: "I'll tell you when we can't—that's not yet."

Mirko nodded. "Get me to The Sorcerers at this tempo and the race is ours."

He ran back to the stern. "Catzen, we're going for broke: I want as big a lead as possible by The Sorcerers."

Catzen smiled, the calmest person on the galley. "Do I thread the Needle?"

"Can you?"

Catzen's smile widened. "I can do anything today."

"We won't push our luck. Your job is to make a decent turn around the conventional route. I want us so cleanly ahead that even if Drallenkoop threads the Needle we'll still come out ahead. One more turn; that's all I need from you."

"I can do it," said Catzen, pushing her hair back out of her eyes.

"I believe you," said Mirko. "You have been beyond compare today, Catzen. They'll be singing about the Lady Helm for centuries to come."

"We haven't won yet."

"You're a legend regardless."

"I intend to be remembered as a winner, not a gallant loser; especially as we'll be dead losers if that happens."

Mirko grinned. "Just make the turn, my lady." He sprang back onto the observation platform. The crew

were visibly straining; but *Dragonchaser* was failing to re-establish contact, and was now coming under pressure from *Excelsior*. Ahead loomed The Sorcerers: if Catzen could pull off a good—or even an adequate—turn here, then *Sapphire Light* really was the favourite.

Damiano's teeth were gritted as he struggled to hold the tempo for his Quartermen; Walisse on the adjacent front Quarter was expressionless but holding the rhythm. The Sorcerers really were not that far away; this was not the time to mollicoddle them.

"Come on, Quarters!" he shouted. "Do you want to be free or not? One more minute, one more minute! How much do you want this? Row! Row!"

Mouths were contorted into grimaces all over the boat; they might no longer have a headwind to face, but the current was still against them, and progress was slow.

Catzen called out: "Mirko! Look at *Dragonchaser*—she's coming adrift!" and sure enough the gap was increasing. The unexpected pressure and *Sapphire Light's* punishing pace were destroying her morale and composure. Now, thought Mirko, *we'll see what you're really made of, Elector's boy Drallenkoop*.

Aboard *Sapphire Light* the crew could see the patent difficulties experienced by *Dragonchaser* and dug deeper into their reserves. As The Sorcerers approached Mirko performed a rapid calculation: was he far enough ahead that even if *Dragonchaser* threaded the Needle she would come out behind? It was very close; and he knew that Drallenkoop would try it if he could. He had a sudden temptation to let Catzen try it; the way she was helming today, he'd back her to bring it off.

Catzen seemed to divine something of his dilemma. "Let me do it, Mirko! You know I can!"

Mirko looked ahead to the looming triple crest of The Sorcerers, angry jagged rocks reaching out for any ship straying too close, waves ending their incalculable journey across the ocean dashed against the rocks. The current raced through the gap, boiling and snarling. It held an evil aspect for Mirko; he was ahead and it wasn't for him to take what might prove an unnecessary risk.

"Sorry, Catzen. We don't need to do it—take the long way."

Catzen looked as if she wanted to argue; Mirko held her gaze sternly and she looked away.

"Jenx! Down to Seven! Beat Seven! We're going round the outside."

Jenx seamlessly converted the tempo from Ten to Seven without discontinuity for the rowers. *Sapphire Light* was approaching The Sorcerers at a smooth progression and manageable speed for Catzen. He looked back to *Dragonchaser*, who had also dropped her tempo: he could see her prow inclining towards the narrower of the gaps. Drallenkoop was taking the last desperate option open to him: forcing *Dragonchaser* to slip between Anazgro and Ryozaax in the face of a roiling current. He was going to thread the Needle. And Mirko mentally raised his cap; he knew that he simply lacked the courage to throw his own galley into that maelstrom. And Drallenkoop had conquered the passage twice before; a third time would be unparalleled.

"Catzen! *Dragonchaser's* going threading!"

Catzen gave a perfunctory nod. She was struggling to hold *Sapphire Light* close enough to Anazgro—with a current determinedly forcing her off—to make a clean passage.

Mirko knew the race would be won and lost within the next two minutes. He did not think that *Dragonchaser* could come through The Sorcerers ahead, even if she threaded the Needle successfully; but if he was wrong then there was a battle in prospect. Catzen now had *Sapphire Light* pulling straight into the current, before advancing the turn so that the current was on the starboard bow.

"Jenx! Beat Eight! Beat Eight!"

A little more speed would be useful at this point, and incurred no risk; Anazgro was past, and they only needed to ride the current to pass Ryozaax. But where was *Dragonchaser*?

Dragonchaser was in the midst of the spate between Anazgro and Ryozaax, Drallenkoop fighting to hold a steady line. The margin for error was small, the consequences of miscalculation or misfortune to be dashed to pieces against unyielding black rock. But so far there had been neither miscalculation nor misfortune.

Sooner than Mirko would have liked, *Dragonchaser* popped from between the rocks like a cork from a bottle. She was facing the wrong way, and now had to spin as rapidly as possible, come back between Ryozaax and Basile-Orario, but this time with the current. It was a faster manoeuvre, but an easier one because she was not fighting the current. Mirko watched in dismay as the 180-degree turn was executed seemingly instantaneously: this was Drallenkoop's trademark manoeuvre and it had been demonstrated to perfection.

"Jenx! Go to Nine! Go to Nine!" he called, and only hoped that the crew could move up a tempo. There was a real danger that *Dragonchaser* really could get out ahead.

Catzen was gripping the helm in silent supplication. There was nothing constructive she could do; *Sapphire Light's* job now was to run in a straight line.

Dragonchaser emerged from between the rocks with a slight lead; but she was slanted across the current, and thus slowed. *Sapphire Light* had the momentum that came with the current, and was facing in the direction she wanted to be moving in. *Dragonchaser* had the choice of slowing to allow *Sapphire Light* through, or allowing *Sapphire Light* to plunge into her side. The rules of racing required her to give way in these circumstances, but Mirko knew that Drallenkoop wouldn't, for it meant conceding the race. He remembered the almost identical circumstance in The Sorcerers regatta when *Excelsior* had been cowed into backing off when she had right of way: it wasn't going to happen here.

"Catzen! Hold your line! Hold your line!" he ordered. "Drallenkoop!" he bellowed into the gap between the galleys, "Back off! Out of our stream!"

Drallenkoop did not deign to respond. Instead of trying to avert a collision he was placing *Dragonchaser* ever more deliberately in the path of *Sapphire Light*. Mirko shrugged: his sharp prow was going to strike Drallenkoop's bows. No doubt both galleys would be damaged, but *Dragonchaser* would surely come off worse. If that was how Drallenkoop wanted it . . .

"Jenx! Go to Ten! Go to Ten! Catzen, aim to strike amidships! We'll sink her if we have to!"

Catzen set her jaw; Jenx simply beat the rhythm. The crew, who heard the order, howled in fury and pent-up frustration. Mirko thought that he wouldn't want to be aboard *Dragonchaser* when *Sapphire Light* struck.

Too late Drallenkoop realised that Mirko was not going to back down as Raidis had aboard *Excelsior*, but there was nothing he could do with his hard-won wisdom.

"Brace! Brace!" called Mirko with redundant emphasis; neither Catzen nor the crew could be in any doubt that a collision was coming. Oars splintered as *Sapphire Light* powered on; then a grinding, thudding, wrenching *stop!* as the two craft met. Mirko looked around, partly to survey the damage and partly to assess if *Excelsior* was near enough to be a threat; but she was

still negotiating The Sorcerers, under renewed pressure from *Fanar's Glory*.

"Back out!" called Mirko. "Tempo Three, get us clear!"

This was not a manoeuvre that *Sapphire Light* had practised in more than the most perfunctory fashion; going backwards was not a skill which normally proved useful in galley racing. As they moved back from *Dragonchaser*, Catzen intelligently used the helm to straighten in the most rapid time, and *Sapphire Light* was facing straight again.

"Jenx! Beat Eight! Let's make sure we stay away from *Excelsior*!"

Mirko looked back over his shoulder; *Excelsior* was making rapid progress while *Dragonchaser* seemed to be listing alarmingly. The collision had clearly holed her below the waterline. Mirko was not inclined to go to her rescue, and as *Excelsior* streamed past, Raidis made an unmistakable gesture which conveyed neither sympathy nor a willingness to lend assistance. Mirko wondered how many times Raidis had relived that moment where he had sheered off to avoid a collision, and thrown away his best chance to beat his old rival. In the circumstances a degree of triumphalism seemed forgivable.

"Keep Eight!" called Mirko. The only chance of losing now was if *Sapphire Light* disintegrated completely. *Excelsior* had too much ground to make up against a *Sapphire Light* buoyed by the current to be able to close the gap without assistance from *Sapphire Light* herself. For two minutes the gap remained the same size; then Mirko felt that *Sapphire Light* was imperceptibly drawing away. The Margariad was won.

From the observation platform he looked down at Catzen, Catzen who had steered the galley with the most impeccable composure and skill. Her performance had never fallen below the highest standards, and on occasion she had aspired to brilliance. She smiled up at him, a dismissive gesture towards *Excelsior* showing that she too knew the race was won. There were various problems ashore to be dealt with, but these could wait—if not for long.

Mirko remembered for the rest of his life the long pull down the home straight. On the starboard bow was the Paladrian coast, and as they came closer and the crowds thickened, their cheers became audible. Partially obscured behind tall manzipar trees Mirko could discern Coverciano, which it seemed would have a new

occupant tonight. Bartazan would have no cause to regret his gamble, although Mirko doubted that his appreciation would take any very tangible form. He was pledged to redeem the crew and make Mirko Captain of the City's Fleet; but Mirko was not sanguine about either prospect. But as the master of the Margariad-winner, he was a figure of importance and influence in his own right, and Bartazan would need to deal with him accordingly.

The buoys indicating the finish line hove into view. *Excelsior* was content to consolidate her second place, while *Fanar's Glory* was well clear in third. *Dragonchaser* was limping home, still listing. Her aim was to sink in shallow water rather than any meritorious finish.

"We've done it!" shouted Catzen. "We've really done it, Mirko!"

"Jenx! Go to Nine! Go to Nine! Let's win this in style." And *Sapphire Light* surged through the finish line to the rapture of the crowd at Tempo Nine, winning the Margariad by a margin unparalleled in recent memory.



Finister

by *Till Noever*

Book Three

— 3 —

Y'liaan woke and stretched, luxuriating in the knowledge that this was her day; anticipating the conversation she was about to have with Oweena; telling the old hag to go and swallow some bitter-water. For today she was going to present herself at Corran's estate—the servant's entrance, of course!—and she would become one of the select few who were allowed to live and work for the Wearer. Again she congratulated herself for her presence of mind and the deft way in which she had handled the matter; for standing up and defying their veiled, and not-so-veiled, threats when she had revealed what she might know. In the end her tenacity had been rewarded. Today she would leave the life of squalor and enter a new world.

Y'liaan rose and went into the kitchen, where her mother was cleaning her father's breakfast dishes. She stood for a moment, watching the woman, trying to feel something that might indicate a regret at having to leave them behind. She found only emptiness. Y'liaan sighed and entered the kitchen. Her mother looked around. "Time you showed your face. And maybe you could make a little less noise when you get home. Your father was not amused."

Y'liaan sighed. Maybe it was better this way: having it made easy. This woman might have been anybody. That she was her mother was a bizarre accident, which Y'liaan had never understood.

"I'm leaving," she said tonelessly.

"Starting work early," her mother said approvingly. She always approved of hard work. And that was about all, too. "It'll help to pay the rent." She returned her attention to the sink.

Y'liaan opened her mouth to say something. Then she shook her head. Pointless even to consider explaining. She'd walk out here and simply not come back. After a couple of days they'd wonder. After another two days they might be bothered to investigate.

Y'liaan left the kitchen and went back to her room. She folded up her meager range of clothes and put them into a cloth bag, which she slung over her shoulder. One last look around the room. Her eyes alighted on a tiny ornament on a rickety sideboard. A tiny dog, black and white, sitting in an attitude of expectancy. The ornament had been given to her by a Gaskarian sailor who couldn't afford to pay the full fee. She had taken it in lieu of her share of the take for the service; treasured it since then. Nobody ever had given her anything like that. Not even Fliz. Especially not Fliz. Fliz wasn't into gifts. To tell the truth, he really didn't have many attractive traits. Off-hand, she could only think of one; and that one really wasn't a good enough reason to bother about him.

As she walked through the streets of Thalonica, heading for the *Pink Palace* to say her good-byes and gloat, she tried to figure out why it had taken her so long to figure it all out. Fliz had never—never!—given her any indication that she was anything but a means to still his Willet frustrations. And then, when he'd met the Gaskarian slut. . . Y'liaan shivered with a spasm of uncontrollable hatred. Well, the slut was no more, and Fliz had lost her, too.

Serves you right, Willet freak!

Good-for-nothing have-nothing!

Y'liaan grinned and accelerated her step. Distantly, she noted that the light was a bit strange this morning. Everything had an orange tint. In the east, Caravella peered down through a haze which grayed most of the eastern half of the sky. Y'liaan, too preoccupied with her own thought, did not pay it much attention but hastened on. Presently, she arrived at the *Pink Palace* doors. She knocked. Oweena opened it.

"What do you want?" she snapped.

Under any other circumstance Y'liaan would have been cowed under that scathing tone. But not now. She lifted her chin defiantly. "I'm leaving," she said.

"Isn't that the truth," Oweena said acidly.

Y'liaan grimaced. This wasn't going as she had planned.

"What do you *mean*?" she asked, curious despite herself.

Oweena raised her eyebrows. "What do I mean?" she said. "I tell you what I mean. I mean that you're a traitorous slither-bug and that I don't want you here anymore! So, get out of my sight!" She slammed the door.

Y'liaan stood frozen. What was Oweena talking about? Surely not the Gaskarian slut? What was the slut to the whores of the *Pink Palace*? She turned to go—only to come face-to-face with Raisa, who appraised the younger woman with a look of distant disfavor.

"What're *you* looking at?" Y'liaan said testily.

Raisa studied her intently. "I thought," she said, as if speaking to herself, "that we were a community: the girls of the Palace and the House. Maybe not friends, but at least people we could trust." She shrugged. "We're not perfect, of course, but I always thought that this was one thing we could depend on: that we'd stand by each other and our friends."

"The Gaskarian was not our friend!" Y'liaan spat. "She was a . . . an *alien*. She took Fliz. She beguiled him and used him and made him forget me!"

Raisa shook her head. Y'liaan thought to detect a trace of pity, mixed in with the air of contempt that overlay everything else.

How dared they!

"She was—*is!*—a guest; and guests are honored, and we don't betray them to *anybody*. Besides, Nerys is a . . . friend . . . of Fliz's—and Fliz is one of us, just like Felicia and Audile were. And we don't betray one of our own. That's always been the way, and if we do anything else then we're just like everybody else and not worth anything at all."

"Fliz betrayed *me!*" Why couldn't the stupid woman understand? The Gaskarian slut had done it to herself! And Fliz! Above all, Fliz!

Raisa sighed. "Maybe he did. Maybe he didn't. You knew as well as we all did, that he didn't love you." She hesitated. Y'liaan saw something in the older woman's face that suddenly frightened her.

"What?" she hissed.

"Fliz made a mistake," Raisa said. "But he came by, looking for you. He wanted to talk to you; explain what had happened." She shrugged. "But you were gone—to betray the woman Fliz loves to Corran."

The words cut through Y'liaan like a knife. At the same time there was a savage satisfaction. He loved the slut? So much the sweeter the revenge.

Then she remembered something Raisa had said a few moments ago.

' "She was—*is!*—a guest . . . ' "

Raisa must have read it in her face. "That's right," she said.

"It can't . . ."

"Maybe not," Raisa said dryly. "But it's true anyway." She nodded at the bag slung over Y'liaan's shoulder. "You'd better get yourself away from here. Fliz threatened to strangle you himself, the moment he lays eyes on you. He sounded as if he meant it."

"They will protect me!" Y'liaan said defiantly.

" 'They'? Who's 'they'?"

"Duke Corran's guards! I have been accepted into the estate! They protect their own!"

There! Let the whore swallow that one!

Raisa's face twitched. Was she going to cry? But, no; it was . . . laughter?

"Corran?" Raisa said acidly. "Good luck to you." She turned away and raised a hand to knock on the door.

"What do you mean?"

Raisa looked over her shoulder. "I guess you don't know. "Corran's a duke no more. For that matter, nobody knows if he is even alive. And as far as his estate is concerned . . ." She pointed at the sky. "See that? That's Corran's estate. Gone up in smoke." She knocked on the door which opened for her. Raisa entered without looking back. The door closed with finality, leaving Y'liaan staring at the gray plume of smoke and the disintegration of all her plans, schemes and dreams.

Ailin placed a bundle of clothes on the bed. Caitlan turned around sleepily and wiped the sleep from his eyes.

"Wakey, wakey," she said softly. "No more excuses, my grim warrior."

Caitlan levered himself up on his elbows and eyed the garments. He snorted. "I'm supposed to wear *that*? What am I? A clown? A popinjay?"

Ailin laughed merrily. "Far from it. But you're wanting to be inconspicuous, yes?"

Caitlan swung his legs out of the bed. "That would be nice," he muttered. "And you think this'll make people ignore me?" He got up, padded over to the basin in the corner, and splashed water across his face.

"It'll help," she assured him. "Let's face it, you're never going to be inconspicuous! So, why not look the part?"

She laughed again, threw herself on the bed, and lay there watching him as he studied the garments. "Look what part?" he asked her.

She pursed her lips. "I hear these are all the rage in Cyretrea," she said. "You could be a Cyretrean gentleman—if you were willing to act like one!"

"What way's that?"

From underneath lowered lashes she gave him a quick, sly glance. Her fingers idly fingered the strings holding the front of her blouse together. As Caitlan watched the knots came undone. Ailin heaved a deep breath. The blouse slid open.

"A Cyretrean gentleman," she said in a sultry voice, "would probably not stand naked before a woman, without doing his utmost to still the lust he knows this must invoke in her." Her mouth twitched. "He'd also be an expert at removing halters—and everything else—with a minimum of fuss."

Caitlan chuckled. "I thought you liked the fuss."

"There is that," she admitted, her eyes laughing at him.

Caitlan came around the bed. "Maybe I could try to be such a gentleman," he offered.

"Practice makes perfect."

"Show me how to be such a gentleman."

She did.

Considerably later, with Caitlan dressed in what Ailin considered suitable attire—and feeling that he looked utterly silly—they left their room. Bearna greeted them as they came down.

"Seen Fliz and Nerys?" Caitlan asked her.

Bearna grinned. "Not yet."

Caitlan glanced at Ailin, who winked at him. Caitlan suppressed a grin. If they hadn't done it by now they never would. But of course they had. That was the way of things and they both needed it sorely. Their elaborate ritual of carefully avoiding what they'd both been dying to do had been becoming rather tedious.

Other matters pressed on Caitlan. "We need a map," he told Bearna.

"A map?" Bearna echoed. "Of what?"

"I can get us maps," Fliz said from the door. He had appeared with his characteristic stealth.

"Where's Nerys?" Ailin asked.

"Sleeping," Fliz said. He hesitated. "She's . . . well," he supplied.

Caitlan chuckled. "We don't doubt it." He eyed the younger man shrewdly. "You're . . . well . . . too, I see," he added.

Fliz blushed slightly. Caitlan was astonished to see it happen. A first love? At the age of . . . what? Thirty? Caitlan wondered what that would be like. Then he looked at Ailin, and he realized that he *did* know.

"Maps," he said.

"I'm worried about Rutger," Fliz said. "Thalonica is big, but not *that* big."

"I know. But above all we need the maps. We have to draw that second location line."

Fliz nodded. "I'm ready."

Caitlan glanced at Ailin. She nodded. "I'll keep an eye on Nerys," she told Fliz, who looked at her with pathetic gratitude. The poor man was terminally smitten.

Caitlan suppressed a grin. He winked at Ailin. "Let's go," he said to Fliz.

"I've always wondered," Fliz said to Caitlan, "How it is possible for people to have such detailed maps of places that nobody's ever been."

Caitlan looked at the thief. *He* knew—but he couldn't tell. Not now anyway.

"Do you see what I mean?" Fliz insisted. "Who would have had the time and the motive to sail around all the coasts of all the continents, mapping them out with such precision? I've never heard of anybody who's done this—or would *want* to; or who'd pay for them to do it! I mean, there has to be somebody who pays, right? Otherwise, who's going to bother?"

Caitlan pulled Fliz out of the stream of people and to one side. There he stopped. "What makes you ask these questions?"

Fliz shrugged. His eyes scanned the people flowing past them.

"We spend our lives assuming things," he said. "Most of these assumptions are correct. Some of them, however, are naïve at best—and wrong at worst."

He looked at Caitlan. "I mean, look at you. Anybody who sees you would take you to be a soldier of sorts. A fighter anyway. You have the strength of several ordinary men. You're all sinew, muscle and bone; yet you look nothing like those brawny freaks from the carnival, who strut and pose and ripple their bellies and twitch their chests, so their nipples jump and jerk and look this way and that. But people look at you and, whether they know it or not, they see death waiting to happen."

Caitlan was taken aback by the younger man's analysis. Was he really that obviously what he was? The notion was troubling.

"And yet," Fliz continued, "you travel in the company of a remarkable woman who obviously loves you more than her life—a sentiment which, I suspect, is entirely reciprocated. A woman who, if rumors are to be believed, is much more than she appears, and whose beauty conceals as many secrets as her smile.

"You also carry with you certain devices which simply do not belong in the world I know." He jerked his head at the people around them. "A world that none of *them* know either. You do incomprehensible things and have mysterious goals. You hunt a man whom I know to be the most dangerous human being I've ever met. And when I made my idle comments about the origins of maps, I suddenly had the most eerie feeling that you could have answered them—if only you chose to do so."

Caitlan started to say something, but Fliz held up a hand. "Hear me out, Caitlan. Did you know that, not so long ago, there lived a Fontaine nobleman, a certain Trill Hagar, who thought that this world is not really ours? That all men came from somewhere else?"

"How do you know this?"

"I read it in a book he wrote."

"A book? How did you . . ." He grinned. "You stole it? Who from?"

Fliz's mouth twisted into a wry grin. "A Fontaine merchant who treasured it so much that he didn't dare leave it on board his ship and carried it around on his person." He paused. "That's what I think anyway," he ruminated. "It's possible, of course, that he was taking it somewhere. Maybe to have it duplicated. There are several scribes here who would undertake such tasks.

"Of course, I didn't know what it was when I . . . appropriated it. I didn't learn how to read until years later. But I kept it anyway."

"Where is it now?"

"It was destroyed; by Rutger, I think. Someone set fire to the place where I lived." He squinted at Caitlan. "To get back to maps! It occurred to me that one way to make such accurate representations would be to hover at great height *above* the land or the water and to draw them from that perspective. And I came to thinking. . .

"What if Trill Hagar was right? What if we *did* originate from somewhere up there? Not that I know where or how or why, but what if?"

Caitlan took a deep breath. What was the point? "Fliz," he said softly, "Hagar was right."

Fliz's eyes went round with surprise. "You know this?" he whispered.

"I know this," Caitlan affirmed.

Fliz exhaled a pent-up breath. "The magice, Rutger; he knows it, too?"

Caitlan took Fliz's arm. "Come. Let us find a map. I will explain when we get back to the *House of Joys* and we draw the second location line."

Fliz guided Caitlan to the wharf area where they found a store called the 'Grand Mariner'. Under the name, displayed on a large wooden sign over the entrance, it read 'Everything Required by the Seafarer'. For the illiterate the spare space on the sign was taken up by depictions of the kinds of things a mariner might require, from ropes to maps.

Caitlan entered the store behind Fliz, to find himself in a bewildering array of merchandise. Sailmaker's equipment, weapons, victuals, ropes, anchors, polefinders, pulleys, nails, paint and brushes, containers, carpentry tools . . . and maps. Maps and more maps; of every conceivable size and detail; covering Finister, Tapide, Unterthal, Cosinante, Grelande, Aslam, the Taelinic Group, and places Caitlan had never heard of.

Fliz gave Caitlan a significant look. "I don't know why not more people wonder about this," he said lowly. "It's so obviously wrong that these things should exist." He paused. "Or not. Not if . . .this . . . is true."

They located a large map of the entire continent of Finister, including the Isle of Greel. A meticulously drawn piece of work, worth every bit of the price Caitlan was forced to pay.

"Where did you get these from?" Caitlan asked the merchant, who, after the haggling was over, was becoming quite personable and loquacious.

The man raised his hands. "Where does anybody get them from?" He indicated the maps on display and rolled up in cases. "They appear. Many are left in exchange for other merchandise. If I enquire about their origin the answer is always the same: they obtained them from somebody else, who in turn received them from yet another source. And so on and so on." He leaned forward confidentially. "Though if you ask me, I think the source is always the same."

"Why do you think this?" Caitlan asked.

The man shrugged. "There are indicators. Look at the parchment. It is always the same material; the same

thickness. The only difference is in the usage. Even here, there is a puzzling mystery. For what kind of material is it?" He picked a rolled-up map from a slot on the wall, untied the piece of string that held it together, and spread it on the counter. "See this?" He tugged on the edges. "It doesn't tear like the parchment I know. Of course, if I try harder . . ." He rolled the map up again and re-tied the string. "Somewhere there are master copies. And someone, for reasons known only to them, does not wish this to be known." He shrugged. "It's not an issue that robs me of sleep. But it is curious nonetheless."

Caitlan and Fliz took their leave. Once outside Fliz asked: "Do you know the origins of these maps?"

Caitlan shook his head. "No." Curious that, among the many things he had told them, Pandrak had not seen fit to include this puzzling matter. Had the magices distributed the maps? Had they done this as part of their 'mission'? Now they were gone. Did that mean there wouldn't be any more new maps?

Caitlan dismissed the question from his mind for the time being. He would address it when the occasion demanded it. Another matter pressed on him. "We need a precise indicator of the four cardinals," he told Fliz. "If we cannot get these, I will have to determine them by reference to Caravella—which is an elaborate process that will take up most of a day."

"There is such an indicator," Fliz affirmed. "It resides in the center of the western market square. It's been there since time immemorial."

"Who constructed it?"

Fliz shrugged. "I don't know. Nobody does. It is old. Very old. I've heard that they have a similar one in Gaskar."

"You think Gaskarians built this? Why would they—in Thalonica?"

"Why do Gaskarians do anything? For profit, of course. Somehow they must have concluded that it would be useful to install such a device here."

Caitlan doubted that this was the answer, but said nothing. Fliz took shortcuts through back alleys, which presently brought them to the bustling square that was the western market. The trade here was eclectic, the goods presented coming from all corners of Tethys. Garments from Greel; weapons from Cosinante; carved tika gargoyles and dried Kint plums from Kean; slither-fish freshly caught in the Thalonican gulf; black-and-white oltha furs from Grelande; colorful

jewelry from Fontaine. In the middle of the square stood a raised platform, hewn from a single, massive stone, about the height of two men. To this Fliz directed his steps. When they stood before it, however, he hesitated and glanced around furtively.

"What is it?" Caitlan asked.

"Rutger," Fliz said, "that's what. If he's still in Thalonica, this might well be a place he would keep under surveillance."

Caitlan was forced to agree. "I'll go up there," he said.

Fliz shook his head. "Someone needs to orient and hold the map in place. You have to conceal what you're doing. By yourself you are unlikely to accomplish this feat." He thought for a moment. "Let us be watchful—and quick!"

Caitlan agreed. The two ascended a flight of well-worn steps carved into the pedestal. At the top they encountered a number of urchins, who were using this vantage point for their mischief; they were eating small, black plums and, after spitting out the kernels, amused themselves by throwing them into the crowd below. At the sight of Caitlan they hastened to depart, leaving the flat top of the pedestal to Caitlan and Fliz.

Fliz pointed. At their feet, set into the stone, was a pointed cross, engraved into a circular base, and made from some unknown metal. Its yellow-copper colored surface was shiny and free of marks or scratches. Caitlan, puzzled, withdrew his knife and drew the tip over the metal. The knife slipped as if over polished pycnar, leaving no mark whatever. The longest arm of the cross pointed south, its opposite to the north; the others east and west; this much Caitlan ascertained by a quick look at Caravella's current position. And there was another small, arrow-shaped mark, about halfway between north and west.

Trying to appear as casual as was possible under the circumstances they sat down on the stone, using the opportunity to sweep the plaza for a known face. Apart from an astuno patrol combing the crowd with an unusual air of purpose, however, they saw nothing to draw their attention. Fliz contrived to unfold the map and place it such that the directional markers on the parchment lined up with those on set into the rock. Caitlan procured a piece of string he was carrying for this purpose and had Fliz anchor it with one finger on the location of Thalonica. He withdrew the locator from its pouch and placed it on the map, hiding what he was

doing with his body. He pressed the buttons in the required sequence and aligned the stretched string with the arrow. He marked a point past Finister, somewhere in the ocean, with a small scratch and put the locator away again. "We can work it out from there."

"What about the second line?" Fliz asked him.

"I have memorized its direction and placement," Caitlan told him. "We have what we need."

Caitlan cast another glance at the cross at their feet. He withdrew the locator again and held it over the center of the cross.

"Look at this," he said.

Fliz bent down.

"What?"

Caitlan indicated the arrow-shaped mark. Fliz drew in a sharp breath. Caitlan put away the locator. "It seems that if you know where to look you won't need this," he said. He rose. "Let's go."

"Let's," Fliz agreed. He rolled up the map; looked out across the crowd again. His eyes widened. Caitlan froze. "What is it?" he asked, not turning his head.

"I think we've attracted attention," Fliz said. "Those astunos; they're trying to hide it, but they're working their way here. I'm sure of it."

Caitlan twitched his head. Fliz's gaze followed the gesture.

"Let's go down this way," Caitlan suggested. Below them, on the side of the platform opposite to the steps, a crowd of people stood around a mime, painted a garish red and green, performing curious gestures and assuming poses suggesting activities and silliness which elicited laughter and whistles from the onlookers.

"Let's," Fliz agreed.

They moved to the edge, turned on their bellies and, in this position, slid off the rock. They landed behind the mime. His concentration interrupted, he turned and uttered a started exclamation. The onlookers jeered. Caitlan and Fliz, shielded from the astunos by the pedestal, merged into the crowd. Fliz led the way, Caitlan instinctively giving him the lead. If anybody knew his way out of this it would be Fliz. Looking around across the heads of the people, he saw that the astunos were muscling their way through the throng, trying to follow. Caitlan bent his tall frame to submerge from their sight. He followed Fliz into an alleyway, around a corner, into yet another alley, and another, and left and right, and presently he lost all sense of direction as they ran.

Fliz halted and ducked into a doorway. Caitlan followed suit.

"What do you think?" he asked the thief.

"We've lost them," Fliz said confidently.

"What did they want?" Caitlan wondered. "Why their interest? We left no trace last night."

Fliz shrugged. "I don't know." Then he paled. "If they know about us, they might . . ." They stared at each other for a shocked instant.

"Let's go," Caitlan rasped.

They started running.

They stood, flattened against a building, looking down the alley at the *House of Joys*.

"I'll go," Fliz said.

Caitlan didn't like it but Fliz's suggestion was rational.

"Go."

Fliz disappeared. Literally. Caitlan, who had witnessed this kind of thing several times, still found it unnerving. At the door of the *House of Joys*, a blur of a motion, like the flickering shadow of a dream. The door opened, Bearna poked out her head. She jerked back with a frightened exclamation. She was pushed back inside; the door shut with a clang. Caitlan waited. The door opened again. Ailin's head appeared. She waved. Caitlan detached himself from the wall, looked around, saw a beggar, a sailor, an old woman. He decided that they were what they appeared to be and hastened across the street. Ailin closed the door behind him.

"What happened?" she asked.

"Nobody's been here?"

"Like who?"

"Astunos."

"No."

Caitlan heaved a sigh of relief, but the emotion was short-lived. "We must leave," he said. "Now."

Fliz nodded. "They'll be here." He turned to Bearna. "I'm sorry; we . . ."

She waved it aside. "We'll handle them. We always have." She winked at Ailin; but Caitlan saw the hint of sadness behind the front.

"I'll go and get our things." Ailin rushed up the steps, just as Nerys came down.

"What . . ."

Ailin took her arm and pulled the startled girl back out of sight with her.

"They recognized you?" Bearna asked Fliz.

He shrugged. "I don't know. They certainly were very interested in us. Maybe someone added things up and came to the right conclusions."

"How could they know?"

"We destroyed a Wearer," Caitlan said dryly. "To think that we should get away unnoticed and unrecognized. . . ." He grimaced. "It seems that we didn't."

"Or maybe Y'liana had her hand in this yet again," Fliz muttered.

"Why aren't they here then?" Bearna wondered.

As if in reply, there was a rap. Everybody stopped talking.

"The back door," Bearna hissed.

"Get Ailin and Nerys," Caitlan told her. He motioned to Fliz. Together they went through a corridor which ended in the kitchen. The back door led out onto the same alleyway passing past the *Pink Palace*. They tiptoed to the door. Caitlan put a finger on his mouth and listened.

Another peremptory couple of knocks.

Fliz frowned. Caitlan drew his dirk and stepped back and signaled for Fliz to open the door. Fliz pulled back the latch, prepared to jump out of the way, should this become necessary. He opened the door. His face dropped with astonishment.

"Ploack?" He opened the door further and nodded at Caitlan. "It's alright. He's a friend."

Caitlan relaxed minutely—and tensed up again when into the kitchen stepped a heavy-set man in an astuno uniform. He froze when he saw Caitlan. Then he turned back to Fliz. "I cannot stay. I'm risking a lot by even doing this." He glanced at Caitlan again. "It was you," he stated. His eyes wandered back to Fliz. "And you." He shook his head, appearing totally bewildered. "Why?"

From the corridor came footsteps. Nerys and Ailin appeared in the doorway, stopping suddenly when they saw the astuno. He regarded them with astonishment. His gaze fixed on Nerys with shocked recognition. "You're the breeder!" he exclaimed. "I saw you! Corran's guard. . . ." He turned to Fliz; regarded him with dawning comprehension. "What are you doing?"

"Protecting a friend."

"You destroyed a Wearer! You. . . you set fire to his house, his estate! For what? A. . . a renegade breeder?" He shook his head. His voice was hoarse. "Do you know what you've done?" He sighed and grimaced; made as if to turn away. "I've warned you," he

said curtly. "Because of our. . . association. . . I'll forget what I've seen here. But. . . I cannot help you anymore. Whatever happens now is out of my hands. The convocation of Wearers is meeting as we speak. They want revenge."

"And they are frightened," Caitlan said quietly. Ploack's head turned in his direction. "Two men," Caitlan said. "That's all it took to destroy one of them. Think! Imagine what would happen should the idea catch on! Imagine every Willet in Thalonica deciding that they've had enough; taking a torch and incinerating another Wearer's property. . . and another. . . and another. . ."

Ploack stared at him.

"Think. . ." Caitlan smiled thinly. "Just think!"

He glanced at Ailin and Nerys. From behind them, Bearna was watching the scene. "Let's go," Caitlan said. They filed past Ploack, who stood aside to let them pass. As he left, Caitlan stopped near Ploack, who stood mutely, watching the exodus. He put a hand on the astunos shoulder. "Think about it," Caitlan said. "Just because something's been as it is forever, doesn't mean that it's right that it should be that way." With that he went after Fliz and the women.

They followed Fliz for a while as he led them through alleys and backways. Occasionally, they had to cross busier thoroughfares. Fliz would stop and scan the area, then wave them on. Twice they immersed themselves in a gaggle of people, using them as a method of concealment from passing groups of watchful astunos. Caitlan did his best to shrink himself to normal size, such as not to stand out above the crowd. On such occasions, he reflected, his size really was not a desirable asset at all.

"What do you want to do now?" Fliz asked him as they hurried along. "There's no way we're going to get out of the city in the usual way."

Caitlan knew that he was right. The caravan depots would be covered, the exit roads patrolled, the harbor carefully watched.

Still, the harbor was their best chance. Earlier, during their visit to the plaza, Caitlan had spied a Keanean cog at the far end of the wharf. He said as much to Fliz, who did not appear too enthusiastic. But, given the circumstances, he admitted that it was probably their best chance.

The question of how they were going to reach the ship was a different issue. It was a minor miracle that

they had not been spotted thus far. If they stepped out onto the wharf, the astunos on patrol would notice them instantly.

"We need a diversion," Caitlan told Fliz. "Something spectacular."

"Or we split up," Fliz suggested. "You are the one who stands out. I can hide in plain sight. The women will easily slip through. If they're accosted, they just have to . . ." He hesitated.

". . . pretend we're whores?" Ailin guessed.

"Something like that," Fliz admitted.

Ailin chuckled and nudged Nerys. "Think we can do that? Could you flirt with an astuno if he approaches you?"

"I can try," Nerys muttered.

Caitlan scanned the wharf from their hiding place between two closely spaced buildings, and spotted a gang of about twenty workers, low-level floaters all, in the process of unloading sacks from a fat-bellied two-master. They carried them into one of the warehouses backing onto the waterfront. Some of the men, Caitlan noted, were just about his own size. The main difference was their garb: loose, short-legged breeches, and nothing more than that. The sweat was running off their tanned bodies in little rivulets, tracing irregular lines into the dirt and grime. Caitlan grimaced. He'd never pass for one of them. Even if he rolled in dirt, he'd look too pale-skinned next to their dark-tanned hides.

"Can you get me a pair of those breeches?" he asked Fliz. "Maybe a tunic as well. Preferably filthy."

Fliz grinned. "I'm a thief. I can get you anything anytime."

"*Now* would be good," Caitlan said dryly.

"Done." Fliz disappeared. Literally.

"Isn't he amazing?" Nerys said proudly.

Ailin laughed softly. "Yes," she said, "I think he is."

Nerys eyed her sideways.

"He is," Caitlan said to Nerys. "You're a very lucky girl."

Nerys' eyes shone with pride. "I know," she said. Then, thoughtfully: "How could I ever *not* have known."

"What are you going to do?" Ailin asked Caitlan.

"I'm going to find a very large sack of *anything* and carry it down the wharf—at the same time as you two display your graces to the world." He grinned. "Small minds usually can attend only to one thing at a time. Two equally interesting things cause bewilderment;

three, total confusion; four, paralysis. It is my experience that the common soldier or astuno has that kind of mind."

He peered around the corner. Two pairs of astunos. Resources must be limited. All the better!

"If the two of you befuddle these innocents the same way you befuddle your lovers . . ." ("Ha!" Ailin interjected.) ". . . I cannot see any reason why we all shouldn't just walk past them without anybody being any the wiser."

Fliz returned with the requested garments. Nerys held her nose. Ailin grimaced. Fliz dropped them on the ground, stepped back, and took a deep breath. "Phew!"

Stoically, Caitlan removed his shirt and gave it to Ailin. Nerys and Fliz fastidiously averted their eyes. Caitlan put on the reeking tunic and dropped his breeches to step into the equally filthy legwear. A bit tight, but they would have to do. He took off his sandals and gave them to her as well.

Ailin kept a careful distance from her lover. Caitlan grinned. She grimaced. Fliz took Caitlan's garments and sandals off her and rolled them up in a bundle, which he tucked under his arm. Caitlan rubbed dirt from the ground over the exposed parts of his anatomy.

"It's a dunk in the ocean for you when this is done," Ailin told him.

He grinned at her. "I need something to carry," he said to Fliz.

Fliz indicated another warehouse. Beside the main door, a pile of sacks awaited cartage to wherever. Caitlan saw activity within the warehouse, but nobody appeared interested in the sacks. He nodded. "When I pick it up, you start moving."

He stepped out of concealment and, putting on a shuffling gait as he had seen unencumbered workers do, approached the sacks. Nobody appeared to be paying attention. He picked one up. A pungent smell assaulted his nose. The contents were objects about the size of his fist, their nature unknown. Caitlan slung the sack over his shoulder in such a way that it hid his face from the two astunos standing near the water; who, at this time, were becoming attentive to the women sauntering along the edge of the wharf. One of them leaned over and made a remark to the other. They both laughed. Caitlan, peering underneath the sack, observed the proceedings as he shuffled along, roughly paralleling the women's path.

The astunos approached Ailin and Nerys. Caitlan tensed, but remembered to maintain his own pose and pretense. The women found their way blocked. Caitlan, tense as a bow-string, glanced over to his right where the other pair of astunos was becoming alert to their colleagues' activities. He forced himself to go on.

Ailin laughed and said something that elicited a howl of laughter from one of the astunos. The men stepped aside. Caitlan heard whiffs of crude remarks, but it appeared that Ailin and Nerys were free to proceed. They did so without hurry. Caitlan slowly untensed. He glanced to his right. The astunos there were far too busy to follow Ailin and Nerys' progress to pay attention to a grimy wharf laborer carrying a sack. They called out to the women. Ailin and Nerys waved at them. The astunos whistled and shouted lewd suggestions. Ailin made a crude gesture Caitlan didn't know she knew. Nerys imitated it with less vigor, but no lesser success, eliciting another chorus of whistles and whoops.

"Come on over," one of the astunos shouted. "We'll see you right."

Ailin laughed that magical laugh of hers. The astunos, much to Caitlan's expectations, were too befuddled to notice the magic. Which was the way it worked, of course. When Ailin turned up her charm . . .

The two men at the waterside joined in the cat-call chorus. Ailin and Nerys, never ceasing their progress toward the end of the wharf, laughed and added a tone of coquettish suggestiveness to their walk. Caitlan, despite the tenseness of the situation, could not help but smile. Even Nerys was getting into the spirit of it. One might almost have thought that she was beginning to enjoy the charade.

The astunos fell behind. Caitlan continued his shuffling progress, now unable to look behind him—which made his back itch with tension. Everything in him wanted to turn back, but he controlled it. They passed a low-decked two-masted coastal freighter with a high poop and a landing ramp that could be lowered with a system of ropes and pulleys, but which was raised. The activity on deck indicated that she was getting ready to sail. Despite this the sailors found the time to shout suggestive comments at the passing women. Ailin and Nerys waved and accelerated their pace. Beyond the freighter lay the Keanean: a small two-masted fat-bellied cog with little activity on deck. A sailor leaned

over the railing, smoking a pipe; another two lay spread out on their backs on a tarpaulin.

From out of nowhere Fliz appeared. He approached Caitlan. "I think they've lost interest," he said. Caitlan dared to turn around. The astunos at the waterside were engaged in conversation with a portly individual; the other two had turned their backs and were ambling along the warehouses. Caitlan shook his head at the laxity. Not that he was complaining; but with a guard-force like that it was no wonder that Thalonica had earned its somewhat dubious reputation among travelers.

"Watch your purse," Pandrak had told them. "Above all watch your purse. Better even: don't take it with you! You won't be killed or maimed, but you'll lose your money quicker than you can take a breath."

Caitlan hadn't been subjected to larceny here yet, but he suspected that having Fliz around him probably had helped a good deal.

The two approached the gangplank, where Ailin and Nerys had stopped. The sailor at the railing was eyeing the women with unconcealed interest. When he saw Caitlan and Fliz approach he waved his pipe at them.

"Go away! Git! Can't you see I'm busy with the ladies?"

Caitlan threw down the sack. The objects inside made dull sounds as they hit the ground.

"Where's your captain?" he asked.

The sailor eyed him up and down and frowned. "What business is it of yours?" He squinted into the bright light of Caravella. "Who do you think you are anyway? What would your kind want with the captain?"

Fliz took a step forward, but Caitlan held him back. He glanced at the astunos down the wharf and, seeing that their attention was not on them, pulled the stinking tunic over his head and threw it into the water. Fliz handed him the shirt and Caitlan pulled it over his head. The sailor eyed him with wide astonished eyes. Caitlan divested himself of the breeches and put on the ones Fliz held. He looked at the sailor again. "Once more," he snapped, "where's your captain?"

The sailor leaned forward and peered along the wharf. "Over yonder," he pointed. Caitlan looked. The portly individual, who had been talking to the astunos, had begun to head their way. The astunos, mercifully, were not paying him any more attention, but had joined

their comrades, to proceed along the waterside—away from them.

“That’s him?” Caitlan asked.

The sailor’s attention, focused on Ailin and Nerys, reluctantly returned to Caitlan. “That’s what I said. What are you. Stupid or something?” He shook his head. “Sorry, ladies,” he said regretfully, “but maybe later. My watch is almost over. If you’ll wait around . . .”

Ailin smiled and pointed at Caitlan. “I don’t think he’d like that,” she said dryly. The sailor’s face fell. “I thought . . .”

“You thought wrong.” Caitlan turned to his companions. “Wait here,” he said, and went to meet the captain. Ailin wrinkled her nose. “You still need a dunk,” she said.

Caitlan sniffed. His nose must have been dulled by exposure to the intense stench, because he smelled nothing at all. “I will,” he promised.

The captain, the top of whose head barely reached Caitlan’s chin, stopped when he saw the big man coming toward him.

“What is it you want?”

“Refuge. Your ship.”

The captain guffawed. “Just like that? Who are you?”

“Former weaponsmaster to the House of Keaen,” Caitlan told him. “Now needing to get myself and my companions out of Thalonica as fast and as quietly as possible.”

The captain’s eyes widened, but his face was skeptical.

“If you’ll let us explain,” Caitlan said. “Then make up your mind. We *do* need your help. More depends on it than you can possibly imagine.”

The portly men studied Caitlan for a few moments. He looked past him at the women and Fliz, standing in attitudes of expectancy. Then he shrugged. “Nothing lost by listening,” he said. He sniffed. “Provided you get that stench off you first.”

“Deal.”

Five people looked at the map, which had been spread out across captain Lethaz’s table in his cabin on the *Passage Trader*. Caitlan had marked the anchor points of the first line, as he remembered them from the map in the Keep. Lethaz drew a line along the side

of a long wooden ruler. He drew another, through Thalonica and the mark Caitlan had scratched.

They glanced sideways at Caitlan, whose hair was still dripping from the rinsing-down the sailors had given him, using a bucket and the questionably clean water from the harbor.

“The Galatadian Ranges,” Fliz muttered. “Why does it have to be the Galatadians?”

The captain, plainly intrigued by the sparse information Caitlan had given him about the nature of the item they were seeking, as well as the method by which they had ascertained its location, squinted at Fliz. “What’s there?” Lethaz asked him.

“It’s where the Wearers hunt for silks,” Fliz told him.

“What’s so special about the Galatadians?” Caitlan asked.

Fliz shrugged. “How should I know? But it’s the only place you find silks.”

“The Wearers travel all that way to hunt a small flying animal?”

“They’re zealots,” Fliz said, as if that explained everything; which, Caitlan admitted, it probably did.

Ailin ran her finger from Thalonica, along the Gulf, across the Bay of Tranquility, to Gaskar. “It looks like we’ll be passing through your home,” she said to Nerys.

Nerys didn’t appear enchanted at the prospect. She glanced at Fliz, who put an arm around her shoulder. Caitlan thought he knew what was going on in her mind. It was home, but she would never be welcome there again. To go there would be like laying open again an unhealed wound.

“What would it take to make you take us to Gaskar?” Caitlan asked captain Lethaz.

He got a quizzical look. “Money,” Lethaz told him. “What else? I’m not in the business of charity, but of survival. This is my ship, acquired after years of toil and strife. I have to pay my crew. At home, in Port Ster, I have a family who depends on me. My course is for Port Ster. Gaskar would add weeks to my journey, worry my poor wife and children, and have my crew consider mutiny.”

Caitlan nodded. “Which of these items of concern would be alleviated by an appropriate payment?”

Lethaz wagged his head. “All of them,” he admitted. “I see.” Caitlan cogitated. “How much?”

A glint of cupidity? What else?

Lethaz named a figure. Fliz tugged on Caitlan's sleeve. "A word with you," he said to Caitlan. "In private," he said, with an apologetic gesture to the others. Caitlan saw him wink at Nerys. Her eyes widened. Fliz gave the tiniest twitch of his head. Nerys bit back whatever she had been about to say. But she did not look happy. Caitlan caught Ailin's eye. She was as puzzled as himself.

"Excuse us." Caitlan followed Fliz outside. "What is it?"

"You don't have any funds to pay the captain, do you?"

Caitlan shrugged. "No. I thought to appeal to his loyalties."

Fliz chuckled. "For a man of your experience you are very naive."

"Maybe."

"We will need the required funds," Fliz stated.

"I don't even begin to have an idea how to do this," Caitlan sighed. He felt helpless. Fliz was right. Lethaz was right. Cupidous also, maybe. But right anyway. A captain needed a crew, and the crew needed to be reliable, and a mutinous crew facing a lot work for no pay was not reliable. Such were the facts.

Fliz smiled. "Maybe I can help," he suggested.

Caitlan frowned. "How so?"

"I'm a thief," Fliz said equably.

Caitlan stared at him. "You're going to *steal* it?"

"You have any other ideas?"

Caitlan heaved a breath. "No," he admitted. The situation required a degree of ethical flexibility.

Fliz grinned. "I can have it before nightfall."

"What?!"

"You wouldn't believe what people carry around with them."

"It's too dangerous!"

"It's what I've done for many years," Fliz pointed out.

"I cannot ask this of you."

"You're not. I'm telling *you* that this is what I will do."

"Nerys . . ."

"Nerys knows."

"I see."

Fliz's face softened. "We won't be able to leave if we can't pay the captain." He grimaced. "Wish me luck."

"Luck is a fickle mistress," Caitlan quoted one of his father's favorite sayings.

"Let's hope she continues to be on our side today," Fliz said, turned away, and vanished around a corner. Caitlan looked, but never saw him go down the gangplank.

He returned to the cabin. "Captain," he said. "Prepare to depart. If all goes as planned you shall have your payment—and we expect to be taken to Gaskar; leaving tonight."

"My cargo . . ."

Caitlan gave him a level stare that shut him up. "We'll pay what you asked for. We will be your cargo."

Lethaz, cognizant of the limits of profitability, nodded. "Just as you say." He craned his neck. "Where's your friend?"

"Getting the money."

As he slid past the astunos and back into the center of Thalonica, Fliz revised his initial estimate of what it would take to procure the sum captain Lethaz had requested. Matters of practicality marred his simple scheme. For, though most visitors worth robbing carried extraordinary sums of money on their person, they often did so in denominations which might, in accumulation, represent an impractical burden. The same equivalence in gold could be carried in a medium-sized purse, while silver might require a small sack, and copper several stout men to cart the loot. On average Fliz could expect to be so heavily laden that he'd never get back to the *Trader*. There was also the matter of diverse currencies which might well attract Lethaz's attention, when the loot was presented to him in this way. Fliz suspected that it might not matter, but he could not be certain.

The obvious solution to the dilemma was unsatisfactory. He could purloin a purse, retreat to some place where he could inspect it without being seen, and discard all but the valuable units. In this manner he would end up with a small purse of gold, which should please everybody. But the process was inherently inefficient. He might still be plying his trade by nightfall, when they should really be well out on the Gulf and on their way.

Then a name crossed Fliz's mind.

Cantinflas.

The name passed and continued on its way, but presently returned, and finally assumed center stage in his further considerations.

Of course, it had never been done—nor ever seriously considered . . .

But maybe . . .

Novel, daring concepts, especially those on the verge of reckless daring often promised success for this very reason.

Cantinflas.

Many years ago he had started off his current business with a concept so novel that no one believed that it could work. He sold the general business he had inherited from his father, who in turn had inherited it from the grandfather, who, so it was rumored, had acquired the funds to start off on his route, by activities well on the other side of respectability.

Not so unsavory as the trade his grandson practiced! Even Fliz, whose morals were pliable, was bothered by the whole concept of what made Cantinflas into one of the richest floaters in Thalonica.

Cantinflas, after selling the business, opened another, starting off in a small, narrow store not far off the main market. He declared that he would lend money in return for goods, which were to be deposited as a security, and which the borrower would forfeit if the money—plus an additional amount, Cantinflas' fee for the service—was not repaid within a stipulated period; usually two weeks; occasionally more, but at a higher lender's fee.

Cantinflas had estimated correctly. People seldom returned for their goods. The goods which were not reclaimed in time were put up for sale in Cantinflas' rapidly expanding store, at grossly inflated prices. Cantinflas presided over the enterprise with an iron fist and a keen eye for profit that made other traders sick with envy. Imitators soon started up similar businesses, but Cantinflas had a good head start and grew in size far ahead of the pack. He built a vault to hold the money which flowed through his hands, and which he now began to lend in ever increasing quantities, expanding his activities to cover all kinds of transactions. Some said that most people in Thalonica had dealings with Cantinflas at one point in their lives—invariably to his benefit.

The matter assumed a new twist when Cantinflas ceased to deal with concrete goods of trade, but declared that he would now lend money only against intangible securities; documents of possession of land, buildings, businesses, ships, and so on. He did not want to be encumbered with the need for a store and similar

inconveniences. He also offered the, totally novel, service of keeping people's money safe on their behalf—in return either for an appropriate fee, or for their consent that he use the same money to lend to yet others, thereby deriving more profit, which he took in stead of the usual deposit fee. Mostly, this was to the detriment of his clients, who did not seem to understand what Cantinflas was doing. The consequences of dealing with him were often unpleasant. Fliz remembered his father's situation . . .

Cantinflas' idea took some time to catch on, but the wealthier traders eventually saw benefits to be derived from having their hard-earned cash stored safely, in a place where a small contingent of sturdy, armed-to-the-teeth guards watched over it. Foreigners also took advantage of the service, using Cantinflas' vault as a place to keep their profits safe, rather than storing them in strongboxes on ships that were liable to sink or be taken over by pirates or larcenous crews with an eye on the treasures below-decks.

Cantinflas purchased an edifice in the center of Thalonica, tore it down, and erected another with a particularly secure vault in the basement. Here, so it was rumored, rested almost half the cash wealth of Thalonica. Cantinflas named it the 'Repository'.

Of course, the Repository had long been the subject of much speculation; especially among Thalonica's larcenous elements. The riches stored there assumed the status of legend. Attempts to divest Cantinflas of at least some of all that wealth were frequent, but always futile. He had established a rigid system to insure that his employees kept each other's cupidity under constant surveillance. Bribery was futile, though it had been tried. Attempts at robbery had invariably been fatal. Consensus had it that the Repository was, after all, impenetrable.

Maybe.

Fliz found himself in Regalis Avenue, just off the main market square, and opposite the Repository; a three-storey building with tiny, heavily barred windows. On the second and third floors a small army of scribes and bookkeepers kept track of Cantinflas' transactions and wealth. The first floor housed a reception area and the entrance to the half-buried vault. Some years ago, a former builder with aspirations of things grander than toiling in the dust, had tried a new approach to divesting Cantinflas of his wealth. He rented a dilapidated store in the ground floor of an

adjacent building and spent the best part of a year toiling in the dirt, digging a tunnel until he reached Cantinflas' vault—only to find that the walls were not, as he had expected, mortar and the usual soft sandy rock on which Thalonica rested, but several layers of, effectively impenetrable, fragments and shards of hitate rock from the Bessynian Range.

Cantinflas had never pursued the matter of the builder's attempt to rob him. There were reasons to believe that he knew about it all along; tolerating it; watching with scorn as he knew the enterprise to be doomed to failure.

Eventually the story got around anyway, and now everybody knew about the vault's impenetrability. Business boomed. Presently the builder—humiliated, ruined, depressed—committed suicide.

Fliz considered the Repository. A tempting proposition. Not one he had ever considered. Indeed, it had never been even occurred to him that he might . . .

But now? Now he needed funds. A lot of them. Preferably in gold. Inside the vault, he was certain, the denominations would be carefully separated. Waiting for him to help himself.

The potential rewards were immense; the risks commensurate. If he was caught he was finished. He would be killed. Never see Nerys again. The thought was like physical pain. The possibility of failure was real. In close spaces, where people bumped into each other, his method of concealment was not perfect. He would be distracted by things he had to do. His concentration might lapse; with fatal results.

Fliz sighed. Certainty was a myth. Across the street lay his best chance to get them out of Thalonica. There was no doubt that he would take it.

He needed a plan.

The events of the previous night came back to him. The conflagration had provided an excellent diversion. Fliz looked up at the barred windows. There was a lot of parchment in there. Though most of it, like the documents of debt and deed, probably resided in the vault, safely stored with the money, a lot of material would be up there for processing. A fire would surely provoke a major panic. It would also do Cantinflas a major disservice. That alone made it into an attractive proposition.

Fliz spared a thought for the scribes, whom he would put in danger. He dismissed the thought. He would do what he could to prevent injury, but he had to

do this. Fliz stood for another moment, then turned and went off to find a store where he might purchase a bunch of self-lighting fidibuses.

The entrance hall of the Repository was a vaulted cavern. The rear was lined with counters where Cantinflas' employees interacted with his customers. Beyond them a barrier of wrought-iron spikes, about the height of two men, behind which sat several scribes at low desks, poring over documents. On each desk also stood a box subdivided into several sections, each of which held different denominations of money. Fliz noted that some of them were nearly empty. Others were filled to the brim. As he watched, a scribe signaled to a pair of guards. They came to his desk; one lifted up the box and took it with him to the back, where a huge door, made from solid iron, and swinging on five massive hinges, stood open. The entrance to the vault. Accompanied by the second guard, the man carried the box past the heavily armed men who stood at each side of the portal, and disappeared into the vault.

Fliz looked around; counted a total of eleven armed guards, strategically distributed around the entrance hall. They wore helmets, and their hands rested on the pommels of their swords.

He searched for the stairwell which must lead up to the other floors, and found that it, too, was situated behind the barrier of spikes. The barrier itself had a gate, guarded by a heavy-set man, with the arm-muscles of a prize-fighter, and a bulging chest whose size might have been the envy of many a woman; if only it hadn't been all muscle, and was hardly the kind that would attract eager custom.

Fliz, enveloped in his fragile aura of invisibility, stood near a wall where no one was likely to run into him, pondering his options. He had to get across the barrier; this was a prerequisite for anything else. He gathered his courage, relaxed into the gait of concealment, and crossed the hall, carefully avoiding touching anyone.

Focus!

Fliz stopped before the barrier, took two breaths to relax himself, and began to climb. It wasn't easy, and he did it slowly. Exertion caused lapses in attention, and those he could not afford.

Relax.

Climb.

Relax.

Climb.

He reached the top and paused again. Below him people were moving around. The guards cast their weary glances around the hall. Nobody looked up.

Relax.

Breathe.

Relax.

The descent was easier. His feet touched the floor; he slipped through the system of desks, barely avoiding a scribe's arm as it stretched out to reach for an inkwell on another, unoccupied, desk. Fliz disappeared into the stairwell and presently arrived at the second floor. A large room full of scribes in various states of busy-ness greeted him. Fliz slipped over to a vacant desk near the wall to his right. Carefully, silently, he took the parchments lying on it, and placed them on the floor. He withdrew a fidibus from his pocket and struck it against the wooden floor. It made a hiss and flared. Fliz didn't look up to see the effect of the sound. He held the fidibus to the parchments, which caught alight immediately.

Scribes leaped from their chairs and approached. Fliz sidled away and, as attention was diverted to the fire and efforts to put it out, slunk over to another desk and repeated the procedure. This time he scattered the parchments, which in turn lit others.

Panic erupted. Fliz hastened to the exit and made his way back downstairs. Behind him came jabbering and gesticulating scribes, pouring into the security area. The guards on the other side of the barrier assumed watchful positions. Those on Fliz's side stood indecisive. One man, who appeared to have a senior position, shouted commands. Guards rushed up the stairwell. It sounded as if Cantinflas' offices were on the third floor. His men were on the way to save him. Fliz, focusing on his task, slid to the vault entrance and stepped over the threshold. He flattened himself against the wall of the passage as two guards came running from the vault. When they were gone he went on. He emerged into a large cavity. Lining one wall were sturdy upright racks, each of which held rows upon rows of the same boxes he'd seen on the scribes' desks. Each box was filled with all kinds of coinage, Thalonican and otherwise, the denominations carefully separated. Each was labeled with a small piece of parchment. Fliz stepped closer and, in the light of the flickering torches, noted that each piece of parchment

listed the precise amount of money contained in each box.

Fliz turned around. On the other side of the vault someone had built a room, the door to which was open. Fliz entered and found himself in a registry of documents, also distributed over a complicated system of racks. Here, he concluded, were kept the records of Cantinflas' transactions; evidence of who owed him what. Loans and deeds. Cantinflas' power over his clients.

From the passage a loud clang. Fliz jerked around in sudden panic. They had closed the door.

Fliz forced himself to calm. So what if they had? It was to be expected. The first act would be to secure the vault. Why hadn't he thought of that? A definite chink in his plans!

Fliz considered his position. Once the fires were extinguished and the place considered secure again, the vault would be re-opened. So he hoped!

Fliz forced down his claustrophobia and redirected his attention to the money stacked up along the walls. There was a positive aspect to the locked vault: nobody would surprise him. Fliz pulled a recently purchased bag from under his tunic and began to fill it with gold coins. When he had reached Lethaz's figure, he paused to consider the weight of the bag. It would, he decided, hold some more. He continued to help himself to Thalonican gold coins, each of which counted for eight hundred faros. Then he went to another box with Gaskarian currency, and helped himself to some more. It would come in useful. Finally he decided that the bag was heavy enough and desisted from his activities. At this time he also noticed that the air was getting stale. The torches were consuming the breathable air. Fliz went to the wall, intending to extinguish the flames. Better to be left in darkness than to suffocate.

The sounds of heavy bolts being withdrawn. Noises in the passage. Fliz felt a draft of fresh air.

Relief!—Now he just needed to get out.

Several men entered the passage. Fliz thought quickly. Then he plucked a torch from its wall bracket and threw it into the document room. The flame licked upward; touched a parchment near the bottom. Another. Fliz moved aside as the blaze spread. The men coming down the passage stopped in disbelief. Cantinflas, who led them, gave a cry that was a mix of fury and despair and rushed to the document room, which was fast becoming an inferno. He screamed his

anger and frustration. Fliz didn't wait to watch for developments, but slipped past the men and out the passage, the bag with the money rolled up tightly under his arm so that the coins didn't jingle and give him away. He almost collided with several more guards; and indeed, one did brush him; but the man never took notice. Fliz pushed himself off the wall and left the vault.

The whole of the entrance hall had been vacated of customers. Guards stood beside the locked door to the outside. But the portal in the barrier stood open. Fliz wasted no time and slipped through it.

Careful . . .

Fliz's senses were acute beyond anything he'd ever experienced; his walk of concealment had become an instinctive act, which required no conscious effort. He was a shadow . . . less than a shadow . . . crossing the wide floor of the entrance hall, and coming to a halt at the door; the last barrier; locked with three massive iron bolts, flanked by two guards, who looked as if they could crush him in their massive hands without even trying hard.

How was he going to get out of here?

Fliz considered the bolts. They were well lubricated and would slide readily enough. The space of two breaths. Another to push it open wide enough to slip through.

Fliz slid away and looked around. He took a deep breath. Timing would be critical. He moved toward the counters, now devoid of attendants. He stepped around them—and revealed himself. Right now, however, everybody's attention was focused on Cantinflas, who emerged from the vault, coughing and cursing, followed by his guards and wafts of smoke billowing into the hall.

Fliz jingled the bag. Heads turned in his direction. Cantinflas shouted an obscenity and issued commands. Fliz ducked behind the counter and slid away. He evaded the guards rushing for the counters and made for the door. He heaved; the latches gave way with audible snaps and clunks. The guards jerked around. Cantinflas screeched an imprecation and started to run across the hall. Fliz jerked back the last bolt; pushed open the heavy door. It gave way and he slipped out—and immediately relaxed into unnoticeability. Guards poured out behind him, looking around futilely. Fliz slunk away.

Victory!

He stopped in a side alley and leaned against a cool wall. The bag felt heavy with promise. He grinned when he thought of the damage he had done to Cantinflas. It went far beyond the mere theft of a bag of gold. He had destroyed valuable documents and damaged the aura of security adhering to the Repository. People would think twice before they chose to rely on Cantinflas' services.

Fliz felt a profound satisfaction. Cantinflas had robbed people for decades. It wasn't called robbery, but it still was. He'd gotten rich and fat on the proceeds from his unsavory activities. Now he had occasion to weep.

When Fliz arrived back at the *Passage Trader* he found Nerys waiting for him at the gangway. She threw her arms around his neck and kissed him. "I was afraid," she said.

He hugged her to him. Caitlan emerged from the poop castle. Fliz held out the bag. Caitlan grinned. "You *are* the best," he said and took it.

"Of course," Fliz replied.

Nerys laughed contentedly. "As yet I have no one to compare you with," she whispered into his ear, "but I believe you anyway."

"As yet?" he echoed.

"Just remember that," she told him.

The *Passage Trader* left Thalonica and sailed out into the Gulf. The rigging creaked and rustled as the wind billowed the sails. Caravella sank into the west. The travelers stood on the starboard side and looked at Endless Beach filing slowly past them.

"Let's hope this passage isn't as exciting as the last," Ailin muttered.

Caitlan put his right arm around her and drew her closer. "We've got quite a bit of time on our hands," he said. "In a few days we might welcome some excitement."

"I think we'll manage," Ailin said lowly. She turned to Nerys, who stood next to her. "What do you think?"

Nerys looked at Fliz and giggled.

Ailin nudged Caitlan. "See?"

"See what?" Caitlan laughed. His hand slid down her side and came to rest on her hips. Ailin put her left arm around his waist and squeezed him. "Let's wait until dark," she said lowly. "We don't want to scandalize the sailors."

Just over two days later the *Passage Trader* put into the small port of Tyssel, much to the delight of the passengers. They all were enjoying the halcyon days aboard, but—particularly the two women—found them marred by several flaws, all of which related to matters of clothing and hygiene. In their haste to leave Thalonica much had been left behind. Facilities for washing themselves and their garments, which consisted solely of those they had worn when they left, were minimal and unsatisfactory. The process of attending to one's bodily functions was even more so. The sight of Tyssel therefore was welcomed by all. No matter how small the town; here was civilization; inns with baths; merchants who sold clothes, soap, combs.

The *Passage Trader* drifted into the tiny bay and was pulled to the wharf by two boats. Ailin and Nerys prepared to leave the ship as soon as it had been moored.

"Expect us when you see us," Ailin said to Caitlan.

"We'll go with you," Caitlan told her.

Ailin looked him up and down. "Good."

"To keep an eye on you," he grinned.

"Well, you can do that *and* try on at least one change of clothes."

Caitlan sighed and submitted to the inevitable. He glanced sideways at Fliz. The thief appeared unperturbed at the prospect of an extended visitation to the market. It might have been, Caitlan reflected, because this was Fliz's world; where he had plied his 'trade' for many years. However, Caitlan knew that Fliz wanted to use at least some of the day to investigate further into his antecedents. "I may never get back here again," he had said.

The *Passage Trader* was scheduled to leave on the following morning. They had most of the day. The party left the wharf and entered the small town, which lay draped over several low hills: a collection of one- and two-storey dwellings constructed to no apparent plan, arranged around a radial system of meandering streets.

Caitlan thought the place quite charming. But then he remembered something, and his mellow mood evaporated. "If Rutger knows—even roughly—where he's going," he said to his companions, "and I would suppose that he does, then he might well be passing through this very town at this very inconvenient time!"

Fliz chuckled mordantly. "Caitlan, you have succeeded, with one small utterance, in killing any enjoyment we might have derived from this visit."

Caitlan shrugged; unrepentant. "Be attentive. Relax, but don't get dull-witted."

Ailin gave him a nudge. "Hey! We are never dull-witted!"

"Of course not."

In the center of Tyssel they came upon a roughly circular plaza, which served as the main trading center for the town. The buildings surrounding it were almost exclusively devoted to one kind of business or another; trading, manufacturing, and miscellaneous services. Stalls, hawking their wares to townsfolk and visitors alike, ringed a cobblestoned area, in the center of which stood a pedestal, and on it a statue, about twice the height of a man. It represented a man in a long coat, whose extended arm pointed somewhere into the distance, and at nothing in particular. Or, Caitlan reflected after considering the statue, maybe he was just pointing north. The visage, with its slightly hooked nose and a thin-lipped, compressed mouth, exuded an air of determination and command. A leader of men, pointing the way to . . . where?

"Tyssel," Fliz said. "The Founder."

Caitlan stopped and looked up at Tyssel's raised hand, its index finger horizontal, its directions definite. The statue represented an amazing effort for such a small community. What could have prompted them to construct such a thing? The labor involved would have been considerable. The figure, made from a yellowish-copper metal must represent a significant amount of wealth. The pedestal itself was hewn from a single rock, which had been shaped into a man-high four-sided cube.

"He looks like Yeolus," Nerys commented.

"Yeolus?" Fliz echoed.

"The founder of Gaskar," Nerys told them. "We, too, have a monument like this. It stands atop Pladys Hill." She eyed the statue curiously. "I never knew . . ."

Caitlan turned to Fliz. "Who constructed this?"

Fliz made a gesture of denial. "It's been there forever. Like so many other things . . ."

"Really?" Caitlan considered the monument. "Have you noticed how clean it is? Does it not remind you of something?"

Fliz's eyebrows went up. Nerys looked puzzled. Ailin's gaze was fixed on Caitlan.

Caitlan took out the locator and surreptitiously activated it. The reading confirmed his initial suspicion. He deactivated the locator and put it away.

"Is this what I think it is?" Fliz asked him.

"It appears that way."

"What do you mean?" Nerys asked.

Fliz grimaced. "It's been here all the time and nobody knew? Here; in Thalonica; in Gaskar even? I wonder where else? And why?"

"Will you please explain?" Nerys said testily.

Fliz did. Nerys looked up at the statue, open-mouthed. Ailin stepped close to Caitlan. "Why would they have done this?"

Caitlan shrugged. "I guess this is something not even the magices knew about. It makes you wonder what else they didn't know; what else they thought they knew, but knew wrongly."

After this surprising interlude they returned their attention to the intended purpose of the excursion. But Caitlan found his thoughts going back to the mystery represented by the pointers in Thalonica, Tyssel, and possibly Gaskar. Where else would they find them? Given Pandrak's account of the settlement and the intentions of the settlers, why should they have placed such obvious pointers? Anybody who bothered to expend a thought or two . . .

But, no; it wasn't like that. If you knew what you were looking for, then, yes, these things suddenly assumed a new meaning. But otherwise . . . they were just statues.

Had Rutger taken the land route and passed through Tyssel? Had *he* wondered? And guessed? If he had, he would by now have a very good idea of where to look, and they were sure to run into him again. Their goal was the same; there were only a limited number of ways to get there. Therefore they would meet him. Therefore they would have to keep their eyes wide open.

"I said," Ailin repeated, "how do you like it?" She shook her head at his distraction, and held up a pair of purple pantaloons and a yellow blouse.

Very colorful. Caitlan told her as much. Ailin rolled up her eyes in exasperation. Caitlan, realizing what he was doing, hugged her. "It's very nice," he whispered in her ear. "Anything you wear is very nice. You could wear a sack for all I care. Or nothing at all—which is the best, of course."

"Shush!" She giggled.

"You asked."

"We'll have to get you something decent to wear, too," she said, changing the subject with the deftness characteristic of her sex.

"That shouldn't take long," he muttered. At least that's what he hoped.

They returned to the *Passage Trader* in the late afternoon, well equipped for the voyage. Caitlan had located an inn which had provided them with rooms to change their clothes, and a bath for each of them; all for an appropriate but, after some haggling, not unreasonable fee. Their old garments had been disposed of. They had dined on something else than sailor's fare and felt almost human again.

When they returned to the ship, Captain Lethaz gave a start. "My! I didn't recognize you!"

"The disguise is working then," Caitlan said dryly. "We can leave—anytime you're ready."

Lethaz nodded. "We have fresh water and provisions. The cargo, too, is now on board. There is nothing to delay us any further. The sooner we leave, the sooner I get home."

Caitlan wondered if he should tell Lethaz now or later. He decided to postpone the matter. The mood was mellow and sometimes it was better to just leave it at that. He'd talk to Lethaz when the time was right.

