

# Siege at Gazbriz

The beginning of the Catowls' Saga

Richard Fawconer

Fawconer Books

## **Siege at Gazbriz**

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*For Linda, Grace and Kat*



## **Locals**

Jacob Ivanson	Fred
Cathy Bullen	Sergeant Andrew Bullen
Caryl Tyklen	Trader Marlo Foggi
Ed Wallace	Merchant Marcus Akhtier
Lady Antoniana	Twiss
Professor Charles Welland	Ann Welland
Citizen Singh	Mathematician Zabney
Dr Haig	Mrs Tippl
Engineer Rance	Officer Jimmy Calant
Grandfather Melor	Scout Talltree
Pale Techno Metz	Old Techno Nick
Young Techno Wack	Wacko Bert
Wacko Jimmie	

## **From New Central**

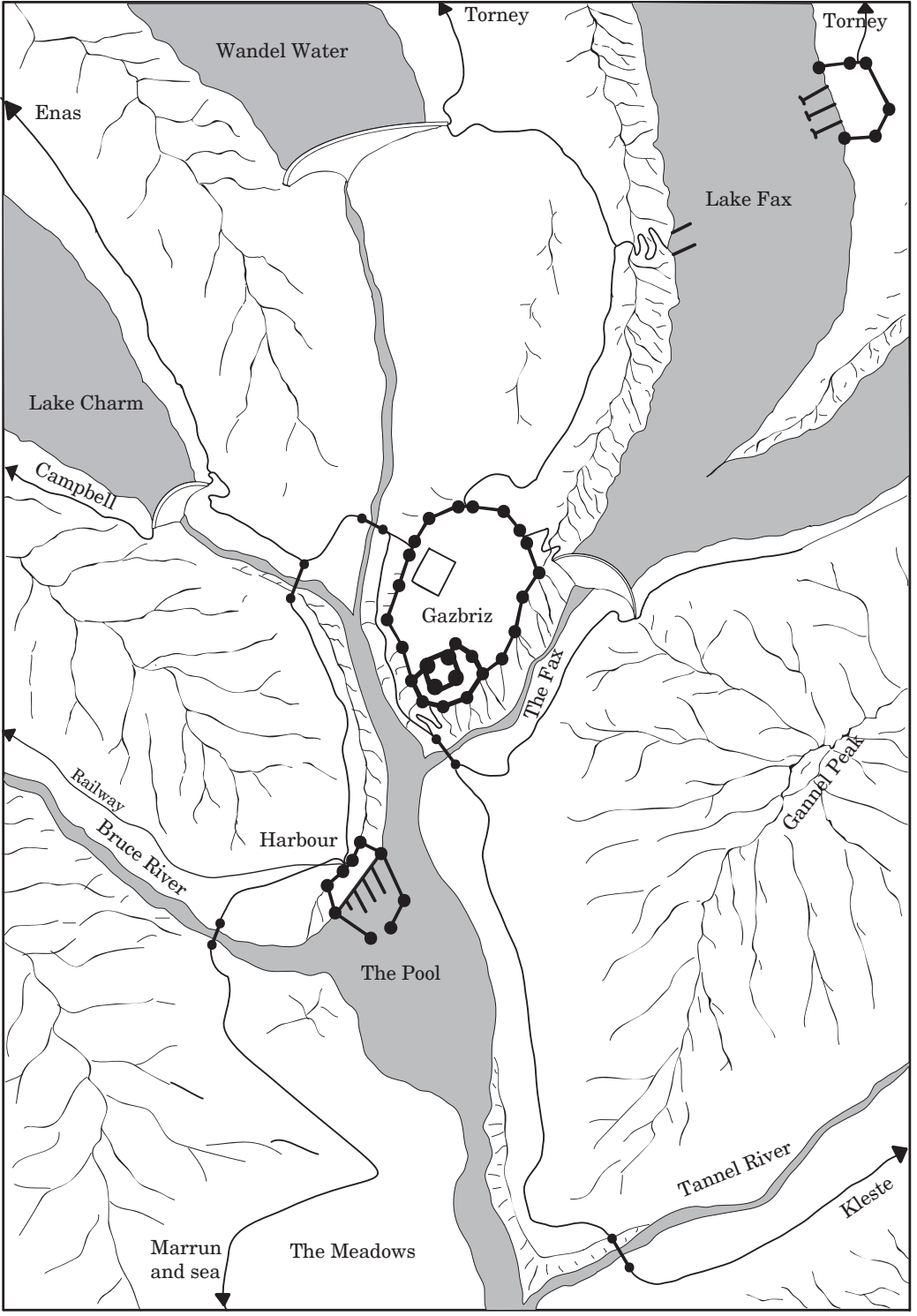
Harry Napp	First Officer Jim Phillips
Amrak Khan	Alan Powell
Angus 'Mac' McKensie	Spiro Constantinides,

## **From Eyrie**

Wing-Sergeant Khriys	First Vrakke
Second Clemists	Third Jifhstha
First Sehrenh	Second Clanteth
Klathest	Bathlett

## **Undesirables**

Michael Krang	Janus Murdoch
Frank Worrall	Bull Krasnikov
Guffy	Angelina
D'ar L'al	Rodiguez
Johnson	Li-Chow
Mack	Alice
Evans	Mangon
Carricg	Sanchez
M'Simbe	



## Prologue

The youngster reclined against an icy rock, and stretched his legs across the sleep sack. He revelled in the sweep of bright stars, while his heavy boots coaxed a last few dregs of heat from dying campfire embers. All around him other Traders prepared for the night; laying out bedding, banking cooking fires, re-checking pack animals or carts, and setting watches to guard against the bandits. It was a routine familiar from the last few weeks, and tomorrow the caravan would descend again to the humid heat of the jungle.

Rarely were the bright pinpoints this sharp; Enas pass was the highest he ever climbed, above six kilometres of altitude, above most clouds, above all the sticky dampness of the valleys, above the eternal sea haze of home. Most of the shadowy shapes were comfortably settled down for the night when a spectacular meteor lit up near the moon. But this glorious majesty persisted, and did not tail away.

The camp sprang to life, folk pointed up and discussed the novelty. After a few minutes of no change, excitement began to ebb away, and the Merchant said it was just a dying star in its last few hours of splendour, so intense it almost hurt the eyes. Some began to return to sleep, but the youth had his doubts; stars did not move, and after half an hour's observation this incandescent blue-white spark had traversed four or five times the moon's diameter.

He reluctantly woke for his duty a few brief hours later, and the light was still burning. Watching for robbers was difficult with such a curiosity in the sky. Eventually, the enigma hid behind the moon, and the night darkened. The scientist within him speculated that the tiny speck might have been brighter than a full moon.

He shivered, steeled himself and looked about intently; now, if ever, would be the time for a raid. The Traders had successfully repulsed two attacks, and tomorrow the trek to Gazbriz would end. Tonight was the final hazard.



## Chapter One

### Spilt Ink

"It's no use crying over spilt milk"

- apocryphal aphorism.

The catowl fidgeted on his perch by the half-open window, gnawing hunger fighting his intense curiosity. He was fascinated, and watched the stick intently; how did it make those jagged black marks on the yellow sheet?

For once, curiosity won, and he fluttered down, landed with a thud on the boy's shoulder, and eased along the busily moving arm, steadying himself with a wing-claw. With his free hand, Jacob gently batted away the catowl, who promptly clumped onto the table beside the work-book.

Outside, blowing through the trees, a fresh and rising cold breeze promised rain. It even smelled damp, but Jacob knew tonight would remain dry, and the wind would subside with the last of the sunlight. He shivered, and pulled his quilted jacket tighter about him; the lodging was always cold, welcome in summer, but not in chilly spring or freezing winter. He tried to concentrate on the write-up, and mistakenly ignored his winged companion.

"Give me a chance to finish this, will you Fred? I'll feed you in a couple of minutes."

In the last year Fred had become much less self-centred; he was more adventurous by far, more aware of others and happenings around him, and now he was determined to find out about the puzzling magic marker.

"Mice?" husked the catowl, closely eyeing the top of the agile pen twitching its way back and forth across the page.

"Not today, I'm sorry but you'll have to make do with sharing my stew."

"Mice?" repeated Fred, still interested in the elegant tool. Suddenly, he made a grab for it with claws extended from the tip of his right wing. The delicate nib broke away from the brittle reed stem, and black drops splattered out across the page. Jacob blotted it frantically in a vain attempt to stop the flooding ink from drowning his work.

"FRED! Now look what you've done! I'll have to redo the whole page. It's going to take me ages, and it's all got to be handed in tomorrow morning!"

"Pretty splat!" grunted Fred, eyeing the results with satisfaction, while sidling away across the table top in a rustle of claws. Safely out of Jacob's reach, he stopped, still hoping for another chance to examine the soggy miracle.

"What am I going to do with you?" Jacob asked his small friend, halfway between anger and laughter.

"Mice? Stew?"

"Oh, you've got a one track mind, and it's not mice stew." Jacob shuddered, "It's plain old soya steak and carrots, with some dhanshew tubers for a treat."

"D'ans'ew good!" Purred Fred as he clambered back over the damp papers, adding inky claw prints to the disaster, and fondly rubbed a whiskery cheek against the homespun sleeve of his 'big one.'

"Oh Fred, I give in, let's eat. I can redo it later, Cathy won't mind if we only go out for a couple of hours instead." Jacob affectionately scratched the tawny catowl behind the ears, picked him up and parked him on his shoulder, just as he had done since he was twelve and Fred just a tiny orphan kit scabbling in the dust.

While the youngster was busy in the cramped kitchen alcove, with its diminutive wood-fired ceramic stove, quickly creating mouth-watering aromas, juggling the food between his pair of precious ceramic pots, the two glass bowls, and his carved wooden plates, Fred continued chattering, usually about the food, and mostly being uncomplimentary about Jacob's cooking.

"Mice best. S'ya stew not real. Cathy cooks real meat."

"Look Fred, I'm just a student here, and it's hard enough paying my way without you complaining. Anyway, if you're so keen on the mice, why don't you catch them?"

"Sykes has all mice in h'se, lady m'ntain not feed him."

"You mean that you let a cat have all the perks?"

"Perks tasty?"

"Fred, you're priceless! Look, here you are, hot and freshly cooked." A sudden thought occurred to Jacob while he placed the plate on the block beside Fred's feeding perch. "Do you talk to that cat?"

"Sykes d'mb animal. Not listen m'ch. Not talk any. Needs all help he can get." The catowl's speech was never clear at the best of times, and the rapid passage of food from plate to stomach only exacerbated the problem.

Jacob stared at his friend. Despite the words being indistinct their meaning was unmistakable. Even after more than seven years, there were new depths of character appearing in taciturn Fred.

"I've never seen you take an interest in anyone else before. You've been grown up for ages now, Fred. What's changed in the last few months? Don't tell me you've found yourself a girlfriend too?"

"All cat'wls kind to cats. Cats not fly. Cats not talk. Cats eat mice." With that final statement, Fred bolted the last of his food, flipped up to his window perch, cleaned his whiskers and began to polish his feathers. The dark, mottled plumage was close to being invisible against the background of an early evening dusk, with its flitting shadows of busy hover-moths seeking nectar amidst the heavy leaves outside.

Jacob finished his share of the skimpy meal; it tasted fine, but there was just not enough. The varied scents from the night blooms on the myriad fruit trees soon dissipated any clues left by his cooking. A small pang of hunger remained, but there was nothing wasted and nothing left to eat apart from their meagre breakfast. After wiping round with some bread crusts, the plates and pots almost did not need cleaning. He missed his mother's cooking, it tasted much better and there was always enough to go round for everyone, even unexpected guests.

A year on in Gazbriz, he no longer suffered the hollow ache within for the comforts of his family, and any hint of homesickness was a forgotten thing of the past. But he was always on the edge of hunger, and his meagre credit had to last for the rest of the year. Fred could, and did, go out and hunt moths, mice and frogs, but being essentially lazy - Dad would chuckle and say 'being economical with energy' - the catowl preferred to eat whatever was offered, whenever available. And that included helping himself to Jacob's meagre ration. Jacob did not relish trying moths, mice or frogs, cooked or uncooked, not even those specially selected for outstanding taste by the grumpy gastronome.

He looked around the tiny rented bed-sit while tidying up. All his goods and chattels amounted to what he could carry on the caravan from Seahome. Even in this compact room there was plenty of empty space waiting for precious books. Perhaps by the end of this second

year it might not look quite so bare. Cathy had offered to paint a picture to go on the wall between the kitchen alcove and the fold-down bed. These spartan necessities, with the addition of a deep chest of drawers, the heavy table, two hard-back chairs, several thick shelves, and a few pegs hammered into the walls and the back of the door were all that the room had to offer. Mrs Tippl was not too bad as a landlady; at least she had not thrown him out when she found out about Fred, nor had she reported his 'foreign pet' to the Mayor. But the lodging was still cold, primitive and pokey compared with the comfortable freedom he enjoyed at home.

Most of all, he missed the luxury of having a proper soak in a proper deep tub. Carrying two heavy pots of hot water from the big range in the downstairs kitchen out to the chilly washroom for his flannel bath was a necessary chore every day, and again this evening. And having done so, like everyone else sharing the lodging, he had to refill the tubs from the single cold tap, and put them back in their places on the hob to heat up ready for the next brave soul.

Wistfully, he thought of Cathy's house. It had three floors and a cellar, all stone built with thick walls, warm in winter, cool in summer, with two bathrooms upstairs, and running hot and cold water on demand. But then her father could afford it, being a First Sergeant in the Militia.

He gazed disconsolately at the lab write-up while dressing in his best clothes. His best clothes, that was a sad joke; he only carried three sets, two for study, one for best, best meaning newest and least threadbare, and now, also free of ink stains.

The blot stared back at him, black, bold and arrogant. It was no good, Professor Welland would be furious at the mess. Trust his luck to have the strictest martinet for his tutor. Surely Cathy wouldn't mind going home an hour earlier than they had planned. There was no chance of re-doing it without another couple of hours of effort.

If he handed in the spoilt work, what would the Professor do? It was still too near the beginning of the academic year, and a bad start would not be clever. Would Welland accept the work late? Unlikely. Deep inside, Jacob knew it was hopeless; he needed to come home early, or else suffer possibly dire consequences.

This problem was a small incident in itself, but alas, Cathy was certainly going to mind. She was looking forward to spending the whole evening out. Promenading about the Entertainments Square with the handsome young student from overseas, and his exotic pet,

would be quite a feather in her cap. In fact she had risked serious trouble at home, before finally getting her father's permission to be out late; thus gaining the undiluted envy of both her younger sisters.

"Please Dad, tonight is extra special. It's the Anniversary Fair in the Square. You know it's the last dry night for ages, and Jacob always keeps his promise to bring me home on time."

"Oh, all right. Now mark you, my girl, stick with young Jacob Ivanson, and no gallivanting off with those other rowdy friends of yours! D'you hear me? Eh?"

"Yes Dad, I promise."

Fateful words. Even though there might have been millions of teenage daughters who have said and meant just that, not one of them was to have quite such an effect on the future.

To reach Cathy's home, high up in the old sector of town, Jacob needed to thread his way through part of the enormous Entertainments Square. Coming out of a small port far from the bright lights of the big city, he was always amazed by the endless variety of stalls and booths. There was usually some entrepreneur who had come up with a new idea for parting the public from its credit, and his rivals would certainly be busy on their next schemes.

It was quickest to cut diagonally across the Square, weaving through the cluttered bazaar. No one ever tried to fight through the theatre queues clogging up the broad avenues bordering the square, the heaving, happy, party zone chaos that marked the bustling boundary between staid respectability and cheerful chicanery.

On reaching the throng clustered around Marlo Foggi's sweetmeat stall, all breathing deep the superb bouquet from the wares on offer, a loud voice boomed in his ear, and a massive thump on his free shoulder sent him staggering into some bystanders, "Hello, Trader! I thought you were studying tonight. Still got ideas about Cathy?"

"Oh, hi Caryl. I see they've unlocked your cage for the evening." Jacob turned to look up with a grin, to see his friend beaming down at him. The onlookers noticed a red-thatched giant, with even white teeth gleaming in a happy sunburnt face, standing a full head taller than the slim dark-haired youth with a strange bird on one shoulder. "Yes, I'm just going to collect her now, be back in quarter of an hour."

"Put on some aftershave. There's lots of decent pong going free tonight. You should have smartened up. You can't see her in the same old work clothes. Why don't you join in the party? Get some colours

instead of that boring brown and green.”

“If I had your money, maybe! At least they’re clean though, just washed.” Jacob smiled wryly at the brief look of aghast horror transforming Caryl’s normally cheerful face. Caryl always managed to collect a smudge, or smear, or stain within minutes of putting on fresh clothes, so now it was a standing joke when anyone mentioned cleanliness.

“Your merchant friend is back in town again. I saw him over by Kumar’s gadget stall on the North corner.”

“Who, Merchant Akhtier?”

“Who else? He comes and goes like a catowl in a hurricane. No offence Fred,” he added hastily when Fred raised his wings and flexed his full array of claws and teeth, “do you want a Goobie-burger? I know about Jacob’s cooking!”

“G’bie-b’rger tasty. Fred wait here for Jacob and Cathy.” Came the instant response.

“Perhaps it’s just as well I don’t take Fred, I don’t know what her father would say about exotic animals. Make sure he doesn’t eat too much, he’ll keep me awake!”

“Fred can share mine, Uncle Marlo always gives me enormous helpings, says I’m a growing lad. He doesn’t want to see me waste away!” Caryl boomed his laugh again, attracting a few incurious glances, and the catowl flipped across to his broad left shoulder. “Don’t be too long, or else Fred might think I’m a better meal ticket!”

“Right then, thanks, see you in a few minutes.” Jacob started off through the press of the gaily-dressed crowd, and soon lost sight of the stall, but he was nearly halfway across the rest of the Square before he lost the echo of that merry laugh carrying over the happy hubbub.

While he went, he reflected on the chances of his having a friend such as Caryl. When entering the University last year, Jacob had been one of only fourteen students from the several Trader States, out of a total enrolment of nearly a thousand from the seven great City States. Caryl was a local lad, whose well-connected family had decided that he needed an education to fit him for his future. By contrast, Jacob was the elder son of a storekeeper in the sleepy Trader port of Seahome. He had needed to work hard to earn his scholarship to the one and only University on Farnell’s World. And if it were not for Merchant Akhtier and his convoy he would still have been unable to attend.

Nevertheless, on that first day last year they were waiting in line to enrol, and Caryl had gently insulted Fred, and laughed with delight when Fred retaliated, less than half a kilo of sharp claws and needle

teeth against someone at least two metres tall, and probably twice Jacob's weight. Somehow in those first few minutes the unlikely friendship had been forged. Now, Fred would have been insulted if Caryl did not make a pointed comment.

He left the busy Square behind, and the noisy crowds thinned rapidly. The narrow stone streets, with their dim and widely spaced electric lights, although spotlessly clean, now seemed dingy and musty, foreboding and empty, and the overhanging upper storeys pressed in on him. He was glad to reach the brightly lit alcove that served as a porch to the First Sergeant's large house.

A quick check of garments showed all to be in order; plain and simple, but clean and presentable. He took a deep breath, and pulled the bell cord.

The solid door flew back, crashing against the wall inside, and an excited Cathy leapt out in a cloud of silky auburn hair and a flowing pale green dress, with complementary gem sparkles in her ears and about her neck, and a subtle hint of some wonderful perfume. "Exactly on time, Jacob! How do you do it? I've been waiting for ages and ages. Let's go!"

"Good evening, Jacob." Cathy's father loomed in the doorway, blocking out the light from the hall.

"Good evening, Sir."

"Cathy has managed to get an extension tonight, see that she is back by the first hour."

"Um, yes, Sir." Jacob stuttered. His brain raced: how was he going to finish the write-up now? She must have moved heaven and earth for three extra hours out!

"Good night, Daddy, don't wait up. Come on Jacob, we'll be late!"

"I'll be up, but that's because I'll be on duty to attend to the drunks being brought in to the Keep. Have fun and enjoy yourselves."

"Good night, Sir. We'll be back on time." His brain stalled, he should be complimenting her on the dress and hair and perfume and sparkles, but nothing came.

Jacob thought he detected the hint of a smile on the Sergeant's craggy face when the door quietly closed, but he was given no time to think about it. Cathy grabbed his hands and whirled him off down the street in an exuberant polka, laughing and singing, and red slippers twinkling.

"Come on Jacob, don't be stuffy now! Tonight is Anniversary night! Time to let your hair down! Where's Fred?" as she appeared to notice

the absence for the first time.

"Oh, he's with Caryl, gorging himself at Uncle Marlo's. We'll meet them there."

"Goody! I like Fred; he's always saying something funny. You wouldn't think a dear little thing like him could be so clever."

"He's not that little, and not that clever, he only thinks of his stomach. He's always asking me for mice!"

"Yuk! I suppose that's his natural food."

"Not so, mice only came here when we did five hundred odd years ago. The catowls have always been here. I think it's a taste he got in Dad's store. Funny, you know, this evening he said that all the mice in Mrs Tippel's house belonged to Sykes."

"What, that old mangy cat?"

"Yes, Fred was quite concerned for him. I never expected he'd think of anything except his stomach." Jacob's own rumbled in sympathy, and he hoped Cathy did not notice.

"Maybe he's growing up at last?"

"He's been fully grown for most of his life, I didn't think they matured so late as all this."

"So how many of you have them for pets?"

"Funny, they don't seem to be pets, rather they tend to adopt you. Except that I found Fred as an orphan."

"Did you? Or do you think his parents had selected you for a likely prospect?"

Jacob stared at Cathy with astonishment, lost for words.

"Well, don't you think so? Fred seems to be a good judge of character, he chose you, and he's very good at keeping out of sight, he just seems to melt into the background. I don't see why adult catowls shouldn't be just as clever, or more so if Fred is still a teenager. How long do they live?"

"Good question, nobody knows. We've never seen a dead one in the wild, and we don't know what an old one looks like. No one has lived with a catowl much before the last ten or twenty years. We knew about them, but they always kept to themselves. Years ago, if they were caught they almost always escaped, or pined away and had to be let go, or died. So we gave up trying to catch them."

"Do you think that's why they're coming to you now? They trust you now?" Cathy smiled again, and it seemed as if the whole street lit up.

"I don't know. I hope so." Happily, he returned the smile and put his arm through hers.

By now they had reached the wide avenue bordering the Southeast side of the Square. The colourful crowd was boisterous and cheerful; the throng was weaving about the theatre fronts, then drifting to the stalls, and back to the theatres. There was much discussion about which play would be the success of the evening. Some favoured the classical attempts, others the new and sometimes bawdy. Everything in the Square was free on the Anniversary night, everyone was celebrating here, and everyone was exhibiting their finery, skimpy costumes ignoring the chill in the air. Colours and perfumes were always ephemeral and precious; this was the best time to show off what you could afford to possess. Jacob could not help remembering Caryl's words and hoped Cathy did not mind him being so drab compared with the others.

The rest of the city was almost deserted. It was said that if one was fast enough, one could meet every person who lived in Gazbriz in the single evening. But perhaps this was becoming impossible, now that there were over thirty thousand citizens crowded into the stout walls of the largest city-state on Farnell's World. In the early days it was the custom to greet everyone, partly to renew acquaintance, and partly to make sure all citizens knew who really were citizens, a great help in the skirmishes for power and territory.

Thus it was no surprise that the Merchant Akhtier should meet the pair just before they reached the sweetmeat stall.

"Greetings, young Jacob Ivanson. Will you introduce me to the charming princess on your arm? Merchant Marcus Akhtier at your service, my lady." He bowed low, black cape held aside with a flash of red lining, and swept his broad brimmed hat off with a wide flourish. Cathy giggled.

"Merchant Akhtier, please meet Cathy, eldest daughter of First Sergeant Bullen of the City Militia."

"I am honoured. Have you known Jacob long? He is a fine young fellow, perhaps too serious, spends too much time thinking, not enough drinking, but he has saved my life once already. Ahh, what a journey that was last year out to Seahome. Now then Jacob, explain the absence of your guardian of the night."

"Fred is near here with Caryl, or at least he should be. I can't imagine him straying far from Uncle Marlo's stall."

At that moment Caryl appeared, looking concerned, and Fred was not with him. "Fred's just flown off, he muttered something about having to visit a very important person, and he'd see you later. He was gone

before I could try to stop him. He didn't even finish his Goobie-burger, and took it with him."

"Perhaps he has a lady friend." Laughed the Merchant, "I know of at least one other catowl in Gazbriz, since she came in with me and M'lady Antoniana some two days ago. A very shy creature, not at all like Fred, by the name of Twiss. She is really quite beautiful." He offered them a nip from a platinum flask, which had appeared from under his cape as if by magic. Jacob remembered the Merchant's tippie from long cold nights on the caravan, and hastily declined. Caryl sipped, gagged and coughed. Akhtier took a healthy mouthful. Cathy just laughed.

The Merchant smacked his lips appreciatively and continued. "I was hoping to see Fred's reaction when I told him she was here. Do you know of this one, Jacob?"

"No. The only other catowls I have seen were all around Seahome in the woods. They used to chatter with Fred but never came near me, and he always stayed close by. I assumed they were talking but could never make out a word of what they said, and Fred never helped either!"

"He'll be back, Jacob. Don't worry. Bring Cathy and the Merchant to the stall and enjoy a Goobie-burger," urged Caryl, "I strongly recommend them, tonight they are better than ever."

With some misgivings, Jacob followed and soon began to enjoy the sensations of the evening. The crowd pressed about them, daring dresses floating in the fresh breeze, brightly coloured capes and fantastic hats competing for attention, all ephemera that would not survive the week.

It was some time later, long after the Merchant had gone his own way; "I see some business looming near. Pleasure must await profit for just a few moments!" that Jacob, Cathy, Caryl and his girlfriend Bernice were coming out of the Empire theatre, having seen the latest representation of Hamlet.

"Ere look, it's the Trader mouse, lost your tree rat?" Half a dozen of the youth of Gazbriz were lurching across the avenue towards the theatre, "c'mon Cathy, come with us, you don't want to hang around with this boring drip and his tame gorilla."

"Ed, you've had too much to drink, watch out that Dad doesn't see you in the lock-up this morning! I got into awful trouble last time I went out with you, two weeks I had to stay in. Never again, that's for

sure. No, let him go Caryl, they're harmless, one good push and they'll not get up 'til tomorrow."

"C'mon Trader, you've seen the whole world, you know everything. What was the light in the sky, the day before you got here this term. If you're so clever, you can tell all of us exactly what it was. Some comet or solar flare, hey?"

"Sorry, I don't know. You know as much about it as I do. I bet you won't make the first lecture tomorrow. Old Welland is going to eat you alive. Mind you, he might know the answer. Try asking him, I dare you."

"Go on, old man," slurred Ed, belching fumes of wine in his face, and referring to the fact that Jacob was a year older than most of the rest of the class, "Ask him yourself, you're teacher's pet, you're the only one who always gets his work in on time."

And with that, the group continued to weave its way down the street, barely staying upright, occasionally colliding with other inebriates in great amusement.

"They're all right, Jacob. Just don't let them get to you. We've still got an hour left before I have to be home, let's see the conjurers competition."

When they reached the little stage in the centre of the square, backing onto Uncle Marlo's Sweet-Meat Emporium and Wendover's 'Magic' trinket stall, they were rejoined by the Merchant Akhtier, who was now escorting an exceptionally well-endowed lady, dripping with tasteful jewellery and oozing subtle wealth and expensive scents.

"Ahh, my young friends, please meet M'lady Antoniana. She, as you must all know, is the sister-in-law of our honoured Mayor." Akhtier continued with the round of introductions, finishing with Jacob, "...and this is the young man I told you about, Jacob Ivanson from Seahome."

"I am pleased to meet you Jacob. The Merchant tells me you are friends with a catowl. I wanted to introduce you and your Fred to Twiss, but she was afraid of the bustle of the crowd, and preferred to stay at home tonight. Would you like to come and see us?"

"Yes please!"

"The Mayor's secretary will be able to tell you when I will be free. I have yet to touch the ground, I have been so busy with the society whirl. The Merchant has just managed to rescue me from the most awful pompous toadies. I don't know what my Tilly sees in that crowd. But I have to be polite."

"M'lady" said Akhtier; "here are the conjurers ready to start the

contest again. We shall see if they have managed to master each other yet!"

A number of showmen had taken their stations around an arc facing out to the crowd. At a signal from the judges walking amongst the spectators, they commenced the entertainment, each vying with the others to produce the newest and most original, and of course, most mystifying tricks.

"Oh, look at the way the light is coming from the bowl, there are no wires or anything!"

"Ahh yes, M'lady, I see a new kind of Electricity as used in a trick. Soon that will be no novelty. Have you tried the new Electric Railway? When that spreads far I will be out of a job. Perhaps I should be in the railway business!" Akhtier was abruptly silent, perhaps a fresh thought had occurred to him. The others were hardly listening, more fascinated by the ingenious marvels on the stages.

Jacob glanced across at the Merchant, and noticed him suddenly start when a thin hand from the crowd plucked his sleeve. Curiously he watched the Merchant slip away from his lady to hold a hurried whispered conference with the pale haired stranger. A moment later Akhtier was back by the Lady Antoniana's side as if nothing had happened, and Jacob thought no more of the incident. Meanwhile, the conjurers launched into a blaze of pyrotechnics bringing cries of appreciation from the crowd.

All too soon the spectacle reached its climax; the winner was announced and received his prize and the plaudits of the multitude. The high spot of the evening being over, it was time for Jacob to return Cathy to her home. The happy public of Gazbriz were already drifting away. A contented murmur spread through the town, while they compared notes on who they had seen and what had been done. Jacob and Cathy soon split off from Caryl and Bernice, and carried on up the hill through the remnants of both of the previous city walls, to reach the more genteel and respectable neighbourhood of Cathy's home.

Still there was no sign of Fred, and Jacob was beginning to be concerned. "Cathy, it's unusual for Fred to disappear like this. I wonder if anything's happened to him. Do you think I should ask your father to look out for him?"

"Don't worry about Fred, I'm sure he's all right, and don't say anything to Dad. You know how fussy he is about things that he doesn't understand, talking animals for instance!"

"Fred's not an animal!"

"You know what I mean. Anyway we're here now. Thanks for a wonderful evening." She reached up and gave him a quick hug and

kiss, just as the porch light went out, "Jacob, just how do you get the time so exactly right? I've got to go in now. See you tomorrow? At lunch?"

"Right! Thanks very much for coming out with me, sorry about Fred, see you tomorrow." Cathy gave him another longer kiss to remember, then, with a happy skip, vanished through the doorway.

While Jacob strolled back towards his lonely room, his thoughts were not on the bubbly redhead he had just left, nor were they much concerned about Fred who was inexplicably absent. No, he was desperately wondering just how he was going to finish his paper in time for Welland tomorrow. He had fewer than seven hours before the class; just seven short hours in which to recover from the long evening, when he felt like sleeping through the whole of the next day. Worse, the paper would take at least two hours, and being tired, he was bound to mess it up again. Jacob resolved to face it out with the martinet, and enjoy the most sleep possible!

Being abstracted, he did not notice the Merchant and his shadowy acquaintance hurrying out of sight when he returned to the Square. He almost did not notice Caryl and Bernice waltzing along the avenue on a collision course with him.

"C'mon Jacob, it's not so bad as all that, the night is young yet. Cheer up!"

"Sorry Caryl, I'm exhausted! I could sleep for a week, and we've got Welland first thing this morning. And I've spoiled the write up, or rather Fred has. Don't let me stop you though. Enjoy yourselves! Good night, Bernice."

When Jacob reached his room, there was still no sign of Fred. So he left the window open and tumbled into bed, trusting to his instinct to wake him in time for class.

He did not rouse when Fred returned just before dawn, and even the strange dreams about the light in the sky and Ed swooping around like a catowl after teleg moths did not stir him. The Merchant and his furtive friend kept creeping through his reverie, with the Lady Antoniana looming over everything like a magnificent trader clipper under full sail.

Finally, exactly on time, images of the Professor intruded to restore reality and Jacob sat up with a start. On awaking properly, he immediately noticed Fred snuggled close in the pillow, fast asleep with a look of deep, smug contentment the legendary Cheshire cat would have been proud of.