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opening extract from

The Flowing Queen

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MERMAIDS



The gondola carrying the two girls emerged from one of the side canals. It had to wait for the racing boats on the Canal Grande to pass, and even minutes later there were still so many punts and steamers milling about in confusion that the gondolier thought it better to wait.

'We can go on soon,' he called to the girls, keeping both hands firmly clasped around his oar. 'Not in any hurry, are you?'

'No,' said Merle, the elder of the two, although the fact was that she felt more excited than ever in her life before.

For days, no one in Venice had talked of anything but the regatta on the Canal Grande. Never before, the organisers announced, had the racing boats been drawn by so many mermaids at once.

Some folk slightingly referred to the mermaids as 'fish-wives', only one of the many demeaning names given to them, particularly after it had been claimed that they were

in league with the Egyptians. Not that anyone seriously believed such nonsense; after all, the Pharaoh's armies themselves had driven countless mermaids out of the Mediterranean.

Today's regatta had ten boats on the starting line at the southern end of the Canal Grande, level with the Casa Stecchini, and each boat was drawn by ten mermaids.

Ten mermaids! It was unheard of; it broke all records. La Serenissima, the Most Serene, as the Venetians liked to call their city, had never seen anything like it.

The mermaids swam in fan-shaped formations, harnessed to the boats with long ropes that resisted even their needle-sharp teeth. Where there were footpaths people had gathered on both banks of the canal, and of course all the balconies and palazzo windows were full of spectators come to see the show.

But Merle's excitement had nothing to do with the regatta. She was excited for another reason and, she thought, a better one.

The gondolier waited another two or three minutes before steering his slender black craft out into the Canal Grande, moving straight across its breadth and into the mouth of a canal opposite. They were almost rammed by a

boat carrying several rowdy spectators who had harnessed their own mermaids to its prow and, shouting raucously, were trying to keep up with the official competitors.

Merle pushed back her long, dark hair. The wind kept blowing strands into her eyes. She was fourteen years old, not tall, not short, but a little thin. So were almost all the children in the orphanage, except of course for fat Ruggero, but then Ruggero was sick – or so the orphanage staff said, anyway. If you slunk into the kitchen at night and gobbled up everyone's dessert, was that really a symptom of sickness?

Merle took a deep breath. The sight of the captive mermaids saddened her. Their bodies were human from the waist up, with smooth, pale skin that many fine ladies must surely beg for daily in their prayers. Their hair was long, for it was considered a disgrace among mermaids to cut it – and even their human masters respected that custom.

What made a mermaid different from an ordinary woman was first and foremost her mighty fish-tail. Seldom less than two metres long, it began at her hips. It was as flexible as a whiplash, as strong as a big cat, and as silver as the plate in the City Council's treasuries.

But the second great difference, the one that humans feared most, was the terrifying mouth that split a mermaid's

face in two like a gaping wound. While the mermaids' other features were human and very beautiful – countless poems had been written to their eyes, and for the sake of those eyes not a few lovelorn youths had willingly gone to a watery grave – it was their mouths which convinced so many people that they were animals rather than humans. A mermaid's great maw stretched from ear to ear, and when she opened it her entire skull seemed to come apart. Her jaws contained several rows of sharp teeth, as thin and pointed as ivory nails. Those who claim that there can be no teeth more terrible than a shark's have never looked into the mouth of a mermaid.

Not much was really known about the mermaids. It was a fact that they avoided human beings, and many Venetians saw that as reason enough to hunt them down. Young men often amused themselves cornering inexperienced mermaids who had lost their way in the labyrinthine canals. If a mermaid happened to die during the chase it was a pity, of course, but no one accused her hunters of any crime.

More usually, however, mermaids were caught and imprisoned in basins in the Arsenal until there was some reason to fatten them up. Usually that was for the boat races,

less often for fish soup – although the flavour of their long, scaly tails was legendary, said to be even better than such delicacies as the flesh of sirens and leviathans.

'I feel sorry for them,' said the girl sitting beside Merle in the gondola. She looked just as famished and even skinnier. Her blonde hair, so fair that it was almost white, flowed down her back. All Merle knew about her companion was that she too came from an orphanage, one in a different part of Venice. She was thirteen, she had said, a year younger than Merle. Her name was Junipa.

Junipa was blind.

'Sorry for the mermaids?' asked Merle.

The blind girl nodded. 'I could hear their voices just now.'

'But they weren't saying anything.'

'Yes, they were,' Junipa contradicted her. 'Underwater. They were singing all the time. I have very good hearing, you know. Blind people often do.'

Merle looked at Junipa in surprise, before remembering how rude it was to stare, whether or not the other girl could see her.

'Yes,' she said at last. 'I feel the same. They always seem rather . . . oh, I don't know, sort of melancholy. As if they'd lost something that meant a lot to them.'

'Their freedom?' suggested the gondolier, who had been listening to the girls.

'More than that,' replied Merle. She couldn't find the words to describe what she meant. 'The ability to feel happy, maybe?' That still wasn't quite right, but it came close.

She was sure the mermaids were as human as she was. They were more intelligent than many people she had known in the orphanage, and they had feelings too. They were *different*, yes, but that gave no one any right to keep them like animals, harness them to boats or hunt them through the lagoon for fun.

The way the Venetians treated them, she thought, was cruel and inhuman – exactly what people said about the mermaids themselves.

Sighing, Merle looked down at the water. The bows of the gondola cut through its emerald-green surface like a knife. The water in the narrow side canals was very calm; only the Canal Grande sometimes became choppy. But here, with the main traffic artery of Venice three or four bends behind them, peace and quiet reigned.

Without a sound, the gondola slipped under arched bridges. Some bore grinning stone gargoyles, with bushy weeds growing on their heads like shocks of green hair.

The facades of the buildings came right down to the water on both sides of the canal. They were all at least four storeys high. A few hundred years ago, when Venice was still a great mercantile power, cargoes used to be unloaded from the canals straight into the palaces of the rich merchant families, but today many of those old buildings stood empty, most of their windows were dark, and the wooden gates coming down to the surface of the water were crumbling, rotted by the damp – and not just since the Egyptian army closed in around the besieged city. The reborn Pharaoh and his Sphinx commanders couldn't be blamed for everything.

'Lions!' exclaimed Junipa suddenly.

Merle looked along the bank to the nearest bridge. She couldn't see a human soul, let alone any of the stone lions on which the City Guard rode. 'Where? I don't see them.'

'I can smell them,' Junipa insisted. Soundlessly, she sniffed the air, and out of the corner of her eye Merle saw the baffled gondolier behind them shaking his head.

She tried to imitate Junipa, but the gondola had glided almost fifty metres further on before Merle's own nostrils picked it up: the odour of damp stone, musty, a little mouldy, and strong enough to drown out even the breath of the sinking city.

'You're right.' It was undoubtedly the odour of the stone lions kept by the City Guard of Venice as their mounts and companions in battle.

At that very moment one of the mighty creatures appeared on a bridge in front of them. The animal was made of granite; granite lions were one of the most common breeds in the lagoon. Some of the others were stronger, but that made no real difference: if you fell into the clutches of a granite lion, you were as good as done for. The lions had been the emblem of the city down the ages, right back to the times when they all had wings and could soar through the air. Today only a few such winged beasts were left, a strictly regulated number of animals kept specially for the personal protection of the City Councillors. The breeders on Lion Island, up in the north of the lagoon, had bred the ability to fly out of all the rest, who were born with stunted wings, just pathetic little stumps on their backs. The men of the City Guard fastened their saddles to these vestigial wings.

The granite lion on the bridge was one of these ordinary stone beasts. Its rider wore the brightly coloured uniform of the Guard. A rifle was slung from a leather strap over his shoulder, dangling in an ostentatiously casual way as a sign of military pride. The soldiers had been unable to protect

the city from the Egyptian Empire – it was the Flowing Queen who did that – but ever since a state of siege was declared over thirty years before, the Guard had won more and more power. Today they were outdone in arrogance only by their masters, the Councillors, who managed the affairs of the beleaguered city as they pleased. Perhaps the Councillors and their soldiers were trying to prove something to themselves – after all, everyone knew they were in no position to defend Venice in an emergency. But while the Flowing Queen kept enemies away from the lagoon they could enjoy feeling all-powerful.

The guardsman on the bridge looked down at the gondola with a grin, winked at Merle and spurred his lion on. Snorting, the creature made its way forward. Merle could hear the grating of its stone claws on the paved surface of the bridge only too clearly, and Junipa put her hands over her ears. The bridge shook and trembled beneath the paws of the great cat, and the echo of its passing was tossed back and forth between the tall facades like a bouncing ball. Even the still water rippled. The gondola rocked slightly.

The gondolier waited for the soldier to disappear into the tangle of alleyways, then spat into the water and muttered, 'The Traitor of Old fly away with you!' Merle looked round

at him, but the man was staring fixedly over her head and down the canal. Slowly, he sent the gondola gliding on again.

'Do you know how much further it is?' Junipa asked Merle.

The gondolier answered for her. 'We're nearly there. Straight ahead and round that corner.' Then it struck him that 'straight ahead' would mean nothing to the blind girl, and he quickly added, 'Just a few more minutes, then we'll reach the Outcasts' Canal.'

It was cramped and it was dark – that was what struck Merle most.

The Outcasts' Canal was flanked by tall buildings, each as sombre as the next. They were almost all abandoned. Window frames gaped, black and empty, in the grey facades, many of the panes were broken, and wooden shutters hung askew on their hinges like wings on the skeletons of dead birds. The yowl of tomcats fighting came through a door that had been broken open; the sound was nothing unusual in a city full of legions of stray cats. Pigeons cooed on window sills, and the narrow, unfenced paths on both banks were covered with moss and bird droppings.