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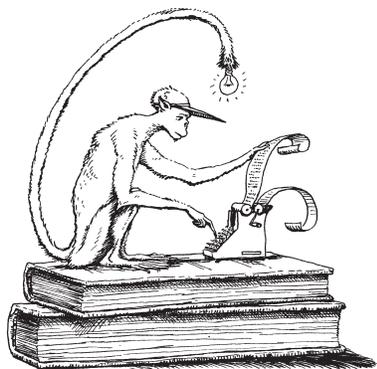
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Editorial

Gentle Readers.

It looks like this is the end. Somewhat prematurely, some might think, but, let's face it: it is too late in the game to start another serialization; and it would be unfair to drag the current ones out, just because we want to fill another *CLS*. No more stories are in the offing, and so, with no more issues currently planned, I bid you a provisional-and-subject-to-contingency good bye. It would have been nice to end on a nice, round number like '30', but '29' will do just as well. It's prime, which '30' is not. What difference does that make? None. So much for numbers.

On behalf of myself and everybody who has contributed to the *CLS* I want to say 'thanks' to those who created it and supported its continued existence. For the contributors it was an excellent opportunity to present their work to what amounts to a free test-audience, and one who can claim, being who they are, of being an audience of taste and discernment. None of the contributors had any negative comments on their work. This may be a function less of the work, but of a reluctance of people to tear into them with evil intent, for any number of reasons. Whatever these may be, thanks to those who read, didn't like what they read, and didn't say so. It massaged our aspiring authors' egos; and actually it's not such a bad thing. In due course, there will be criticism galore—there always is!—but for right now let us bask in the warmth of the basic approval of the few commentators.

Those who read *Cosmopolis* will probably be aware that I have a bee in my bonnet about the process of story-telling and the integrity required of the story-teller. The *CLS* has been an excellent medium to spin yarns and not pretend to do any different; like is so often the case in *Cosmopolis*. A few letter writers have commented with various degrees of directness, on this aspect of the *CLS*—favorably!—and I thank them for their words. They show that *someone* appreciates the simple craft of story-telling; also known as the 'spinning of yarns'. It is a tradition probably predating the practice of religion and politics. I'd like to claim that story-telling could well be the 'oldest profession' of them all, but methinks another rightly claims that spot.

The term ‘story-teller’ invokes images of camp fires and minstrels of times past. Not much of that left nowadays. But, while we may have changed our techniques and the methods of distributing the tales—no flickering camp fires, or ballads sung to audiences of kings and commoners alike—the differences are in the details of implementation, not in substance. And so, tonight, after I’ve sent off this editorial to Malcolm for *CLS*-composition, I shall break open a bottle of good New Zealand Pinot Noir—which is the equal or better of any Pinot Noir I’ve ever had anywhere else—and toast to the venerable and noble tradition of story-telling. Long may it continue to enrich human existence and be a guide through the labyrinths of our lives. Certainty eludes us all, but we need to see *something* in the darkness, so that we may guard our step and avoid the bottomless pitfalls that riddle our paths. Stories shed some light on those paths and help us in our stumbling progress.

Of course, it all often gets lost in the cannibalistic ambience of commercialism, vanity and egos. But so does everything else. It’s no reason to despair. If anything, it should rouse us and make us work twice as hard to ensure our continued integrity.

A final, personal note:

I have asked myself, on more than one occasion, whether I’m presumptuous in assigning to this thing that I do and which am passionate about a ‘meaning’ or even—dare I say use those terms?—a ‘noble purpose’. Maybe I’m just trying to make myself believe that what I like doing isn’t just an exercise in self-gratification, or a way to make money without hard work. This may be the case, but the evidence is against it. I’ve tried to write stories since my late teens, and even from before that I remember, whenever I read something I really liked, that I wished I could do the same. I’ve stopped writing again and again, and always I came back to it, like an addict to his drug. Only in my 40s did I finally admit to myself that I might as well stop resisting the urge—for doing so only made me unhappy and left me with a sense of something that I ought to be doing but wasn’t. It took me another few years to understand that it wasn’t being-a-‘writer’ that was drawing me, but being a story-teller.

What should create such a strange and powerful urge? I don’t know, and maybe I never will. But I know it is real and I think it’s true to say that it has been, is, and will continue to be, just as real, to many others.

And though story-telling always has also been a ‘profession’ and therefore also fulfills the apparently ‘lowly’ purpose of ‘making a living’, there’s more to it. I don’t know what it is, and maybe it doesn’t have a name, but it’s there anyway.

I know it’s there with Jack; definite, strong and quite unadulterated by the usual contaminants: fashion, ‘artiness’, the critics’ clamorings, and so on. And in his own, occasionally curmudgeonly, way he’s remained true to it; as this ‘integral’ edition of his work amply demonstrates. The fact that he is not a millionaire may be the price he has to pay for sticking to his guns. I salute him for that and I hope you all join me.

Best wishes to you all, and, as always, happy reading.
Till Noever



Dragonchaser

by Tim Stretton

Chapter 36

The crew pulled *Sapphire Light* from the finish line to the docks at an easy and largely irregular rhythm; the time for discipline and martial tempos was past. The waterfront was packed with crowds waving banners of Bartazan Azure; all those who had championed the gold and scarlet of *Dragonchaser* held their peace, or maybe argued that their real allegiance had always been to the House of Bartazan anyway. No voices could be heard to decry the performance of *Sapphire Light* or her once-renegade master.

The name of Mirko was first on the lips of the crowd; but little behind was that of Bartazan. Mirko had come to know the Electors of Paladria for the sheep they were; there was simply no chance that they would do anything other than vote out Medina, probably in their droves. Corrando would be changing his employer tonight.

As they rowed past the Elector's stand, Mirko gave an airy salute to Bartazan, who gave an unprecedentedly warm gesture in response. He stood at the helm, his arm around Catzen, who nestled into his side with only the most dilatory attention to steering the galley. He noticed that Larien had disappeared from Bartazan's box; Mirko's victory had represented the death of so many of her hopes, as she had feared. He was not surprised she had chosen to absent herself.

Dockside labourers vied with each other to moor *Sapphire Light* soundly to the very jetty where not so long ago Fenneker had tried to set light to her. Now Fenneker was dead and his scheme for revenge, so easily fed by Corrando, had come to naught. But Corrando was still at large, and still a threat.

Mirko jumped from *Sapphire Light* onto the jetty, pausing to raise an arm in the air to acknowledge the cheers of the crowd. He turned to help Catzen from the deck, and they stood, hand in hand, as the crew disembarked. While they waited, Bartazan of Bartazan House appeared.

"Ascalon!" he cried, throwing his arms around Mirko, and even embracing Catzen. "You really did do it!"

"You knew we would," said Mirko. "Otherwise your conduct in allowing me to sack your overseer and your helm, and agreeing to release your slaves would be completely inexplicable."

"A degree of pessimism is always cautionary for a man in my position," said Bartazan. "But I knew your qualities—good and bad—and always believed you could beat *Dragonchaser*. I notice she has sunk in the harbour, which adds an extra gilding to an already most memorable day."

"Drallenkoop authored his own demise. I spare him no sympathy."

"Very good!" beamed Bartazan, straightening his cap which had become somewhat unbalanced during the course of his celebrations. "Sentimentality is a weakness we cannot afford in public life."

"You will remember too, my lord, your necessary pledge to redeem the indentures of the crew."

"I did notice the first time you mentioned it; it is both unsubtle and inelegant to draw my attention to the matter a second time."

Mirko gave a rueful cluck. "Nonetheless the situation must be resolved sooner or later, and best done before the press of business becomes too irksome."

"Mirko! Mirko! Your loyalty to your crew—albeit a crew of slaves—is to your credit, and no doubt an important factor in the harmony of today's victory; but this is an administrative detail, and one that will be better resolved tonight, or even tomorrow, when the necessary papers are to hand. There are formalities to attend to in freeing slaves, you know."

Catzen nudged Mirko, who knew better than to push. Bartazan would only become truculent and obstinate. The evening revelries, flushed with wine, or the morning after, flushed with magnanimity, would have to do instead. Mirko nodded and smiled.

"Good," said Bartazan. "You are not going to mar our triumph with petty wranglings. As you are aware, the Election takes place at sundown tonight, and I would like to invite you to be my guest for the ceremony. Such events are always attended by the families of Electors and those of good character they ask to join them. You are very much the man of the moment, and I would be honoured by your company. My Lady Catzendralle, your performance today was impeccable—and I confess something of a surprise to me. You are of course

invited to the Election in your right under the House Drall banner, but I suspect you to be neither welcome nor comfortable in such company. Please do me the honour of attending the Election with Captain Ascalon as my guest.”

Catzen bowed. “The honour would be mine, my lord. I have already had a memorable day which I would very much like to continue.”

Bartazan returned the bow, and shook Mirko’s hand. “Excellent! I will see you both tonight for what I hope will be a similarly triumphant occasion. Today will have an entire chapter in the annals of the House of Bartazan!”

He swept away, followed by his entourage. The crowd chanted “Bartazan! Bartazan! Peremptor Bartazan!”

Mirko smiled ruefully and shook his head. “He has played a very clever game,” he said to Catzen. “I wouldn’t like to be in Medina’s shoes tonight.”

Catzen gave him a wondering look. “Now is not the time to worry about Medina, who after all has proved not to be worth my loyalty. Our own position—and especially yours—is quite precarious enough without sparing attention for others.”

“You didn’t take Bartazan’s remarks at face value, then?”

“He needs you, for tonight at least. You are the most popular man in the city today, and an open breach with you is the last thing he needs. Once he has secured his Election the situation becomes very different. I assume you still intend to secure the slaves’ freedom?”

“Catzen! Of course I do! How could you think otherwise?”

Catzen merely shrugged. “It would have made things easier if you had been prepared to sacrifice them, but I understand why you won’t. I am just unused to seeing affairs directed by principle, and it may take me a while to come to terms with it.”

“What would happen—for the sake of argument—if I stood up at the Electoral Banquet and said that I refused to endorse Bartazan unless he fulfilled our compact?”

“He’d be Peremptor anyway—Electors’ votes aren’t swayed by people of your class—and you’d be dead within thirty minutes. And the slaves would stay slaves.”

Mirko ran his hands through his hair. “What choices do I have?”

“Realistically, you need to show Bartazan that you’re no threat to him. There is one way—only one way—that you might even be able to help him.”

“Yes?” said Mirko cautiously.

Catzen walked over to the sea-wall and sat down looking out into the bay and the foreshore where *Dragonchaser* lay half-submerged in six feet of water.

“Bartazan offered you the position ‘Master of the City’s Fleet’?”

“How did you—sorry, that was an unintelligent question.”

Catzen smiled and toyed with the dragon ring she wore on her little finger. “I assume you thought this was a reward for services rendered.”

“And one he never intended to fulfill.”

“It isn’t quite that simple. Firstly, the post is no sinecure, especially with Bartazan as Peremptor. The City Fleet is not an impressive force, particularly by Garganet standards; and the Fleet has, by tradition, a strong allegiance to House Luz. It has no such allegiance—especially among the officers—to the House of Bartazan.”

“So?”

“Bartazan, Peremptor or not, cannot count on the unquestioning loyalty of the Fleet. Most of the Captains are related either to House Luz or its allies such as Tichanet or Chiess-Vervario. Bartazan would prefer the post to go to someone who will command respect among the seamen and not, I imagine, one of his own kinsmen. It is by no means out of the question that he may yet offer you the post. It would neutralise the Luz sympathies of the officers if you could appeal over their heads to the loyalty of the seamen.”

Mirko looked at her. “Is this a serious possibility?”

“If I made it clear to him during the course of the evening that you were prepared to accept the honour under certain strictly defined conditions, then I think we might be able to reach an agreement. It means you carry on working for Bartazan, which I cannot imagine is a prospect you relish; but you may get to see your crew released. It’s your choice.”

He stroked her cheek. “And what about you, Catzen? You can never go back to Darklings, and surely you don’t want to become one of Bartazan’s party?”

“Mirko, let me worry about myself. In my trade you have to be a survivor, and I’ll accommodate myself to however circumstances array themselves.”

Mirko nodded. "Catzen, whatever happens, it happens to both of us. You know that, don't you?"

She leaned forward to kiss him. "I wouldn't be here now if I didn't. I never wanted to share my destiny with anyone before; but you and I will live and die together."

Mirko couldn't help smiling at her serious expression. "Live, surely! We have plenty to do yet."

"You're right, and if we're going to the Election Banquet we can't reasonably attend in our galley clothes. Do you think Panduletta will have anything spare? I am not disposed to return to Darklings to collect my wardrobe."

"Damiano! Walisse!" called Mirko, and the two Quartermen unwillingly left the ribald songs they had been conducting since they had come ashore. "Damiano, I need you to undertake some important commissions for me; Walisse, would you kindly escort the Lady Catzendralle to the Waterside and wait for her while she arranges certain events with Mistress Panduletta."

Both men signified largely unenthusiastic assent.

"And Damiano," said Mirko. "Make sure the men stay sober. I may need them to have their wits about them tonight."

"Am I to take it we are still slaves?"

Mirko frowned. "I have to deal with Bartazan here, by no means a straightforward process. Trust me to arrange the best outcome for us all."

Damiano gave an apologetic smile. "I'm sorry. You've been honest so far."

Mirko added to Walisse's burdens by setting out a list of his own wardrobe requirements to be collected from the Waterside. Damiano was apprised more extensively of his duties, and Mirko took himself back to Urmalest to rest and briefly refresh himself. The sun was already low in the sky and it would not be long until the Electors' Banquet, not an event he viewed with confidence.

He let himself into the store-room at the barracks and settled down on a packing crate to be alone with his thoughts. The day had already proved eventful, and whatever happened he had done what he set out to. Against all the odds, *Sapphire Light* had won the Margariad! He had inherited a crew of underfed and uninterested slaves supervised by brutal and incompetent officers; and in three months he had turned them into the best galley in Paladria, one which would stand comparison with Garganet standards. But more than that,

he had rekindled his appetite for life. He had taken on the job for money, and been prepared to resign over the size of his bonus. Now he realised that he hadn't even thought about it, hadn't raised the matter with Bartazan. The race itself, and the challenge, had been enough. And at long last he and Catzen had recognised and acted on their feelings for each other. If only they could survive tonight, there was every reason for optimism.

The light in the store-room was dim, and he was surprised by a scraping in the shadows. "Who's there?" he said quietly.

"I'm sorry if I startled you—it's me," said Larien.

"Hello," said Mirko, who judged a neutral tone the most appropriate. "How did you know I was here?"

"I followed you after the race."

Mirko nodded to avoid saying anything. He looked off into the middle distance. Larien held her hands awkwardly.

"Well done," she said. "On the race, I mean. You were right all along."

Mirko gave a frosty smile. "I can't imagine the outcome gave you much satisfaction."

"For what it's worth, I'm glad you sank *Dragonchaser*. Drallenkoop and I—we are no longer friends."

"For what it's worth, the loss is all on his side. You should have taken my advice, left Paladria."

"I'm booked on the packet for Garganet tomorrow lunchtime. I cannot stand to stay here with my uncle as Peremptor."

Mirko gave a sad smile. "Do you know, I envy you: Garganet is the one place in the world I can never go. I am exiled forever on pain of death."

Larien sat down softly on the packing case next to Mirko.

"Is it true that you and Catzendralle are—"

"Yes."

"Oh, Mirko. Do you love her?"

"Yes."

She sat quietly for a minute. "I didn't just come to say goodbye."

"I wondered."

"Are you going to the Election Banquet tonight?"

"Yes."

"My uncle plans to kill you."

Mirko sat upright and looked at her. "That sounds like inside knowledge?"

"Before the end of the race I slipped away; I could not bear to watch Bartazan's triumph. I was sitting in our Retiring Room when Bartazan came in; he didn't realise I was there."

"And?"

"That Lieutenant of the Constables, the one with his shoulder in a sling—"

"—Corrando."

"Yes, that's him. He seemed to have been working for my uncle all along. He came in and told my uncle that you had been working for Medina."

She paused. Mirko said nothing.

"Is that true?" she asked.

"Inadvertently, although if you want the truth I always imagined I was working for House Drall, for all the difference it made."

"Corrando said that Catzendralle was Medina's agent too and that the pair of you had been conspiring against Bartazan. I take it that's the truth?"

Mirko nodded.

"I won't ask why, if that's true, you won the race today that will secure his Election. Anyway, as you can imagine, Bartazan was furious. Corrando is to be Captain of the Constables, and you and Catzendralle are to be arrested after the banquet tonight. Bartazan doesn't think he's strong enough to get away with killing Catzendralle, but you will be hanging on a gibbet by tomorrow morning. 'A terrible warning of the price of treachery to the House of Bartazan' was how he put it."

"My options would appear to be limited."

"You must disappear, and take Catzendralle with you if you care about her."

Mirko frowned. "It isn't quite that simple."

Larien's face fell. "You don't believe me, do you?"

Mirko gave a wry smile. "Could you blame me if I didn't?"

"No. But I am telling the truth this time. How could I know what I knew if I wasn't telling the truth?"

"There are all sorts of ways of finding out things you aren't supposed to know, believe me. I've learned some strange ones myself recently. But I can't see what motive you'd have for lying. I believe you, all right."

"Then why don't you just go?"

"I need to be at the Banquet tonight. It's the only hope I have of freeing my crew."

Larien gave a laugh of sheer exasperation. "You think Bartazan will keep his word? After all this time dealing with him?"

"I think I may be able to strike a deal with him. The chances may not be good, but I couldn't live with my conscience if I didn't try."

Larien got up and walked over to the door. "I'm going to go now; if I don't I'm going to make a fool of myself again. You are the most perverse, obstinate man I've ever met; and it will break my heart if anything happens to you. Goodbye, Mirko!"

She dashed through the door before her self-control was lost completely. Mirko, as ever, was affected by her strong emotion, but he had made his choice where she was concerned, and it was clearly the right one. More important now was to work out how he and Catzen were going to survive tonight.



Chapter 36

Mirko went out into the courtyard to await the return of Catzen and Walisse. The latter was swiftly dispatched on a further series of errands while Mirko apprised Catzen of his afternoon conference as they walked around the high defensive walls of the barracks.

Catzen turned her attention away from dissatisfaction with her attire; Panduletta was several inches taller with more pronounced curves, and the effect of the red dress she had finally borrowed was not altogether flattering, despite hasty work with pins and needles.

"The sensible thing to do," she said, "as you very well know, is for the pair of us to disappear now. If we slip out across the Flats, we can be in the hills before anyone knows we're gone. Or there are places we can lie low until we can take passage on a trade galley."

Mirko leant against the crenellations and looked out into the bay. "It would, as you say, be 'sensible'. It would also condemn a group of men to whom I owe loyalty to a lifetime of continued slavery."

Catzen took his hand. “We could even just sail off in *Sapphire Light*, although that approach seems fraught with unnecessary risk.”

“Don’t think I haven’t considered it,” said Mirko with a slight smile. “But we sprung a leak in the collision with *Dragonchaser*. We aren’t seaworthy until it’s repaired. Isn’t there some Old Craft remedy you can work?”

“You know the Old Craft doesn’t work like that. My gift is Voyeurant, and that is waning. I used the Craft yesterday; to use it again so soon would kill me, or worse.”

“Then I see no alternative. We have to go to the Banquet, and we have to convince Bartazan that I am the only man who can deliver him the City’s Fleet.”

Catzen sighed and smiled. “I knew it would be that way.”

“Catzen, you really don’t have to do this, you know. If you want to run or hide, I won’t ever hold it against you.”

“You need me to negotiate with Bartazan. It will be beneath the Peremptor’s dignity to bandy terms with you. Mirko, we are together on this—and everything.”

Mirko simply squeezed her hand.

“How did you feel when Larien showed up this afternoon?” she asked.

“I hardly know what to say. I can never forget that she once had some real hold on my affections, and she is very good at manipulating that. I’m glad I don’t have to see her again. When I’m with her it’s very easy to believe that I’ve wronged her, and all that intriguing and deception with Drallenkoop was just an unfortunate mistake. All smoke and mirrors, of course, but exhilarating. . . she is the greatest actress of all, because she believes it.”

Catzen smiled. “You do her an injustice; her feelings for you are real enough.”

“Maybe. But she is mutable, prey to whatever strong personality is close by. I could never trust her.”

“No? She could deliver you up to Bartazan at any time: that looks very much like trust to me.”

“The wise man trusts only to himself. I’m prepared for a certain amount of—unpleasantness—this evening. I wouldn’t entrust my safety to Larien, and certainly not yours.”



The sun was sinking ever lower in the Paladrian evening; the time of the Election Banquet was drawing close. Mirko had selected his attire with care, not just with aesthetics in mind, but also freedom of movement. Who knew when he might have to run or fight tonight? Mirko walked over to Damiano, clarified certain contingent instructions, then took Catzen’s arm and led her out of the temporary sanctuary of Urmalest.

The Election Banquet, arranged by the Elector Mompesson, was taking place in a giant pavilion of forest-green erected in the central plaza. The very public location was deliberate. Mompesson, Bartazan’s ally, had chosen a venue hemmed in by the populace—a populace which would be likely to vent strong displeasure if the Electors’ votes did not accord with their wishes. In front of the pavilion, facing out to sea, was a long wooden platform along which the Electors walked to make, in public, their choice for the next Peremptor of Paladria. At one end of the platform was an exit from the pavilion; at the other, two flag-poles. One pole carried a powder-blue flag with the sapphire sigil of the House of Bartazan; the other, flapping languidly, was the indigo field with yellow star representing House Luz. Each Elector advanced the flag of his preferred candidate one notch up the pole. The first to reach a twenty-sixth notch was the flag of the Peremptor.

But first came a banquet of six courses, although Mirko for one felt his appetite somewhat limited even as they walked up towards the entrance of the pavilion. Peremptor’s Constables lined the approach, as might be expected in the circumstances.

Catzen squeezed his hand. “Relax,” she said. “We can do this.”

Mirko retained doubts but he returned her pressure with a smile. “Of course. Together we can do anything.”

Two Constables stepped towards them at the entrance. Mirko’s heart pounded and his mouth dried.

“Good evening, sir, madam. Your names, if you please.”

“Mirko Ascalon and the Lady Catzendralle of Drall; guests of the Elector Bartazan of Bartazan House.”

The Constable bowed. “This way, if you please.”

They stepped inside the pavilion, subtly lit by a thousand lanthorns. Standing inside the entrance Mirko saw with a start was Corrando, the black of his uniform offset by the brilliant white of the sling around his

shoulder. He smiled genially at Mirko and slowly drew a forefinger across his throat. Mirko merely nodded back.

Bartazan had not felt the need to pack his table with a large number of guests. The Lady Inuela, managing to look simultaneously tense and bored, was at his side. Bartazan's kinsfolk Lord Calaran and Lady Ysabel, and their adolescent son Balaran—Bartazan's heir since Carnazan's fall from grace—were of course present; and Larien, pale and taut, sat in a reverie of her own, ignoring the conversation of the well-bred nonentity she was seated with. Mirko was rather glad that she was too far away to permit free conversation.

Mirko looked around as he took his seat for the other faces he might expect to be present. The table of House Drall was some distance away, and did not look disposed for merriment. Koopendrall wore his white Election robes with gloomy resignation; Drallenkoop had chosen to dress all in black and did not look inclined to conviviality. By no stretch of the imagination could he reflect upon a day in which he had suffered his first defeat in three years, seen his galley sunk from under him, and faced the prospect of his father's rival being elected Peremptor, with any form of equanimity.

Nearby was the table of House Vavar. Cascais was present, resplendent in silver and green, but studiously avoided Mirko's gaze. At the front of the pavilion was the table of House Luz, with Peremptor Medina at its head. Medina appeared calm and composed, especially considering the foreboding which must be in his heart. He felt Mirko's glance and looked up appraisingly, shook his head ruefully and returned to his wine. A Peremptor had to weigh up the consequence of every different factor, and in Mirko he saw one he had misjudged. Mirko did not admire his morals, but his sangfroid was worthy of respect.

As Mirko munched his way through the early courses it seemed to him that nobody was enjoying themselves. The occasion was too important to admit of any spontaneity or relaxation. Events were about to be arranged in potentially a new and dangerous configuration, and it was not just the Houses of Luz and Bartazan which had much at stake. Many of the Houses had more or less formal ties, and hopes and promises which depended on victory for the right candidate. A victory for Bartazan would mean a lucrative appointment for House Kiffen, leading to an advantageous marriage into

House Zagramonte and corresponding woe for impoverished House Bierselyn. House Sey might prefer victory for Medina, whose animosity towards Kindry of House Io would ensure another period of obscurity for that traditional rival. And so it went; Mirko did not pretend to follow the details, but the web of vested interest and inter-relationship was plain to see. Plots and intrigues had come and gone, some withering, others coming to secret fruition; but Mirko had upset it all with a single galley race no-one had thought he could win—not until too late, at any event.

After the third course—spit-roasted stag with involute tubers—which Mirko had found rather dry, there was a break in proceedings to allow a series of stately dances. This was not a part of the evening Mirko had looked forward to, being unpractised in the world of pavaues and waltzes. While he tried to avoid embarrassing himself with the Lady Inuela, and even more importantly avoiding Larien's gaze, he noticed with approval that Catzen had engaged Bartazan for the Circumamba, a slow tedious dance which took them all the way around the room at an extremely deliberate pace. A dance better fitted for secret negotiation could not have been devised.

After the second round of dances the opportunity arose to change partners. Mirko, sweating from consciousness of his ineptitude rather than exertion, joined a fresh Catzen who had not even raised a flush in her cheeks.

"May I?" he asked, with an ironic bow.

Catzen extended her hand. "Honoured. But don't tread on my hem—the stitching is coming loose. I do wish Panduletta had a less obviously buxom figure."

Mirko merely smiled and led Catzen across the floor to pass the Slumba, another exercise in moderation at which any approach to a jig would be firmly discouraged.

"Well?" he asked, as they performed their stately evolutions.

"He's agreed—you'll be Master of the City's Fleet tomorrow."

"And do you believe him?"

"Hard to say. He understands the advantages of the appointment. It's a question of whether he feels he can indulge his animosity against you; and he's too much the politician to be swayed by his emotions. It's not completely safe, of course; but it's the only real option you have to get the slaves released."

Mirko said nothing.

"And of course," she said, "if he does intend to double-cross us, there isn't much we can do about it. We'll hardly be allowed to walk out of here if he intends a mischief against us."

"That's not a reassuring assessment."

Catzen shrugged and pursed her lips. "You wanted to come here. You're here. I've done my best."

Mirko gave his head a sideways twitch. "At least we have good seats for the Election."

He took Catzen's arm and they returned to their table for the final three courses, ending with a marvelous assortment of cheeses and a sturdy full-bodied wine. Just at the point where Mirko was wondering when something was going to happen, the Elector Mompesson rose from his seat, ringing a small clear silver hand-bell to attract attention. Mirko looked across at Medina; even he seemed uneasy.

"Electors, and guests of the Electors!" called Mompesson, squat and bald. "I have been charged by my peers with the arrangement of tonight's climactic event—the final selection for the August Office. To whet our appetites for honourable strife, we have had the spectacle of a Margariad race which will long live in our minds. We are fortunate enough to have among us tonight not just the patron, but the master of the illustrious winning galley, *Sapphire Light*: Bartazan of Bartazan House and the Worthy Ascalon. I see too among us the gallant former winner, the Noble Dralenkoop, and the sponsor of second-placed *Excelsior*, the young Lord Coolis of House Zagramonte.

"But these exertions, of course, are merely the precursor to the real contest of the day, the Election of our new Peremptor. We have had already many speeches by and on behalf of our excellent candidates, Peremptor Medina of House Luz, and his challenger Bartazan of Bartazan House. Electors are men of sense, not swayed by trivial considerations, whim, or womanish inconsistency. I am sure we all know the directions of our individual votes; so let us cast them without further delay or theatricality."

Mirko could not suppress a grin at this very manifestation of theatricality; and what could be more melodramatic than the long slow walk across the Election Stage to advance a flag by no more than six inches?

"By tradition the Peremptor signifies his preference first. Your August Dignity, would you care to make your selection?"

Medina inclined his head, got up slowly from his seat and walked across to the stage. On the other side of the Election Stage, an expectant crowd filled the plaza. A rotten vegetable, and considerable jeering, were launched at the Peremptor: Constables went among the crowd to identify and eject the miscreant although not, Mirko noticed, at Corrando's order.

Medina affected not to notice the vegetable—which after all had been cast with more enthusiasm than accuracy—and calmly hoisted the House Luz flag one notch aloft. For the first—and, Mirko suspected, the only—time, Medina was ahead.

"Next," cried Mompesson, "the House of Bartazan."

To patently orchestrated chanting, Bartazan made his procession across the stage, stopping to smile and wave. On reaching the flags, he affected to deliberate, at one point turning to the crowd for advice. *What a snake*, thought Mirko. *Can't he just win gracefully?*

Bartazan eventually came to the conclusion that a vote for the House of Bartazan best represented his will, moved the flag aloft and returned to his seat to even greater acclaim. As he dismounted the stage he permitted himself a thin smile at Corrando, who seemed lost in a reverie of his own.

The next few minutes passed in blur for Mirko.

"House Quisp!", "House Chiess-Vervario!", "House Esterling!"—all raised the flag of Bartazan a further notch. There was a brief hiatus as House Drall was called: Koopendrall stepped forward with manifest contempt for the crowd, and with an unconcealed sneer raised the flag of Luz a notch. Order returned when successively Io, Kiffen and Zagramonte raised the flag of Bartazan.

A brief rally was promised when Sey and Bierselyn both cast their votes for Luz, their traditional ally. This took Medina's votes to four, while Bartazan could claim seven. Next came the notorious 'Bastard House', Hesse-Zagramonte, known as strong Luz allies. The crowd was markedly displeased at what might represent a fifth vote for Medina, and surged towards the Election Stage. Corrando languidly instructed Constables forward with a total lack of menace. Snarling faces strained forward; clutching arms reached for Udesse of Hesse-Zagramonte. Visibly intimidated, Udesse pulled aloft the flag of Bartazan to huge applause.

"Can they do that?" Mirko quietly asked Catzen. "It's obvious he wanted to vote for Medina."

Catzen gave him a wondering look. "That's the whole point! Why do you think Bartazan and Mompesson chose the Election for today? It's *Sapphire Light* and you they're voting for, not Bartazan."

"I know," sighed Mirko. "Now I understand why everyone was telling me to throw the race. I could have stopped this. And Medina is behaving so well."

Catzen touched his hand. "Don't be fooled. Medina is every bit as corrupt as Bartazan, believe me; and if he's behaving with dignity, courage in the face of defeat is an important Elector's virtue. He's just acting out his part in the play."

House Tichanet declared for Bartazan, as did Nool Vavar of House Vavar; his son Cascais' humiliation at the hands of Bartazan's galley-master counting not a jot in the end. It became a procession. With thirty-four of the fifty Electors having voted, Medina had nine votes—some of them the result of real courage—and Bartazan twenty-five. One more would see him Peremptor.

Mompesson—who had yet to vote—called the next name: Deverello. The tall dyspeptic figure of Deverello of Deverello House, generally a moderate, stepped forward. Walking across the stage on hesitant—the uncharitable might even say inebriated—legs, he raised high the flag of Bartazan, which now sat atop its pole.

Bartazan had twenty-six votes; he had won the Election; he was Peremptor of Paladria.

And, thought Mirko, he was also a murderous hypocrite; and he, Mirko had put him there.

The crowd would be denied no longer. "Bartazan! Peremptor Bartazan! Give us the new Peremptor! Bartazan! Fly the Sapphire Flag!"

Medina sat expressionless at his table; Mirko sat with his head in his hands next to a frozen Catzen. Larien looked across at the pair of them, her thoughts unreadable. Elsewhere, at a signal from Corrando, the Constables took up new stations at the exits.

Mompesson rose from his seat and called the room to attention. "My lords, may I direct your attention to the flagpoles? You will see that the Election has a winner; the Azure of the House of Bartazan is at the summit. I give you your new Peremptor, Lord Bartazan of Bartazan House!"

The crowd outside bellowed in approval. Inside the pavilion rapture was more contained; everybody knew that many of the votes cast for Bartazan had been the result of direct or indirect duress. Larien cast a long

look at Mirko, rose from her seat and went to stand by the exit leading to the Election platform.

Bartazan stood up and walked with measured dignity to the far end of the pavilion, pausing as he passed Medina's table to exchange a few quiet words. Mirko was mildly encouraged; there was as yet no gloating or triumphalism. Mirko knew from his own experience that one could never tell in advance how power would affect a man, and that his means of securing it did not necessarily give a clue as to how he would discharge it. Perhaps Bartazan would prove statesmanlike after all.

After briefly condoling with Medina, Bartazan sprang up to the lectern swiftly unveiled for the victory speech.

"My fellow Electors, and my guests," he began, his face overspread by a benign if possibly not sincere smile, "I stand before you not as your Peremptor, but your servant."

Mirko identified the cough at the back of the room as coming from Larien; it seemed likely that the knowledge would not escape her uncle either, but Bartazan was not detained in his oratory.

"I am conscious of a deep personal inferiority as the responsibility of the August Office settles upon me; but my House has a long and honourable history of service to the common weal of Paladria, and I will strive with all my might to live up to the traditions of my House and the Office."

Larien appeared to have brought her scorn under control, and no-one else among the Electors felt the need for interjection or open scepticism.

"It is my intent to dispense only justice as your Peremptor. I forswear all senseless harshness and vendetta; however, it is necessary to begin my tenure with a certain reckoning, which will deal justly with certain persons who have fallen away from their loyalties and obligations. In public affairs there is inevitably a tension between justice and mercy; and on occasion the diligent ruler must choose between the two. Corrando, step forth!"

Mirko looked at Catzen, his stomach leaping. What was Bartazan planning? Was it possible he was going to make an example of the treacherous Corrando and accept the wisdom of reaching an accommodation with Mirko? The idea had never previously occurred to him. Or was this moment he chose to rid himself of all the problems Mirko represented?

Corrando walked slowly to the lectern, his face expressionless. Mirko realised that Corrando had no more idea of Bartazan's intentions than anyone else; megalomania and paranoia were not predictable states of mind.

"Welcome, loyal servant of Paladria!" cried Bartazan. "You may consider yourself, as of this moment, Captain of the Constables."

Corrando bowed, his expression still unreadable.

"Your first act is to secure the exits from this room, that justice may be administered the more effectively."

Catzen reached across and took Mirko's hand. *Sorry*, she mouthed. Mirko squeezed her hand, and allowed his other hand to drop to his sword hilt. *My fault*, he mouthed back.

Corrando wordlessly directed the Constables to all the exits; although Mirko noticed that Larien had managed to slip out while all eyes were elsewhere.

"It has come to my attention," said Bartazan, "with a heavy heart, that a man I had come to rely on, from whom I had come to expect loyalty and even considered a friend, has been conducting a secret intrigue against me these many months. Intrigue against the Peremptor is treason."

Mirko considered that, even were he a Paladrian citizen, the law hardly permitted treason to be determined retrospectively; but felt that Bartazan was unlikely to be in the mood for legalistic quibbles.

"Sadly I refer to the self-styled 'Captain', Mirko of Garganet. You have all seen his consummate skill on the water today; but like so many of our galley-masters, he has been corrupted into dabbling with politics, to his ultimate woe. In conspiracy with the Lady Catzendralle, of the pernicious House Drall, he has sought to undermine and betray me. I will deal with the body of House Drall later, but regrettably the Lady Catzendralle must be taken into custody, awaiting the trial by her peers which is her right. No such privilege need be extended to the rogue Garganet, neither citizen nor gentleman.

"Corrando! Kindly take the Lady Catzendralle into custody; then remove Ascalon and kill him immediately."

Constables moved towards Catzen and made to lead her away, while others moved towards Mirko with drawn swords. Catzen shook off the first arm which reached her.

"Be good enough to allow me to adjust my hem!" she said with quiet hauteur. "If this is to be my last public appearance, I would not have my skirt flapping at my ankles."

Such was her authority that the first Constable stepped back while Catzen knelt to adjust her hemline. Before Mirko could fully establish what had happened, Catzen had stood erect with one of Panduletta's hem-pins concealed in her hand, and plunged it into the stomach of the hapless Constable, who leapt back in alarm with a cry of chagrin.

All eyes moved to the scene; Mirko took advantage to draw his sword and skewer the wrist of the first of the advancing Constables. The odds were still long but he now had the initiative. He leaped onto the long banquet table. "Come on!" he roared. "Who's first?"

The other two Constables stepped back in puzzlement; this had been no part of their expectation. Catzen drove her elbow hard into the nose of the Constable she had pinned; he fell back with blood coursing from his nose. Hampered by her dress, she clambered onto the table to stand back-to-back with Mirko.

The Constables around the exit looked irresolutely on: they were unwilling to desert their positions and risk an escape. Mirko essayed a sally down the table; Electors scattered and he caught one of the unwary Constables with a thrust to the belly. This technique would work, Mirko realised, until the Constables managed to collect their wits. Lady Inuela sat below them, her face transfixed in horror. Mirko thought about taking her hostage, but he knew Bartazan would simply not care.

Deftly Mirko flipped up the injured Constable's blade with his own and threw it to Catzen. For the time being there was a stand-off of sorts, but it could not last. Ladies around the room screamed; Bartazan bellowed largely incoherent advice. Then Corrando called out: "Archers! Fetch me archers!"

Mirko knew the game was up; an archer could pick him off from the side of the pavilion and he would be able to do nothing. Catzen looked at him in alarm; Mirko shook his head. He was a dead man either way; but he could save Catzen from the archers by giving in. "Corrando!" he called.



Chapter 37

From outside Mirko was interrupted by a high clear female voice, and one he recognised.

"Listen to me!" it shouted. "Bartazan is killing Mirko!"

Larien, thought Mirko. *What is she doing?*

"Help me!" she called. "Will you let them kill brave Mirko? And the Lady Catzendralle? Help me now!"

Mirko could hear the great inarticulate roar go up from the crowd, who only minutes earlier had been threatening to lynch anyone who did not vote for Bartazan; but the person of a galley-master—especially a Margariad winner—was inviolate. The next thing Mirko knew splintered planks were sailing through the entrance; they were ripping up the entrance in their rage and hurry to get inside.

Corrando turned. "Where are the archers! Manirotis, keep them out!"

But the first members of the crowd had surged through the entrance, trampling Constables underfoot. This wasn't a rescue attempt, it was a riot. Corrando called the Constables to order, turned tables on their side to create a barricade. Once the archers arrived they could easily restore order, but until then they simply had to hang on. The Electors milled around like chickens molested by a fox, running this way and that to no great effect. Bartazan dashed over to Corrando's barricade, shouting great imprecations.

"Come on!" yelled Mirko to Catzen. "Let's get out of here—now!"

The Constables were too concerned with their own safety to spare a thought for them; the panic-stricken Electors neither recognised them nor cared; and the crowd parted to let them through with a great cheer, although already the thought of looting and destruction held more appeal for them than their original purpose.

Mirko took Catzen's hand as they dashed pell-mell from the pavilion out on to the plaza, trying to force a passage through the great press of bodies swelling in the opposite direction. "Don't let go of my hand!" he shouted.

Eventually, after much bargaining and cursing, they found themselves in a side-street; only to be confronted by a squad of Constables, all armed with bows.

"You there! Halt!" cried the leader of the group. "Where are you going?"

"There's a riot at the pavilion—the crowd is trying to lynch the Peremptor. Corrando needs you there now! There's no time to waste!"

The Constable nodded. "Come on, lads! There's work to be done!"

And the archers pounded off down the street.

"Where now?" panted Catzen. "Those archers will sort things out soon enough."

"The docks, as quickly as we can—I had a feeling this might happen. Come on, Catzen!"

Catzen found it hard to keep up with Mirko's unflagging pace; and Mirko himself felt his lungs burning and his legs moved as if he were running through water. Catzen cast her sword aside in sheer exhaustion as she held on to Mirko's hand. Behind them Mirko heard a horn blowing loud and long.

"That's the pursuit," gasped Mirko. "We're back where we were this morning."

Directly in front of them was the jetty, guarded by surly Constables annoyed at having missed the more glamorous task of superintending the Election.

"Let us through!" called Mirko. "I need to get to *Sapphire Light*!"

The Sergeant of the Constables looked puzzled. "No-one's to go through, captain, that's the orders of Corrando."

"You blockhead!" said Mirko. "I hardly think that applies to galley-masters, do you? Your job is to protect the galleys—I'm hardly going to set fire to my own boat, am I?"

"I suppose not, sir . . ."

"Stand aside, then!"

The Sergeant moved aside with a mumbled apology, and Mirko and Catzen clattered down the jetty. *Sapphire Light* was illuminated in the crescent half-moon, rocking gently on the tide, the sail bellied with the light breeze.

"This is where we find out if Damiano has followed instructions," said Mirko. "If he hasn't, we're dead. Damiano! Are you there?"

"Who is it?" came a voice back out of the darkness.

"Mirko and Catzen—are we ready to go?"

Catzen said quietly to Mirko: "I thought we had a leak?"

"Not if Damiano has done as I hoped."

Damiano sprang from the deck onto the jetty with a grin. "Welcome aboard! I take it events have not gone according to plan."

Catzen permitted herself a thin smile. "It depends: if the plan was to ensure Bartazan—or should I say, Peremptor Bartazan?—passing a death sentence on us, we enjoyed complete success."

"Well," said Damiano, "we have replaced the damaged timbers and taken aboard a full complement of provisions. If there's anywhere you want to go, *Sapphire Light* will take you there."

Mirko nodded. "We no longer have a choice. Bartazan will not remit your indentures, he has told the Constables to kill me and arrest Catzen. We need to go."

"What about Florio?"

Mirko looked at Catzen. She shrugged and shook her head.

"There's nothing we can do for him," said Mirko. "There's no way we can rescue him, and no reason Bartazan should harm him. We need to go with all due speed. Tell the crew they have five minutes. Catzen, you go aboard; I'll join you shortly."

Catzen looked at him in surprise and went aboard. Mirko walked back down the jetty and past the Sergeant, who saluted smartly as he went past. Leaning against the sea-wall, he looked back into the Old Town. This place had been home to him; only for a year, but it had been home. On any rational basis Paladria was not a city to regard with affection, its ruling class corrupt, evil, at best inept. But here he had found friendship—admittedly at a price—purpose, and confidence. He doubted he would ever be returning; he had left a few loose ends, especially—

Even before the thought could crystallise he heard a whisper in the still quiet of the night: "Mirko! Are you there?"

Mirko looked around. From the shadows stepped Larien.

"I knew you'd be here," she said. "I wanted to make sure you got away."

Mirko smiled thinly. "That remains a premature assumption. *Sapphire Light* is seaworthy, and we will have to trust to our chances; but our escape is by no means assured."

"You know my uncle wasn't bluffing about killing you."

"Of course not. But you know I had to try and redeem the slaves. And thank you for what you did."

Mirko thought he could discern a flush spread across her moonlit face.

"Think of it as paying my debt," she said. "After the way I've treated you this summer . . . now I can look you in the face if I ever see you again."

Mirko looked up at the sky. Why was dealing with Larien never straightforward? "You can come with us, you know. You must be in danger here now."

Larien shook her head with a half-smile. "Even Bartazan won't kill his own niece—not before tomorrow lunchtime, anyway, and I'm out of here on the Garganet packet then. And don't take this the wrong way, but I really don't think I enjoy seeing you and Catzenralle together."

Mirko smiled. "Is there a right way to take that?"

"I suppose not," she said with a laugh. "But are we friends again?"

He took her hand. "It depends what you mean by friends—but yes."

She stood up and pulled her cloak around her shoulders. "Then that's enough for me. One day we'll meet again, Mirko—so I'm glad we've parted like this."

"Goodbye, Larien."

"Goodbye Mirko."

He watched her as she slipped slowly off into the darkness; and sighed with relief. The final interview had not created any conflicts he could not deal with, and he would no longer have to worry about her continuing ability to affect him in ways he could not fully understand.

Cries in the distance brought him to full alertness: "Treason! Treason! To the docks!"

He sprinted back up the jetty. "Jenx! Help me cast off—we're leaving!"

Mirko and Jenx untied *Sapphire Light* and leaped back aboard.

"Which direction?" asked Catzen.

"Just out into the bay—we need to get away from the land."

Jenx beat a steady Six tempo as they pulled out towards the Hanspar. Mirko looked back towards the shore; on the seafront he could see torches, enough for several squads of Constables. He jumped down from the observation platform to stand next to Catzen.

"What will Bartazan do?" he asked.

"You've stolen his galley and his slaves: what do you expect him to do?"

"Come after us with the Fleet."

"Yes, but it's not quite that simple. Bartazan has been Peremptor half an hour; the Fleet officers are tra-

ditionally loyal to the House he has beaten; and you are not without a certain popularity in the city. I rather suspect he might not be able to launch the Fleet against you.”

Mirko looked at her in surprise. “We can cruise the seas, then . . .”

“It only needs a few officers—the rowers are loyal to the officers and to their purses. We need to get out of here, and quickly.”

Mirko nodded. “I’m not keen to run against the current once we’re outside the bay, so that rules out Estria. We’ll make for Aylissia, and if anyone wants to press on for Garganet from there, they can. Jenx! Go to Seven!”

Mirko climbed back to the observation platform and looked across to the Fleet Docks, which were lit but still. Steadily *Sapphire Light* made her way west across the bay, steering by the light of the Morvellos lighthouse. This course took them closer to the Fleet Docks than Mirko wanted to go, but he was unwilling to leave the bay for the open sea without the protection of the coastline.

“Look!” shouted Catzen, “there’s a galley coming out of the docks.”

Mirko pulled out his spy-glass. “It’s only one ship, but a double-lateen sixty-four: twice our size and faster than us, especially with a fresh crew.”

The black shape of the Fleet galley scudded rapidly across the inshore waters; at her rate of progress she would intercept *Sapphire Light* while they were still in the bay; and Mirko knew the chances of out-running her were slim.

“Jenx! Down to Five! Down to Five! Catzen! Put about—prepare to fight!”

Jenx wordlessly lowered the tempo; Catzen looked at him in astonishment.

“You can’t fight a sixty-four—she’ll destroy us!”

Mirko’s eyes were cold. “I ran away once before. It’s not the Garganet way. This time, Catzen, we stand and fight. We may not be a Garganet galley but we’ll go down like one.”

Catzen shook her head. “Not like this, Mirko, not like this. I didn’t come all this way, go through everything that I’ve been through, to die because you’re too proud to run!”

“We can’t outrun her anyway,” said Mirko levelly.

“It buys us time!” cried Catzen, her eyes alight. “Don’t be a fool!”

Mirko’s eyes narrowed. “Do I have to take over the helm myself? Do as I say!”

Catzen stood defiantly as Mirko jumped down from the platform.

Mirko! Mirko! Listen to us!

He stopped short.

Come to the rocks; we will protect you.

“Mirko?” said Catzen in puzzlement. “What’s happening?”

Mirko held his hand up to silence her.

Mirko—you are our friend. We will help you.

He looked out towards the Morvellos lighthouse. Clustered on the rocks at the base were more mermaids than he had ever seen, ten or even fifteen.

“Jenx! Go to Eight! Catzen, steer for the lighthouse.”

Catzen swung the helm around. “It’s the mermaids, isn’t it? They’re talking to you again.”

Mirko said nothing. He raised his glass again to look more closely at the Fleet galley: on its bow was painted the legend *Esterling* with its sigil of a manzipar tree indited below. At the stern fluttered a long scarlet pennon with a golden dragon.

“Catzen,” asked Mirko uneasily, “why would a Fleet galley have a House Drall pennon?”

“It wouldn’t—unless . . . can you see the helm?”

Mirko trained his glass at the stern. “Oh, Catzen . . . it’s Drallenkoop . . . but why?”

The oars smacked raggedly at the water as Catzen said: “He has every reason to resent you: you’ve taken his title, you’ve sunk his galley and destroyed his relationship with Larien. It looks like he hates you enough to make it worth doing Bartazan a favour.”

Mirko set his shoulders. “I like to know who my enemy is. We aren’t beaten yet.”

The lighthouse approached with agonising slowness as *Sapphire Light*, her crew already exhausted from the day’s efforts, pulled into the current. *Esterling’s* oars seemed only to skim the water’s surface as her sixty-four oarsmen rapidly closed the gap. Mirko knew they could not make the open sea ahead even if they tried: matters would be settled on the rocks and waters around the lighthouse.

Mirko! Trust us, we will protect you.

An arrow dipped in pitch thrummed across the narrowing gap between the galleys, falling no more than ten yards short of *Sapphire Light’s* stern. The chances of *Esterling* setting fire to *Sapphire Light* were not high, but a

burning arrow catching in the lateen sail could conceivably set her alight. Mirko instructed two oarsmen away from their duties to reef the sail. Around the rocks it would be of dubious value anyway.

"Catzen, take us as close into the lighthouse as you can. Try and keep the lighthouse between us and *Esterling* at all times."

Catzen nodded and gave the little half-smile she normally used when Mirko's intelligence had exceeded her expectations. The mermaids watched inscrutably as *Sapphire Light* approached; for now they had no further counsel to give Mirko.

"Am I too close?" asked Catzen, one eye on the waves pounding relentlessly against the rocks. Mirko was not wholly comfortable with their proximity but felt that the mermaids would warn him if they flirted too openly with the rocks.

"Keep us where we are," he said. "The closer we are, the harder *Esterling* will find it to follow us in."

And *Esterling* clearly was in a quandary, if not in real difficulty. With two decks of oarsmen she sat heavier in the water and could not take the risks to stay close to the lighthouse that *Sapphire Light* could. The superior speed and freshness of her crew were negated in this slow-paced cat and mouse. *Esterling* launched sporadic volleys of arrows, but these were half-hearted and were no threat. Mirko grinned. *Sapphire Light* could keep *Esterling* at bay indefinitely, dodging around the lighthouse.

Catzen shook her head at him. "This stalemate helps *Esterling*, not us. Bartazan only needs to launch one more galley and he can trap us."

"He hasn't done it yet, which suggests he can't. What if there's been a mutiny?"

"He controls the treasury. Sooner or later he'll find someone competent to take a galley out."

"But if we run for the open sea, *Esterling* will be on us in minutes. If we don't he needs only wait."

He turned to look at the mermaids. They might want to protect him but there was very little they could do if Bartazan managed to launch a second galley. On the upper deck of *Esterling*, Drallenkoop was pacing with barely containable energy, berating the archers for failing to land an a fire-arrow near enough to cause any damage.

"Does Drallenkoop look like a man who's prepared to wait for reinforcements, Catzen?" Mirko asked. "Just

look at him! He's seething with frustration. Let's goad him!"

Catzen raised her eyebrows quizzically.

"Your job is simple but important. I want us so that you could draw a straight line from *Esterling*, through the lighthouse, to us. And be prepared to respond to my instructions on the instant. Understand?"

"Your plan is hardly so complex as to tax the intellect," she responded dryly.

"Jenx! Tempo Two, but be ready to move up."

For the next ten minutes, *Sapphire Light*, on the ocean side of the lighthouse, gently manoeuvred in an attempt to arrange the configuration Mirko wanted. The moonlit sea was calm, the winds were light. The only sound was the gentle plashing of her oars, and the rhythmic pounding of the waves against the rocks. *Esterling* seemed uninterested in tracking the minutiae of *Sapphire Light's* movements. For all Drallenkoop's brilliant reputation, Mirko realised, he was by training and inclination a galley-racer: he would never before have fought a naval engagement.

Mirko stood on the observation platform looking back at the lighthouse; very little of *Esterling* was visible—she was now almost completely obscured by the bulk of the lighthouse.

"Jenx!" he called in a tone little louder than conversational. "Get ready."

Jenx merely nodded. Catzen looked up expectantly; whatever Mirko was planning, he had the position he wanted.

"Go to Eight!" he cried. "Tempo Eight!"

The crew ground into action, forcing *Sapphire Light* into a muscle-grinding acceleration which must have been torture for muscles which had alternately strained and cooled throughout the day. But accelerate they did, with Catzen steering for the open sea and looking to steal a march on *Esterling*.

Aboard *Esterling* a cry went up; oaths drifted across the water. Mirko could hear Drallenkoop roaring orders; and, more slowly than would have been the case on *Dragonchaser*, the crew responded. Drallenkoop swung his helm to starboard and looked to pass the Morvellos to his left.

"Jenx! Down to Six."

Jenx looked puzzled but complied. *Esterling* looked to be beating Eight or even Nine; giving the Morvellos a wide berth she rapidly closed the gap.

"Catzen! Hard about! Hard about! Back past the lighthouse. Jenx, go to Eight!"

Sapphire Light was now coming back the way she had come—in towards the shore—with the current carrying her along, adding impetus to the tired rowers' efforts. *Esterling's* great speed was now taking her further away from the doubled-back *Sapphire Light*. Drallenkoop pulled his helm across to try and intercept *Sapphire Light* before she could regain the shelter of the lighthouse. He was too involved to think of ordering arrows now.

Mirko! Come closer!

So the mermaids are still awake, thought Mirko. "Catzen, bring us in a touch."

Drallenkoop! Drallenkoop! Come closer to the rocks, the way is short.

Mirko looked around in astonishment. The mermaids were talking to Drallenkoop—and somehow he could hear that too.

Drallenkoop kept *Esterling* on a steady course; she was already close to the rocks; although not to Mirko's eye close enough to foul them, which was his hope.

"Jenx! Go to Nine!" He needed to unsettle Drallenkoop enough that she would gamble with the rocks and push too hard.

Drallenkoop! Drallenkoop! Great helmsman, lord of the sea! You can sweep closer to our rocks than that. We are calling to you, waiting for you! Come to us!

A shiver went down Mirko's spine. He could feel the power of their call, though it was not for him. Would Drallenkoop be strong enough to resist it?

He saw Drallenkoop bring the helm around to port, in towards the rocks. His heart gave a leap, half horror, half exultation. If Drallenkoop did make it through, he realised, he would be virtually on top of *Sapphire Light*: there would be no escape.

There was a grinding sound behind them; *Esterling* visibly slowed. *She's grounded*, thought Mirko. But how badly was she damaged?

Esterling appeared to have come to a complete halt. She had managed to wedge herself completely and immovably on a submerged rock.

"Jenx! Down to Six! Catzen, put us about again!"

Sapphire Light slowly turned to face *Esterling*. If she managed to get free, Mirko wanted to be in a position to launch one serious ramming run. But *Esterling* was already listing heavily. She had hit the rocks fast and it

seemed she had hit a large rock too. There could be no doubt: *Esterling* was sinking, and quickly.

"Jenx! Go to Seven! Catzen, open sea."

Catzen nodded. This was no time to be picking up survivors. Drallenkoop and his crew had been trying to kill them for the past hour; now they would have to secure their own rescue. Let Drallenkoop, lord of the sea, cling to rocks and debate matters with the mermaids. He would have plenty to think about: not many galley masters managed to be sunk twice in one day.

Mirko raised his arm in thanks to the mermaids who, for the second time, had come to his aid. They were dangerous friends, but worse enemies. *Thank you*, he thought. No words came into his head from the rocks; all but one of the mermaids slipped into the sea and vanished from sight and knowledge. The final one remained on her rock and looked back at him. Into his head came not words but an image: Mirko himself with his sword out, marching towards the two louts on the beach as they prepared to molest the mermaid: louts with the scarlet tabard with a golden dragon of House Drall. He smiled. The mermaids always paid their debts.

He climbed down from the observation platform to stand beside Catzen. She put her free arm through his.

"Well," she said. "Where to now, Captain?"

Mirko looked back over his shoulder at the dim shapes of Paladria looming out of the dark. "Aylissia can wait," he said. "I always wanted to see what was over the horizon. South it is."

Catzen's eyes were dark pools in the moonlight as she smiled up at him. "They say we'll sail off the edge of the world."

"We already have, Catzen, we already have."

And Catzen brought the helm around, and *Sapphire Light* made her moonlit way into her own unknown future, unique among all the other unique futures she might have chosen.

THE END



Finister

by *Till Noever*

Book Three

— 5 —

The *Passage Trader* was in the process of berthing at the far side of Gaskar's eastern wharves, well away from the main body of vessels. The spot had been chosen with deliberation. It kept the ship away from casual passersby, and it also decreased the cost of mooring. Captain Lethaz had grumbled about what he considered his passengers' 'stinginess', but Caitlan had been unrepentant.

"You wish to pay the excess fee? Feel free to do so."

"I do not wish to pay anything," Lethaz remarked.

"That's what I thought."

"This is not a good position to attract offers of freight," Lethaz muttered.

"Then go out and solicit them," Caitlan suggested, not unreasonably.

Nerys, watching Caitlan, saw that the big man was leading up to something. Lethaz was being driven into a corner, but as yet he didn't know it. The former Keanean weaponsmaster, Nerys thought, was much more shrewd than one might expect from a man of his profession. He wielded his skill of manipulation with the same ease as he did a sword or those lethal sling-shots of his.

"This is not a good place to take on freight," Lethaz fretted. "I tend to avoid Gaskar—and for good reason! I've yet to make a profit by coming here."

"You've made a handsome profit so far!" Caitlan pointed out dryly.

"It'll pay the bills," Lethaz muttered. "Just!"

"Of course," Caitlan observed, "there is a way to augment your profit yet further."

"Really?" Lethaz said sarcastically. "I'm open to suggestions!"

"We will need to get back to Keaen," Caitlan pointed out.

"When? Next year?" Lethaz snapped.

"Maybe a week," Caitlan said. "Maybe two. In any case, we will be returning here and looking for a ship—the owner of which will profit handsomely as a consequence."

"What if you don't return?"

"We'll leave a deposit: a third of whatever we agree upon. If we don't return within, say, three weeks, you are free to take the money and go on your way. If we do return you'll get paid the rest and take us back to Keaen. Everybody will be happy; including your crew and your wife."

Lethaz narrowed his eyes as he considered the proposal.

"Of course," Caitlan added, as if as an afterthought, "if you take the deposit and *don't* wait for us . . ."

Lethaz raised a defensive hand. "I know who you are. I would not be so stupid."

Caitlan nodded. "I didn't think so."

"Three weeks you say?"

Caitlan glanced at Nerys, who made a mental calculation. A one-way trip to the final depot took about four days. Wearers tended to stay in the range for about ten days; seven of which they were allowed to use for 'gathering' silks. A jammer was always there for their return; part of the service—for which the Wearers were prepared to pay handsomely. Including the return trip that added up to eighteen, maybe nineteen days. A few more days for the unexpected.

"Twenty five days," she said.

Caitlan looked at Lethaz. "You heard." Nerys was flattered. Caitlan appeared to trust her judgment without hesitation. It was an eerie experience. She wasn't used to being listened to like that. It was also frightening. What if she was wrong; remembered wrongly; miscalculated? Lives might depend on what she had just said!

A presence behind her. "Don't doubt yourself like this," Fliz said lowly.

She turned her head. "How . . ."

"How do I know?" he said. He shrugged. "I just do."

Lethaz had finished his own computations. "I will wait," he said. "Twenty-five days." He shook his head. "I'll have to find work for my men. They won't know what to do with themselves."

Caitlan eyed the deck of the *Passage Trader*. "It looks like an excellent opportunity to attend to those matters that are never attended to while at sea," he noted.

Lethaz followed Caitlan's gaze. "Indeed." He looked up. "For a fact, the sails are getting tattered. A good blow and they'll rip like women's gowns."

Caitlan slapped him on the shoulder. "There's your work!"

Nerys watched as the sailors completed the berthing procedure. Beyond the port rose the hills of Gaskar, the city draped across them like a huge mosaic. Back home again! Just like that. Fate's strange meanderings had returned her to the one place she'd been certain she would never see again. In—and here was a delicious irony—the company of a man whom, only weeks ago, she would not even have given a second look; whom she would have considered at the same level as those loathsome drudges who had tried to force themselves upon her. She, who had rejected the cream of her Gaskarian suitors, in love—and in love she was—with a Thalonian thief, returning home for a clandestine visit on her way to finding an artifact from before the beginning of time.

Nerys shook her head. Sometimes she wasn't sure that her memories were not playing her tricks. Had she really been that same girl she remembered?

A presence behind her. Fliz. He always moved with the grace and stealth of a stalking predator, but she sensed him anyway. As usual—and it had been that way since the first time they'd met; only then she'd been too silly to know—his presence was soothing and reassuring.

He stood close behind her. "How do you feel?" he asked.

"About being home?"

"Is it still home?"

"In a way." She leaned back against him. His arms went around her. "And then again it isn't. I think I don't have a home anymore. There are just . . . places. Places where I am. Where we are."

Caitlan's and Ailin's voices emerged from the poop castle as they stepped out on the deck. Familiar voices. The voices of friends.

Friends.

She'd never had any friends before. Not real ones anyway. Now she had three. A home lost. Friends gained. Nerys decided, there and then, that the exchange had gone in her favor.

Ailin stopped beside Nerys and leaned on the railing. Nerys gave her a quick little smile and ran her right

hand over her, now very-short-cropped, hair. Ailin's doing; who had done a somewhat better job than Fliz with his well-meant, but hasty, hackings.

"Worried they'll recognize you?" Ailin asked her.

"A bit," she admitted.

"Unless you stare them in the face I doubt they'll know you," Fliz said. He kissed the top of her head through the inch-long stubble. He obviously didn't mind. However, that was Fliz. He was hardly objective.

But Nerys minded. As soon as this was all over she would grow her hair back. For the moment though, 'adaptation' was the watch word; and it must suffice as a reason for allowing herself to be mutilated in such a fashion. Just as Caitlan and Fliz allowed themselves to be dressed in garments, which they would not have chosen had the occasion not demanded it. Their colorful outfits, loose pantaloons in brown and maroon, topped by equally loose-hanging white (Caitlan's) and green (Fliz's) shirts, each buttoned at the front and fringed with a row of small tassels on each arm, marked them as foppish Greelean gentlemen—though their demeanor hardly did justice to such an image. Ailin above all would have her hands full keeping that man of hers in the role he'd assumed. He would need every bit of help he could get. As would Fliz, who didn't appear very comfortable either. It had taken some persuasion to get him into his outfit.

Nerys considered her own garments: not unlike Ailin's, a two-piece combination of a thin colorful skirt—hers was red; Ailin wore the purple one she'd bought in Tyssel—and a blouse from the same airy material, that only barely hid the halters underneath. Especially in Ailin's case.

The Greelean role, they had decided, was inherently convenient. The populace of the small island off the southern coast of Finister represented a stark contrast to the residents of Thalonica and Gaskar. Greel was a resort ringed by almost continuous beach. The climate was agreeable the whole year around; virtually all the residents were well-off and relaxed about it. Their wealth derived from the visitors who took advantage of Greel's beaches and hospitality, as well as from the commercial deftness of its jewelers and gem-traders. Cyretrea, though small in comparison to its larger neighbors, or even Keaen or Sacrael, represented a major concentration of wealth. It also exhibited a degree of social magnanimity and grace, which was sadly lacking on Finister. Greelean males considered

themselves gentlemen, and exhorted the virtues of chivalrous behavior. Women, though not equals, nevertheless often had significant influence on business and political affairs. Nerys had heard—though she found it difficult to believe in the rumor’s veracity—that at least one Greelean female actually *owned* her business, boasting male subordinates. However, even if a woman did not aspire or achieve such influence, she could still be assured of respect and deference. Greelean travelers almost always took their womenfolk with them; which made their mixed foursome much less unusual.

“If you’re not sure,” Fliz said, “you can stay here.” His voice betrayed his reluctance at even contemplating such an alternative. She could have kissed him here and now for that, but decided that the occasion discouraged such a display. “I’m coming,” she said firmly. “I may only be a merchant slut, but I know my way around.”

“You’re not . . .” Fliz started.

She turned around and put a hand on his mouth. “Shh. Truth is, I was a merchant slut. Why deny it? But now I’m a vagabond; lover of a Thalonian thief; seeker for prehistoric treasure—and the best guide you can have to this place. Guaranteed not to try and swindle you like everybody else.” She grinned at him to show him that it was a joke. Well, maybe not quite, but there was humor in it. “Don’t forget that my kind—the high and the low—are merchants,” she added. “Our skills in extracting a profit, preferably excessive, from everybody and everything are legendary. When my father sold me to Duke Corran he did so at an immense advantage to himself.”

Fliz’s eyes darkened. “He did not have the right . . .”

Ignoring Caitlan and Ailin she kissed him. “Yes, he had,” she said. “You see, that’s the difference between you and him. You maybe a thief, but you’d be horrified to even contemplate such a thing. Gaskarian merchants do it as a matter of course. Only the eldest son is sacrosanct; exempt from such treatment. Everybody and everything else is a commodity—to trade and barter with. It stops just short of outright mendacity—and even that cannot be always guaranteed.” She made a fatalistic gesture. “Such are the rules which govern Gaskarian lives. Nobody questions them. Certainly not those who benefit.”

Fliz seemed disinclined to tolerance toward Gaskarian idiosyncrasies. “Some things just are *wrong*,” he snapped, “even if a thousand people think otherwise.”

Nerys looked at him and thought how much she loved him. She should have, she supposed, been irritated at his intolerance, which aimed at the heart of the values and truths that had been instilled into her since the day of her birth. She wasn’t, because his anger was not directed at *her* world—but at the world she’d grown up in; and which she had mostly rejected herself. Fliz’s ethics, though flexible and not necessarily unassailable, were nonetheless sound. As was the man himself. The days on the *Passage Trader* had given Nerys some time to get to know him, without the incessant rush that had been their short life together until then. A complex character, her lover; full of contradictions; principles that were often at odds with each other; urges which tugged him in opposite directions. And yet, beneath all that—or was it not ‘beneath’ at all, but rather pervasive of all the layers of his personality?—the one person she’d always dreamed of, but never really believed existed.

She squeezed his arm. “More than a thousand,” she told him, “but they know no better.”

“How can they not?” Fliz muttered, but refrained from further comment. Nerys nudged him and glanced at Ailin and Caitlan. “Shall we go?”

The four departed the wharf and inserted themselves into the life of Gaskar.

“The sand-jammer agencies are just off Jaira Way,” Nerys explained to her friends. “When the Wearers go to the Galatadians this is where they arrange their passage.”

“Who else goes there?” Caitlan asked her.

“Few but the Wearers go to the Galatadian Valley itself,” Nerys said. “There is a depot, just at the mouth. The jammers stop there. The Wearers proceed on horseback.”

“The jammers exist just to transport Wearers?” Fliz asked, astonished.

Nerys shook her head. “There are two mines. My father part-owns one of them. The jammers’ main task is ferrying ore, gems, and drudges to and from those mines. The Wearers’ business is just a lucrative extra. Behind their backs, of course, they laugh at them; but to their faces they’re all earnest and obliging.”

“We’re going to stand out,” Fliz muttered. “What would a bunch of Greeleans want in that part of Finister?”

"Greeleans cut and polish gems," Nerys reminded him. "Some of them visit to inspect the mines; get a close look at the operation itself."

Fliz gave her a lopsided smile. "Just as well we have ample funds. It wouldn't look good if we had to stint. Maybe I should . . ."

Nerys tightened her grip on his arm. "No, you're not!" she declared.

The thought of Fliz loose and on the prowl in Gaskar . . .

She would worry herself sick about him! In Thalonica he knew his way around. He was tolerated by the astunos. Here, no such advantages existed. If Fliz were caught he would fare badly indeed.

"Please don't," she implored.

He looked at her and his face softened. "I won't," he said. "Not unless we have no choice."

She realized that this was the best she was going to get. She resolved to do her best to ensure that a situation of such need never arose.

Two jammer companies plied the route to the mines and Galatadia Depot. The Galatadian Line was the largest, operating over thirty jammer wagons; almost twice as many as their competitor, the Northern Jammers. Their trains went more often, and were usually longer. Such was indicated on a large sign outside the Galatadian Line's offices. These were housed in a building owned by the company, from the rear of which departed carriages that ferried passengers of means—meaning merchants, Wearers, and miscellaneous visitors—from Gaskar to the departure depot, about fifteen miles east of Gaskar. Another sign indicated that the next departure would be on the following day. 'Choice berths still available', announced another notice.

"'Berths?'" Fliz asked Nerys. "How big are these jammers?"

"Big," she replied. "A 'berth' is like a small cubicle, to provide a modicum of privacy for those who wish it."

Caitlan studied the fare schedules. "They don't come cheap," he commented. "Are the prices negotiable?"

Nerys shook her head.

"Everything's negotiable," Fliz noted.

"Not the fares," she insisted. "This is particularly true if you're from outside Gaskar."

"Let's look at the Northern Jammers," Fliz suggested.

They walked to the more modest offices of the smaller company and found that, though the tariffs were marginally lower, no train was scheduled to depart for several days.

"That decides it," Fliz said. Caitlan gave a nod of assent. "The Galatadian Line it is."

Fliz turned around and began walking back whence they had come. He took one step and stopped. Nerys bumped into him.

"What is it?"

If only he knew . . .

He tried to shake off the sudden frisson of unease, but found that it clung to him like a wet garment.

"I don't know," he confessed.

Observation!

Like someone . . . something . . . watching . . .

He took Nerys' hand and commenced walking again. If his perceptions were true then dissimulation was the best immediate course of action. He knew that she sensed something amiss, but she didn't ask; and for that he was grateful. He had to think about this. It was like . . .

He held back until Caitlan and Ailin drew abreast with Nerys and himself.

"Something's not right," he said lowly.

Caitlan's stride didn't falter, but Fliz felt him tense up.

"Someone watching us?" the big man asked.

Fliz looked at Caitlan's face. The smile on his lips never reached the eyes, which were scanning furtively.

"It's more than that," Fliz said. He could feel Nerys' hand tighten in his.

And then he knew. "He's here," he said tonelessly.

"Rutger." It wasn't a question. "Where? How do you know?"

"I know."

They arrived at the offices of the Galatadian Line.

"Should we go through with this?" Ailin said dubiously.

"It changes nothing," Caitlan responded. "We have to proceed." He pushed open the door. "We'll get our berths organized. Then we'll deal with Rutger."

At the sight of Fliz, whom he recognized instantly, despite the distance and a slightly altered appearance, Rutger jerked back and flattened himself against a wall. He stood like this for a few moments, then cautiously peered around the corner. Fliz and three others. The

sight of the big man gave Rutger another jolt. It couldn't be, but it was. He knew Caitlan of Tinagel by sight.

Rutger forced his jumbled thoughts into discipline.

What was the weaponsmaster doing here? And who—Rutger ventured another quick look—were the women? Especially the taller, dark-haired one. There was something about her he found distinctly unsettling. The whole thing didn't make any sense at all. Fliz's theft of his locator assumed new dimensions of meaning. Had he completely misjudged the situation? Was all this a part of a much vaster plan than he had dared to conceive?

Rutger forced himself to relax. His agitation itself was disturbing. A magice was not supposed to be unsettled in such a manner. That he was, indicated a troublesome state of mind.

He watched them enter the offices of the Galatadian Line. The conclusions were clear: they knew. They probably not only had the locator, but knew how to operate it. Which meant that someone must have instructed them.

Pandrak. Of course! Pandrak, the traitor. He'd always known that the boy would be trouble; from the first day they'd scanned him and found that he'd locked up a part of himself, which none of them could pry open. It was Rutger who had suggested that the boy be disposed of. The others had demurred; arguing that the boy's talents were important enough to keep and train him.

A brilliant talent. A rebel. A young man whose detestation was kept under tight control; though every now and then it seeped through the crack of the armor. Now: a traitor.

The implications were dire. The Keep had been taken. That's why there had been no communications. The magices . . . who knew what had been done to them? A traitor like Pandrak was capable of anything; making it all the more imperative that he, Rutger—possibly the last of the loyal magices—found the tool that would undo the rebels' work. Now more than ever.

Rutger considered the situation. The weaponsmaster, though formidable, would be no serious obstacle. His mind was untrained, though his body was a lethal force. The thief finally had run out of luck. Now that Rutger knew where he was headed, he would not elude him again. The women didn't count. They would run screaming. Of course, they, too, could not be allowed to live. They would know; which was intolerable.

Rutger considered the possible scenarios for their disposal. It would have to be done quickly, though discreetly. He had to avoid attention if at all possible.

Rutger paused in his reflections as a new idea came to him. If he allowed them to proceed to the target point . . . The area, as far as he knew, was desolate and uninhabited. There would be no witnesses; the Wearer who was booked to go on his foolish errand on the tomorrow's jammer train was not going to be a problem either . . .

Maybe this was the better of the alternatives. They could find the place for him. *Then* he would strike.

Rutger considered the plan from all angles and continued to find it to his liking. The decision was made. Now he just had to ensure that they would not discover his presence. Rutger waited until his four quarries had re-emerged from the Galatadian Line offices and disappeared down the street. He detached himself from the wall, walked across the road, and entered the building.

"He knows," Fliz insisted.

"That means he knows where we're going," Caitlan said. "The jammers are leaving tomorrow. It gives him little time to prepare."

"He may just decide to kill us all," Fliz said.

Caitlan had to concede that this was a real possibility. The magice had nothing to lose. They had something he wanted. He would do whatever it took to get it. Caitlan secretly admitted to himself that he was worried. A magice was a formidable enemy.

Ailin sensed his concern. "What can I do, my love?" she said lowly.

He put an arm around her shoulder and shook his head. "Nothing—I think." He turned to Fliz. "Any ideas?"

Fliz looked as if he'd tasted something bitter. "How can we avoid this man?" he asked. "If, as you say, he can do as I do, how can we even see him?"

"You knew he was there!" Nerys told Fliz.

Fliz looked thoughtful. Caitlan considered the thief and, not for the first time, wondered what other talents he might have. Had he lived in the Valley, the magices would surely have located him and taken him to the Isle. What was even more remarkable was that Fliz had grown up so far away from the Myrmidic Woods, which, according to Pandrak, were the source of the 'talents' of magices and circes alike. Had the magices been wrong

about that, too—like they seemed to have been wrong or misguided about so many other things?

"I don't know why I did," Fliz said. "I haven't done so before. I think . . ." He fell silent.

"You think what?" Caitlan prompted.

"Don't you sometimes just know things?" Fliz asked him. "When someone looks at you really intensely? You ever felt the pressure of observation?"

Caitlan admitted that he had occasionally imagined such a thing, but that he wasn't truly convinced that it was anything more than imagination.

"It is," Fliz told him.

"Do you sense anything now?" Caitlan asked Fliz, changing the subject. He was no sensitive; like Fliz; like Ailin, who also seemed to just know things without having to think about them.

"No," Fliz said. "The pressure's gone."

"Let's make very sure about it," Caitlan told them. He turned to Nerys. "You know this town well."

Nerys looked uncomfortable. "Not as well as I wish I did. I am a merchant's daughter. We may be disposable, but our lives are . . . detached . . . from those of the drudges." She gave her head a vexed shake. "Please forget I said that. I call them 'drudges'—and they call me a 'merchant slut'! Is it any wonder that . . ." She sighed. "I know this town well enough. Why?"

"Take us along the most complicated route you can manage. Back to the ship."

"Rutger has seen us," Fliz reminded Caitlan. "He will have figured out what we're doing. All he has to do is wait for us at the departure depot."

He was right. But there were other considerations. "Tomorrow is less important than tonight. Even Rutger will have to watch his step when there are a lot of people around, like on the jammers. Magices are not all-powerful. They place a lot of reliance on stealth. Only when cornered and desperate—or when it is expedient and useful—will they resort to violence. This is Pandrak's view, and I have no reason to question it. Once on the jammers he could not touch us—especially not if we stick together." He looked at them significantly. "Do you understand that? We have to stay together! Only then can we protect each other." It wasn't easy to admit this; to himself, or to anyone else for that matter. Caitlan was used to dealing with threats like Rutger on his own terms, preferably without involving others; and especially if they were people he considered under his protection. But the rules were

different now. With their sensitivities, Fliz and Ailin must be considered the eyes and ears of the group. Without them, being stalked by a magice was a nightmarish prospect indeed. A creature that could, like Fliz, hide in plain sight, was something to be afraid of.

They had entered the market square. Caitlan's attention was distracted.

"Nerys!?" The young man halted as if he'd run into a solid wall. "What are you doing here?"

Caitlan caught Fliz's eye. He glanced at the young man and twitched his head. Fliz's gave the tiniest of nods. Together they moved . . .

Nerys stared at Teufel. Before she could say anything, Fliz moved away from her. On her other side Caitlan's big figure interposed itself between her and her brother. The briefest of struggles. Caitlan and Fliz half-carried, half-dragged Teufel out of the main stream of people and pushed him against a wall.

Ailin took Nerys' arm and they followed.

"Who's this?" Caitlan asked her.

Nerys sighed. "My brother. One of them."

"Nerys?" Teufel stared at her. "What are you doing here? Why aren't you . . ." His eyes widened. "What happened to Corran? We heard terrible things. Father's immensely annoyed."

"At what?" she snapped.

Teufel struggled against the hands that held him.

Nerys shook her head. "He's not going to give you any trouble," she told Caitlan. The big man looked dubious, but released his hold. Fliz followed suit. The two remained in an attitude of readiness; Teufel wouldn't be able to take two steps before they had him again.

"Well?" she hissed, "what is annoying father so? That he gave away his daughter to a Wearer who's not a Wearer anymore? No profit in that, is there?"

Teufel didn't reply, but glanced at the men flanking him. Ignoring Ailin as if she didn't exist.

"Who are these people? What are you doing with them?"

"These 'people', as you call them," Nerys said curtly, "are my friends."

Teufel's high forehead crinkled in a puzzled frown. "Greeleans?" he said.

Nerys was going to say something more, but caught a glance from Caitlan that shut her up.

"Do you have something against Greeleans?" the big man asked Teufel in a deceptively gentle tone.

Teufel glanced sideways. "Not at all," he said hastily. "It's just that . . ."

"We encountered your sister in Thalonica," Caitlan said. "She was in some distress. Being Greelean gentlemen we naturally offered our assistance." Again he glanced at Nerys. She gave the tiniest of nods to indicate that she was going to keep out of this. He had something in mind; the look he gave Teufel was thoughtful and reeked of hatching schemes.

"We chose," Caitlan continued, "to consider her a guest and a friend. Right now she is under our protection—and will continue to be so while we visit the mines and the southern slopes of the Galatadians. If she wishes, she may then return with us to Cyretrea—where," he added with more than just a trace of righteous scorn, "we know how to treat women as they should be; not as they do in these uncivilized regions."

Over Teufel's head Caitlan looked at Fliz. A silent communication was exchanged between the two. Nerys saw Fliz's mouth twitch.

Fliz addressed Teufel. "I believe your father owns a share of Tandree Mine. We are dealers in precious stones," he lied. "It occurs to me that we might consult with him about certain aspects of our business."

Teufel's attention focused on this new, unexpected development. Nerys could almost *see* him thinking. Anything he could do to aid their father's business would be to his benefit. In the brothers' favorite game of mutual stabbing and jostling for positions of favor, any advantage was to be welcomed. Maybe he could even avoid being sent to the mines to work there as a clerk!

"Maybe I can help!" he said eagerly. "If you'd allow me to go . . . I could . . ." He considered the two men; ignoring Ailin and Nerys. A Gaskarian merchant sniffing profitable transactions. When things reached this stage, women mattered even less than they did otherwise.

Caitlan nodded. "You're free to go." His eyes were laughing, but the rest of his face was completely serious. Nerys divined his thoughts. People were so easily manipulated! Teufel's attention had been completely diverted away from her.

Her brother made a move as if to go, then halted. "Where can I find you?" he asked.

"We've just arrived," Caitlan told him truthfully. "As yet we have had no time to arrange for suitable accommodation." He looked across the market square, search-

ing for something. Presently he found it and returned his attention to Teufel. "That inn yonder. The one with the gilded ornament on a wooden sign. I believe we will be taking refreshments there. If you don't tarry too long, you may well find us at one of its tables."

"The Onnadic Inn?" Teufel nodded. "I'll be as quick as I can. If you'll excuse me now." He ran off.

Caitlan shook his head and looked at Nerys. "Are they all single-minded like that?"

She sighed. "Worse."

Fliz took her arm. Ailin, who had been observing the goings-on without a word, hooked hers under Caitlan's. "What now?" she asked.

"Now we're going to the Onnadic Inn and do what we said we'd do?"

"What about Rutger?" she asked.

Caitlan shrugged. "He's not going to do us any harm while we're sitting there, surrounded by people."

"Are you serious about talking to my father?" Nerys asked Fliz.

"Why not? We might find out something useful in the process."

"He's going to be livid when he sees me."

"He'll have to live with it." Fliz slipped an arm around her shoulder and squeezed. "If you can handle it."

Could she? All of a sudden she wasn't just back in Gaskar, but there loomed the prospect of going back *home*. How did she feel about *that*? How would she deal with her parents'—especially her father's—disapproval? On the other hand, her father could not know the full truth about what happened in Thalonica. He might just choose to ignore her.

And her mother? How would *she* react?

Her thoughts were interrupted as they arrived at the Onnadic Inn. Caitlan located a vacant table and claimed it for them. A merchant of lower status heading for the same table drew back quickly when faced with Caitlan's uncompromising size and demeanor. The four seated themselves. A wench appeared to attend to their needs. When she was gone Caitlan outlined his stratagem for dealing with Nerys' father. She detected a certain hesitancy, which she ascribed to a reluctance on his behalf to expose her to people and contingencies she might not wish to be exposed to. Nerys was touched by the solicitude. "Don't worry about me," she assured Caitlan. He appeared relieved. He was, she confirmed to her-

self, a nice man. He had to be, if for no other reason but that Ailin was crazy about him.

Presently, Teufel returned. The alacrity of his response to Fliz's suggestion amused her.

"My father wishes to speak with you," he said. An uncertain glance in her direction. "He . . ." His voice faltered.

"He what?" Caitlan prompted.

"He . . . suggests that you be guests at his house tonight."

"Why, that's very generous," Caitlan said.

"He . . ." Teufel took a deep breath. "The invitation does not extend to . . . Nerys." He found it impossible to meet her gaze. "Or," he continued, "to . . ." His gaze flicked over to Ailin and immediately averted again.

Caitlan nodded. "In that case," he said briskly, "we thank your father for his invitation—which we must, however regretfully, decline. Nerys is our friend and protégée—and as for the lady over there," he nodded in Ailin's direction, "she happens to be my partner in everything. That includes my business." He gave Teufel a dismissive wave. "Your effort is appreciated, but the conditions are intolerable. We bid you farewell."

He nodded with minimum politeness and turned to his companions, pointedly ignoring Teufel's presence. "We've wasted enough time here, I think. Let us find a place for the night. The stints for the depot leave before sunrise."

He rose. Nerys and the others followed his example. Nerys carefully avoided looking at Teufel, who stood there, incomprehending and looking like a whipped cur. She almost felt sorry for him. She also wondered if Caitlan may have presumed too much. Her father was not known for his flexibility. If he said that he didn't want her in the house he had meant it.

They stood and waited while Fliz went to a counter to pay their bill. Teufel still stood in paralysis. Presently he shook himself out of it and gingerly approached Caitlan.

"My dear sir . . ." he began.

"What?" Caitlan said offhandedly.

"You don't understand . . ."

Caitlan towered over him. "It is *you* who doesn't understand," he growled, and Nerys appreciated that not all of his disdain was play-acting. If anything, he was controlling himself.

"Tell your father that his churlish whims are unproductive. They impugn my status as a gentleman. Hardly

a basis on which to construct successful business transaction."

Fliz returned. The four started walking away.

"Wait!" Teufel cried, now quite beside himself. "I will speak to him again. Once he realizes the importance you attach to . . . their . . . presence . . ."

Caitlan paused. "Be quick about it then," he snapped. "Return here in one hour. We may or may not return to meet you."

Teufel departed in haste. Caitlan glanced at Nerys and winked. "What do you think?"

Nerys bit her lip. "My father will not be pleased." She grinned. The situation was not entirely without humor. "He will shout and curse," she said. "However, if he thinks that you are going to bring him significant profits, he will eventually come around."

They returned to the *Passage Trader* along complicated, roundabout ways. Neither Fliz nor Ailin appeared to sense anything untoward. Caitlan remained tense, moving with the alert, springy step of a watchful predator, his eyes everywhere. They arrived at the ship and consulted with captain Lethaz.

"Tomorrow you leave," Lethaz noted. "Twenty five days I wait. No more."

"No more is expected," Caitlan confirmed.

They packed their belongings into two bags, which the women had purchased in Tyssel; beautiful, ornate, woven from multi-colored, dyed daka wool. Fliz suggested that he should be the one to go and meet with Teufel. He could conceal himself as well as any magice. Caitlan agreed reluctantly. Fliz disappeared, and returned some time later, announcing that Nerys' father had invited them all to be his guests for the night—though he had remained adamant that business discussions were to be held among men only.

"What do you think?" Caitlan asked Nerys.

"There will be no more concessions," she told him. "That he has yielded this much is a minor miracle. He must have high hopes for his profit margins."

"Then we go," Caitlan said.

"I told Teufel that this might be our consensus," Fliz noted. "A carriage is waiting for us in the market square." He grinned at Nerys. "A Gaskarian merchant providing a carriage for a Thalonian thief . . . One wonders what else could happen, given the right circumstances."

The four bade farewell to captain Lethaz and returned to the city. A small, open carriage, drawn by a

single horse and attended by a driver, was waiting for them at the far end of the market square. Teufel, too, was in attendance, pacing up and down impatiently. Nerys, who knew him well, saw the brief expression of utter relief before he composed himself to receive the guests. She was almost tempted to feel sorry for him. If Caitlan's plans came to fruition Teufel would derive no advantage from the visit. Just for once her father would become a tool of others. In due course he would know this. Teufel would suffer the consequences.

Where were her loyalties? Could she do this? Was it fair? Teufel was her brother; the man they were about to use her father. Their blood was hers. And yet she could not bring herself to feel anything but mild pity for either. In truth, they were strangers; the blood connection an accident; a contingency that mattered little—mainly because *they* had made it that way. She owed them nothing. To Fliz, Caitlan, and Ailin she already owed more than she could ever repay. And never had they asked anything in return. This was the substance of friendship.

Nerys tightened her arm around Fliz.

He glanced sideways; saw the tears in her eyes. "What is it?"

"Nothing," she said firmly, using her left sleeve to wipe away the moisture. She smiled. "I'm just happy." If the truth be told, she should be grateful to her father; her brothers; Corran—their greed; their folly. Grateful to the whole rotten system. For without it she would never have met Fliz.

Darreel Ohan, her father, was as thin as ever, his long nose appearing somehow even longer, his sparse maroon-dyed hair carefully waxed and combed. He greeted his guests, and as was his habit—and perfectly acceptable in Gaskarian society—ignored her and Ailin. Caitlan's smile froze in place and presently disappeared. Fliz also regarded her father without benevolence. Caitlan made a minute gesture which Fliz picked up. The latter took Nerys' hand and pulled her to stand beside him. Caitlan did the same with Ailin.

"Allow me," Caitlan said to Darreel, "to present Hsm.* Ailin. My partner—in life and in business."

* Hsm. Short for 'Heedana Sama', and enunciated like 'heeda-sam': a Greelean honorific, applied to women of particularly exalted standing, translating approximately as 'she who commands honor'.

Nerys' father was forced to perform a minute gesture of acknowledgement.

"And, of course, you already are acquainted with your daughter," Fliz added. "She is gracing us with her company on this journey."

Darreel Ohan's posture was so stiff that Nerys thought he might crack. He nodded with the most frigid urbanity and waved at a footman in white livery. "Take the . . . ladies . . . to their rooms." He looked at Caitlan. "They will rejoin us at dinner, when we have finalized our discussions."

Fliz cleared his throat. "Your daughter and I," he said, "we . . . share . . . our accommodation."

Darreel Ohan's right eyelid flickered. His brows twitched almost unnoticeably. Nerys observed, with some surprise, that her father appeared pleased at this revelation. The reason came to her almost immediately. She might, he thought, be good for something after all. If the Thalonican duke was out of the picture, why not introduce a Cyretrean gem-trader instead? If this was the way the wind was blowing, why not take advantage of it? Maybe the Golden Branch was smiling on him after all. Misfortune might be turned into profit yet.

These, Nerys divined, were the contents of her father's cogitations: the reasons why he nodded and turned to the footman. "Only two suites will be required. Ofal and Lymoria." The names indicated to Nerys that her father placed great hopes on this visit indeed. Ofal and Lymoria were sumptuous accommodation by any standards. Corran himself had stayed in Lymoria during his last visit, when the arrangements for Nerys' disposition and the equivalent exchanges had been finalized.

Fliz bowed minutely. "We are, of course, eager to proceed to business," he advised her father. "However, our custom—and common courtesy—demands that we accompany our ladies to our suites."

Darreel Ohan made a polite gesture. "Of course." Nerys detected the carefully concealed annoyance. He motioned to the footman. "Show the gentlemen into the Pontifex room when they're done."

"We appreciate your hospitality," Caitlan told him.

"Please," Nerys' father invited them to enter. The footman moved with haste and then, more sedately, led the way as they passed Darreel Ohan; who raked a quick glance over Nerys before averting his gaze in continued indifference.

Nerys suddenly remembered something. She pulled Fliz closer to her. “Warn Caitlan,” she whispered into his ear. “No conversation under this roof is confidential. Especially not those we might have in our quarters.”

Fliz grinned. “Good,” he said lowly.

Nerys was nonplussed. “What?” she hissed.

Fliz brought his mouth to her ear. “Now that we know, we shall use it to our best advantage.”

They passed through the long hallways of Polhard Wing and presently arrived at the two-leafed door to the Ofal suite. The footman pushed it open and stepped aside to let them pass.

Fliz turned to Nerys. “It looks very pleasant,” he said, loudly enough to be heard by all. “Don’t you think so?” he asked Caitlan and Ailin.

Caitlan nodded agreeably. Ailin, Nerys noted, was careful not to appear too impressed by the opulence of their surroundings; a wide, sweeping ceiling, held up by a radial system of shrouded beams, and painted with intricate, abstract designs. To one side, slightly raised on a pedestal, a large four-post bed. On the other side a huge, ornate desk. At the opposite end of the room another door which, Nerys knew, led to a short corridor, at the other end of which there was yet another door, which opened into the, similarly opulent, Lymoria suite. To the left of the bed a smaller door led into a bathroom, featuring not only a bath which filled with water from a tap—though that water was cold, hot water being added by servants who carted it up in buckets—but also one of those new-fangled inventions that produced a stream of water from a perforated metal bulb attached to a pipe protruding from the ceiling. Nerys had tried it once and found it intriguing. Bathing in this manner was like standing naked in a heavy rain. Not unpleasant at all. Titillating almost.

Anything, Nerys thought, to impress the guests and instill in them a notion that they were dealing with a personage of significance and wealth. Which was true enough.

The four arranged for the allocation of the suites. Fliz and Nerys would stay in Ofal, Caitlan and Ailin in Lymoria. That the suites were connected was a bonus. Nerys didn’t really feel like being on her own. Ailin’s presence, as always, would be soothing.

The footman waited discreetly until Caitlan and Fliz had pronounced their satisfaction with the arrangements and declared that they were ready to meet with

their host. As they filed out of the room Nerys touched Fliz’s arm.

“Good luck,” she whispered.

Caitlan, who knew his limitations and had discussed the matter with Fliz at some length, said as little as possible. He was not given to this kind of subterfuge, whereas Fliz seemed to positively enjoy it. Besides, for Fliz this here was a payback of sorts, and he would make the most of it.

Following Fliz’s most recent remarks, Darreel Ohan considered Caitlan with renewed interest. “Of course, we all have heard of recent events in Keaen. I didn’t realize that so much wealth is leaving the Valley as a result.”

Neither did Caitlan, but that wasn’t the point. Darreel Ohan’s curiosity was piqued, and he appeared prepared to accept at face value the notion that Caitlan had expatriated himself even prior to the *putsch* and had adopted Greel as his new home—and that with him had come a significant amount of disposable wealth. The story served to answer the questions Darreel Ohan might have had as to why he’d never heard of *Ing & Wertel*, the names by which Fliz and Caitlan had represented themselves.

“Why do you wish to see the mines?” Darreel Ohan wondered. “There is only desert and dust there. I have a selection of some of the stones we find there at hand right here.”

Fliz nodded. “Ah, yes; and we would very much like to inspect them. But, as you know, Greeleans are fond of travel and new vistas. Our own island is so small. Despite its beauty one wonders about the world at large—if for no other reason but to have it confirmed that Greel is, indeed, the most favored of places.” He nodded at Caitlan. “Of course, my friend here, he’s seen quite a bit of the world, but Finister’s new even to him. So, we thought to combine a trip to the legendary Galatadian Valley with a visit to your much talked-about mines. If nothing else, it will provide us with extra insights and help our decision-making process. A well-run operation is usually an excellent indicator of the permanence of a prospective business partner.” He made a small gesture. “Forgive me for being so forward, but we are considering major commitments.”

At this point Caitlan nodded sagely.

“That we should be your guests is, of course, an extra bonus,” Fliz continued. “Though our visit must

needs remain brief, if for no other reason but that the jammers depart in the early morning.”

Caitlan bit back a grin. The seed had been planted. Now the ground would have to be watered.

Fliz’s glance flicked in his direction. He took up the cue. “A number of other . . . notables . . . from the Valley are also looking for . . . investments . . . outside Keaan and Tergan,” he said. “The situation is simply too uncertain. Interests in the Laska and Nacra mines may soon be in jeopardy. Something more . . . constant . . . would be highly desirable indeed.” He leaned forward. “Tell me, Msm.* Ohan—if this is not too . . . intrusive . . . a matter—but you own Tandree mine in a partnership.” Letting it sink in that Nerys had been only too prepared to divulge whatever she knew about her father’s business—which might well be more than he thought she did. “Your partners, Msms. Ropwinder and Langewelt, they would be amenable to any . . . arrangements . . . we might arrive at?”

Darreel Ohan drew himself up. “Of course!” he said, with a touch of frost. “I, as you probably also know, own the largest share. My words and my counsel therefore carry a proportionate weight.”

“Yes, of course,” Caitlan said.

Fliz smiled apologetically, as if trying to make up for his partner’s un-Greelean bluntness. “This is excellent news indeed,” he said soothingly. “It appears that, by a stroke of good fortune, we have come to the right man. And now, if you could perhaps show us some of the stones you talked about . . .”

Ailin looked around the room. The many nooks and crevices might well serve to conceal listening holes. As Nerys had explained, the holes connected to a system of tubes, which in turn led to a secret room on the floor immediately below them; a room only Darreel Ohan had access to. He reserved entirely to himself the right to listen to his guests’ private conversations.

“Since father’s busy talking,” Nerys said to Ailin, keeping her voice so low that only the circe could hear it. “I think we probably have privacy. Besides, we are only women.” Not without a trace of bitterness.

Ailin considered the Gaskarian. She’d always considered that her own past had been troublesome. She had discovered her talent at the age of about twelve, when

she had healed a small scratch on a friend’s arm. She hadn’t even known what she was doing. She was just going to clean it—but as she touched it, it just mended under her eyes—much to the horror of the other girl, who ran from her, screaming in fright. Ailin had stared after her former friend, only dimly comprehending—though it was slowly beginning to make sense to her why she, herself, never seemed to have had any problems with scrapes and bruises, which had always vanished almost as quickly as they appeared.

The healing had led to an almost immediate expulsion from her family and her social context. Her mother had regarded her with horror; her father had simply dismissed her from his world. Her sister, five years older, had called her ‘freak’, and mocked her in public. At the end of that winter, shortly after her thirteenth birthday, the girl had packed a meager bundle of what she could call hers, stolen away from her home in Teela, and wandered off along the Teela Road; hiding among the bushes, hoping to find someplace she wasn’t known, where she would be able to find a menial job to see her through the next day, and the next. Before she even got as far as Pruid Fair though, she had had to learn that a child, especially a girl who was already as well developed as Ailin had been, had no protection whatsoever from the abundance of sick and merciless predators prowling for prey. What those men had done to her when they spotted her crouching in her inadequate concealment . . . before they discarded her like a used rag and left her there, soiled and sore, bruised and sick to the heart at her lost innocence.

She was a circe. She healed quickly. But only her body, because her mind was injured beyond conception. It took years before she could even look at a man without wanting to be sick; without wanting to shrink back; without wanting to hurt him really badly. The fact that, despite all her best efforts to avoid it happening, she was raped several times more during the following decade, did not help at all. In due course, however, the injury healed—after a fashion. The years, stretching into decades, and finally a century, did their work. The memories faded; the events of her past became an indistinct blur as she tried to cope with being an, effectively immortal, outcast. Dealing with this situation required new methods of adaptation. She would, she knew, never know men as anything but fleeting acquaintances. Since she did not need to fear either pregnancy nor sickness as a result of their attentions, it

* Msm. ‘Mahada Sama’. The male equivalent to ‘Heedana Sama’, enunciated like ‘maha-sam’; meaning ‘he who commands honor’.

was easy to use them as a relief for occasional urges—if she was of a mind to do so. Zygie, her circe friend in Sacrael once had suggested another alternative. Ailin, after trying it once, if for no other reason but to satisfy her curiosity, had decided that she wasn't that way inclined. Oddly enough, Zygie had agreed. The matter remained their secret and was never talked about again. Until Ailin told Caitlan, of course. She'd been somewhat apprehensive at his possible reaction, but found her fears to be groundless.

"She's your friend—yes? And you love her, don't you?"

Ailin admitted as much. Caitlan shrugged. "An experiment; between friends; who remained friends. Why should anyone think it wrong?"

How very typical of him.

"What are you thinking?" Nerys asked Ailin; who tore herself out of her trance.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I was just thinking . . . how *do* you feel about being back here? It must be . . ."

Nerys shook her head. "It isn't. Mostly I feel detached. Almost like I've never been here before. Like it's someone else."

What was worse? Ailin wondered. To suffer her own fate, or Nerys'? To be *sold*, bargained away, for the sake of a business? Did it make sense at all to measure or compare misfortune? Was it really a question of one being worse or better than the other? In the end, all that mattered was how one coped; what kind of a human being came out at the end of it all. Of course, it helped if luck pushed things along a bit. If it hadn't been Fliz who found Nerys that night . . . and if she, Ailin, hadn't served Caitlan that night at Walker's Tavern . . .

"I would have found you anyway," Caitlan had told her once. "Later, maybe; but I would have."

She wasn't so sure about that—but then again, maybe he knew something she didn't. He knew a lot of things she didn't. Just like it was the other way around. Complementing each other.

Ailin put an arm around Nerys' shoulder. "Explain to me this new method of taking a bath," she said, in a normal tone of voice.

They went into the bathroom and Nerys explained the operation of the device. "There's a tank somewhere under the roof. The servants keep it topped up all the time. A copper pipe goes from the tank to the tap, and from the tap to the bulb."

"Copper?" Ailin exclaimed. "For pipes?"

Nerys glanced at her.

"In the Valley people use it to protect themselves from elecs," Ailin explained.

Nerys professed her ignorance of such matters. Ailin explained. Nerys was fascinated. Presently, Ailin expressed her willingness to try the indoor 'rain bulb'.

Nerys grinned. "I knew you would. I was wondering when you'd get around to it."

Ailin laughed. "Wouldn't *you*?"

"Definitely. In fact, I think I'll go and do the same. Father installed this things for his guests. He never thought to do the same for us. I might as well take full advantage of my new status."

Nerys departed. Ailin undressed and stood inside the bath, which was underneath the water-emitting bulb; thus acting as a catchment. She turned the tap; the water started flowing. It was as Nerys had indicated: like standing nude in heavy rain. The water was just on the warm side of cool. The sensation was utterly pleasant. Sensual even. When they returned to the Valley, as eventually they must, she must introduce this new method.

Then, beside a rack holding a basin, she spied that luxury of luxuries: a small, square block of soap.

Heaven!

A rap on the door.

"Who is it?"

"Can I come in?" Caitlan's voice.

Most definitely!

"Do!" she called out.

He opened the door; stepped inside; stared.

"What's *this*?"

Ailin grinned. "Want to find out?"

She didn't have to ask him again.

Later, with her legs still wrapped around him and supported very comfortably by his hands, the water sluicing over their faces and bodies, she detached her mouth from his, caught a few drops of water with her tongue, then ran it over his lips. She brought her mouth close to his ear. "Well, Msm. Wertel," she breathed, "that was very much what I would have expected from the Greelean gentleman you aspire to be." She took his earlobe between her teeth and tugged.

Caitlan laughed softly. "You're not the only one who seems to think so," he whispered. "It looks like we'll be traveling in style."

"Really?"

"Really. Meaning that Rutger will be very disappointed tomorrow morning. We'll also beat him by at least a day—even if we get delayed at the mine."

"We're leaving so soon? Tonight?"

"No. Tomorrow. After noon."

"But . . ."

"Apparently the private jammers aren't only more comfortable, but also *much* faster than the big ones. We'll be overtaking Rutger on the way—before night-fall, if our host's assurances are to be believed."

"I'm impressed." Her mouth sought his again; found a smile. "What are you grinning at?"

"Fliz. He's very good. He talks about gems as if he'd grown up in the business."

"He's quite remarkable," she agreed.

"That he is."

"But I know someone even more remarkable." She wriggled her hips. The effect was . . . predictable.

"Oh, yes?" he whispered.

"Definitely."

Nerys and Fliz, she noted, both had wet hair. Both looked pleasantly exhausted. Which was as it should be. Of course, for Nerys such abandon might have . . . consequences; but Ailin had a strong feeling that neither would mind. They had known each other a short time only, but there was little doubt that whatever they had, it was for keeps.

They discussed the meeting with Nerys' father openly and loudly. If Darreel Ohan was listening in his secret hideout he would—or so Ailin hoped—be wetting himself with apprehension. From what Nerys had told them, such openness with womenfolk, such involvement in the business of men, was inconceivable among the merchants of Gaskar. Nerys took advantage of the opportunity to add to her father's worries.

"Don't trust him," she declared. "He'll get the better of this deal, no matter what you do."

Fliz grinned at her, playing her game. "Oh, come on," he said. "I'm sure it's not like that at all. We're in this for our mutual benefit. You've said yourself that your father will end up *owning* Tandree mine. Sounds to me as if we don't have much of a choice."

"You could try Vernan Huil," Nerys suggested wickedly. "He owns Calicta mine outright. It's not as big as Tandree, but he's just as shrewd as father—and just as determined to expand his business."

Ailin saw Caitlan's mouth twitch as he restrained a laugh. He scowled falsely. Nerys saw the expression and held a hand to her mouth to stop herself from giggling.

"I think," Caitlan grumbled, "that we shall inspect the mine and then make our decision. If we're not satisfied, we can still try to talk to the Vernan Huil. But not before we've seen the fabled Galatadian Valley."

"I hear," Fliz said, "that a Wearer from Thalonica is also on the way there. He might not like us around when he's chasing after his silks."

"Wearers be damned," Caitlan snapped. "The valley's not theirs—even if they'd like it to be."

"My father tends to defer to them," Nerys said venomously.

Fliz waved an admonishing finger at her. Nerys grinned and blew him a kiss.

Caitlan took up the cue. "Your father will have to make a decision about whom to defer to," he said, injecting a testy note into his remark. "I could *buy* his share in Tandree if I were of a mind to do so. He'll have to figure out which he prefers: dealing with those zealots from Thalonica and their whims and crotchets—or with solid, reliable folk like *Ing & Wertel*. I know whom I'd choose."

"But of course you do," Ailin told him.

"Anything wrong with that?" her lover growled.

"Of course not, dear," she retorted.

The conversation proceeded in this vein until a footman knocked discreetly to summon them for dinner. This particular individual Nerys knew well; an old drudge with a sparse tuft of gray hair, a bowed thin figure, and a nose that jutted forth from his strangely flat face like a weapon. He had, in the past, been assigned to the women's wing, where Nerys and her mother had had their quarters. Then, one day, he had disappeared. Nerys had briefly wondered about his absence, but never thought to enquire. Such things happened in the mansion and it was not a matter to excite any extended interest. The truth was that she didn't even know his name. The truth was also that, had she enquired, he would have been most put out. The relationship between merchants and their drudge servants was strictly impersonal. Never were they called by their real names; instead they were given 'service names'. That's what they did: render a service and get paid for it. If some animal could have been induced to perform the same service, thus it would have been.

The man, whatever his name was, recognized Nerys instantly, despite her mutilated hair. A brief widening of the eyes was all the indication he gave. Tongues among the servants would wag.

They followed the man through the hallways, to arrive at the Portal Room, where they found, to Nerys' utter amazement, that her father had elected to include all those family members currently present at the mansion in the occasion: five of her brothers, including Teufel—who, she thought, appeared slightly peevish—and her mother. Nerys swallowed hard and stuck close to Fliz as another servant showed them to their seats. Adjacent ones. Good! It meant that she could hold Fliz's hand when she needed to. Even just having him beside her was a tonic.

Her father and Gherwan, her eldest brother, had taken the cardinal positions at opposite ends of the table. The guests and family members were arranged in order of importance opposite the guests at the long side.

The eight-course meal, an insufferably decorous affair—much like the other few she had been required to take part in—proceeded with ponderous inevitability. The women, as usual, were ignored by the Gaskarians. Fliz and Caitlan in turn made it a point of involving Nerys and Ailin, and even made an effort to get her mother to open her mouth for anything else but the insertion of food. They found themselves stymied.

Nerys wasn't surprised. Her mother was plainly bewildered at Nerys' presence. Her unusual appearance had probably given her a major shock as well. Nerys wondered what she was thinking. Probably nothing much. The jolt might have been too profound. She found herself glancing at her mother from time to time; wondering how it could be that this was, indeed, the woman who had carried her for almost a year; who had suffered the pain of giving birth to her.

Despite the stiffness of the occasion, Nerys found herself under a close, though carefully veiled, scrutiny by her father and brothers alike. At first she found this uncomfortable; then amusing; finally annoying. At which point she ceased to pretend that she hadn't noticed and glared back at them defiantly. Strangely enough, they desisted from there on. Or maybe they were just being more subtle about it . . .

The dinner finished with a course of imported Kint plums, sitting in a caramel flan, and topped with just a touch of tangy walta leaf juice. The stilted conversa-

tion ran its course. Finally, Darreel Ohan rose, toasted his guests with a raised glass of extract-of-olfergine, and declared the occasion at an end. The guests repaired themselves to their quarters. Nerys hooked her arm under Fliz's, finding sanity in the feel of his presence. The four entered Ofal suite. When the door had closed behind them Nerys let out a sigh of relief. She considered her friends and detected similar sentiments. She looked around and slowly out her finger on her lips.

Caitlan raised a questioning eyebrow. "Now?" he asked lowly.

Nerys nodded. "Especially now."

Ailin nudged Caitlan. "I'm tired," she declared.

"So am I," Fliz announced.

Caitlan grinned. "Then we're all agreed," he said. "We go to bed."

— 6 —

Rutger reviewed his stratagems and, as before, could find no flaws with them. Through careful manipulation he had ensured that he would not share their jammer. His outfit, consisting of a loose kaftan, not unlike that worn by the nomads, and incorporating a loose hood; the limert oil he had applied to make himself appear dark-skinned; they would serve as an additional protection against discovery. During the journey he would decrease his perceived presence to the minimum sustainable level. All this should allow him to make the trip without being discovered. To avoid accidentally meeting them in the conveyance stints he had also chartered his own, which was right now ferrying him out to the jammer depot.

And when they arrived at the Galatadian depot? At this point Rutger's plans became vague. But, in truth, he had little choice in the matter. One could, this much he had ascertained, hire mounts and equipment for forays into the valley. The Wearers routinely availed themselves of this offer. He would have to adapt himself to the situation, and evade his quarries at the same time. It wouldn't be easy, but it could be done.

His carriage discharged him at the depot just before dawn. The stints with the other passengers had not yet arrived. Rutger surveyed the scene before him. He had never seen a jammer; only knew of them through descriptions. He knew the principles by which they

operated, but seeing the reality of not just one, but eight, was an experience to induce awe.

The jammers were vehicles designed to transport passengers and cargo along the Fortitude Valley to the Calicta mine, then across the southern reaches of the northern desert to Tandree and finally to Galatadia Depot. Rutger felt the dry wind from Fortitude Valley blow into his face. It was this wind, blowing either north or south, which the jammers utilized. Using conventional transport along this route would have presented insurmountable obstacles, and made communication and the carrying of ore and gems from the mines extremely impractical. Fortitude Valley was barren; the low mountains defining it were outcrops of bare rock. Water was nowhere to be found; the trip was an endless procession of unfriendly environs whose sole purpose seemed to be to keep man and his draft animals away.

The principle of the jammer's operation had been invented centuries ago by a certain Horatio Jink; the first man crazy enough to prospect the dismal areas of the Fortitude Valley and the desert beyond. Finding the use of animals as sources of motive power well-nigh impossible, upon his return to—a much smaller—Gaskar he invented what he called a 'rotary sail'; a device which was basically nothing but an horizontal wheel, placed as high as possible above the vehicle to be moved. The wheel was equipped with vanes which caught the wind and produced a torque, which was transmitted through a vertical shaft, and, by means of a system of pulleys was transmitted to an horizontal axle, at the end of which were the wheels that propelled the vehicle in question.

The idea was simple and had since also been adopted to power the ore-crushers and other mechanical devices at the mines. Its implementation for propelling vehicles had led through a series of designs, to converge upon the currently favored one, a vehicle constructed on a chassis the shape of an elongated rhomboid, with a blunt and a pointed end. The main axle supported the widest part of the chassis, at right angles to the main axis. The standard jammer was powered by a pair of wind-wheels, towering above it in tapering frames. Vertical shafts and a system of pulleys and clutches transmitted the power to the axles. The jammer's steering was accomplished by having the wheels at the prow and stern set in pivots, connected to a central steering wheel by means of a system of pulleys ropes. A system of outrigger wheels extended from the sides of the

jammer, thus preventing it from capsizing in inclement winds. These could be raised or lowered and locked in place, as necessity dictated. To further aid the jammer's progress by favorable winds—meaning those blowing in the direction of travel—a pair of sails could be run out at either side on a system of spars that were retracted when not in use.

Jammers made extensive use of iron, almost all of which came from the Boroon mine, and was smelted in the foundries of the bleak town of Boroon. The blacksmiths of Boroon were craftsmen of the highest caliber, who had perfected the techniques of alloying the iron with other metals and minerals until it became hard and useful. Wind-wheels, shafts, axles, bearings, wheel frames: all manufactured from alloys of iron—which made each jammer into an expensive vehicle indeed. The chassis frame itself was usually manufactured from pine, which had the advantage of strength and lightness; reinforced with a system of iron supports.

On top of the basic chassis—a structure possibly long as fifty and as wide as fifteen feet, whose design varied little from one jammer to another—were placed either open compartments for passenger accommodation, or cargo holds; depending on requirements. Every jammer also carried what was effectively a fully equipped small workshop, in order to deal with mechanical problems that might arise en-route. The crew of four to eight men always included carpenters and blacksmiths. In order to further protect themselves against eventualities, jammers seldom traveled alone.

Rutger sauntered over to the main building to register his presence. Looking up at the jammers to his left he saw the great wind-wheels turning slowly in the early morning breeze. The adjustable vanes were drawn as far back as possible. When traveling they would be fully extended. Men were crawling all over the structures: inspecting, testing, adjusting. The grinding and creaking of metal against metal and wood against wood filled the air. A rancid smell of lubricants wafted from the structures.

Behind the depot buildings Rutger spied another, smaller compound, where a number of men were busy with a smaller jammer. This one looked like the personal vehicle of a rich merchant. It had a sleek, fast look about it. Some effort had been made to make it appear more than just functional. The cabin was integral with the chassis and was enclosed, protecting the occupants from the drifting sands. Rutger's vehicle,

though his berth was in the 'luxury' class, had no such protection for the passengers. Rutger spared the private jammer a regretful thought. It would have been much preferable to ride in this one.

Rutger grimaced and entered the office, where he registered and was shown to his jammer by an employee of the line. He deposited his small bundle of personal affairs in the berth assigned to him. Looking up he saw the first of the conveyance stints pull into the compound. Rutger composed himself into the state he would have to maintain for most of this journey. As of now he would be almost unnoticeable to anybody but those specifically looking for him; and even they would have difficulty discerning him.

Rutger scanned the arriving passengers, but failed to locate his quarries. This did not worry him. They might have arranged for a personal carriage as well. Indeed he would have expected them to. He felt the first traces of doubt when the boarding began in earnest and they still had not shown. What had happened *this* time? Another miscalculation on his behalf? When? How? The notion that he had been duped, even out-thought, again was galling; but he had to consider its possibility.

Shouts and commands outside. The vanes on the wind-wheels were run out to their full length; the wheels spun faster; wagons jerked as the clutches were engaged; the big wheels with their broad rims started turning; frames creaked and strained; the line of jammers shuddered into motion.

Still they had not appeared. Rutger slumped back into his seat to contemplate this development and what it meant for him. He expended a brief thought on the advisability of jumping off and pursuing an alternative course of action. He discarded the notion and sat back to listen to the sounds of the caravan, ponder the slowly passing landscape, and formulate new plans.

Halfway through the day the jammer train stopped. One of the leading wagons had developed a fault, which a small army of men set about fixing. The passengers were grateful for the break and clambered off the wagons to stretch their legs. The interval was short-lived. The repair had been accomplished with astonishing efficiency. The passengers re-embarked and the trek continued.

In the late afternoon a small jammer—the same Rutger had seen at the depot—caught up with the

train, passing it at a brisk pace. Rutger again allowed himself to be touched by a bout of fleeting envy. A brief notion flickered past his conscious mind. He grasped for it; held it; inspected it. It was possible. Extremely unlikely but possible. His mind reached out for the small jammer, overtaking his own lumbering giant at this very instant.

Too much noise; the minds around him blanketed the mental realm with their incessant chatter and confusion.

And yet . . .

The furtive emanations of a woman. Fragments of desires; apprehension; even fear.

Familiar . . .

Familiar?

How could it be?

The jammer drew past; the occupants well concealed under the canopy.

Familiar . . .

From where? What occasion?

Rutger invoked past associations, occasions, events, probes . . . attempted to match them with the pattern he'd sensed.

From the jumble emerged the image of . . .

. . . a beach . . .

. . . a woman . . . lying curled up on the sand.

. . . a boat at the edge of the surf.

Rutger's head jerked with the surprise. What a strange confluence of circumstances . . .

But one thing was certain: they were in the jammer; getting ahead of him; how far he had no foundation to estimate. But if the speed of their jammer was anything to go by . . .

Rutger found that, despite his vexation, he was also beginning to develop a certain . . . respect . . . for his quarries. Whether they knew about his pursuit or not, by some means beyond his ken they had drawn away from him yet again.

Quite remarkable. These were, indeed, dangerous and resourceful individuals. They *would* be disposed of; if not now, then at the end of this journey. He knew where they were going. He would find them.

"We must assume that he knows," Caitlan told his companions. "He may not, but we must proceed as if he did."

Fliz didn't like the idea much, but he saw the wisdom of Caitlan's stance. Besides, somehow he'd known it

from the moment he'd laid eyes on him: Rutger was not an ordinary man. If he had been wise, he would never have been so intent on robbing him. Or maybe it had been the challenge? Who could know? And he must not forget that without the magice he'd still be a thief in Thalonica . . . and, he reminded himself guiltily, his mother and sister would still be alive.

Why did it have to be like this? Why couldn't things just be *good*? Why this juxtaposition of tragedy and joy? Was there a law here that he didn't understand—some inscrutable cosmic rule that could not be broken; no matter how much one tried?

"You're right," he told Caitlan, because at that very moment he *saw* that it was so. "He knows."

"Then we'll have to hurry," Ailin said.

"It is just as well my father could not come," Nerys said lowly, glancing at her eldest brother, who sat at the front of the cabin, just out of earshot; prevented from following their conversation by the ubiquitous noises of turning wheels, rubbing linkages, and creaking suspension. They had requested the privacy, ostensibly to discuss business. Gherwan had acceded with ill grace. But his father had taught him well. Gherwan knew that a lot might depend on humoring their guests; no matter how incomprehensible their mores.

Fliz didn't like Gherwan. Neither, he suspected, did Gherwan like him much; or any of them, for that matter. Had Gherwan been the brother of any other girl, Fliz would have suspected that the man's dislike of him was caused by an innate protective urge toward the sister, for whom no man could be good enough. This was hardly the case here. The furtive, fleeting glances Gherwan accorded to Nerys carried no message of concern or affection; only of a supercilious disdain for this . . . creature . . . who had so blatantly flaunted the rules Gherwan held to be of essence in his order of the world—if for no other reason but that he profited from them more than anybody.

Without being aware of it, Fliz made a small sound. Nerys leaned closer to him. "What is it?"

He shook his head. "Nothing."

"You always say that," she accused him. "And it's always *something*."

From the corner of his eyes Fliz saw Ailin glancing at them. A tiny smile, then she looked away again. Fliz sometimes thought that she looked right through the protective layers of his personality and knew *exactly* what was going on in his mind. An unsettling notion.

Had it been anybody else, he would have found it invasive.

Then something very unsettling happened. As he looked at Ailin, her face partially obscured by Caitlan, the noises of the jammer faded. And then he was somewhere else; in a cave; and they stood beside . . . something . . . something huge and alien . . . something he had no name for.

Then . . . tragedy . . .

Together shall they die.

It wasn't a voice—more like a thought; just . . . there . . .

Fliz jerked uncontrollably. Nerys looked at him in alarm.

"Fliz?"

He grabbed her arm.

"Fliz? What is it?" Through her concern she scowled at him. "And don't tell me again it's 'nothing!'"

Fliz drew a deep breath.

"I just . . . saw . . . something . . ." he said slowly.

"'Saw'?"

"I don't know . . ."

He glanced at Ailin; only to be riveted by Caitlan's steady gaze. He looked away.

Tragedy . . .

Why should he perceive such a thing?

Nerys hugged him. "Fliz? Please . . ."

He held her tightly. Over her shoulders he saw a silent communication flow between the Ailin and Caitlan. And he knew that she was the focus of this; of his vision; of the tragedy. Ailin was more than she appeared. Much more.

Caitlan: another focus.

His weakness will be his strength.

Where did *that* come from? What did it *mean*? Why were these things welling up from some netherworld to bubble to the surface of his consciousness?

That was the one thing he did *not* know. But he knew it to be true.

"Don't worry," he whispered in Nerys ear.

She pulled back. "You scare me." She saw the expression on his face. "No! Not like that!" she amended. "I didn't mean . . ."

"I know," he said. "Sometimes I scare myself." Which was true. He turned to Ailin. "I have never 'seen' things in this way. I wonder if . . ." He shook his head. "Never mind. Someday . . . someday I'll know."

Or maybe he already did.

Ailin . . .

Who knew what manner of events her mere *presence* could precipitate! A woman of power—much like his mother had been. Only now that Felicia was long dead and buried, did Fliz realize just how much power there had been in his mother—and he also understood that she had *known* that she would die; that she did it so that he could live.

Caitlan placed a hand on his arm. “If we can help . . .”

Fliz grinned crookedly. “I wish you could. But not with this. I think . . . I think it’s something I’ve been avoiding for a long time . . . finally catching up with me.”

The jammer pulled past the last of the convoy and gained the open floor of the valley. The wind-wheel chattered and whined. The ground wheels bumped over the gently undulating, compacted sand.

“We’d better exchange some polite small talk with your brother,” Caitlan told Nerys.

She pulled a face.

“He’s right,” Fliz told her. “We need to keep up appearances—for the time being.”

Nerys grimaced but relented. Fliz went over to Gherwan and invited him back to sit with them. It was still difficult to be polite to the man, and Fliz marveled at his own powers of dissimulation. But things had to be done, and he would do them. As would they all.

The jammer, being driven by the wind, had no need to halt for resting, and lumbered on hour after hour. It was dark when they arrived at the Calicta Mine. The jammer train would stop here, but there was no need for them to do so. The open desert lay before them; mostly flat, with a few insignificant undulations, presenting no obstacle to a smooth ride under the stars. The steersmen knew their way. The passengers had the choice between sleep—not easy because of the ever-present noise—and talking or watching the stars from the open rear platform. All of them chose the latter.

There was something eerie about their inexorable, unrelenting progress across the sand, with the two great wind-wheels grating away above them in a steady rhythm, the squeaking of the ropes on the pulleys, the grinding of the rear wheel on the sand below. A different experience altogether, Caitlan thought, than his ride across the steppe. The smell of horse had been replaced by a ubiquitous metallic tang, mixed in with

the rancid aroma of lubricants. The sounds had become plangent and harsh; the rhythm jerky and unpredictable. Caitlan decided that he didn’t like it much. But he saw the wisdom in dispensing with animals here. The wind, though rapidly cooling now, remained parching and somehow unpleasant; possessed, it seemed, of an unforgiving quality.

When it became too cool to stand on the platform they went back into the protective cocoon of the cabin and tried to get some sleep. They found Gherwan had already stretched out on one of the bunks; leaving three for them. Despite Caitlan’s size, he and Ailin managed to squeeze onto another. Fliz and Nerys did the same, with much less trouble.

They arrived at the Tandree Mine depot well before dawn, and rudely woke the depot manager. Somewhat later they found themselves in somewhat more comfortable bedding in the rooms used by Darreel Ohan, or such guests as he might bring here.

Caitlan and Ailin emerged from their quarters to find the morning half-advanced and Fliz and Nerys already up and about. Caitlan casually enquired with the chief-steersman of their jammer (who was also the effective captain) about the likely progress of the train they had passed.

The man, a certain Kolic, was almost as tall as Caitlan, with muscles that were considerably bulkier than Caitlan’s. Not necessarily as well-tuned; certainly not as fast. But powerful nonetheless. In a fight they’d be a handicap. Muscles like that hindered, rather than helped.

Kolic grinned from ear to ear. “They’d be arriving at Calicta by now. Or maybe not. With so many big jammers there’s always a breakdown or two, and then the whole train has to stop and wait for repairs.” He jerked his head at their own vehicle. “Give me that one anytime. She’s a reliable little ketch, I tell you. Swift as they come, and nary a breakdown if she’s serviced properly.” He shook his head. “It’s the size of the big jammers that their downfall. The bigger they make them, the more breakdowns they have. Too much strain on all the linkages; and too much time it takes to fix whatever goes wrong.”

Caitlan tipped a finger to his head. “Very interesting. Thanks.”

Kolic eyed him curiously; made as if to say something, but then decided against it.

"What is it?" Caitlan asked him.

Kolic gave him a shrewd inspection. "Now, you'd be Greeleans, right? Or so I heard. But as for you, you don't much look like one to me. They're all fops; all fancy and elegant. But you . . . well, you look like you've been in a few fights." His mouth twisted in a lopsided smile. "And I don't think you've lost too many either." He flicked an appreciative glance at Ailin, who stood a few paces apart, chatting to Nerys and Fliz. "And your women . . . well, they're . . . quite something."

Caitlan chuckled. "That they are," he agreed. "And, no, I'm not what you'd call a native Greelean."

"I thought so," Kolic said thoughtfully. "Well, it's none of my business, and maybe I shouldn't say this, what with master Gherwan being the eldest son and all, and . . ." He squinted at Caitlan, uncertain of his position; maybe torn between loyalties, too.

Caitlan waited. Kolic had already gone too far. Whatever he had to say he would.

The chief-steersman looked around him furtively. Seeing no one within earshot he relaxed a trifle. "I don't know why I'm telling you this," he said lowly. "It's just that . . . well, I know she's a merchant sl . . ." he bit back the words, aghast at the slip.

Caitlan nodded. "Go on," he said. "You have my word: this will not go beyond you and me."

"Not even your . . ."

"If this is the way you want it."

Kolic glanced around again. "The young one, the daughter of Master Ohan . . ." he said. "I'm not supposed to know this, of course, but when we were getting the jammer ready . . . I heard Master Gherwan talk to Tiolkoy . . . That's the carpenter. They were standing on the other side of the front wheel, so they didn't know I was there. So they talked about things they maybe shouldn't have."

"Like?"

"Like that . . . the young lady . . . is to be disposed of. If—and only if—it will most surely look like it had been an accident."

"Do you know why?"

Kolic shook his head. "Master Gherwan wouldn't tell the likes of us. Not even Tiolkoy. We're just drudges. He's a merchant, and an eldest son at that."

"What kind of accident?" Caitlan wanted to know.

"The kind that kills," Kolic told him.

Caitlan gave Kolic a sharp inspection. "And why does this bother you?"

Kolic shrugged. "It's just . . . not something you do. Not even to a . . ." He grimaced. "Well, you know . . . She is what she is. She didn't choose it. And now . . . she doesn't even *look* like what she is anymore. Just another girl, really. Could be one of my own." He appeared faintly embarrassed by the admission. "I have children, you know," he continued. "Daughters mostly. Too many, if the truth be told. They're more trouble than anything. Boys are, too, but they . . . well, you know . . ." He grinned. "Anyway, trouble they may be, but they're still my flesh and blood, and . . . well, this thing Tiolkoy is supposed to take care of . . . that's . . ." He shook his head and sighed. "What's she done—that her own father would want her dead?"

"He thinks," Caitlan said, "that she knows too much of his business . . ."

Kolic mouth formed a small 'o'. "And telling you too much of it, eh?"

"Hmm."

"He'd murder his own flesh and blood for this?"

"Looks like it."

"That's not very fatherly," Kolic noted grimly.

Caitlan nodded. "Thank you, friend. You did a good thing. There's a woman there that now owes you her life. One day, when we're well out of reach, I'll tell her who you are."

"Just don't do it now!" Kolic said. "And watch Tiolkoy. He's a devious rapsallion. Never liked him much, but even so . . . I never thought that this was the kind of thing he'd agree to." He snorted. "It's what happens when one aspires too far."

"Aspires to what?" Caitlan wondered.

"Tiolkoy's meant to be a *maker*. He's a carpenter. But he also trades in things; things he *hasn't* made. Underhanded kind of stuff. Not just on Habaday either, when everybody's permitted *some* trading." Kolic leaned closer to Caitlan. "I'd say they know about it. So they twist his arm, in return for looking the other way. Maybe they even offer him a guild membership! Menial, mind you, but it's a start—for the likes of Tiolkoy anyway. Who knows what he'll do for a membership . . ."

"I just don't understand this," Caitlan admitted. "Why's everybody so keen to be a merchant?"

Kolic made a gesture of denial. "Everybody? Certainly not! You can count *me* out; or the folks I consort with!" He shrugged disdainfully. "I admit, the mer-

chants—at least the rich ones—have the best of it. But they're an immoral bunch. They produce nothing and live on the proceeds of shuffling things about between them; and the likes of us end up paying far too much for what we could have had for half the price!" He muttered something under his breath. "There are those," he continued, "who think that we should dispose of the lot of them. Make them work like the rest of us. It'd be a change, that's for sure. They call us 'drudges' and that's what we are to them. Vermin."

Something behind Caitlan attracted his attention. He straightened. "Talking of vermin . . ." he muttered. "I'd better return to my duties." With a quick glance at Caitlan: "Watch over that girl. Tiolkoy is a sly devil. He'll think of something."

"So will I," Caitlan said grimly. "Thank you, friend." The two separated. Caitlan returned his attention to his companions and Gherwan, who was striding purposefully toward them. A false smile lay plastered across his face.

"Msm. Ing. Msm. Wertel. The foreman is ready to show you the operation."

Caitlan nodded. "Good. Let us proceed." He nodded at Ailin. "Shall we go?"

Gherwan cleared his throat in alarm. Caitlan glanced at him. Unless he was very much mistaken . . .

"I'm afraid . . ." Gherwan began, but faltered. He straightened. "No females are permitted in the mines. This rule is definite, unalterable, and allows for no exceptions." He glanced at Ailin, ignoring Nerys. "I regret the inconvenience." Caitlan noted that Fliz was about to issue a testy remark. He put a hand on Fliz's arm. Fliz gave him an unpleasant look. Caitlan shook his head minutely. He turned to Gherwan. "One moment, if you will," he said, jerking his head, signaling Gherwan to give them privacy. The young man acceded with ill grace. Caitlan stepped closer to Fliz and the women.

"This has been carefully arranged," he said lowly. To Fliz: "Whatever you do, don't let Nerys out of your sight—do you hear? Preferably not out of your reach either. Never let her venture so far that you cannot instantly come to her assistance. Watch her every move. Observe the people who approach her; watch out for the possibility of falling masonry or timber; excessively close approaches to precipices. Anything that might put her into a position where an 'accident' might become a real possibility." To Ailin: "You, too. Espe-

cially if you are forced to separate from us because of . . ." he faltered.

Ailin nodded. "I understand," she said softly, all traces of merriment gone from her face.

Nerys looked at Caitlan in alarm. Fliz's face was a stony mask. "What do you know?"

"Let's just say," Caitlan offered by way of an explanation, "that I have been informed that Nerys is considered a threat to her father's enterprise." He exhaled sharply. "I'm sorry," he said to Nerys.

Nerys shook her head. "No," she said softly, despairingly. "I don't believe that. They don't like me much, but . . ."

Caitlan exchanged a quick glance with Ailin, who put an arm around Nerys. The young woman tried to shake her off, but Ailin was not deterred. Presently, Nerys yielded. Fliz just stood there, murder in his eyes. Caitlan glanced up—and straight into Gherwan's face. Gherwan tried to avert his gaze, but it was too late; dissimulation futile. At that moment Caitlan knew that everything Kolic had told him was the limpid truth. Gherwan paled under Caitlan's stare and turned away.

"Believe it," Caitlan said to Nerys.

The young woman looked at him from sad, anguished eyes. How could they do this to her? Caitlan wondered. How could anyone do this to their own blood? It was monstrous, reprehensible, wicked. He and Ailin could never have children, and he certainly did not know what parenthood implied. But there were things that ought to be beyond doubt, beyond variation; even across different sets of values, customs, and systems of propriety. One of these was that your offspring were entrusted to your care, and that, no matter what happened, they had to be able to trust you. Taking that away was a heinous act indeed.

"Listen to me," he said to Nerys. "This is as it is. It is a terrible thing. And terrible things happen. They always have. They always will. But here, you also have friends—who will never treat you thus."

Nerys took a deep breath. "I know that."

"Good," Caitlan said, and allowed himself a tiny smile. "We shall foil their stratagems. Right?" This was directed at Fliz.

"Who?" Fliz asked, "is supposed to . . . do . . . this?"

"If my information is correct, the carpenter. He's eager to please his masters and hopes to profit handsomely. But he also has limited options, since he has been ordered to simulate an accident."

"If he can't," Fliz said darkly, "he may decide to be less discreet and devious."

"That's possible," Caitlan conceded. "All the more reason to be excessively vigilant."

"And we're not going down the mines," Fliz said.

"No."

Caitlan called out. Gherwan, composed once more, approached them.

"We have decided to forego the visit," Caitlan told him.

"But . . ."

"Your rules are definite. So are ours. We choose the path of least resistance. It avoids unnecessary conflict—which has a tendency to interfere with the smooth transaction of business."

"But your visit . . ."

"Our visit was instructive already. We know what we need to know." Caitlan glanced at his companions; back at Gherwan. "If it is not too much to ask . . . we should like to leave for the Galatadians right away."

"It's . . . I don't know if . . ." Gherwan sputtered.

Caitlan made a dismissive gesture. "Unless you . . ."

"No, no!" Gherwan hastened to assert. "We'll leave right away. I'll inform the chief steersman. It's no problem, I assure you."

Caitlan nodded coldly. "Good."

The last leg of the journey was a tense affair. Gherwan—aware that something was wrong, but unable to define what; and unwilling to push the matter and risk an unproductive exchange with his guests—did his best to keep out of their way. Caitlan caught him casting occasional dark glances in Nerys' general direction. He attempted to devise plans to deal with the situation, but discarded all but one. When he had decided that this was, indeed, the only alternative, he leaned over to Ailin.

"There's something I have to do," he told her. He nodded in the direction of Fliz and Nerys, who had curled up in one of the bunks, sound asleep. "Keep an eye on our friends."

"Where are you going?" Her voice betrayed her anxiety.

"To remove a threat."

"Be careful."

"I promise."

He left the cabin through the forward hatch and climbed a short ladder to the wheel-house. There,

much to his relief, he found Kolic, who had taken the first watch. With him was another individual. The second steersman, Caitlan presumed.

He made polite enquiries about Kolic's health; the winds; the condition of the sand and the jammer; their likely time of arrival. Anything but what he had come to know. Kolic answered in precisely those terms one would have expected of him. Presently another man arrived. The second steersman took the wheel; Kolic left. Caitlan followed him, continuing with his attempts at polite but meaningless conversation.

There came a moment when no one was within listening distance.

"Where do I find Tiolkoy?" Caitlan asked.

"In the workshop. Doing some maintenance—or so I would hope."

"Thank you."

"I daren't enquire why you ask."

"Good."

Caitlan and Kolic separated and went their separate ways. Caitlan clambered over a railing flanking a walkway and poked his head around a corner to peer into the cubicle that served as a workshop. A single man was at work; filing and scraping on a wooden object whose purpose Caitlan could not identify. He looked around and saw Caitlan; twitched in an uncontrollable reaction, and, with feigned disinterest redirected his attention to his task. "This area is off-limits to passengers," he said without looking around.

"Tiolkoy?" Caitlan asked him.

Tiolkoy stopped filing and slowly turned his head. A stringy, tough-looking individual with a pointed face, accentuated by a cleft nose and heavy-lidded eyes.

"What do you want?" he asked.

Caitlan stood such as to block the entrance; a fact which did not escape Tiolkoy.

"Advice, maybe," Caitlan said.

"Advice?" Tiolkoy echoed.

Caitlan eased himself into the cubicle. "I have a problem," he said. "I thought you might be able to help."

He took another, small step. He issued what he thought was a friendly smile. Tiolkoy was not deceived. His right hand, still holding the sharp chisel he'd been using to work the wooden object, jerked forward. He pointed the tool at Caitlan and lunged; apparently confident that Caitlan would be too surprised, or otherwise too slow to react. The weaponsmaster's hand shot out

and clamped over the wrist that held the chisel. He wrenched. Bone snapped. Tiolkoy opened his mouth to scream. Caitlan's free hand slapped onto his mouth, pushed his head back. Tiolkoy lurched over backward. His head hit the workbench with a crack. His eyes crossed and he went limp. Caitlan released him and felt the neck for a pulse. He found it and straightened; contemplated the situation; looked around to see if anybody had witnessed the brief altercation. The workshop cubicle, however, was set low in the jammer's frame and was well out of sight of most positions occupied by the crew. Caitlan shrugged. Tiolkoy's wrist would keep him occupied for some time to come. He doubted that, when they finally found him, he would tell them the truth about the affair. He would also know that Caitlan knew. It was extremely unlikely that he would have the stomach to take any action against them or Nerys for quite some time.

Caitlan, with another look at Tiolkoy's prone body, removed himself from the vicinity of the workshop and returned to the cabin by way of the rear platform and the back door. Ailin received him with obvious relief. He sat down beside her and took her hand.

"How did it go?" she asked him.

"We've still got to keep our eyes open," he said. "But the situation has definitely improved."

She leaned against him. "Good." It was the way she said it when she felt that things were going right. He liked it when she felt that way. Her contentment was contagious and transmitted itself to him. He leaned back, aware that this affair was by no means over; but that things could be much worse.

"Where's Gherwan?" he asked her.

She nodded in the direction of the forward exit ladder. "He left only a few seconds ago."

Caitlan wondered if Gherwan had gone off to speak to Tiolkoy. If this was the case, they would have missed each other only by the most fortuitous of accidents and because he, Caitlan, had chosen to return to the cabin by the back door.

Gherwan would suspect a connection between the carpenter's debilitated state and Caitlan's absence from the cabin. Caitlan grinned to himself. Let Gherwan suspect whatever he liked.

The southern winds were favorable. Not only did they exercise the wind-wheels, but the side sails, too, billowed tight and helped to push the jammer forward

at a brisk pace. The desert was left behind; the mountains to their right, rounded by the wear and tear of eons of wind and drifting sands, became verdant; a pale, tentative hue at first; then, as they proceeded, the colors deepened until the mat of vegetation covered everything from the valley floor to the tops of the ranges around them. Scrubs and trees appeared; grew denser. By the time they pulled into the Galatadia depot in the late afternoon it was difficult to believe that behind them lay miles and miles of arid desert. Everywhere was luscious growth and color.

"My father has asked me and some of the crew to accompany you on your journey into the valley," Gherwan informed them. "It will ensure your comfort and your safety. Wearers do not take kindly to being disturbed when hunting silks. We know their hunting grounds; thus we can help you to avoid them."

Caitlan smiled thinly. He'd expected something like this.

"You're welcome to accompany us," he said. "But just you."

"I'm not all that familiar with the environs," Gherwan pointed out. "However, my men . . ."

Caitlan made a curt gesture. "Just you. If you want to, that is." He looked at him meaningfully. Gherwan paled under the regard. "I would like to," he began, "but I really think . . ." He swallowed whatever else he wanted to say.

Caitlan turned away and proceeded to ignore him. They went to the office and enquired about the hiring of horses and equipment. For a price, they were told, they could have anything they wanted. "But you want to be careful," the owner, who introduced himself as Zander Haslit, told them. "There's a Wearer out there in the valley, and they're not pleased when they're disturbed."

He leaned on the counter, which doubled as a bar and a desk of sorts. "Mad they are, when they get into the mood. Mind you, they're weird enough when they arrive here, dressed almost like normal folks, with their beards in their little pouches, and the gleam of zealotry in their eyes. But you should see them when they're out there! My son had the misfortune once. He said he'd never seen anything as frightening in his life as a half-naked Wearer, bareback on a horse, his pouch dangling on his bare chest, and his hunting spear clutched in his hands, bearing down on him. Barely escaped with his life—and then only because his

friends were quick enough to knock the lunatic off his horse. They said he fought like a man possessed. Screamed at them to leave him alone, and they couldn't have the silks and he was going to kill them if they touched him." He chuckled. "If the Wearers weren't such good business for us, and it would have looked bad to kill one of them . . . I believe they would have; and with my blessings!" He shook his head. "I've never been to Thalonica and I don't ever want to go there. To imagine that they're allowed to run a city! Madmen like that?" He blew a gust of air through his straggly beard. "Why does anyone tolerate them?"

"We have no intention of disturbing whoever's out there," Caitlan said, avoiding a reply.

Zander Haslit looked skeptical. "What you want and what actually happens might well be two very different things. The Wearers usually stay on the eastern side of the valley, in the Opash forests, where all the silks hide out. But every now and then one of them gets it into his tiny mind that he might find them on the other side. There's no reason why he should, of course. There just aren't any there! But you tell this to one of these fellows. And when they find you there . . . well, they'll get very unpleasant."

Caitlan shrugged negligently. "Let's hope the one out there stays on the other side then."

Zander Haslit's face never lost its dubious air. "But you're welcome to go, of course. Your gold is as good as theirs. The freedom of the valley is yours. It belongs to nobody, and that's the truth."

They settled on a price for six horses, to be rented for a tentative period of five days; a refundable deposit to cater for the dire possibility of their failure to return. Four of the horses were saddled; the remainder was equipped with bags, which were filled with provisions, cooking utensils, and the components of two small tents. "You won't need water," Zander Haslit assured them. "There's a reason why the valley is so green. For a fact, it's the most beautiful place I've ever seen; right up to the Northern Gorge, where it begins to turn to desert again."

Caitlan was eager to depart, but night was falling, and they decided to stay over at the depot. He wondered why they hadn't seen Gherwan for most of the day; where he'd disappeared to. The jammer was still there and might or might not await their return. It was difficult to say. Caitlan's off-handed treatment of Gherwan

might well have prompted the merchant son to giving up on the pesky Greeleans.

In the event, Gherwan suddenly appeared, as if out of nowhere. He approached them as they were finishing their evening meal, an ample repast prepared in the depot's kitchen by unknown agencies. It had been served on the west-facing patio of the main depot building; where stood several tables, waiting for the occasional guests.

Gherwan stopped at a cautious distance.

Caitlan deigned to give him a brief inspection. "You have decided on a course of action?"

"I will accompany you," Gherwan declared with evident reluctance. "How long are you intending to stay in the valley?"

Caitlan shrugged. "It seems like a beautiful place. We have some time on our hands. We're keen to see as much of it as we can."

Gherwan sighed. "You leave tomorrow?"

"At first daylight."

Gherwan nodded heavily. "I will be there." He bowed perfunctorily and departed.

"I didn't think he'd go," Caitlan said to the others.

"I wonder what he wants," Nerys said darkly.

Fliz chuckled siccantly. "Please your father, no doubt. I wager he's been told not to lose sight of us, no matter what. So, that's what he's doing."

Caitlan hoped that was all, but he didn't say anything. He didn't have to. He saw the same thought reflected in all their faces.

They departed in the early morning. Gherwan was there, ready and waiting. He appeared ill at ease, but Caitlan had expected as much. Gherwan's current condition gave no hint as to his ultimate motives, which might or might not be harmless; his intentions merely to remain close to them. Still, Gherwan's absence during the previous day added an air of menace. The depot was a small place where avoiding people was inherently difficult. Caitlan did not like the alternatives offering themselves.

For the first half of the day they followed a trail along the floor of the valley; laid by a succession of Wearers and other visitors over hundreds of years. It wound its way through tall grass, reeds and tussock; around and through copses of tassel trees, kilyeens, and liaan pod stalks; across innumerable small rivulets, through a forest of noquos, beech, and ferns; another

forest of tall dryad stalks, each tipped with a knoll and a tuft of stiff hair, the stalks covered in a thick layer of a green and purple checkered moss. The air was warm and humid, leading the riders to discard all clothing but that required for purposes of modesty.

They made brisk progress, despite the constant temptation to stop and survey yet another charming vista. Caitlan found himself pressed into the role of taskmaster, who pushed on when the others wanted to dally. Especially Gherwan, who seemed to be set on keeping their progress as slow as possible and who, as they went further into the valley, exhibited an increased degree of unease, as if he had an inkling of something ominous lurking somewhere in their future. Since he had no reason to suspect Gherwan to be possessed of any 'talent', Caitlan was forced to conclude that Gherwan knew something, and that this knowledge might quite possibly derive from his own contrivance of whatever it was he now seemed to fear.

Caitlan brought his horse close to Fliz's and, in a low voice, communicated his suspicions. Fliz nodded. "I've been thinking along similar lines," he admitted. "But if anything happened out here, it would be difficult to make it appear like an 'accident.'" He frowned. "Or maybe. . . What *could* happen? An ambush, during which one of us gets killed—that person being Nerys? It's the only thing I can think of. I mean, what else is there? A tree falling on her? Hardly! A vegetable running rampant? Her horse throwing her off? . . ." He paused thoughtfully. "That's a possibility. A branch, held back by a cord. Someone cuts it. It whips forward. The horse shies. Nerys is thrown off. If all goes well for the attacker, she breaks her neck."

Caitlan nodded. "We should adapt a more protective formation. I'll make sure Gherwan is in our sight at all times. We should start by bringing him up to the front."

Fliz nodded, his face grim. "I think so, too."

Nerys, who was riding beside Ailin, leaned across to the circe. "I have to talk to Gherwan," she said lowly.

Ailin glanced at her. "Don't expect too much," she advised Nerys.

Nerys pulled a face. "I won't" she said, and pulled on the reins. The dappled mare slowed. Gherwan's gray gelding pulled alongside her. Her brother tried to ignore her, but she wouldn't let him. It was time that she at least spoke her mind to him. It didn't matter that it didn't make any difference. All her life the men in

her family had spoken to her, and she had been forced to listen; because that was the way it was: men spoke; women listened.

No more. She would speak. Gherwan would listen. It should be an interesting reversal of roles.

His face was averted, staring straight ahead.

"Why do you hate me so?" she asked.

He made no reply, but continued to stare forward.

"You *will* answer me," she declared. "If it takes all day—but I *will* make you talk. And I *will* know why you are as you are."

Slowly he turned his head. "I don't hate you," he said, his voice distant and indifferent. "Why should I hate you? You're just a . . ." He shrugged and turned his head away again.

"A merchant slut?" she supplied.

His head whipped around. "I'm no drudge!" he hissed. "Don't you *ever* insinuate . . ."

"What am I then?" she snapped. "What would *you* call it?"

His dark eyes regarded her with an indifference that was more hurtful than if he'd screamed his hatred at her. "A woman," he said, "and as such without any significance. What else?"

"Significant enough to want me killed," she said accusingly.

His eyes widened, but it was only a brief loss of control. The face settled back into its previous state of indifference. "Your knowledge of our affairs is intolerable. They," with his head he motioned at the three riders ahead of them, "will use it to extract excessive profits from our transactions."

Nerys shook her head. "So it would have been with Corran," she pointed out. "If you're so sensitive about your secrets why pawn me off to such a zealot?"

"Corran would never have listened to a woman," Gherwan said. "He just wanted a breeder to get into Pastor's heaven. Wearers are fanatics; superstitious, blinkered zealots. Giving you to Corran was safe. These Greeleans, however . . ."

"What about them?" she challenged him. "They actually *listen* to me? Is that what bothers you?"

Gherwan snorted contemptuously. "They pay far too much attention to women," he declared. "Women enslave them. These men are pathetic. And you're using it. Especially with the little one. You're servicing him, are you not? No doubt he tells you all his secrets. Now if you would do your duty and transmit these to *me* . . ."

Nerys laughed. She couldn't help it. Did he really believe that she would do such a thing? She considered him and concluded that, as preposterous as it sounded, he actually *did!*

"You are the pathetic one," she snapped. "And, yes, I do know his secrets, and he knows mine, and I have already told him all I know. We have taken from and given to each other freely. Not just secrets, but affection, trust. . . ." She grinned. "As well as a lot of extremely enjoyable 'servicing'. Would you like me to tell you about some of *those* kinds of secrets? The kinds of things he knows how to do and lets me do. . . ."

"Stop!" Gherwan's face had turned crimson. He took a few deep breaths.

"Why?" she laughed. "Don't you want to know what he. . . ." 'did to Corran?' she wanted to say, but caught herself just in time. The temptation to hurt this man, who was the same flesh and blood as herself, but whom she could never reach except to injure and humiliate, was so great. . . . It took all her willpower to clamp down on her words. These were things that must not be known.

She noticed that Caitlan and Fliz, having ridden side by side talking for a while, had now separated. Fliz pulled his horse aside to let Ailin pass. He waited until Nerys and Gherwan had caught up with him.

"My partner would like you to join him," he said to Gherwan, in a tone that allowed no contradiction. Gherwan, not deigning a reply, spurred on his horse and did as he was told. Fliz fell in beside Nerys. "What did he have to say?" he wanted to know.

Nerys shook her head. "How can this be my brother?"

Fliz reached out and touched her. She didn't feel like smiling, but she forced herself to. "I'll live," she said softly.

Fliz's face turned grim. "That's exactly what we're going to make sure of," he said. His expression softened. "I'm going to stay close to you from now on."

"You would be closer if were riding the same horse," she teased.

"I think Gherwan would be quite scandalized."

"Definitely."

He held out a hand. She took it and they continued to ride along in this manner.

Caitlan looked at the swaying back of Nerys' brother and wondered why he had a notion that he was missing

something important. The scenario Fliz and he had discussed earlier simply didn't make sense. Gherwan was not stupid. Not for a moment would he believe they they'd accept an ambush as anything but a device to dispose of Nerys. With Tiolkoy having been disposed of in such a decisive fashion, Gherwan must assume that they knew most of his plans.

Even more incredible was the notion that he would have been able to procure men of a suitable disposition at the depot. Men willing to set up a complicated ambush, whose target was a selected member of their group—and then risk being chased by the remaining members of the group, whom they were not allowed to touch or harm.

No. It didn't make sense. Something else was afoot.

Think!

What assumptions was he making?

Gherwan wanted Nerys dead. This much was almost certain, given past events.

Gherwan had been unable to arrange this during their journey here. He now had devised a new plan. This, too, was immensely reasonable.

Gherwan was doing his best to make any attempt on Nerys' life appear like an accident. This too, was sensible, given past experience.

Gherwan may or may not have been able to enlist the help of others to execute his plan.

If he had, they would be waiting somewhere ahead. Maybe very close.

If he had *not* been able to do so, then he would. . . .

. . . have to do it himself.

. . . and make it look like an accident!

Which he was not going to be able to do; and Gherwan had to know that. Unless he was stupid beyond belief. Caitlan didn't think he was. He might be zealot, just like the Wearers he and his ilk looked down upon—but an idiot he was not.

Caitlan ran back over his list of assumptions and could find no flaw with any of them. Still, a flaw there was.

Starting with. . . what?

Maybe Gherwan was willing to forego the 'accident' part and to kill Nerys outright? But that would be counterproductive. Because then *they* would know; and, even if they didn't kill him in turn—which, for Gherwan, must be a real possibility—they would, at the very least hurt him. Apart from all that, this would definitely demolish any chances of the prospective lucre-

tive deal between them and Darreel Ohan; who would be very embarrassed should they elect to turn to the owner of Calicta and added to *his* wealth and influence—at Darreel Ohan’s expense. That, as Nerys had explained to them last night, would be a major humiliation—especially, as must surely become known, his wayward offspring, whom he’d bartered off to Corran, had not only shirked her duty, but was now in league with those who had scorned him. All that after he had gone to some length to curry their goodwill!

Humiliation indeed! In more ways than one.

A new thought entered Caitlan’s mind. How far would Darreel Ohan go to avoid humiliation? A merchant’s status was maybe even more important to him than was a Wearer’s in Thalonica. The merchants had their own superstitions, and, though they did not aspire to some mythical paradise on the other side of Caravella, they instead focused their attention on this world and their position in it. Nerys, Caitlan realized, was not the only one who represented a threat to Darreel Ohan; and, by implication, to Gherwan.

Caitlan considered Gherwan’s back. The notion was preposterous, of course, but if the putative ambush was not just meant for Nerys . . .

The more he explored the idea the more sense it made. It was possible that, as little as a day ago, Nerys had been the only target of Gherwan’s attention. But, depending on his father’s instructions, or maybe just his own delusions, it was possible that after Tiolkoy’s ‘accident’ goals had changed. And finding blackguards that would happily massacre the four of them would definitely have been much easier than for the more delicate, and dangerous, task of singling out Nerys as their sole victim. In Caitlan’s, admittedly cynical, opinion, hiring men to kill was vastly simpler than most civilized people would dare admit to themselves. All it required was a sufficient number of coins; preferably golden. Those Darreel Ohan had in abundance.

Which left the question why Gherwan was still with them. Why not leave the task to those he hired? Because we wanted to make sure?

Maybe. Whatever the reasons, Caitlan divined that this new scenario was as close to the truth as he would get. It was time to act.

“Halt!”

Caitlan pulled up his horse. Those behind him stopped. Gherwan looked around, surprised, but finally followed suit.

“What is it” Fliz asked.

Caitlan gave him a significant look and shook his head minutely. He turned to Gherwan and urged his horse closer to the young man’s. Gherwan backed off a little. Caitlan ceased his approach.

“Let’s leave the path behind,” he said.

Gherwan could not avoid a brief look of alarm crossing his face. “Why?” he asked, perplexed. “What do you hope to find?”

“Nothing,” Caitlan said. He motioned at the meadow to their left, an expanse of tall grass, punctuated by the purple and red blooms of wild flowers. “Let us go down there. That tassel tree copse on yonder rise looks like a good place to rest and admire the views.”

“We will get lost,” Gherwan said urgently.

Caitlan laughed. “How can we? The mountains are our guides. No one could possibly get lost in here.” He waved at the others. “Shall we?”

They all agreed, taking their cues from him. He saw the puzzlement in their faces; but also a renewed alertness. They knew that *something* was not as it should be. Why else would he suggest such a sudden change of direction?

Gherwan decided to be stubborn. “With all due respect,” he objected, “I do not think it a good idea. Your charming meadow might be a bog. Indeed, it lies very low. We might get stuck. Also we don’t know what lurks in the thickets.”

“We don’t know what lurks along the path either,” Caitlan retorted.

Gherwan’s head snapped up. “Why should anything lurk along the path?”

“Why should anything lurk *off* the path?” Caitlan retorted. “There are no dangers; the depot owner assured us as much.” Caitlan waved at his companions and encouraged his horse to start into the meadow. “Let’s go.”

“No!” This was Gherwan.

“What?” Caitlan halted the horse.

Gherwan’s face was a study in conflict and despair. Caitlan shrugged and turned away, nudging the horse into motion again.

“No,” Gherwan hissed.

From the corner of his eyes Caitlan saw him reach into his loose jerkin. His hand came out; in it he held a small object, whose purpose Caitlan could not discern. Gherwan pointed the hand with the object at Caitlan. Nerys screamed. Caitlan ducked and jerked on the

reins. There was a small clicking sound. A small, needle like object, struck the horse's neck. It whinnied and reared on its hind legs.

Gherwan uttered a vile curse. Caitlan threw his weight forward. The horse went back down, but now lurched aside with Caitlan struggling to control it. Gherwan's hand continued to follow Caitlan's movement. Another clearly audible click. Caitlan ducked instinctively. Another tiny projectile whizzed past his head; landed harmlessly somewhere in the grass behind him. Gherwan gave a despairing cry, spurred his horse into motion, and plunged into the forest immediately ahead of them. Caitlan drew the dirk from his belt and made as if to throw it—then hesitated. This was Nerys' brother. Whatever else he was, he was her brother . . .

He jerked on the reins and kicked the still-jittery horse. Thus encouraged it bolted after the fugitive. Caitlan ducked as he entered the thin forest, and low hanging branches started to slap at his face. Gherwan was about five horse lengths ahead. He was unprepared for such a flight. The branches whipped into his face. He held up one arm to ward them off. With his view blocked in this manner he did not see the trunk of a fallen tree lying across the path, several feet off the ground. But the horse did. It veered off at a crazy right angle. Gherwan, unprepared, was thrown off. His body continued in a straight trajectory that ended when his head hit the obstructing trunk with a sickening crunch. The horse disappeared between the trees. Caitlan pulled his own mount and jumped off; bent down beside the fallen man. The impossible angle of the neck, however, told him that for Gherwan it was too late.

Caitlan's head snapped up. What was he thinking?

He stood up. "Ailin!"

He heard a faint reply. "Hurry!"

She arrived a few moments later and knelt down beside Caitlan. She felt the Gherwan's broken neck. "I have never done this," she said uncertainly. "I don't know if I can."

He put an arm around her shoulder. "You mended your friend."

She sighed. Caitlan stood up. Nerys and Fliz were dismounting. Caitlan motioned to them to stay back. Nerys stared at her brother's corpse. "Is he . . ."

Caitlan put a finger on his lips. "We don't know."

He looked back at Ailin.

"Help me," she asked him.

Together they pulled Gherwan off the trunk and laid him flat on the ground. Caitlan stood back as Ailin adjusted Gherwan's head so that it appeared aligned with the neck. The sight of the open eyes, angled to look in opposite directions, made him uncomfortable. He looked away, at Fliz and Nerys, who stood there, staring in mute fascination. He wondered how they would react once they knew . . .

Behind him, the silence stretched. Caitlan looked again. Ailin sat, bent in an attitude of intense concentration, her hands folded around Gherwan's neck. Again it hit him, just what an incredible, wonderful creature she was; what a fortunate man *he* was, that she should have taken him, of all, as her 'chosen' one. What had he ever done to deserve this?

Ailin shifted her hands and placed them on Gherwan's chest. A few moments later the corpse shuddered. A gasp of air, followed by another. A regular cycle of breathing resumed. Ailin lifted her head and looked at Caitlan. He saw that she was exhausted beyond words. He helped her up and held her to him for the space of a few breaths.

Nerys rushed past them, to kneel beside her brother. She did not touch him; just looked down into his face. Ailin detached herself from Caitlan. "What can I do?" he asked her. She shook her head. "I'm fine, Honestly. It was just . . . tiring. There was no . . . help . . . from him at all. Nothing. Just . . . emptiness." She shook her head. "Usually they help. I don't know how to explain it; but it's as if they're not gone yet, and they don't *want* to be gone. Dead . . . but not quite. Something's left that helps them and helps me." She sighed. "But this one here . . . he was . . . nothing . . ."

From Gherwan came a dry cough. Caitlan saw that his eyes were moving in coordination again. Focusing on the group around him.

Nerys got up; stood there, considering her brother with an air of detachment. Then she turned to Ailin; took a deep breath. "He was dead—wasn't he?"

Ailin nodded mutely.

"You . . ."

Caitlan felt Ailin tense.

Nerys shook her head. "How can this be?"

"It just *is*," Ailin said.

Nerys put her arms around Ailin and hugged her.

"Thank you," she said softly, wonderingly. "Who are you? I didn't know people could do this. It's like . . ."

Caitlan chuckled. "I know how you feel," he assured Nerys. "When I figured it out . . ." He smiled at the recollection.

Ailin nudged him with her elbow. "No tales, Caitlan of Tinagel," she said sternly. But her eyes were laughing at him.

Fliz eyed Ailin with an expression of intense interest. Presently he nodded his head, as if events had confirmed something he had long suspected.

Nerys glanced at Caitlan. There was a wild, sad look in her eyes. "He was going to have us all killed, wasn't he?"

Caitlan said nothing. Nerys took a deep breath. "You've given him his life," she said to Ailin. "That's more than he deserves. Leave him here. I don't ever want to see him again. Him, my father, my mother, my brothers . . . I don't want to see them or think about them again. Ever." She looked at Fliz, with the plea of a drowning person looking for a rescue. "Please . . ." she said in a small voice.

Fliz hugged her. Across her head his eyes questioned Caitlan. The weaponsmaster nodded. Fliz led Nerys away to the horses. Caitlan pointed the way they'd come. "I'll be with you in a few moments." He turned to Ailin. "Better go with them. I have to ask this man some questions."

Ailin nodded somberly and went to her horse. Caitlan knelt by Gherwan's side. Color was coming back into the pale face, which was still twisted up in pain.

"What happened?" he croaked. His hands twitched.

"Lie still," Caitlan snapped. He rifled through the man's pockets and came out with a number of items whose purpose he could not fathom. One looked like the object which had projected the needles at him earlier. It was small, intricately manufactured, and barely filled his palm. The other was a small, cylindrical canister. Caitlan took them gingerly and put them into a pouch on his belt. There was also a small, thin-bladed knife in a sheath. Caitlan pulled it out. The blade was mottled and stained. Caitlan, careful not to touch the blade, held it up to the light; turned it this way and that. Poison, he guessed. The edge: razor-sharp. An ignoble weapon. The kind one might expect at the courts of Tergan, where intrigue and treachery were rife and lives often terminated suddenly and mysteriously—or, as was evidenced by the facts, in the hands of a Gaskarian merchant.

Gherwan lay still as Caitlan searched him, his eyes staring at the canopy and the sky above. When Caitlan was done he rose and looked down at the young man. "Where are they?" he asked.

Gherwan said nothing. He didn't look at Caitlan.

"You will tell me," Caitlan said curtly. "It can be now—or after you have screamed so much that you'll think you can scream no more. The choice is yours. And so I ask you again: Where are they waiting for us?"

Gherwan's eyes wandered across to Caitlan. "I was dead," he said hoarsely. "I know I was dead. I felt it. I was . . . floating . . . dissipating . . . beyond pain . . . or care . . . or need, or want . . . dispersing . . . like smoke . . ." An accusing look. "Why . . . why did I have to come back? Why did *she* have to make me come back?"

Caitlan looked at him, puzzled. "Don't you want to live?" he asked Gherwan.

"What for?" the young man said. "So I can contrive to kill my sister? To please my father? To inherit his empire?" He made a soft sound of despair. "Why should I not welcome the gray void instead? It has as much meaning as all of these things."

Caitlan knelt down. Unexpectedly, he found himself feeling sorry for the man.

"If you feel this way," he asked Gherwan. "Why did you do what you did? Why not just . . ." He shrugged. "Look at Nerys. A mere woman . . . right? Did she submit to what was ordained?"

"Nerys," Gherwan spat out the name as if it was a curse. He fell silent again, staring blankly and unseeingly at the canopy.

"If you continue along the path," he said, his voice dreary and emotionless, "you will come upon another meadow. The path winds around a rocky mound. To the right lies a small copse of beech, with all the trees covered in slither vines. On top of the mound, behind a rocky outcrop, wait four men. They have bows, knives, and swords." His head turned away. "Leave me," he said emptily. "I do not wish to be in the company of men. I am sick of this life. Why could the freak-woman not let me leave when I should have? Why did she have to interfere?"

Caitlan stood up. "Because we needed you to tell me what you just told me." He turned to go, then stopped. "How can you not want to live?" he asked. "How can you not want to have hope that tomorrow will be better than today?"

Gherwan turned his head; and it was like looking into the face of a dead man. Caitlan, realizing that there would be no reply, shrugged and took his horse's reins. He mounted and, without looking back, returned to his friends. He showed the device he had taken off Gherwan to Nerys, who told him it was a 'flecheur' and explained its purpose and function. The cylinder opened when the top was twisted, and revealed about two dozen small flecheur needles, each about as long as his small finger. The tips were serrated edges, cut so that they would lodge in the target. Caitlan nodded thoughtfully. Like the knife, the flecheur was an ignoble weapon; though he could see its purpose in the hands of those who needed it for self-defense. Nerys retold one incident in which she might have fared badly indeed, but for her use of it. He gave it back to her. She had experience in its use and obviously knew how to handle it. They also retrieved the flecheur Gherwan had used on Caitlan, and which he'd dropped during his attempt at escape. Caitlan, following Nerys' instructions, loaded it and gave it to Ailin. She took it soberly and placed it into the small leather pouch she carried at her right hand side. Caitlan discarded the dagger by jamming it into the ground near the root of a tree and then stamping on it until its hilt had disappeared from sight. Hopefully it would never resurface again.

He inspected his horse's neck, where the needle from the flecheur still lodged. The animal exhibited none of the symptoms Nerys had described. The animal's bulk, Caitlan reflected, may have prevented the poison from being effective. Or maybe it was just its thick epidermal layers. He carefully extracted the needle and disposed of it in a manner similar to the knife. Then he washed the wound with water from a nearby brook.

The four discussed their choices. Caitlan's immediate instinct was to neutralize the four men waiting for them. The others disagreed vigorously; Ailin in particular. "If we go around them they'll never know," she said. "Why do you want to endanger yourself?"

"And on our way back?" he wanted to know.

"We don't have to come this way!" she argued.

In the end she won, as he had suspected she would. They veered off the track and cut across the meadow, through the tassel copse, and around another hillock. This should take them in a wide circle around the place where the ambush awaited. Caitlan consulted the locator and determined that their target lay behind the

small mountain that dominated their horizon right now. Too far for today.

They set up camp at the foot of the mountain, inside a grove of beech and green noquo. After some trial and error they managed to erect the two tents. Caitlan was adamant that no fire be lit, lest it gave away their position. They ate their meal of bread, sausages and dry cheese, followed by dried fruit, all of which they washed down with clear water from one of the myriad tiny brooks threading the bottom of the valley. By the time night had fallen, activity had ceased. They sat in the darkness, companionable silence, and a little talk.

Caitlan wondered if Nerys would ask about Gherwan, but so far she hadn't. After the day's events she had remained quiet and thoughtful, keeping close to Fliz, and generally exhibiting a distracted air. Now, at night, when they could not even see each other except as dark, barely discernible silhouettes, she suddenly appeared more inclined to open up about whatever it was that had been going around in her mind.

"They're just . . . gone," she said sadly. "Somehow I can't even remember their faces."

Fliz made soothing noises. "It's true," Nerys insisted. "This here, this is real. This is what I want to remember when I'm old and I need to remember. I don't want to remember that my father wanted me killed; that my brother was willing to do it . . ."

"He didn't want to," Caitlan said.

"But he would have," Nerys said, her voice a lonely accusation in the darkness. "That's what matters to me."

"He didn't want to live," Caitlan said. '*I think that bringing him back may have been the gravest punishment anybody could have devised.*' That's what he wanted to add. But Ailin deserved better than that. Her gift was of healing, not delivering punishment. So, instead, he said, "but now he has a chance to think again. I hope he takes it."

"He won't," Nerys said softly.

"You can't know that," Fliz said.

"I know," she assured him. "They will remain like this until they die—and their children will be the same, and so on and so on, until one day something gives and everything falls apart around them."

"*You* are not like them," Ailin said; and she said it with such a ring of conviction that even Nerys had no objection to raise.

Silence fell upon them; the only sounds their breathing, a light breeze ruffling the canopy, and an

occasional rustling from some small creature in the undergrowth. Presently they bade each other good night and crept into their tents.

"Tomorrow we'll know," Ailin whispered. She was lying on top of Caitlan, her face buried in the crook of his neck. Underneath her, his chest rose and fell with the even rhythm of his breathing. Their lovemaking had been slow and quiet. Comfort as much as passion. Still, when they came together, she had to bury her face against his neck to stop her involuntary gasps; and she had to hold her hand over his mouth to prevent him from giving away what they were doing.

Not that it would have mattered. She suspected that in the other tent similar events were transpiring, and that Nerys and Fliz had other things on their minds but to listen to the sounds of the night.

His hands stroked her bare back. "That we will," he agreed.

"What do you think we'll find?"

"The truth?" he said. He exhaled. "I have no idea."

"Do we want to know?" she said quietly.

His hands stopped roaming; his arms tightened around her. "I don't think it matters what we want," he said. "We *need* to know."

"Why? Why can't we just make sure that Rutger does not get there? Then we all go home. I'm not sure I want what this . . . whatever it is . . . is going to bring to our world."

He was silent for the space of several breaths. She did not interrupt his contemplations. It was shocking enough to hear herself say what she had just said. Because the only way to 'make sure that Rutger does not get there' was to kill him. Nothing else would do. The only alternative was to take possession of whatever it was before him. And even then she didn't really think that a confrontation with the *magice* could be avoided—and that the outcome would be much the same. How could she advocate such a thing? How could she, without apparent emotion of remorse, contemplate the death of a human being; even if he was a *magice*?

If only she wasn't so afraid! Especially now. It hadn't been so bad when their goal was many miles and many days distant. But now that they were almost upon it—now that they would *know* . . .

Once they knew they could not un-know again. Once the final step had been taken and the secret revealed, the world would never be the same again.

Maybe for the better. This much she hoped with every fiber of her being. But even more she feared that it would be for the worse. This totally unknown thing—object? magic? what could it possibly be?—what would it do to them all?

Ailin didn't trust the ancients and their motives. They had not been very nice people. If they had . . . constructed . . . designed . . . the countries and cities she knew . . .

What had they wrought but iniquity? Bizarre customs. Oppression. Misery. A few living in privilege at the cost of the squalor of the many.

"You said that you didn't like the world they created very much," Caitlan said gently. "Maybe this will make it better."

"Oh, I hope so," she whispered. "But what if it doesn't?"

His hands cradled her head, his thumbs gently stroked her cheeks. He kissed her. "I think," he said slowly, "that whatever's out there, whatever we'll find . . . we'll do what is right."

"You're so certain . . ."

"I am," he said. He ran a hand through her hair. "I mean, look at us. You and me, Nerys and Fliz. A healer; a fighter; a rich merchant's daughter; a thief." He chuckled. "Between the four of us, how can we *not* do what is right?"

She laughed softly and gently dug her fingernails into his side. Caitlan twitched and squirmed. He was ticklish, and she knew all the right places. She loved that he was ticklish. It made him less fearsome; took away some of the grim, lethal edge. Like his bantering now did, as he was trying to make light of something very grave; knowing that it was grave, but wanting to make *her* feel better about it anyway.

"Stop it!" he hissed.

"Why should I?"

"Because I say so."

"I need a better reason than that!"

"I see . . ."

He knew all the right places as well. And he was stronger. This time she didn't manage to suppress her squeal. She dug her face into his neck to stifle the sound.

"Don't mind us," Caitlan said, loudly enough for Nerys and Fliz to hear. Ailin thought she heard a suppressed giggle coming from the other tent.

"Now look what you've done!" she whispered accusingly.

"What?"

She sighed. "Never mind."

"You know," he said, serious again, "I meant it."

"What?"

"About making the right decision. I think the four of us, we'll know what's right."

"I hope so."

"I *know* so."

He sounded so certain, she was almost willing to believe it.

— 7 —

The jammer train left two of its cargo wagons to be loaded at Calicta and continued on to Tandree. It arrived there in the early morning hours, left behind another three wagons at Tandree, and proceeded to the Galatadia depot, where it arrived in the late evening. Rutger, whose patience was being stretched to its limits, disembarked without delay. He ascertained that his quarries had indeed been here—and that they had departed for the valley on the morning of this very day. Meaning that they had a whole day on him; a considerable lead, but one he could reduce by appropriate action.

With persuasion, both verbal and mental, he secured himself a good horse, supplies, and a map of the valley. Presently he set out on his own into the night. If, as he had reason to believe, the four intended to rest during the night hours, he would be able to reduce their lead significantly. He had enquired about possible hazards on this route, but, apart from a zealot Wearer hunting for silks at the eastern side of the valley, this place appeared to be considerably safer than the steppe. He could concentrate on following the landmarks—or as much as he could discern without Janus, who would rise later, to cast light onto the scene. There was also a well-worn path which was comparatively easy to follow, even in the darkness.

Rutger briefly contemplated the advisability of using his light-emitting rod, but then decided against it. It would have speeded his progress, but it also made him readily detectable; the last thing he wanted.

The first part of his ride led him along the gently meandering path along the tall grass of the valley floor. To his left and right the dark shadows of trees, copses

of trees, small forests. Beyond them the mountains; jagged silhouettes against the stars. Progress was brisk. The path was a dark line in the lighter grass. The horse plodded on tirelessly. The cool of the night was a soothing contrast to the oppressive heat of the day.

The night passed. Janus rose. The path crossed through occasional copses of trees. Underneath the canopies darkness reigned. Rutger reluctantly used his light rod to help him through these areas; though each time he felt ahead with his mind, trying to ascertain whether sentient presences were watching.

Urgency tugged on him. If he came too late, if they gained control over whatever it was they would find . . .

The prospect was appalling. Indeed, a few days ago Rutger would not have even seriously entertained it. That he did so now was a reflection of a bitter lesson. As he rode through the night, Rutger reluctantly considered the possibility that he might fail, and that he had made some very serious errors indeed. He had arrived at this conclusion slowly and with difficulty during long hours sitting in the jammer, watching the arid desert and the bleak mountains pass by, pondering everything that had happened with a leisure he had somehow not been able to muster before.

How could this have happened to him? He was a mage, trained to supreme discipline of mind and body. Years of instruction, rigorous and unforgiving, lay behind him. He and his brethren—all of them quite probably dead by now—were the spiritual descendants of many hundreds who had gone before. And all of this destroyed by one man. The traitor. Pandrak.

When had he, Rutger, started making mistakes? Maybe since the day Fliz had relieved him of the locator. Since then he had consistently underestimated the nature and caliber of his opponents. Fliz; the weaponsmaster; the women—whoever they were, and whatever role they played in the grand scheme of things.

Who were they, indeed? The young one: a Gaskarian. Possessed of no outstanding attributes whatsoever. An ordinary, feeble mind. The other one: a mystery. Like the weaponsmaster, her mind was closed to him; surrounded by a yielding, but impenetrable wall that absorbed his attempts at invasion without apparent effort.

Misjudgments. How could he not have *seen*? How could his reason, coupled with a finely honed intuition, have failed him thus? He saw it all. His mistakes. Starting that night on the beach. He shouldn't have

given up so readily. Patience was an attribute whose practice had been impressed upon him again and again during his instruction. Patience. Waiting. Observing. Seizing the moment when it came. Acting decisively and without hesitation.

But maybe it wasn't too late. Maybe he could catch them. And when he did, there would be no hesitation. Not this time. No questions, no probes, no delays.

Rutger pondered his opponents one by one and decided that the weaponsmaster would have to be killed first. He knew of Caitlan of Tinagel; a man not to be taken lightly. If he gave him even the slightest chance, allowed him the tiniest of openings, then even his superior weapons might, ultimately, be useless. Which was one of the reasons—or so he told himself—that he had dithered about dealing with them when he saw them again in Gaskar. If . . .

A presence impinged on his consciousness. Rutger pulled on the reins and halted the horse. The impression was still vague and distant, but with nobody else around it had touched his vigilant mind. Too far though to discern patterns of thought. Rutger dismounted and pulled the horse into the cover of a clump of young tassel trees. He hesitated, then dropped the reins on the horse's neck and allowed it to nibble on the grass.

There was no doubt now. The presence was becoming stronger. Rutger stood in the shadow of the tassel trees, listening and probing with his mind. A curiously . . . vacant . . . something met his exploration. Devoid almost of thought. Where one might expect to find threads of joined images, notions, concepts, fantasies, plans . . . here there was . . . what? Sparks from a fire. Random, sputtering, evanescent. Images surfacing and submerging, without connection or system. Spatters of anguish and torture.

The noises of the approaching rider became audible. Rutger insinuated a tendril into the mind; attempted to weave an ensnarement.

Futile. The sparks slipped away as soon as he attempted to grasp them.

Rutger stepped away from the tree; into the path of the approaching rider.

"Who goes there?"

The rider stopped. Rutger's renewed probe found . . . nothing. Not even curiosity. Wildly dancing motes and sparks, incoherent and random.

Still . . .

"What do you want?"

The question was put in a manner so disinterested that it gave Rutger pause. He reached out again—only to find that now, that the mind was close, the connection strong because of the additional perceptual contact, there still was . . . nothing.

"Where are you headed?" he said aloud, prevaricating as he tried to formulate his next move.

"Back," came the laconic answer.

Rutger stepped even closer. In the faint light of a partially risen Janus he thought to discern a young man; an observation confirmed by the voice, which lacked the timbre that comes with age.

"Back, where?"

"Home." His questions were tolerated with continued indifference. Despite the certainty of his own power, Rutger felt the slightest trace of unease creep up on him.

"Where is home?"

"Where my father awaits."

This wasn't getting anywhere. Rutger was not interested in the man's history. He just wanted to know if . . .

"I look for . . . friends," he said. "I wonder if you have seen them."

The pale oval of the man's face looked down at him. "Not friends," he said. Indifference tinged with . . . contempt?

He knew.

"I have seen them," he said.

Rutger's attention focused on the man.

Motes. Sparks. Swirls of a gray, viscous nothingness, crawling across the foundations like wet silt. Random eddies of colors emerged from nothing and disappeared as inexplicably.

Rutger gave up trying.

"Where?"

"Earlier." Rutger decided that, in a way, this was an answer to his question.

"They were following the path?"

"They left the path."

"Where?"

"Earlier." Again, a temporal answer.

"They spoke to you?"

"She brought me back."

"Who brought you back? From where? What happened?"

Silence.

Rutger forced himself to patience. Maybe, with the state of that mind . . . maybe three questions together . . .

"Who brought you back?" he repeated.

"The woman."

"Which woman?"

"The freak."

Did he detect a trace of emotion? Rutger reached out again and found . . .

The shreds fled and disintegrated. Rutger drew back, frustrated.

"Where did she bring you back from?"

"The nothingness." A hesitation. Then, the first volunteered reply: "She would not allow me to stay." A trace of emotion? Bitterness maybe. Disappointment. Resentment.

Then . . . the briefest of images flitting across the surface of the emptiness.

A face.

The mystery woman.

"Why not?" Rutger asked.

"The man wanted to ask me questions."

"Questions about what?"

"Those who are waiting for them."

"Who is waiting for them?"

"Men."

"How many?"

"Four."

"Why are they waiting?"

"Because I paid them to do so."

"For what purpose?"

"To kill them."

And so it went: Rutger asking question after question; the young man, whose name turned out to be 'Gherwan', answering—without impatience; but also without interest and an ineffable indifference that was as eerie as everything else about him.

Rutger persisted until he knew what he wanted to know.

A circe! Of all the people in the world, what was circe doing here in the company of these men and the Gaskarian?

Rutger let go of the reins. The man who had been dead—and who, in his mind, still was and probably always would be—sat silent. Waiting. Maybe not even that. Maybe he was requiring an impetus for initiating the next sequence of actions. Rutger's interception had disrupted whatever he was doing, and it appeared that

he had lost sight of whatever his previous goals had been. If the term 'goals' made any sense here. For all Rutger discerned, this man had no capacity for formulating or sustaining goals anymore. He was infinitely patient—a quality which could only lead to a complete lack of purposeful action. His detachment was almost complete. Rutger wondered if he would eat and drink—of if he was doomed to perish because he did not even have the impetus to perform such fundamental actions. Still, when Rutger had stopped him he had been going *somewhere*.

He stepped out of the way. "Go," he said.

The creature (Rutger decided that he could not bring himself to think of it as a man anymore) set the horse in motion again—without a word; unhurried; vacant. Yet Rutger thought to catch a whiff of menace—as if, at some fundamental level, far below the threshold of detectability, there was a sense of purpose after all.

The creature passed by Rutger without another look and presently was lost in the darkness.

The magice stared after him.

The circe would be the second to die. Who knew what else she could do? Bringing people back from the dead . . . it was something the magices often had speculated about. But circes kept in hiding; and they were so good at it that even the magices could not locate them.

So it was true . . . How ironic that only now, when the knowledge was useless to him, should he find out the truth. He returned to his horse to find it grazing placidly. He mounted and continued along the trail, all his senses pitched to a state of the highest alertness. But it was almost morning, and the first daylight was creeping over the eastern mountains, before he came upon the ambush. The men lying in wait—their bodies torpid from a night's futile watch, their minds feeble, primitive, disgustingly base—had no chance against the power of a magice. One by one, he threaded a noose around each of their minds and sent them into a deep sleep. Thus protected, he passed the position of the ambush unmolested. When he was well clear of it he stopped and consulted his map. He studied the peaks around him and concluded that he was maybe half a day's ride from his goal.

Half a day until he knew.

And then? Was the ancients' promise going to hold true? Was whatever he would find there—and what he would have to protect from those who would try to use it for their own purposes—was it really going to be all

they thought it would be? Was it going to allow him, the last of the loyal magices, to literally save their world? He couldn't even begin to imagine what kind of object—or what else could it be?—he would find to accomplish such an impossible-seeming task.

But he had to have faith. Without it he would surely fail.

They rose early, ate a sparse meal, packed up the tents, and left the grove. The horses plodded their way through grass heavy with dew. Caitlan consulted the locator and confirmed their path. They skirted the mountain and Caitlan checked again. The locator's arrow pointed straight at the concave cliff to their left; a straight, bare face of schist. It looked like someone had taken an enormous knife and carved a semicircular gash into the mountainside. The exposed schist was weathered by the rains and winds, at its foot a huge pile of crushed rubble. The four halted and stared up at the cliff.

"Now what?" Caitlan wondered aloud. "Where is it? At the foot? The top? On the surface? In the ground?"

Fliz eyed the cliff thoughtfully. He produced the second locator and pushed the buttons in the required sequence. He brought his horse close to Caitlan's.

"May this will work," he said. He pointed the locator into the direction indicated by Caitlan's; then turned it slowly on its axis until the display plate was vertical. The arrow shifted, pointed upward, somewhere half up the cliff face.

"That's where it is," Fliz pointed. "Whatever it is."

They all looked up.

"I can't see anything," Caitlan admitted.

They stared up the near-vertical face. To try and scale it would be foolhardy.

"Let's have a closer look," Caitlan suggested. He pulled out his map. The spot corresponding to their current location—if he read the map correctly!—was known as 'Thorn's Nook'.

"Who was Thorn?" Caitlan wondered aloud. He urged his horse into motion. The rest followed.

The cliff covered a large part of the sky. They stopped again. Caitlan and Fliz obtained a better fix on the location of whatever it was they were looking for.

Caitlan pointed. "Look." Halfway up the cliff face, where the locator was pointing, the rock was . . . different: a rough patch of bumps and fissures protruding from the otherwise smooth surface.

"Something's up there," Fliz agreed.

Caitlan looked around. A climb seemed even more impossible from their current perspective. He glanced up again. Somehow they were meant to get up there! It made no sense that their goal should be inaccessible. It would defeat the very purpose of its existence.

Whatever that purpose may be.

"A cave," Fliz said suddenly. "Unless they buried it in solid rock, we're looking for a cave."

"Then what's that up there?" Nerys wanted to know.

Fliz craned his neck and studied the protrusion. "I think it's the mouth of a cave," he said. "Maybe someone blocked it up with rocks. Lots of them."

Caitlan studied the cliff above them. Fliz might just be right. The cracks between the rocks could have been filled in with mortar to make them less obvious. Over the centuries some of the mortar would have washed away, leaving what they saw now.

That still left the issue of how to get up there.

He considered the huge pile of rubble stacked up against the rock-face. If these people had indeed *cut* this piece out of the mountain . . .

People who could do such things; what would they have devised to allow access—and yet to keep the access confined to those who . . .

. . . who knew . . .

There was an itch between Caitlan's shoulders. He twitched them to dislodge the sensation. "Whatever their motives," he said, "this is the endpoint of our journey—and now we must find this thing, before the magice gets here."

"You think he's close?" Nerys asked, alarmed.

Caitlan shrugged. "He knows, if only roughly, where this place is. He will be here. He might already have arrived at the depot."

"What are we going to do?"

"Kill him," Fliz said, his voice ringing with cold anger.

"Let's find a way up there," Caitlan said firmly.

"How?"

Caitlan's gaze raked over the base of the cliff, where bushes and small trees might well be hiding what he was looking for. He pointed. "Fliz and Nerys, you look over there. Ailin and I will take this section."

"What are we looking for?" Nerys asked.

"An entrance."

They separated and began investigating the base of the cliff. Presently Caitlan heard Fliz's shout. They

hurried to where Fliz and Nerys stood before a curious structure at the base of the cliff; concealed behind a clump of bushes and small trees. About the height of two men, its outline was irregular and roughly triangular, emerging from the schist like the cliff had split apart and allowed the lighter rock to push through. In the center of the formation nested another structure of a dark-brown rock. It was about height of a small man and about as wide. An imaginative mind might have proposed that it looked like a very irregular door.

Caitlan required no imagination. This was it.

He stepped closer and traced around the outline of the dark-brown rock. His fingers found an irregular but distinct groove, filled with mosses and lichens. He prodded, dug out some of the vegetation. He took his knife and dug some more. Some effort cleared out more detritus. The blade now went in all the way to the hilt.

"This is it."

"How do we open it?" Ailin asked him.

"It opens to the inside," he said. "I suppose we could try to push . . ."

"How do you know?" Nerys asked.

"The angle of the joint," Caitlan said. He held his hands slightly spread apart to demonstrate. "This was driven against the opening from the *inside*."

"You don't really think we can move this," Fliz said.

Caitlan shook his head. "Of course not. There's got to be another way."

True enough. But what should they be looking for? Caitlan began to search the periphery of the gate for the kinds of knobs he'd seen underneath the keep. None were evident, but he hadn't expected that they should be obvious. They might be hidden under a layer of mortar, disguised as rock. They might not look like anything he thought they would. And if he found them, who could guarantee that the code he remembered from the keep was indeed the same here?

Think! Something didn't make sense. This place was meant to be hidden from all but those who chose to look for it. Not just the magices either. Using the pointers from Yeolus and Tyssel, anybody could find their way here. The only reason why they didn't was that they didn't know it existed.

But, suppose someone *did* come here. Someone who knew that *this* was what he was looking for. A magic mayhaps. What then? How could he be expected to enter? If what Pandrak had told them was correct, then not only did the magices have no information about how

to enter this place, but they didn't even know what they would find here! What hope did they have of ever entering, even if they had a legitimate cause to do so? And ordinary men had even less of a chance. Of course, frivolous invasion would have to be discouraged; but for someone with the required background the obstacles should be surmountable.

The more he thought about the more Caitlan became convinced that there would be no knobs, no keys, no keyholes.

What was left?

"What is it?" Ailin asked. As always, she was finely attuned to his emotional state—and right now he had suffered a revelation that left him breathless.

He stood back.

"Open!" he commanded.

He glanced at Ailin and saw that she at least understood. Nerys and Fliz didn't and stared at him as if he'd lost his mind.

Nothing happened.

"Open!" he repeated.

Nothing.

Was he wrong? But, no, he couldn't be. Unless the mechanism that opened the door had become unable to listen to voices . . .

. . . or simply didn't understand what the voice was saying . . .

He remembered something else Pandrak had told them.

Caitlan focused his mind to invoke an image—a vision of the door sliding out of the way . . . just like . . . *this* . . .

A grating sound. Ailin grabbed Caitlan's arm. The ground shuddered as the blocking rock slipped back and to one side. The gaping blackness of the opening stared at them.

"How did you do that?" Fliz whispered.

Caitlan smiled thinly. "I just remembered something."

"Look!" Nerys pointed.

The inside of the cave had come alight, revealing a narrow passage that wound to the right and out of sight.

Caitlan looked at Ailin. Her face was pale but determined. "We have to," he said gently.

"I know," she said. She tugged on his arm. "Let's get this over with."

The passage angled to the right at an upward slant. It was broad enough to allow a large man to pass without having to squeeze himself through. Like in the Keep the light came from bright strips affixed to the walls. The four entered and began to climb the winding incline.

Then, without warning, they arrived at the end. Before them opened a vast, vaulted cave, illuminated by a dual ring of light strips around the circumference. In the center . . .

Nerys gasped. Ailin's fingers dug into Caitlan's arm. He knew how she felt. The strange, alien shape before them would indeed change the face of their world. Nothing would, nothing *could*, ever be the same again.

"What kind of a thing is this?" Fliz whispered.

"This," Caitlan said slowly, and he knew it to be true, "is a ship." He pondered the smooth elongated structure with the stubby fins, resting on a set of six thin legs. "A ship-of-the-void," he added.

They stepped closer, until the ship-of-the-void towered over them. If this was but a boat, Caitlan thought, how large would be the mother-ship? And was it still in existence, somewhere above their world?

Ailin looked around. "Where's the entrance we saw?"

Caitlan looked around. His eyes followed the line marked by the ship's main axis. Mentally he extended it in the direction of what he judged to be the prow.

He pointed. "There." A roughly circular irregularity, about the height of maybe ten men.

Suddenly, Fliz jerked around.

Nerys looked up.

She screamed.

From his elevated point of view atop a low mound covered with beech and ferns, Rutger observed his quarries milling about at the base of the cliff. They split up; their purposeful behavior suggesting that they were searching for something. Rutger reminded himself to keep his emotions neutral and replace interest with indifference. With a circe in their midst, who knew! Maybe she could sense him. Nobody knew what these women were capable of. Maybe that's why they had gotten away from him in Gaskar . . .

At the cliff, renewed activity. His quarries gathered again. A brief consultation. They stepped behind a clump of bushes . . . and disappeared.

They had found it!

Rutger spurred his horse into motion and galloped down the mound. He could not allow them the time to familiarize themselves with whatever they had found! The horse raced through tall grass, skirted a clump of giant tussock and pulled up where the other horses stood. Rutger dismounted and withdrew his lightning rod. He ducked low and ran zig-zag toward the clump of bushes. He arrived without incident; froze when he saw the opening of the cave. He listened; thought he heard faint voices. Rutger looked at his feet. The soft moccasins would make no sound on the stone floor. He entered the passage. Now he ran. Something told him that he was running out of time. The passage seemed to go on forever. He was almost at the end, when heard voices. Rutger paused, then accelerated his steps. He reached the end of the passage and stopped, staring in wonder. The illuminated cavern. The starkly simple, smooth gray shape in the center.

The enormity of what he faced made him hesitate for the space of a breath or two. The four stood close to the ship, their backs to him. Suddenly one of them, the thief, turned around. The young woman followed suit. She saw him and screamed. The weaponsmaster moved with frightening speed. Rutger leveled his lightning tube, aimed it at Caitlan, and pressed the trigger button.

At Nerys' scream Caitlan spun around. Near the entrance to the access tunnel stood a man. Caitlan had never seen him before, but he knew . . .

Rutger held a small tube in his hand which he pointed straight at him. Caitlan's hand went to his belt and the knife, but he knew that it was too late. He'd never make it in time.

Then Ailin threw herself to one side, interposing her body between Caitlan and the magic. Caitlan opened his mouth to shout at her to get out of the way. He gripped the hilt of his dirk and stepped to one side to get a clear throw. A jagged lance of lightning emerged from the tube in Rutger's hand and crossed the distance. It enveloped Ailin in a cocoon of grotesque fire. She jerked and twitched. Her mouth opened as if to scream, but no sound came. Her face distorted with uncontrollable muscular spasms as she collapsed on the ground in a lifeless heap. The lance of lightning collapsed. Rutger swung his weapon around to point at Caitlan. Caitlan threw the dirk. The lightning flared again; reached out for him. But the flying dirk inter-

cepted it, dragging it along on its trajectory, turning it into a missile surrounded by a halo of dancing blue flames. The impact of the lightning jolted the dirk from its intended path. Instead of impaling itself in Rutger's chest it was deflected upward. The pointed blade rammed its way through Rutger's slightly opened mouth, splintered several teeth on the way, and pierced the palate, the tip coming to a rest in the back of Rutger's brain. The impact jerked the head back. The tube pointed upright; the lance of lightning collapsed. Rutger toppled like the trunk of a small tree. His skull cracked on the hard rock. He lay still.

Caitlan stood for the space of a breath. His eyes wandered to Ailin's prone form. He heard someone scream. Didn't know that it was him. An inarticulate outpouring of grief and loss. He rushed to her side and turned her over; saw that it was too late; *felt* that it was too late; *knew* that this time she was really gone. Knew it because the place where she had been was a dreary spreading void.

With infinite tenderness he smoothed the twisted lines of her face, lifted her still form and, oblivious of the others, held her to him. He noted, with a terrible detachment, that in this emptiness he couldn't even find tears.

What do you do when the better part of you is forever gone?

Ailin's head lolled forward to lie against his shoulder. Caitlan was like a blind man. The world had gone. Nothing mattered anymore. He had done what he had to do. He had brought them to the place of the treasure. He had defeated the last of the magices.

And now . . . it was all over. It ended here. Just like Ailin's life had. For if he couldn't protect the one person that mattered, what good was he to anybody?

He held her to him; already felt her growing slowly colder; wondered if he could . . .

Could he?

A brief spark of hope, almost immediately extinguished by reality. He wasn't like her. She could bring people back from the dead—but that was Ailin. And her gift . . .

"I don't want it," he whispered to her dead ears. "Not without you."

He knew that he'd heal, of course. But never would he be whole again. Just as he hadn't been before he met her. Only then he hadn't known. But now he did—and that knowledge would be with him forever.

He didn't want 'forever' to last for any longer than it had to.

"Please take it back."

But she couldn't.

He would have to *give* it back.

But how do you give back eternity?

She floated. Drifting in a gray fog. Her body, left somewhere behind—the memory of it already fading. Even its shape . . .

What was happening? Even as she contemplated what she was, she changed into something she hadn't been. The thought of the thought . . . already not . . .

Her name . . .

Name? . . . What was 'name'?

A dreary ache grew inside the slowly diffusing fragment that remained. The pain of loss; of extinction; of diffusion into an amorphous, insubstantial wraith that would soon be gone . . .

And then even the pain was no more . . .

Caitlan . . .

Who . . . what . . . was . . . 'Caitlan'?

Impressions . . . wavering on the canvas of the gray nothingness . . .

So cold. So terribly cold . . .

Ailin!

Ailin?

Please take it back!

Take . . .

Give . . .

I don't want it. Not without you.

Diffusion . . .

The wraith struggled to hold onto the words . . .
. . . lost the struggle as words and concepts dissipated in the gray void . . .

Except one . . .

Caitlan.

The dispersing complex of eddies and swirls that had been Ailin clung to that one remaining word . . .

Caitlan . . .

. . . drifting nothingness . . .

Ailin!

Focus.

. . . a tentative polarity . . .

Please!

Caitlan . . .

The wraith hesitated . . .

. . . dissipation . . .

. . . Caitlan . . .
 . . . direction . . .
 . . . light . . .
 Light?
 Through a jagged tear it poured into the void;
 flooded the wraith with . . .
 . . . Caitlan . . .
Please take it back!
 So much . . . love. So much . . . despair. Guilt. Bitter
 regret. Such certainty that . . . he . . . had failed . . .
 . . . again . . .
 . . . always failing . . . her . . .
 Failing?
 How could he fail her?
 How could he not know?
 He was light . . .
 . . . streaming into this formless void . . .
 The wraith gathered the last remaining shreds
 of . . .
 . . . purpose . . .
 . . . a desperate effort . . .
 . . . reaching for the light . . .
 . . . finding a response . . . a hand reaching out . . .
 . . . succor . . .
 . . . safety . . .
 . . . love . . .
 . . . being pulled out of there . . .
 . . . into the light . . .
 Scattered bits and pieces, still attached to the wraith
 by the most tenuous of bonds, snapped back into place;
 reassembling into form; memory; identity . . .
 . . . and the grayness fled before the onslaught of
 the light . . .

Caitlan swayed and almost fell, nearly blinded by the
 radiance that swirled around him with a thousand
 threads of lightning and cold fire. He held Ailin even
 tighter, as if that would restore his balance. Buried his
 head against her chest. A soft moan of loss and despair
 emerged from deep inside him.

Please take it back!

He shouted it into the void, only to feel it disappear
 like a drop of water in the arid desert floor. Like Ailin
 had disappeared from his life.

A gasp; not his own.

Caitlan lifted his head.

Her limp body twitched.

And again.

A wheezing, shuddering intake of breath.

Her right arm moved; lifted slowly; fell back again.

Another shuddering gasp.

Exhalation.

Another breath . . .

And another . . .

Her eyes remained closed, but her mouth twitched;
 like that of a sleeper in a dream.

"Don't you know?" He barely heard it. Her chest
 heaved as she drew in air in small gasps.

"Ailin . . ." his voice cracked.

"I can never take it back," she whispered.

He held her close and leaned his head against her
 chest; felt the beat of her heart. Strong, regular beats,
 full of the promise of something he'd thought forever
 lost. Looking into her face he saw color coming back
 into the pale features. Her eyes opened, looking right
 at him; into him; seeing what he had refused to see—
 but now he did, because he saw it reflected in her.

And then she smiled.

Nerys stood still, transfixed in shock and grief. Cait-
 lan picked up his lover's body and stood there like a
 statue, holding her like a child. Something in his pos-
 ture terrified her; a intimation that their friend had
 been wounded just as fatally as the woman whose body
 he held in his arms; that, though they had won, this was
 an empty victory. What should have been a beginning
 had turned out to be the end.

Fliz took a step forward, but she held him back. He
 stopped, gazing at Caitlan's still form. He appeared
 thoughtful, rather than distraught.

How could this be? How could he be so untouched
 by this tragedy? These people were their *friends!*

Slowly, Caitlan turned around, Ailin in his arms. His
 face was mixture of bemusement and revelation, suf-
 fused with something Nerys never seen there before.

Nerys stared as she saw . . .

Ailin whispered something into the big man's ear.
 He looked dubious, then put her down with obvious
 reluctance. She stood on unsteady legs, one hand firmly
 in his. Nerys, still disbelieving, stepped forward and
 gave her a hug; as did Fliz.

"You knew," Ailin said to Fliz, her voice still weak.

"Yes."

"Your mother," Ailin said, "she knew things, too."

"She did," he whispered. He considered the circe for a few moments. "You were dead," he said. He looked up into Caitlan's face. "But you can only die together."

"You know this, too?" Ailin said.

"Yes."

Caitlan put an arm around Ailin's shoulders and drew her to him. She fitted herself into the embrace. Nerys felt Fliz's hand touch hers. She grasped it; their fingers intertwined. The touch made her tremble—and, in that instant, she caught a glimpse of a tiny, but all-important, aspect of the great truth. It was this: that no matter what else happened in the world, no matter how momentous the events that shaped it—in the end it always came down to this . . .

The touch of a hand. A lover's breath mingling with your own. The reality of their aliveness.

Nerys considered the four of them: here; in this cave; in the presence of an artifact so ancient that it predated recorded history. It could—probably would!—change the face of their world. And yet, without Fliz and herself, without Caitlan and Ailin—two people who, in some strange way, were not two but one—without all this, everything would indeed be nothing.

It was simple.

So very simple.

Caitlan, still holding onto Ailin's hand, stepped closer to the ship-of-the-void. His free hand ran over the smooth surface, tracing the outline of a barely discernible rectangular fissure.

A door?

The last one before . . .

Before what?

Caitlan, Nerys thought, was oddly hesitant. He looked at them all—but mostly at Ailin. Searching her face for . . . approval maybe?

Ailin nodded.

"Are you sure?" He took a deep breath.

"I am," she said. "You were right. Wherever this leads . . ."

Caitlan stood back. A look of concentration occupied his face.

Nothing happened for the space of a breath or two. Then, somewhere inside the sleek hull, there arose a whine, which worked its way up the scale until it became inaudible. Ancient seals creaked and popped as

the door pulled back from its frame and, with a whir, slid aside.

THE END



Letters

To the Editor,

Things coming to an end are always painful. And, even though I haven't read much of the *CLS*—for reasons that have nothing to do with *CLS* and everything with my own inability to read fiction on a screen—I will miss going to the VIE site, downloading the latest *CLS* installment, putting it in the appropriate folder and hoping that someday something will happen that will let me read those Vancian novels that the few passages I read make me truly want to read and that my infirmity prevents me from reading. For instance, I might one day break a leg which would give me the time and the patience to assemble and print the novels.

So, to console myself, and supposedly to check for missewn pages, I was rereading *Night Lamp* and, once again, I have a problem with where Vance tells of Jaro killing his mother. I understand that where to put it and how to lead to it was difficult but I cannot accept it in Chapter I, section 4. In a prologue, yes, even though it has been rather overdone, somewhere towards the end, yes, but not there. Compare, for instance, with *Marune*.

I have read "all" of Vance many times and I do read a lot in general and I have never had this reaction and, in any case, I am *bon public*.

I am wondering what could have been the reason for it and/or if per chance I may not be the only one to react so.

Regards,
Alain Schremmer

EDITOR'S REPLY:

Regarding the issue of the up-front revelation of Jaro's 'crime', I have some sympathy for your feelings, though I do not share them.

I agree: the 'usual' way of having a certain type of story progress is to show the protagonist and his or her situation and problems, etc., and then to reveal, over the course of the story, what the causes of these problems are. This is a common structure, especially in what I, with a definite dismissive undertone, call the 'literary' kind of tale. Its purpose is usually progressive revela-

tion of something that is hidden. It's the same as a detective story, only we might not have a crime lurking somewhere, but some other dark and psychologically influential thing that's happened to the protagonist; either as one or more specific events, or as a steady influence throughout his life.

The implicit intent—dare I say 'agenda'?—behind such stories almost always is this: to show what someone is like and reveal why he is that way; thereby making the point that such-and-such makes people behave like so-and-so. In order to make the story interesting, and to satisfy the 'literary' requirements of such stories, the protagonist almost always is in a bad state and thinks and/or does stupid things. (Who gives a toss about someone who's well-adjusted or at coping with life in a competent and up-front manner, right?) Therefore the such-and-such should maybe be avoided, because then people won't behave like so-and-so.

I don't know about you, but I find these kinds of stories . . . well, simplistic, boring, tedious, dull. Let's face it, it's just somebody's view of what-causes-what, and can probably be expressed in a paragraph or two, and doesn't need thousands of words to belabor. The only thing those extra words might possibly add, is a kind of fake verisimilitude.

With very few exceptions, Jack has steered away from that kind of approach to story-telling. I admire him for that, I really do, and it has taught me that you can tell stories that are not like this, the dismal example of much 'literature' notwithstanding. Indeed, Jack's *antagonists* usually are of the type I described above: dominated by their past, inclined to grasping for every possible excuse in sight, in order to make it perfectly pardonable and even sensible that they are such toss-ups.

Night Lamp is a prime example of telling a story in the non-conventional way. By revealing the initial trauma, and not wasting time on elaborate 'revelation', Jack is able to focus of the *development* of Jaro, who is a classic Vance hero in the sense that, even as a child, he exhibits the virtues Jack holds in high esteem: competence; a determination not to be enslaved by one's past; a willingness to grow, no matter what obstacles stand in the way. Things like that.

There is no other way—except in the exact details—to tell Jaro's story. With its up-front honesty and no-nonsense approach, it may well be my Vance favorite.

To the Editor,

This edition of the *CLS* sees the final instalment of *Dragonchaser*. It's been a long journey, and I've been greatly heartened by the advice and encouragement of many *CLS* readers. Some of you have been kind enough to write in saying how much you've enjoyed the story, and even that they think commercial publishers should be interested. Who knows, maybe they will: it's early days yet.

My thanks are due to many people associated with the VIE. Paul Rhoads, who thought of the *CLS* in the first place, and encouraged me to submit my work, deserves his usual credit here. Despite the many other calls on his time, he even managed to find the scope to provide an illustration for *The Zael Inheritance*. Steve Sherman, another who has put in so many hours on the VIE, also found time to encourage and offer suggestions for both *The Zael Inheritance* and *Dragonchaser*.

Finally my gratitude goes to the hardworking volunteers of the *CLS* itself: Till's editorial labours have provided a platform from which no-one has benefited more than myself; and Malcolm Bowers has provided continual help with his assiduous type-setting, proof-reading and many words of encouragement.

I hope that you, gentle reader, have enjoyed reading my stories as much as I've enjoyed writing them. There will be more to come, but not, alas, through the medium of the *CLS*.

Tim Stretton
Bosham

ing—and even if much of it never sees the light of day, it still serves to make us better story-tellers.



EDITOR'S REPLY:

Thank *you!*

Ahh, an orgy of thank-you thank-you thank-you. It's like the damn Oscars! Anyway, Tim, you did well indeed. In the final analysis it appears like you and I are the only ones within the context of the VIE, who a) like to write at length, and b) aren't coy about putting it 'out there'. There were others, but they came and went without leaving a trace but some teasing words to pique our interest, only to disappoint by a lack of follow-up. While there may be many reasons for this, none of which I am qualified to comment on, it must be noted that, with few exceptions, those who eventually get published are those to produce and keep produc-