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Opening extract from

Physik: Septimus Heap Book Three

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(* TOWER MOVED AND REBUILT ON INSTRUCTIONS OF QUEEN DATCHET III.)

PROLOGUE: THE PORTRAIT IN THE ATTIC



Silas Heap and Gringe, the North Gate Gatekeeper, are in a dark and dusty corner of the Palace attic. In front of them is a small door to a Sealed room, which Silas Heap, Ordinary Wizard, is about to UnSeal. "You see, Gringe," he says, "it's the perfect place. My Counters will never be able to escape from there. I can just Seal them in."

Gringe is not so sure. Even he knows that Sealed rooms in

attics are best left alone. "I don't like it, Silas," he says. "It feels peculiar. Anyway, just because you've been lucky enough to find a new Colony under the floorboards up 'ere doesn't mean they'll *stay* here."

"They jolly well will stay if they're Sealed in, Gringe," says Silas, clutching his box of precious newfound Counters, which he has just caught. "You're just being funny because you won't be able to entice this lot away."

"I did not *entice* the last lot either, Silas Heap. They came of their own accord. Weren't nothing I could do about it."

Silas ignores Gringe. He is trying to remember how to do an UnSeal Spell.

Gringe taps his foot impatiently. "'Urry up, Silas. I got a gate to get back to. Lucy is most odd at the moment and I don't want to leave 'er there alone for long."

Silas Heap closes his eyes so that he can think better. Under his breath, so that Gringe cannot quite hear what he is saying, Silas chants the Lock Incantation backwards three times, finishing it off with the UnSeal. He opens his eyes. Nothing has happened.

"I'm going," Gringe tells him. "Can't 'ang around like a spare part all day. Some of us 'ave work to do."

Suddenly with a loud bang, the door to the Sealed room slams open. Silas is triumphant. "See—I *do* know what I'm doing. I *am* a Wizard, Gringe. Oof! What was that?" An icy gust of stale air rushes past Silas and Gringe, dragging their breath right up from their lungs and causing them both to subside into fits of coughing.

"That was cold." Gringe shivers, with goose bumps running up and down his arms. Silas does not reply—he is already in the UnSealed room, deciding on the best place to keep his Counter Colony. Curiosity gets the better of Gringe and he tentatively enters the room. It is tiny, little more than a cupboard. Apart from the light of Silas's candle, the room is dark, for the only window that it once had has been bricked up. It is nothing more than an empty space, with dusty floorboards and bare, cracked plaster walls. But it is not—as Gringe suddenly notices—entirely empty. In the dim shadows on the far side of the little room a large, life-size oil painting of a Queen is propped up against the wall.

Silas looks at the portrait. It is a skilful painting of a Castle Queen, from times long past. He can tell that it is old because she is wearing the True Crown, the one that was lost many centuries ago. The Queen has a sharp pointy nose and wears

her hair coiled around her ears like a pair of earmuffs. Clinging to her skirts is an Aie-Aie—a horrible little creature with a ratty face, sharp claws and a long snake's tail. Its round, red eyes stare out at Silas as though it would like to bite him with its one long, needle-sharp tooth. The Queen too looks out from the painting but she wears a lofty, disapproving expression. Her head is held high, supported by a starched ruff under her chin and her piercing eyes are reflected in the light of Silas's candle and seem to follow them everywhere.

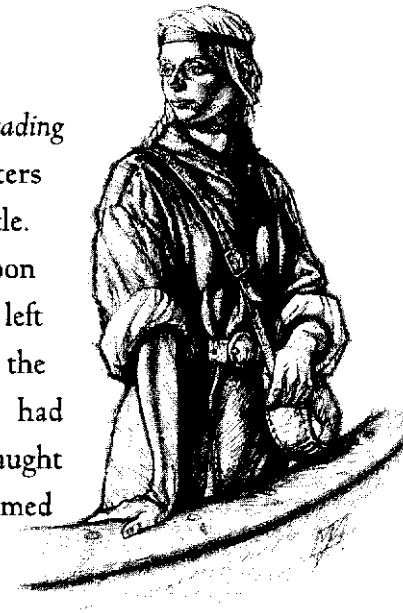
Gringe shivers. "I wouldn't like to meet 'er out on me own on a dark night," he says.

Silas thinks that Gringe is right, *he* wouldn't like to meet her on a dark night either—and neither would his precious Counters. "She'll have to go," says Silas. "I'm not having her upsetting my Counter Colony before they've even got started."

But what Silas does not know is that she has already gone. As soon as he UnSealed the room, the ghosts of Queen Etheldredda and her creature stepped out of the portrait, opened the door and, pointy noses in the air, walked and scuttled out—right past Silas and Gringe. The Queen and her Aie-Aie paid them no attention, for they had more important things to do—and at long last they were free to do them.

I

SNORRI SNORRELSSEN



Snorri Snorrelssen guided her trading barge up the quiet waters of the river towards the Castle. It was a misty autumn afternoon and Snorri was relieved to have left the turbulent tidal waters of the Port behind her. The wind had dropped but enough breeze caught the huge sail of the barge—named *Alfrún*, after her mother who owned it—to enable her to steer the boat safely around Raven's Rock and head for the quay just beyond Sally Mullin's Tea and Ale House.

Two young fishermen, not much older than Snorri herself,

had just returned from a day's successful herring catch and were more than happy to catch the heavy hemp ropes that Snorri threw to shore. Eager to show their skills, they tied the ropes around two large posts on the quay and made the *Alfrún* secure. The fishermen were also more than happy to dispense all kinds of advice on how to take the sail down and the best way to stow the ropes, which Snorri ignored, partly because she hardly understood what they were saying but mainly because no one told Snorri Snorrelssen what to do—*no one*, not even her mother. Especially not her mother.

Snorri, tall for her age, was slim, wiry and surprisingly strong. With the practised ease of someone who had spent the last two weeks at sea sailing alone, Snorri lowered the great canvas sail and rolled up the vast folds of heavy cloth; then she heaved the ropes into neat coils and secured the tiller. Aware that she was being watched by the fishermen, Snorri locked the hatch to the hold below, which was full of heavy bales of thick woollen cloth, sacks of pickling spice, great barrels of salted fish and some particularly fine reindeer-skin boots. At last—ignoring more offers of help—Snorri pushed the gangplank out and came ashore, leaving Ullr, her small orange cat with a black-tipped tail, to prowl the deck and

keep the rats at bay.

Snorri had been at sea for more than two weeks and she had been looking forward to stepping on to firm land again, but as she walked along the quay it felt to her as if she were still on board the *Alfrún*, for the quay seemed to move beneath her feet just as the old barge had done. The fishermen, who should already have gone home to *their* respective mothers, were sitting on a pile of empty lobster pots. "Evening, miss," one of them called out.

Snorri ignored him. She made her way to the end of the quay and took the well-trodden path that led to a large new pontoon, on which a thriving café was built. It was a very smart two-story wooden building with long, low windows that looked out across the river. The café looked inviting in the chill early-evening air, with a warm yellow light coming from the oil lamps that hung from the ceiling. As Snorri walked across the wooden walkway that led on to the pontoon she could hardly believe that, at long last, she was here—at the fabled Sally Mullin's Tea and Ale House. Excited, but feeling very nervous, Snorri pushed open the double doors to the café and nearly fell over a long line of fire buckets full of sand and water.

There was always a general buzz of friendly conversation in Sally Mullin's café, but as soon as Snorri stepped over the threshold the buzz suddenly stopped, as though someone had thrown a switch. Almost in unison, every customer put down their drink and stared at the young stranger who wore the distinctive robes of the Hanseatic League, to which all Northern Traders belonged. Feeling herself blushing and wishing furiously that she wasn't, Snorri advanced towards the bar, determined to order one of Sally's barley cakes and a half-pint mug of the Springo Special Ale that she had heard so much about.

Sally Mullin, a short round woman with an equal dusting of freckles and barley flour on her cheeks, bustled out of the kitchen. Seeing the dark red robes of a Northern Trader and the typical leather headband, her face took on a scowl. "I don't serve Northern Traders in here," she snapped.

Snorri looked puzzled. She was not sure that she understood what Sally had said, although she could tell that Sally was not exactly welcoming.

"You saw the notice on the door," Sally said when Snorri showed no sign of leaving. "No Northern Traders. You are not welcome here, not in *my* café."

"She's only a lass, Sal," someone called out. "Give the girl a chance."

There was a general murmur of assent from the other customers. Sally Mullin gave Snorri a closer look and her expression softened. It was true; she was only a girl—maybe sixteen at the most, thought Sally. She had the typical white-blond hair and pale, almost translucent blue eyes that most of the Traders had, but she did not have that hard-bitten look that Sally had come to remember with a shudder.

"Well . . ." said Sally, backtracking, "I suppose it's getting late and I'm not one to be turning out a young girl into the dark all on her own. What will you have, miss?"

"I . . . I will have," Snorri faltered as she tried hard to remember her grammar. Was it, *I will have* or *I shall have*? "I shall have a slice of your very fine barley cake and a half-pint of the Springo Special Ale, if you please."

"Springo Special, eh?" someone called out. "There's a lass after me own heart."

"Be quiet, Tom," Sally chided. "You'd best try the ordinary Springo first," she told Snorri. Sally poured out the ale into a large china mug and pushed it across the counter towards the girl. Snorri took a tentative sip and her face wrinkled in dis-

gust. Sally was not surprised. Springo was an acquired taste and most youngsters thought it was revolting; indeed there were some days when Sally herself thought it was pretty foul. Sally poured a mug of lemon and honey for Snorri and put it on a tray with a large slab of barley cake. The girl looked like she could do with a good meal. Snorri gave Sally a whole silver florin, much to Sally's surprise, and got back a huge pile of pennies in change. Then she sat down at an empty table by the window and looked out at the darkening river.

Conversation in the café started up again and Snorri breathed a sigh of relief. Coming into Sally Mullin's café on her own had been the hardest thing she had ever done in her life. Harder than taking the *Alfrún* out to sea on her own for the first time, harder than trading for all the goods now in the *Alfrún*'s hold with the money she had saved up for years, and much, much harder than the crossing over the great northern sea that separated the land of the Northern Traders from the land of Sally Mullin's Tea and Ale House. But she had done it; Snorri Snorrelssen was following in the footsteps of her father, and no one could stop her. Not even her mother.

Later that evening, Snorri returned to the *Alfrún*. She was met by Ullr in his night-time guise. The cat emitted a long,

low welcoming growl and followed his mistress along the deck. Feeling so full of barley cake that she could barely move, Snorri sat in her favourite place at the prow, stroking the NightUllr, a sleek and powerful panther, black as the night with sea-green eyes and an orange-tipped tail.

Snorri was far too excited to sleep. She sat with her arm draped loosely over Ullr's warm, silky-smooth fur, looking out across the dark expanse of river to the shores of the Farmlands on the opposite banks. Later, as the night grew chill, she wrapped herself in a sample length of the thick woollen cloth that she planned to sell—and for a good price, too—in the Traders' Market, which started in two weeks' time. Balanced on her lap was a map of the Castle, showing how to get to the marketplace; on the reverse of the map were detailed instructions on how to obtain a license for a stall and all manner of rules and regulations about buying and selling. Snorri lit the oil lamp she had brought up from her small cabin below and settled down to read the rules and regulations. The wind was still now, and the fine drizzle of the early evening had died down; the air was crisp and clear, and Snorri breathed in the smells of the land—so different and foreign from the one she was used to.

As the evening drew on, small groups of customers began to leave Sally's café, until just after midnight Snorri saw Sally extinguish the oil lamps and bolt the door. Snorri smiled happily. Now she had the river to herself, just her, Ullr and the *Alfrún*, alone in the night. As the barge rocked gently in the outgoing tide, Snorri felt her eyes closing. She put down the tedious list of permitted weights and measures, pulled the woollen cloth more tightly around her and gazed out across the river for just one last time before she went down to her cabin. And then she saw it.

A long, pale boat outlined in a greenish glow was coming around Raven's Rock. Snorri sat very still and watched the boat make slow, silent progress up the middle of the river, steadily drawing closer to the *Alfrún*. As it drew near, Snorri saw it shimmering in the light of the moon, and a shiver ran down her spine, for Snorri Snorrelssen, Spirit-Seer, knew exactly what she was looking at—a Spirit Ship. Snorri whistled under her breath, for she had never seen a boat quite like this one. Snorri was used to seeing wrecks of old fishing boats steered by their drowned skippers, forever seeking safe harbour. Every now and then she had seen the ghost of a warrior longship, limping home after a fierce battle, and once she had

seen the ghostly tall ship of a rich merchant, with treasure pouring from a gaping hole in its side, but she had never seen a Royal Barge—complete with the ghost of its Queen.

Snorri got to her feet, took out her Spirit eyeglass, which the wise woman in the Ice Palace had given her, and focused it on the apparition as it drifted noiselessly by, propelled by eight ghostly oars. The barge was decked out in flags that fluttered in a wind that had died long ago; it was painted in swirling patterns of gold and silver and was covered in a rich red canopy, strung from ornate pillars of gold. Beneath the canopy sat a tall, erect figure staring fixedly ahead. Her pointed chin rested on a high, starched ruff, she wore a simple crown and sported a decidedly old-fashioned hairstyle: two coiled plaits of hair tightly wound around her ears. Next to her sat a small, almost hairless creature that Snorri took to be a particularly ugly dog until she saw its long, snake-like tail curled around one of the gold pillars. Snorri watched the ghost boat drift by, and she shivered as a chill ran through her—for there was something different, something *substantial*, about its occupants.

Snorri put away her eyeglass and climbed through the hatch to her cabin, leaving Ullr on guard on the deck. She hung her lamp from a hook in the cabin roof, and the soft yel-

low light from the lamp made the cabin feel warm and cosy. It was small, for most of the space on a Trader's barge was taken up with the hold, but Snorri loved it. The cabin was lined with sweet-smelling applewood that her father, Olaf, had once brought home as a present for her mother and was beautifully fitted out, for her father had been a talented carpenter. On the starboard side was a built-in bunk that doubled up as a seat in the day. Under the bunk were neat cupboards where Snorri stowed all the cabin clutter, and above the bunk was a long shelf where Snorri kept her charts rolled up. On the port side was a drop-down table, an expanse of applewood drawers and a small pot-bellied iron stove from which a chimney ran up through the cabin roof. Snorri opened the door to the stove and a dull red glow came from the dying embers of the fire.

Feeling sleepy, Snorri climbed into her bunk, pulled her reindeer-skin blanket around herself and snuggled down for the night. She smiled happily. It had been a good day—apart from the sight of the ghost Queen. But there was only one ghost that Snorri wanted to see—and that was the ghost of Olaf Snorrelssen.

2

THE TRADERS' MARKET



The next morning Snorri was up bright and early, and Ullr, back in his daytime mode of scrawny orange cat with a black-tipped tail, was eating a mouse for breakfast. Snorri had forgot all about the ghostly Royal Barge, and when she did remember it over her own breakfast of pickled herring and dark rye bread, Snorri decided that she had dreamed the whole thing.

Snorri pulled out her sample bag from the hold, heaved it over her shoulders and set off down the gangplank into the bright morning sunshine, feeling happy and excited. Snorri

liked this strange land that she had come to; she liked the green water of the slow river and the smell of autumn leaves and wood smoke that hung in the air, and she was fascinated by the tall Castle walls that reared up before her, behind which was a whole new world to explore. Snorri walked up the steep path that led to the South Gate and breathed in deeply. There was a chill in the air, but it was nothing like the frosts that Snorri knew her mother would be waking up to back home in their dark little wooden house on the quay. Snorri shook her head to get rid of any thoughts of her mother and followed the path up to the Castle.

As Snorri walked through the South Gate she noticed an old beggar sitting on the ground. She fished out a groat from her pocket, for her people considered it good luck to give to the first beggar you saw in a strange country, and pressed it into his hand. Too late, as her hand went through his, Snorri realised that this was a ghostly beggar. The ghost looked surprised at Snorri's touch, and in a bad temper at being Passed Through, he got up and walked away. Snorri stopped and dropped her heavy bag on to the ground. She looked around and her heart sank. The Castle was *packed*, stuffed full to overflowing with ghosts of all descriptions, which Snorri, as a

Spirit-Seer, had no choice but to see—whether the ghosts had chosen to Appear to her or not. Snorri wondered how she was ever going to find her father in such a crowd. She very nearly turned around right there and went home again, but she told herself that she had also come to Trade, and as the daughter of a renowned Trader, Trade she would.

Keeping her head down and avoiding as many ghosts as she could, Snorri followed her map. It was a good map, and very soon she was walking through the old brick archway that led into the Traders' Market Palace, where she made straight for the Traders' Office. The office was an open hut with a sign above it saying HANSEATIC LEAGUE AND NORTHERN TRADE ASSOCIATION INCORPORATED. Inside the hut were a long trestle table, two sets of scales with assorted weights and measures, a large ledger and a wizened old Trader counting the money in a large iron cash box. Suddenly Snorri felt nervous, almost as nervous as when she had entered Sally Mullin's. This was the moment when she had to prove that she had a right to Trade and a right to belong to the Association. She swallowed hard and, head held high, strode into the hut.

The old man did not look up. He carried on counting out the strange coins that Snorri had not yet become used to:

pennies, groats, florins, half crowns and crowns. Snorri coughed a couple of times but still the old man did not look up. After a few minutes, Snorri could bear it no longer. "Excuse me," she said.

"Four hundred and twenty-five, four hundred and twenty-six . . ." said the man, not taking his eyes off the coins.

Snorri had no choice but to wait. Five minutes later the man announced, "One thousand. Yes, miss, can I help you?"

Snorri put a crown on the trestle table and said fluently, for she had rehearsed this moment for days beforehand, "I wish to buy a license to Trade."

The old man looked at the girl in her rough woollen Trader dress standing before him, and he smiled as though Snorri had said something foolish. "Sorry, miss. You have to be a member of the League."

Snorri understood the man well enough. "I *am* a member of the League," she told him. Before the man could object, Snorri took out her Letters of Charter and put the roll of parchment with its red ribbon and great blob of red sealing wax in front of the man. As if humouring her, the old man very slowly pulled out his glasses, shaking his head at the impudence of youngsters today, and slowly read what Snorri

had given him. As his finger moved along the words, his expression changed to one of disbelief, and when he had finished reading, he held up the parchment to the light, searching for signs that it was a forgery.

It wasn't. Snorri knew it wasn't and so did the old man. "This is most irregular," he told Snorri.

"Ir-regular?" asked Snorri.

"*Most* irregular. It is not usual for fathers to pass their Letters of Charter on to their daughters."

"No?"

"But all appears to be in order." The old man sighed and rather unwillingly reached under the table and pulled out a stack of licenses. "Sign here," he said, pushing a pen over to Snorri. Snorri signed her name and the old man stamped the license as though it had said something extremely personal and rude.

He pushed it across the table to Snorri. "Stall number one. You're early. The first one here. Market starts at dawn two weeks from Friday. Last day is MidWinter Feast Day Eve. Clear out by dusk. All market waste to be removed to the Municipal Rubbish Dump by midnight. That will be one crown." The man took the crown from where Snorri had laid

it on the table and threw it into another cash box, where it landed with an empty clatter.

Snorri took the license with a broad smile. She had done it. She was a Licensed Trader, just as her father had been.

"Take your samples to the shed and leave them for quality control," the old man said. "You may collect them tomorrow."

Snorri left her heavy bag in the sample bin outside the shed, and feeling as light as air, she danced out of the marketplace and bumped straight into a girl wearing a red tunic edged with gold. The girl had long dark hair and wore a gold circlet around her head like a crown. Beside her stood a ghost dressed in purple robes. He had a friendly expression in his green eyes and wore his grey hair neatly tied back in a ponytail. Snorri tried not to look at the bloodstains on his robes just below his heart, for it was impolite to stare at the means by which the ghost had entered ghosthood.

"Oh, sorry," the girl in red said to Snorri. "I wasn't looking where I was going."

"No. I am sorry," said Snorri. She smiled and the girl smiled back. Snorri went on her way back to the *Alfrún*, wondering. She had heard that the Castle had a Princess, but surely this could not be her, walking around just like anyone else?

The girl, who was indeed the Princess, continued on her way to the Palace with the purple-robed ghost.

"She's a Spirit-Seer," said the ghost.

"Who is?"

"That young Trader. I did not Appear to her but she saw me. I've never met one before. They're very rare, they are only found in the Land of the Long Nights." The ghost shivered. "Gives me the creeps."

The Princess laughed. "You are funny, Alther," she said. "I bet *you* give people the creeps all the time."

"I do not," replied the ghost indignantly. "Well . . . only if I want to."

Over the next few days, the autumn weather closed in. The north winds blew the leaves from the trees and sent them skittering down the streets. The air grew chill and people began to notice how early it was getting dark.

But to Snorri Snorrelssen, the weather felt good. She spent her days wandering around the Castle, exploring its highways and byways, looking with amazement into the windows of all the fascinating little shops tucked away underneath the arches in The Ramblings and even buying the odd trinket. She had

gazed up at the Wizard Tower in awe, caught a glimpse of what appeared to be an extremely bossy ExtraOrdinary Wizard, and been shocked at the great piles of manure that the Wizards kept in their courtyard. She had joined the crowd watching the old clock in Drapers Yard strike twelve noon and laughed at the faces that the twelve tin figures had made as they sauntered out from behind the clock. Another day, she had walked down Wizard Way, taken a tour of the oldest printing press, and then peered through the railings at the beautiful old Palace, which was smaller than she had expected. She had even talked to an old ghost called Gudrun at the Palace Gate, who had recognised a fellow countrywoman, even though they were divided by seven centuries.

But the one ghost that Snorri had hoped to see in her wanderings eluded her. Although she only knew what he looked like from a picture that her mother kept at her bedside, she was sure that she would recognise him if she saw him. But despite constantly scanning the crowds of ghosts that wandered by, Snorri caught not so much as a glimpse of her father.

Late one afternoon, after exploring some of the darker alleyways at the back of The Ramblings where many of the Traders took lodgings, Snorri had had a fright. It was getting near sun-

set and she had just bought a hand torch from Maizie Smalls's Takeaway Torch Shop. As she walked back along Squeeze Guts Alley to the South Gate, Snorri had the uncomfortable feeling that she was being followed, but every time she turned around, there was nothing to see. Suddenly Snorri had heard a scuffling behind her, she spun around and there they were—a pair of round red eyes and one long needle-like tooth glinting in the light of her hand torch. As soon as the eyes saw the flame, they melted into the twilight and Snorri saw no more of them. Snorri told herself that it was only a rat, but not long after, as she walked briskly back to the main thoroughfare, Snorri had heard a shrill scream coming from Squeeze Guts Alley. Someone who had ventured down the Alley without a torch had not been so lucky.

Snorri was shaken and in need of some human company, so that evening she had supper at Sally Mullin's. Sally had warmed to Snorri because, as she had said to her friend Sarah Heap, "You can't blame a young girl just because she's got the misfortune to be a Trader, and I suppose they're not *all* bad. You've got to admire her, Sarah, she's sailed that great barge all on her own. Don't know how she did it. I used to find *Muriel* difficult enough."

The café was strangely empty that evening. Snorri was the only customer. Sally brought Snorri an extra piece of barley cake and sat beside her. "It's terrible for business, this Sickenesse," she complained. "No one dares stay out after dark even though I tell them that rats run a mile when they see a flame. All they have to do is carry a torch. But it's no good, everyone's scared now." Sally shook her head gloomily. "They go for your ankles, see. And quick as greased lightning they are. One bite and that's it. You're gone."

Snorri was having some trouble following Sally's rapid stream of words. "Yorgon?" she asked, catching the end of the sentence.

Sally nodded. "As good as," she said. "Not dead exactly but they reckon it's only a matter of time. You feel fine for a while, then you get a red rash spreading up from the bite, feel dizzy and bang—next thing you know you're flat out on the floor and away with the fairies."

"Fairies?" asked Snorri.

"Yes," said Sally, springing to her feet at the welcome sight of a customer.

The customer was a tall woman with short spiky hair. She held her cloak close around her. Snorri could see little of the woman's face, but there was an angry look to the way she

stood. A murmured conversation ensued between her and Sally, then the woman left as swiftly as she had come.

Smiling, Sally rejoined Snorri at her seat overlooking the river. "Well, it's an ill wind that blows no one good," she said, much to Snorri's bemusement. "That was Geraldine who just came in. Strange woman, reminds me of someone, though I can't think who. Anyway, she asked if the RatStranglers can meet up here before they go out, er, rat strangling."

"Ratstrang-gling?" asked Snorri.

"Well, rat *catching*. They reckon if they get rid of all the rats, they'll get rid of the Sickenesse, too. Makes sense to me. Anyway, I'm very pleased. A load of hungry and thirsty rat catchers is just what the café could do with right now."

No one else came into the café after the spiky Geraldine left, and soon Sally started noisily putting up the benches on the tables and began to mop the floor. Snorri took the hint and bade Sally goodnight.

"Goodnight, dear," said Sally cheerily. "Don't hang around outside now, will you?"

Snorri had no intention of hanging around. She ran back to the *Alfrún* and was very glad to see the NightUllr prowling the deck. Leaving Ullr on guard, Snorri retreated to her cabin, barred the hatch and kept the oil lamp burning all night.