



Glen Cook

Dread Brass Shadows

From the files of Garrett, P.I.

Whew! The things I get me into!

We had snow hip deep to a tall mammoth for four weeks, then it turned suddenly hot and the whole mess melted quicker than you could say cabin fever. So I was out running and banging into people and things and falling on my face because the girls were out stretching their gorgeous gams and I hadn't seen one leg, let alone two, since the snow started falling.

Running? Garrett? Yeah. All six feet two and two hundred pounds, poetry in motion. All right. Maybe it was bad poetry, doggerel, but I was getting the hang of it. In a few weeks I'd be back to the old lean and mean I'd been when I was twenty and a crack Marine. And pigs would be zooming around my ears like falcons.

Thirty isn't old to somebody who's fifty, but when you've spent a few years making a career of being lazy and the belly gets a little less than washboard and the knees start creaking and you start puffing and wheezing halfway up a flight of stairs, you feel like maybe you've skipped the twenty in between, or maybe just started spinning The digits over on the left-hand side. I had a bad case of got-to-do-something-about-this.

So I was out running. And admiring the scenery. And huffing and puffing and wondering if maybe I ought to forget it and sign myself into the Bledsoe cackle factory. It wasn't a lot of fun.

Saucerhead had the right idea. He sat on my front stoop with a pitcher Dean kept topped. Each time I lumbered past he got his exercise by throwing up fingers showing the number of laps I'd survived without a stroke.

People shoved me and cursed me, Macunado Street was belly button to elbow with dwarves and gnomes, ogres and imps, elves and whatever have you else, not to mention every human in the neighborhood There wasn't room for pigeons to fly because the pixies and fairies were zipping and swooping overhead. Nobody in TunFaire was staying inside but the Dead Man. And he was awake for the first time in weeks, sharing the euphoria vicariously.

The whole damned city was on a peak high. Everybody was up. Even the ratmen were smiling

I churned around the corner at Wizard's Reach, knees pumping and elbows flailing, gawking ahead in hopes that Saucerhead would be struck as dumb as he looks and would lose count, maybe a couple laps in my favor. No such luck. Well, some luck He showed me nine fingers and I figured he wasn't lying much. Then he waved and pointed. Something he wanted me to see. I cut to the side, apologized to a couple of young lovers who didn't even see me, bounced up the steps with all the spring of a wet sponge. I looked out over the crowd,

"Well."

"Tinnie."

"Yeah." Well, indeed. My gal Tinnie Tate, professional redhead, She was still a block away but she was in her summer taunting gear, and wherever she walked, guys stopped and bounced their chins off their chests. She was hotter than a



house afire and ten times as interesting. “There ought to be a law.”

“Probably is but who can keep his mind on legalities?” I gave Saucerhead a raised eyebrow. That wasn’t his style.

Tinnie was in her early twenties, a little bit of a thing but with hips that were amply ample and mounted on gimbels. She had breasts that would make a dead bishop jump up and howl at the moon. She had lots of long red hair. The breeze threw it around wilder than I suddenly hoped I might in about five minutes if I could run off Saucerhead and Dean and get the Dead Man to take a nap.

She saw me gaping and panting and threw up a hand hello and every guy in Macunado Street hated me instantly. I sneered at them for their trouble.

“I don’t know how you do it, Garrett,” Saucerhead said. “Ugly dink like you, manners like a water buffalo. I just don’t know.” My pal. He got up. Sensitive guy, Saucerhead Tharpe. He could tell right away when a guy wanted to be alone with his girl. Or maybe he was just going to head her off and warn her she was wasting her time on an ugly dink like me.

Ugly? A vile slander. My face has gotten pushed around some over the years, but it has all the right parts in approximately all the right places. I can stand to look at it in a mirror, except maybe on the morning after. It’s got character.

As I grabbed my mug and took a long drink, just to replace fluids, a dark-skinned, weaselly little guy with black hair and a pencil-stroke mustache grabbed Tinnie’s chin with his left hand. His other hand was behind her, out of sight, but I never doubted what he was doing.

Neither did Saucerhead. He let out a bellow like a wounded bison and flew off the stoop. His boots never touched the steps. I was right behind him yowling like a saber-tooth with his tail on fire, eyes teared up so I couldn’t see who I was trampling.

I didn’t run into anybody, though. Saucerhead broke trail. Bodies flew out of his way. It didn’t matter if they were two feet tall or ten. Nothing stops Saucerhead when he’s mad. Stone walls barely slow him down.

Tinnie was down when we got there. People were clearing out. Nobody wanted to be near the girl with the knife in her back, especially not with two madmen roaring around.

Saucerhead never slowed down. I did. I dropped to one knee beside Tinnie. She looked up. She didn’t look like she was hurting, just kind of sad. There were tears in her eyes. She reached up with one hand. I didn’t say anything. I didn’t ask anything. My throat wouldn’t let me.

Maybe it was our bellowing. He squatted down. “I’ll take her inside, Mr. Garrett. Maybe His Nibs can help. You do what you have to do.”

I grunted something that was more of a moan than anything, lifted Tinnie into his frail old arms. He was no muscleman, but he managed. I took off after Saucerhead.

Tharpe had a block lead but I gained ground fast. I wasn’t thinking. He was. He was pacing himself, matching the assassin’s stride, maybe following to see where he led. I didn’t care about that. I didn’t care about anything. I didn’t look around to see what else was happening on the street. I wanted that blademan so bad I could taste blood.

I came churning up beside Saucerhead. He grabbed my shoulder, slowed me



down, kept squeezing till the pain took the red out of my eyes. When he had my attention he made a couple of gestures, pointed.

I got it. First time, too. Must be getting smarter as I age.

The skinny guy didn't know his way around. He was just trying to get away. There aren't many straight streets in old TunFaire. They wander like they were laid out by drunken goblins blinded by the sun. This character was sticking to Macunado Street even though we had passed the point where it changes its name to Way of the Harlequin and then again to Dadville Lane after it narrows down.

"I'm gone." I cut out to the right, into an alley, through, darted down a narrow lane, ducked into a breezeway, skipped over some ratmen wasted on weed and a couple of blitzed human winos, then blasted out into Dadville Lane again, where it finishes the big, lazy loop around the Memorial Quarters. I chugged across the street and leaned against a hitching rail, waiting, puffing, and wheezing and grinning because boy, was I in shape for this.

I was ready to dump my guts.

And here they came. The gink with the mustache was going all out, scared to death, trying so hard he wasn't seeing anything. All he knew was the pounding feet were catching up.

I let him come, stepped out, tripped him. He flew headlong, rolled like he had some tumbling experience, came up going full speed—wham! Right into the end of a watering trough. His momentum kept his top half going. He made a fine big splash.

Saucerhead got on one side of the trough I got on the other. Tharpe slapped my hand away. Probably that was best. I was too upset.

He grabbed that gink by his greasy black hair, pushed him under, pulled him up, said, "Winded as you are, you ain't gonna hold your breath long." He shoved the mustache under again, pulled him up. "That water's going to get cold going down. You're going to feel it going and know there ain't one damned thing you can do to stop it." The big louse was barely puffing. The guy in the trough was wheezing and snorting worse than me.

Saucerhead shoved him under, brought him up a half second before he sucked in a gallon. "So tell us about it, little man. How come you stuck the girl?"

He would have answered if he could. He wanted to answer. But he was too busy trying to breathe. Saucerhead shoved him under again.

He came up, swallowed an acre of air, gasped, "The book!" He gobbled some more air—and that was the last breath he drew.

"What book?" I snapped.

A crossbow bolt hit the guy in the throat. Another thunked into the trough, and a third put a hole through Saucerhead's sleeve. Tharpe came over the trough in one bound and landed smack on top of me. A couple, three more bolts whizzed past.

Tharpe didn't bother making me comfortable. He did stick his head up for a second. "When I roll off, you go for that door." We were about eight feet from the doorway to a tavern. Right then, that looked like a mile. I groaned, the only sound I could make with all that meat on top.

Saucerhead roiled off. I scrambled. I never really got myself upright. I just sort of got my hands and feet under me and made that door in one long dive, dog-



paddling. Saucerhead was right behind me. Crossbows twanged. Bolts thunked into the door. “Boy!” I said. “Those guys are in big trouble.” Crossbows are illegal inside the city wall.

“What the hell?” I gasped as we shoved the door shut. “What in the hell?” I dived over to a window, peeked through a crack in a shutter still closed against winter.

The street had cleared as though a god had swept a broom along it, excepting a mixed bag of six nasties with crossbows. They spread out, weapons aimed our way. Two came forward.

Saucerhead took a peek. Behind us the barkeep went into a “Here, now! I won’t have trouble in my place! You boys clear out!” routine.

Saucerhead said, “Three dwarfs, an ogre, a ratman, and a human. Unusual mix.”

“Odd, yes.” I turned. “You got trouble already, Pop. You want it out of here, lend a hand. What you got under the bar to keep the peace?” I wasn’t carrying anything. Who needs an arsenal to lumber around the block? Tharpe didn’t carry, usually. He counted on his strength and wit. Which maybe made him an unarmed man twice over.

“You don’t get going you’re going to find out.”

“Trouble’s the farthest thing from my mind, Pop. I don’t need any. But tell that to those guys outside. They already killed somebody in your watering trough.”

I peeked again. The two had pulled the mustache out of the water. They looked him over. They finally figured it out, dropped him, eyeballed the tavern like they were thinking about coming inside.

Saucerhead borrowed a table from a couple of old boys puffing pipes and nursing mugs that would last them till nightfall. He just politely asked them to raise their mugs, picked the table up, and ripped a leg off. He tossed me that, got himself another, turned what was left into a shield. When those two arrived, he bashed the dwarf’s head in, then mashed the ogre against the door-frame with the table while I tickled his noggin with a rim shot.

One of their crossbows didn’t get broken. I grabbed it, put the bolt back in, popped out the door, and ripped off a one-handed shot at the nearest target I missed and pinked a dwarf ninety feet away. He yelped. His pals headed for the high country.

Saucerhead grumbled, “You couldn’t hit a bull in the butt with a ten-foot pole if you was inside the barn.” While I tried to figure that out, he grabbed the ogre, who was as big as he was, and tried to shake him awake. It didn’t work. Not much of a necromancer, my buddy Saucerhead.

He didn’t try the dwarf. That guy had gotten pounded down a foot shorter than he started out. So Tharpe just stood there shaking his head and looking baffled. I thought that was such a good idea I did it, too. And all the while, that old bartender was howling about damages while his clientele tried to dig holes in the floor to hide in

“Now what?” Saucerhead asked.

“I don’t know.” I peeked outside.

“They gone?”

“Looks like. People are starting to come out.” A sure sign the excitement was over. They would come count the bodies and lie to each other about how they saw the whole thing, and by the time any authority arrived—if it ever did—the story’s



only resemblance to fact would be that somebody got dead

“Let’s go ask Tinnie.”

Sounded like a stroke of genius to me.

Tinnie Tate wasn’t some mousy little homemaker for whom the height of adventure was the day’s trip to market. But she wasn’t the kind of gal who got messed up with guys who stick knives in people and run in packs shooting crossbow volleys at citizens, either. She lived with her uncle Willard. Willard Tate was a shoemaker. Shoemakers don’t make the kinds of enemies who pop people. A shoe doesn’t fit, they bitch and moan and ask for their money back, they don’t call out the hard boys.

I thought about it as I trotted. It didn’t make sense. The Dead Man says when it doesn’t make sense, you don’t have all the pieces or you’re trying to put them together wrong. I kept telling me, Wait till we see what Tinnie has to say. I refused to face the chance that Tinnie might not be able.

We had a curious and rocky relationship, Tinnie and me. Sort of can’t live with and can’t live without. We fought a lot. Though it hadn’t been going anywhere, the relationship was important to me. I guess what kept it going was the making up. It was making up that was two hundred proof and hotter than boiling steel.

Before I got to the house, I knew it wouldn’t matter what Tinnie had done, wouldn’t matter what she’d been into, whoever hurt her would pay with interest that would make a loan shark blush.

Old Dean had the house forted up. He wouldn’t have answered the door if the Dead Man hadn’t been awake. He was, for sure. I felt his touch while I was pounding on the door and hollering like a Charismatic priest on a holy roll.

Dean opened the door. He looked ten years older and all worn out. I was down the hall pushing into the Dead Man’s room before he finished bolting the door behind Saucerhead.

Garrett!

The Dead Man’s mind touch was a blow. It was an icewater shower, It stopped me in my tracks. I wanted to scream. That could only mean.

She was there on the floor. I didn’t look. I couldn’t. I looked at the Dead Man, all four hundred fifty pounds of him, sitting in the chair where he’d been since somebody stuck a knife in him four hundred years ago. Except for a ten-inch, elephantlike schnoz he could have passed for the world’s fattest human, but he was Loghyr, one of a race so rare nobody has seen a live one in my lifetime. And that’s fine by me. The dead, immobile ones are aggravation enough.

See, if you kill a Loghyr, he doesn’t just go away. You don’t get him out of your hair that easy. He just stops breathing and gives up dancing. His spirit stays at home and gets crankier and crankier. He doesn’t decay. At least mine hasn’t in the few years I’ve known him, though he’s a little ragged around the edges where the moths and mice and whatnot nibble on him while he naps and there’s no one around to shoo them away.

Do not act the fool, Garrett. For once in our acquaintance astound me by pausing to reflect before you leap.

That’s the way he is. Usually more so. My tenant and sometime partner, sometime mentor. Despite his control I croaked, “Talk to me, Chuckles. Tell me what it’s all about.”



Calm yourself Passion enslaves reason. The wise man...

Yeah. He does go on like that, hokey philosopher that he is. Only not in the really grim times... I began to suspect something.

Once you get used to a particular Loghyr, you can read more than words when he thinks into your head. He was angry about what had happened but not nearly so outraged and vengeance hungry as he should have been. I began to control myself.

“I did it again, eh?”

You get more exercise jumping to conclusions than you do running.

“She’s going to be all right?”

Her chances seem good. She will need the attention of a skilled surgeon, though. I have put her into a deep sleep till such time as one becomes available.

“Thanks. So tell me what you got from her.”

She had no idea what it was about. She was involved in nothing. She did not know the man who wielded the knife. He left out his usual stock of sarcastic comments when he added, She was just coming to see you. She went to sleep completely bewildered.

He loosened his hold on me, let me settle into the big chair that’s there for me when I visit.

Till you lumbered in with your recollections, I assumed it was random violence. Meaning he had sorted through my memories of the chase.

Saucerhead joined us. He leaned on the back of my chair, stared at Tinnie. He jumped to the same conclusion I had. I admired his self-control. He liked Tinnie and had a special place in his heart for guys who wasted women. He’d lost one once, that he’d been hired to protect. No fault of his own. He’d wiped out half a platoon of assassins and had gotten ninety percent killed himself trying to save her. He hadn’t been the same since.

I told him, “Smiley over there put her to sleep. She’ll be all right, he thinks.”

“Sons of bitches must pay anyway,” he growled, hanging on to the tough, but he looked relieved all over. I pretended I didn’t see his show of “weakness.”

The book? the Dead Man asked. That is all you got before the sniping started? Like it was my fault. Some sniping was about to get started here. He knew damned well that was all we’d gotten. He’d sifted our minds.

“That’s all.” Play it straight. That was my new tactic. It drove him crazy when I didn’t fight back.

There was nothing in her thoughts about a book.

“Ain’t much to go on,” Saucerhead said. He had lost his mad urgency. Tinnie was going to be all right. He didn’t have to go out and lay waste. Not right away, anyway. He—and I—would keep an eye out for the characters responsible, though.

No. I suggest you both calm yourselves, then recall those blackguards carefully. Any insignificant detail might be consequential. Garrett, if you feel this is of great importance, you might consider collecting the debt that Chodo Conrague imagines he owes you.

A reflection of my thoughts, that. “I will if I have to. Too soon to think about that. I need to see Tinnie taken care of and get my mind straightened out before I go off on any crusade.” That was a straight line of the sort he scarfs up usually,



but this time he let it slide. “Something happens and she goes, I’ll ring in Chodo like that....” I snapped my fingers. I’m a fountain of talent.

Chodo Contague, often called the kingpin, is the grand master of organized crime in TunFaire. In some ways he’s more powerful than the King. He’s no friend. He’s damned near the embodiment of everything I hate, the kind of creep I got into my line to pull down. But just by doing my job I’ve managed to do him some accidental favors. He has an obsessive, if skewed, sense of honor. The slimeball thinks he owes me, and I’ll be damned if he won’t do almost anything to pay the debt. If I wanted, I could say the word and he’d put two thousand thugs on the street to make us square.

I’ve avoided collecting because I don’t want my name associated with his. Not in any way. Be bad for business if people suspected I was on his pad.

Hell. I haven’t really said what I do I’m what the guys who don’t like me call a peeper. An investigator and confidential agent, the way I put it. Pay me—up front— and I’ll find out things. More often than not, things you didn’t really want to know. I don’t dig up much good news. That’s the nature of the racket.

On the confidential-agent side I’ll do a stand-in, like pay off a kidnapper or blackmailer for you, and make sure there’s no last-second comedy. I’ve worked hard to build a rep as a straight arrow, a guy who plays square, who comes down like the proverbial ton if you mess with my client. Which is why I wouldn’t want anybody to think I’d roll over for Chodo.

If Tinnie died, I’d change my rules. For Tinnie it would be dead ahead full speed, and whoever got in my way had best have his gods paid off because I wouldn’t slow down till I ate somebody’s liver. If Tinnie died.

The Dead Man said she ought to pull through. I hoped he was right. This once. Usually I hope he’s wrong because he’s damned near infallible and works hard reminding me of that.

Dean came in with a tray, beer, and stronger spirits if we needed them. Saucerhead took a beer. So did I. “That’s good. That hits the spot after all that running.”

The Dead Man sent, I suggest you go see her uncle. Inform him what has happened and find out about arrangements. Perhaps he can give you a clue.

Yeah. He had to bring it up. I’d been wondering about who was going to tell the family. There had to be somebody I could stick with that little chore.

The candidates constitute a horde of one, Garrett.

He figured that out all by himself. He is a genius. A certified—and certifiable—genius. Just ask him. He’ll tell you about it for hours.

Any other time I would have given him a ration of lip. This time the specter of Willard Tate got in the way. “All right. I’m on my way.”

“Me too,” Saucerhead said. “There’s some things I want to check out.”

Excellent. Excellent. Now everything is under control I can catch up on my sleep.

Catch up. Right. In all the years I’ve known him his waking time hasn’t added up to six months.

I let Saucerhead out the front door. Then I headed for the kitchen, got Dean to draw me another of those wonderful beers. “Have to replace everything I sweated out.”



He scowled. He has some strong opinions about the way I live. Though he's an employee, I let him speak his mind. We have an understanding. He talks, I don't listen. Keeps us both happy.

I hit the street without much enthusiasm. Old Man Tate and I aren't bosom buddies. I did a job for him once, and for a while afterward he'd thought well of me, but a year of me playing push-me pull-you with Tinnie had somehow soured his outlook.

The Tate place will fool you. It's supposed to. From outside it looks like a block of old warehouses nobody bothered to keep up. You can see why from the street out front. First, the Hill. Our overlords are buzzards watching for fortunes to flay through the engines of the law. Second, the slums below. They produce extremely hungry and unpleasant fellows, some of whom will turn you inside out for a copper sceat.

Thus, the Tate place pretending to be poverty's birthplace.

The Tates are shoemakers who turn out army boots and pricey stuff for the ladies of the Hill. They're all masters. They have more wealth than they know what to do with.

I gave their gate a good rattle. A young Tate responded. He was armed. Tinnie was the only Tate I knew who faced the world outside unarmed. "Garrett. Haven't seen you for a while."

"Tinnie and I were feuding again."

He frowned. "She went out a couple hours ago. I thought she was headed your way."

"She was. I came to see Uncle Willard. It's important." The kid's eyes got big. Then he grinned. I guess he figured I was going to pop the question. He opened up. "Can't guarantee he'll see you. You know how he is."

"Tell him it can't wait till it's convenient."

He muttered, "Must have been hell being snowed in." He locked the gate. "Rose will be devastated."

"She'll live." Rose was Willard's daughter, his only surviving offspring, hotter than three little bonfires and as twisted as a rope of braided snakes. "She always bounces back."

The kid snickered. None of the Tates had much use for Rose. She was pure trouble. And she never learned.

"I'll tell Uncle you're here."

I went into the central garden to wait. It looked forlorn. Summertime it's a work of art. The Tates all have apartments in the surrounding buildings, They live there, work there, are born and die there. Some never go outside.

The kid came back looking pained. Willard had scalded his tail for letting me in but apparently hadn't told him to get hurt trying to throw me out.

The thought made me grin. The kid was as big as any Tate gets, about five two. Willard once told me there was elvish blood in the family. It made the girls exotic and gorgeous and the guys handsome but damned near short enough to walk under a horse without banging their heads.

Willard Tate was no bigger than the rest of his clan. A gnome, almost. He was bald on top, had ragged gray hair that hung to his shoulders in back and on the sides. He was bent over his workbench tapping brass nails into the heel of a shoe.



He wore a pair of TenHagen cheaters with square lenses. Those don't come cheap.

One feeble lamp battled the dark. Tate worked by touch, really. "You'll ruin your eyes if you don't spring for more light." Tate is one of the wealthiest men in TunFaire and one of the tightest with a sceat.

"You have one minute, Garrett." His lumbago was acting up. Or something Couldn't be me.

"Straight at it, then. Tinnie's been stabbed."

He looked at me for half the time he'd given me. Then he put his tools aside. "You have your faults, but you wouldn't say that unless you meant it. Tell me."

I told him.

He didn't say anything for a while. He just stared, not at me but at ghosts lurking behind me. His had been a life plagued by loss. His wife, his kids, his brother, all had gone before their time.

He surprised me by not laying it off on me "You got the man who did it?"

"He's dead." I ran through it again.

"I wish I could have had a piece of him." He rang a bell. One of his nephews responded. Tate told him, "Send for Dr. Meddin. Now. And turn out a half-dozen men to walk Mr. Garrett home." Now I had me a "mister."

"Yes sir." The nephew bounced off on a recruiting tour.

"Anything else, Mr. Garrett?"

"You could tell me why anybody would want to kill Tinnie."

"Because she was involved with you. To get at you."

"A lot of people don't like me." Present company included. "But none of them work like that. They wanted to get my goat, they'd burn my house down. With me inside it

"Then it has to be senseless. Random violence or mistaken identity."

"You sure she wasn't into anything?"

"The only thing Tinnie was involved in was you." He didn't say it but I could hear him thinking, Maybe this will learn her a lesson. "She never left the place except to see you.

I nodded. Undoubtedly he kept track.

I wanted to believe it was random. TunFaire is overcrowded and hagridden by poverty and hardly a day passes when somebody doesn't whittle on somebody with a hatchet or do cosmetic surgery with a hammer. I would have bought it except for those guys who danced the waltzes with me and Saucerhead.

I said, "When we caught him, the guy said 'the book' just before his friends croaked him." If those were his friends. "Mean anything to you?"

Tate shook his head. That straggly hair pranced around. "I didn't figure it would. Damn. You get any ideas, let me know. And I'll keep you posted."

"You do that." My minute had stretched. He wanted to get back to work.

The nephew returned and announced he had a squad assembled. I said, "I'm sorry, sir. I'd rather it had been me."

"So would I." Yes. He agreed a hundred percent. Man. You be nice to some people...

I plopped into my chair, reported to the Dead Man while the Tate boys collected Tinnie. They had a cart to carry her home. The best medical care would be



waiting. It was out of my hands now.

Nothing gained, the Dead Man sent when I finished.

“I think Tate hit it. They got the wrong woman. You’ve been around awhile.” Like half of forever. “You sure ‘the book’ doesn’t ring any bells?”

None. There are books and books, Garrett. Even some men would kill for, considering their rarity or content. I do not hazard uninformed guesses. We cannot, now, be sure that man even meant a book as such. He may have meant a gambling book. He may have meant a personal journal capable of indicating someone. We do not know. Try to relax. Have a meal. Accept the situation, then put it behind you.

“Nobody came around asking about the dead men?” TunFaire’s Watch aren’t exactly police. Their main mission is to keep an eye out for fires or threats to our overlords. Catching criminals is way down their list, but sometimes they do bumble around and nab a baddie. TunFaire is blessed with some pretty stupid villains.

No one came Go eat, Garrett. Attend to the needs of the flesh. Allow the spirit to relax and become refreshed. Forget it. All is well that ends well.

Good advice, even coming from him. But he’s always so damned reasonable and wise—when he isn’t trying to play games with my mind. He got my goat, being cool and sensible. I headed for the kitchen.

Dean was in shock still, distraught because uncaring fate had cast a cold eye so close to home. His mind was a thousand miles away as he stirred some kind of sauce. He didn’t look at me as he handed me a plate he’d kept warm. I ate without noticing what, which is a crime itself, considering the class cook Dean is. I was drifting around a few yards away myself. I didn’t interrupt the old man’s brooding. I was pleased that he cared.

I rose to leave. Dean turned. “People shouldn’t ought to do like that, Mr. Garrett.”

“You’re right. They shouldn’t ought. You’re a religious sort. Tell the gods thanks for not making it worse than it was.”

He nodded. He’s a gentle sort generally, a hardworking old fellow trying to support an ungrateful gaggle of eligible but terminally homely nieces who give him more grief than any ten men deserve from their female kin. Generally. Right now he had him a bloodthirst bigger than a vampire who hadn’t fed for a year.

I couldn’t relax. It was over, but my nerves just wouldn’t settle. I prowled up the hail to the front door, peeked outside. Then I checked the small front room to the right like there might be a forgotten blonde cached in there. I was fresh out. I trudged back to the deluxe coffin I call an office, waved at Eleanor on the wall, then crossed the hall to the Dead Man’s room. That takes up most of the left side of the house. It contains not only himself but our library and treasury and everything we particularly value. Nothing for me there. I glanced up the stairs without going up, went into the kitchen, and got a mug of apple juice. Then I did the whole route over, taking a little longer at the door to see if my place had become a dwarfish tourist attraction. I didn’t see any watchers. Time dragged.

I got on everybody’s nerves. That’s what I do best, anyway, but now I was fraying my own. Now even I resented my mumbled wisecracks. When Dean growled and tested the heft of his favorite frying pan, I decided to take myself



upstairs.

For a while I looked out a window, watching for Saucerhead or somebody in a black hat watching me back. The watched pot didn't boil.

When I got tired of that, I visited the closet where I keep the more lethal tools of my trade. It's a nifty little arsenal, something for every occasion, something to go with every outfit. You never catch me carrying a weapon that clashes.

Everything was in tip-top shape I couldn't work off any nervous energy sharpening and polishing. I eyeballed the ensemble. Nothing I had was worth much in a scrimmage with crossbowmen.

I did have a few little bottles left over from the time I'd done undercover work for the Grand Inquisitor. I took the case down, looked inside. Three bottles, one emerald, one royal blue, one ruby, each about two ounces. You threw them. Once they broke, the stuff inside took the fight right out of guys. The contents of the red one would melt the flesh off their bones I was saving that for somebody who really got on my nerves. If I ever used it, I'd have to stand back a ways.

I put the case away, secreted knives all over me, hung the longest tool legal on my belt, then took down my most useful all-round instrument, an oaken headthumper eighteen inches long. It had a pound of lead inside the business end. It did wonders making me more convincing when I got into an argument.

So what was I going to do now? Go looking for some villains, just on general principles? Sure. Right. The way my luck runs, I'd have a building fall on me before I found any bad boys to astonish and dismay.

I managed to kill time till supper came along. I spent most of it trying to figure out why I was restless and uneasy. Tinnie had been hurt, but she was going to make it. Saucerhead and I had—sort of—dissuaded her attacker from becoming a repeat offender. Everything had turned out all right. Things were going to be fine. Sure.

I didn't get much sleep that night.

It was a time of weirdness for TunFaire, maybe because of the weather. The whole world had turned cockeyed, not just me with my running and my going to bed early so I could get up before anybody sane was oriented vertically. Mammoths had been seen from the city wall. Saber-tooth tigers were at large within a day's travel. There were rumors of werewolves. There were rumors of thunder-lizards being sighted near KirtchHeis, just sixty miles north of TunFaire, two hundred south of their normal range. To our south, centaurs and unicorns, fleeing ferocious fighting in the Cantard, had penetrated Karentine territory. Every night, here in the city, the sky filled with squabbling morCartha, weird creatures who traditionally confined their brawls to rain-forested valleys on the marches of thunder-lizard country.

Where the morCartha disappeared during the day no one knew—nobody gave a big enough care to find out— but all night they zoomed over the rooftops settling old tribal scores or swooped down to mug citizens or to steal anything not nailed down. Most people accepted their presence as proof the thunder-lizards were migrating. In their own country morCartha lived in the treetops and slept during the day. That would make them easy snacks for the taller thunder-lizards. Some of these stand more than thirty feet tall.

Despite the morning's excitement I tried going to bed at what Dean and the



Dead Man perversely call a reasonable hour. My theory was that if I rolled out early, my neighbors wouldn't be out to giggle and point at the spectacle of Garrett running laps. But that night the morCartha brought their flying carnival to my neighborhood. It sounded like the aerial battle of the century. Blood and broken bodies and war cries and taunts rained down. Whenever I threatened to drift off, they staged some absurd, cacophonous confrontation right outside my window.

I decided it was time somebody on the Hill suffered a stroke of smarts and enlisted them all as mercenaries and sent them down to the Cantard to look for Glory Mooncalled. Let him lose sleep while they squabbled over his head.

Old Glory probably wasn't getting much sleep, anyway. The Karentine powers that be had thrown everything into the cauldron down there They were grinding his upstart republic fine, inexorably and inevitably, permitting him no chance to catch his breath and turn his genius toward their despair.

The war between Karenta and Venageta has been going on since my grandfather's time. It's become as much a part of life as the weather. Glory Mooncalled started out a mercenary captain in Venageti service, had a major falling out with the Venageti warlords, and came over to our side swearing mighty oaths of vengeance. Once he had smashed everybody who offended him, he suddenly declared the Cantard—possession of which is what the war is all about—an autonomous republic. All the Cantard's native nonhuman races supported him. So, for the moment, Karenta and Venageta have a common cause, the obliteration of Glory Mooncalled. Once he's gone, it'll be back to war as usual.

All of which is of more interest to the Dead Man than me. I did my five years in the Marines and survived. I don't want to remember. The Dead Man does. Glory Mooncalled is his hobby.

Whatever, I didn't sleep well and I was less cheerful than usual when I got up, which is saying something. On my best mornings I'm human only by charity. Morning is the lousiest time of day. The lower the sun in the east, the lousier that time is.

The racket in the street started about the time I got my feet on the floor.

A woman screamed. She was frightened. Nothing galvanizes me so quickly. I was down at the door with a small arsenal before I started thinking. Somebody was pounding on that door now, yelling my name and begging to be let in. I peeped through the peephole. One ounce of brain was working. I saw a woman's face. Terrified. I fumbled at bolts, yanked the door open.

A naked woman stumbled inside. I gawked for half a minute before my brain started chugging. Then I checked the street. I saw nothing till a thing slightly larger than a spider monkey, built along similar lines but hairless and red, with batlike wings instead of arms and with a spadelike point at the end of its tail, crashed and flopped around, squealing. A city ratman ambled over. The moment it stopped moving, he shoveled it into his wheeled trash bin. The creature's kin didn't protest or claim the body. The morCartha are indifferent to their dead. So now they were doing it in the daytime, too. If you could call it daytime. Just because it was light out. Personally, I don't believe daytime really starts till the sun is straight overhead.

I slammed the door, spun around. The woman had collapsed. What I saw in that bad light was enough to make my hair stand up and get split ends.



Not a stitch on her, like I said, but she had the body to wear that kind of outfit. She clutched a raggedly wrapped package in her left hand. I couldn't pry it loose.

The word flabbergasted gets bandied about in this age of exaggeration, but you don't often get into a situation where it's appropriate. This was a time when it was appropriate. I didn't know what to do.

Don't get me wrong. I've got nothing against naked women. Especially nothing against naked women when they're beautiful and running around my house. Most especially not when I'm chasing them and they have no intention of getting away. But I'd never had one come to the door all ready to race. I'd never had one drop in and instantly transport herself to dreamland with such diligence that I couldn't wake her again.

I was still trying to figure out what to do when Dean showed up for work.

Dean is my housekeeper and cook, in case you haven't figured that out. He's a sour-faced but sentimental guy about a thousand years old who should have been born a woman because he'd make somebody a great wife. He can cook and keep house and has a tongue to match the nastiest of them. He took one look at the woman. "I just cleaned that carpet, Mr. Garrett. Couldn't you confine your games to the second floor?"

"I just let her in, Dean. She came this way, right off the street. I opened the door, she stumbled in and passed out. Maybe she was hit by the morCartha. She's gone into a fugue I can't wake her up."

"Must you stare so shamelessly?"

"I don't notice you studying the fly specks on the ceiling." He wasn't that old. Nobody ever gets that old. And the lady deserved a stare or two. She was the nicest package I'd had stumble in in a long time. "Hell, yes, I must. How often do the gods bother to send us the answer to our prayers?"

He's more alert at that hour than I'll ever be. He honestly believes that getting up before sunrise is a virtue, poor misguided soul. "Attempt at levity noted, Mr. Garrett. Noted and found wanting. I suggest we move her to the daybed and cover her, then get some breakfast into you. You're less at the mercy of adolescent fantasies once you've gotten your blood moving."

"How sharper than a serpent's tooth is the tongue of an ingrate servant."

He knew I couldn't be talking about him. He wasn't a servant. He was an in-house working partner.

He grabbed the woman's ankles. I took the heavy end. Maybe he was put out because the woman had gotten several of his nieces' shares of natural goodies. "Red hair, too," I muttered. "Isn't that nice?" I'm a sucker for redheads. I've been known to favor the occasional blonde, brunette, whatever, too.

Dean would just say I'm a sucker. He might have a point.

We put her on the daybed in the small front room, on the right side of the house. Your left, coming in the front door. She hung on to her package. Once she was set, I moved to the kitchen. Reluctantly. I was thinking maybe I should be there for her when she woke up, just in case she needed to throw herself into somebody's arms and be comforted.

Dean filled me up with breakfast. As I finished up Saucerhead arrived, to supervise me in my pursuit of physical excellence. Or incapacitating cramps, whichever came first. We yakked over tea for a while, me somehow forgetting to



mention my nude. Would you tell a pirate where you'd found buried treasure
Then we went outside and got busy with our respective exercise regimens. I wore
him down. He ran out of fingers before I ran out of laps.

Puffing and panting and aching, I forgot my mystery guest. Puffing and
wheezing is a full-time job.

Last lap. Beer ahead. Relief only a few yards away. I came off Wizard's Reach
full speed, about a walk and a half, snorting like a wounded buffalo, listing from
side to side, steering like a ship without a rudder. Only my neighbors watching
kept me from getting down and crawling the last hundred feet

I'd lost count of my laps. Saucerhead had slipped a few extra in on me. I hadn't
figured that out till a minute ago. If I lived, I'd get even with him if it was the last
thing I did. If that involved running, it would be the last thing I did.

I had my chin down. You're not supposed to do that, but I had to keep an eye on
my feet. Otherwise they might quit. Meanwhile, I tried to figure how many laps
Tharpe had shafted me. I'd lost count because there had been no landmark events
to separate one lap from another. There were none to help me come up with an
actual number, either. But I knew he'd done it to me.

I reached the foot of the steps honking and snorting, grabbed the handrail,
dragged myself up toward the pitcher that would help put the misery behind me.

"This the character I'm looking for?" The voice wasn't familiar.

"That's him." Saucerhead. "Don't look like much."

"I can't help that. I ain't his mother."

My pal. I got my chin up. Huff. Puff. Saucerhead wasn't alone. Being brilliant, I'd
worked that out, all ready. What I hadn't figured out was that he was talking to a
woman. Maybe.

At first glance she looked like Tharpe's big sister. Maybe she had a touch of giant
in her. She was taller than me by an inch. She had stringy blonde hair that
would've been nice if she'd washed and combed it. In fact, she had nice stuff in all
the right places, only she was so damned big. And so uncaringly kempt. And
looked so damned hard.

"The name's Winger, Garrett," she said. "Hunter." Her stance dared me to treat
her like a lady. She wasn't dressed like any lady. Lots of worn leather and stuff,
that needed cleaning as much as she did. Lots of metal, stuff hanging all over her.
She looked like a hunter. She looked like she could whip thunder-lizards with one
hand tied behind her. Hell, she could knock them down with her breath.

The name meant nothing to me. She had to be new in town. I would have heard
of an amazon like her if she was a regular.

"Yeah, I'm Garrett. So what?" Still gulping air by the bucket, I couldn't get
gracious.

"I'm looking for work. New in town."

"No kidding?"

"People I talked to said we might could kind of team up sometimes." She looked
at Saucerhead, jerked her head at me. "Kind of puny to have such a big rep."

Tharpe grinned. "Things get exaggerated." He was loving it, The big goof. The
way he was grinning I was sure there were wonders yet to come.

"Not much call for hunters in the city," I told her. "We can catch our dinner at
the corner butcher."



“Not that kind of hunter, Ace. Manhunter. Bounty hunter.” Just in case I’d mistaken her meaning. “Tracker.” Her gaze was hard and steady. She worked at being tough. “Trying to make contacts. Trying to get set up. I don’t want to have to cross the line to make it.”

She had small hands for a woman her size. Her nails were trimmed neatly. But her palms were used to hard work. Looked like she could bust boards with them. Or backs. I wanted to chuckle but decided I might be smart to keep my amusement to myself. Not more than ten thousand people ever said I wasn’t smart. “What do you want from me?”

“Whyn’t we get in out of the sun, set a spell, down a few brews, let me tell you what I can do?”

Saucerhead was behind her now. Grinning from ear to ear. She must have tried to sell him already. I kept a straight face. “Sure. Why not?” I hammered on the door, glared Tharpe a dagger or three. He thought he’d set me up. I was going to get him for this. Right after I got him for skewing the lap count. Right after I got him for about seven other things on my list.

Dean opened up. He looked at Winger in awe. She snapped, “What you staring at, runt?” Still working hard at that tough.

“Dean, we’ll be in the office. Bring us a pitcher, After you lock up.” No more free drinks for Tharpe.

I stepped out of Winger’s way. “Straight up the hail.”

I followed her while Dean locked up. She looked around like she was trying to memorize every crack in the walls.

I guess Saucerhead was outside har-harring.

“Take that chair,” I told Winger, indicating the client’s seat. It’s wooden, hard as a rock. It’s supposed to discourage prolonged visits. They’re supposed to sit there only long enough to tell me what they have to, not long enough to bury me in trivia. Theoretically. The real whiners enjoy being miserable.

Winger kept looking around like she was sneaking through enemy territory. I asked, “You looked for anything in particular?”

“You stay alert when you’re a woman in a man’s racket.” Another dose of tough.

“I imagine. What can I do for you, anyway?”

“Like I said, I’m new here. I need to make contacts, You could use an extra hand sometimes, probably. Finding people.”

“Maybe.” Her alertness had me wound up now, She had something on her mind.

Dean brought the pitcher. I poured. Winger downed a mug, stared at the painting behind me. She shivered. Eleanor can have that effect. The man who painted her was a mad genius. He filled her portrait with indefinable creepiness.

I glanced back. And Winger moved so fast I barely had time to face her again before she had a knife at my throat. A long knife. A knife that looked like a two-handed broadsword right about then. “I’m looking for a book, Garrett. A big one. You wouldn’t have it, would you?”

Sure I wouldn’t. “I wish I did.” But her tone said she wasn’t going to believe that. She wasn’t going to get confused by facts.

Her knife pricked my throat. Her hand was steady. She was a pro. Not even a little nervous. Me neither. Not much. “I don’t have it. How come you think I do?”

She didn’t tell me. “I’m going to look. I’m going to take this place apart. You



want to stay healthy, stay out of my way. You want your house to stay healthy, give me the book now.”

I gave her a look at my fluttering-eyebrow trick. I tossed in a big smile. “Have fun.”

She smiled back. “Think you can take me? Don’t even think about trying.”

“Little old me? Perish the thought. Hey, Chuckles. Time to do your stuff.”

Winger glanced around. Her knife hand remained steady. She couldn’t figure out who the hell I was talking to. “Who the hell you talking to?”

“My partner.”

She opened her mouth. That was as far as she got. The Dead Man turned her into a living statue. In the last instant her expression turned to horror. I edged away from her knife, got out of my chair. “You got nerve,” I said. She could hear and understand. “But nerve isn’t everything.” Nobody who’d studied me would try to take me in my own house. The Dead Man doesn’t get out much, but that hasn’t kept him from acquiring a reputation.

I patted Winger’s considerable shoulder. It was rock hard. “Live and learn, sweetheart.” I finished my mug, strolled across the hall. “What’s the story, Smiley?”

No story, Garrett. She has told you everything. She is looking for a book. This is her first job in TunFaure. She was hired by a man named Lubbock. He paid her thirty marks to shake you down. He will give her forty more if she finds the book.

“Interesting coincidence. What’s she know about that gang yesterday?”

Nothing. Obviously she was selected for that reason. She can tell no one anything because she knows nothing.

“I guess friend Lubbock did his research.”

Perhaps.

“She has an accent.” She was Karentine but from way out there somewhere. Hender. West Midlands.

“Never heard of it.”

Not surprising. Population less than a hundred. A farming village. A suggestion. Assuming your curiosity has been piqued, as mine has, have her watched. Her contacts might prove interesting. It seems likely that Lubbock is not her employer’s real name. She believes it to be a pseudonym herself

Sounded good to me. Something was going on. And I don’t like sitting around waiting for things to happen. “Right. Can’t use Saucerhead, though. She knows his face. I could dash over to Morley’s.”

Quickly?

Sarky old clown can put a lot into a single word. He’d recovered from his earlier consideration for my feelings, was back to letting me know what he thought of my ways.

“I’m gone.”

I got back faster than either of us expected. I had some luck.

Saucerhead was still loafing on the stoop. He hadn’t finished the pitcher Dean had provided for my run. He had company again, a local blackheart called Squirrel. I don’t know Squirrel’s real name. I never heard him called anything else. He was a skinny little gink with atrocious posture, a pointy face and buckteeth, and huge ears that stuck straight out from the side of his head. He’d



have trouble making any headway walking into a light breeze.

They didn't call him Squirrel because of his looks.

Somebody left something out when they gave him his brains. He was a first-class goofball.

And a second-class thug.

He worked for Chodo Contague. He was more than a gofer but not one of the heavyweights, like Sadler and Crask. I didn't know Squirrel well but did know he wasn't somebody who was going to elevate the standards of the neighborhood.

I looked at him. He gave me a grin full of teeth. Friendly as hell. That was Squirrel. Always trying to be your pal—till it came time to put a knife in your back. Squirrel desperately wanted to be liked. And wanted to make Chodo's first team even more. "Garrett. The boss heard about your trouble." Chodo hears everything, "Sent me over to help. Said if you need anything, just yell. Said he don't hold with anybody hurting women."

Sure he didn't. Unless they worked for him, showed a wisp of independence. But he probably doesn't consider hookers women.

I didn't want to take anything from Chodo, but, on the other hand, using Squirrel was so damned convenient. So what the hell "You showed up at the perfect time."

Squirrel grinned. He loved praise. If that was praise. Weird little guy. "How's your woman, Garrett? I should've asked. Chodo wanted to know. Said he'd send somebody to look after her if you want."

"She'll be fine. Her family is taking care of her." They could afford the same quality care Chodo could provide. "If something turns bad, they'll let me know." Willard would do that. He'd expect me to hunt down everybody even remotely responsible if Tinnie died. Then he'd cut out their livers and eat them.

"So I'm right on time. What can I do for you?"

I shivered. Squirrel had a whiny voice to go with an ingratiating manner. Slimy little weasel. But dangerous. Very dangerous.

"There's a woman going to come out of here. Tall blonde amazon type. Follow her. See where she goes. Be careful. She's maybe some bad road." I had no idea how good Squirrel was. His only recommendation was that he had stayed alive so far.

"I can handle it." Like he heard me wondering.

"What's up?" Saucerhead asked.

"She pulled a knife on me. Wanted a book The Dead Man put her in freeze

"A book again?"

"Yeah."

"You getting into it even if Tinnie's all right?"

"Say I'm curious." I wasn't getting into anything. I didn't have a client. I don't like work, anyway. I mean, why bother as long as I've got a roof over my head and something to eat?

On the other hand, I might fish a fee out of this somehow. And it does take money to pay Dean and to keep the house from falling down.

"Spread out," I told those two. "Saucerhead, take off. She'd recognize you."

"Sure. You need me, check Morley's place."

I waved them good-bye. slipped inside, stuck my head into the Dead Man's



room, whispered, "Turn her loose?" I whispered because I didn't want Winger to hear me.

Yes.

I returned to my office, pried the knife out of Winger's hand, settled myself, started cleaning my nails. The Dead Man turned loose. If somebody could jump out of their skin, Winger would have. "Welcome to the big city, Winger. Something to keep in mind. Everybody has a trick up his sleeve here."

She gobbled air and headed for the hallway. I asked, "You mind telling me where to find Lubbock? Can't say I like people I don't know sicking hired blades on me."

That shook her even more. She hadn't mentioned the name.

I followed her to the door, adding more questions calculated to rattle her so she wouldn't look for Squirrel. She was almost running when she hit the street.

I looked around. I didn't see Squirrel or Saucerhead. I didn't spot anybody interested in my place, either. I went inside to talk to Dean about supper.

Dean didn't want any suggestions He never does, but he doesn't mind having me offer. Then he can turn me down.

I settled at the table. Dean asked, "What was that all about?"

"I'm not sure. Somebody called Lubbock sent her to shake me down for a book."

He frowned. He's mastered the art. His face turns into a badland of shadowed canyons "That fellow who stabbed Miss Tinnie..."

"Yeah."

"There's something going on." Another genius. My place is lousy with them.

"Yeah."

"You going to find out what?"

"Maybe," I didn't have much inclination. The world is full of mysteries Do I have to solve them all? Without even anybody paying me? But I did wonder why Winger had come to me.

Somebody pounded on the front door. I grumbled something about maybe it was time to move. Too many people knew where I lived. Dean said, "That's Mr. Tharpe."

"You can tell from here?"

"I know his knock."

Right. Sure he did. But why argue? Let him have his little fantasies. I headed up the hall... "Whoa!" There was Saucerhead. Inside. "What the hell?"

He looked a little crogged himself. "It just opened up when I knocked." He stared at the door like it would maybe sprout fangs.

Couldn't be. I'd locked it myself. That's a prime rule. There are people on those mean streets dumb enough to drop in. Dumb enough not to worry about the Dead Man. I just sent one packing.

I puzzled it for half a minute before I caught a glimmer of a possibility. "Three geniuses!" Saucerhead scowled, baffled I popped my head into the small front room.

My guest had vanished "Dean!" I'd forgotten her in the excitement of my run and those cozy moments with Winger

"Mr. Garrett?"

"Something's missing." I indicated the small front room. "And Saucerhead found the door open."



Dean looked properly amazed. He went into the room and sniffed around, making sure everything was there. Like it was his own stuff. “The blanket is gone.”

She would’ve taken something. You have to work to attract attention on a TunFaire street, but naked will do it every time

Saucerhead asked, “What’s going on?”

“You know as much as I do. Dean, get Mr. Tharpe a beer. I’m going to talk to the Dead Man.”

Dean herded Saucerhead toward the kitchen. I dropped in on my permanent guest, who—I sensed before I said a word—had fallen into a surly mood. His natural state. “What’s eating you all of a sudden?”

You failed to mention this visitor who has vanished.

“Why should I?” He knew all the comings and goings. He was so disturbed he didn’t prance around it. I was unaware of her presence. This is unprecedented. I had not thought it possible. He went off somewhere inside himself, looking for explanations for the impossible.

He was disturbed? I was beside myself. On both sides. All three of me were one breath short of a panic. Somebody could come and go around here without us having any warning?

“This doesn’t sound good, Mr. Garrett,” Dean said from behind me.

“Not only a genius but a master of understatement.” I considered. “She can’t have much of a head start. She’ll stand out in the crowd. I better catch her.”

“Catch who?” Saucerhead asked. So I explained. “Naked women just falling through your door.” He sneered. “How do you do it? That don’t never happen to me.”

“You don’t live right. We don’t have time to hang around yakking.”

“We? You got a pixie in your pocket?”

“You’d be impressed. That is, if you ever saw her. Imagine Tinnie but with a little more in the lung department.”

“I wasn’t up to much else anyway. Let’s go.”

But that little weasel of a god who watches out for Garrett’s affairs didn’t figure I ought to go chasing redheads. No sense of proportion at all.

Maybe he was just trying to save my legs. He did deliver another one to my door.

Dean was there already. He’d been fixing to let us out when the knock came. Now he was wringing his hands. I asked, “What have we got?”

“Another woman.”

I opened up and looked her over. That took a while. You’re going to do a job, do it right. There was plenty there to appreciate, though in a small package. I was surprised the whole neighborhood wasn’t howling. Hot stuff. All the right goodies packed together in all the best ways. Big green eyes. Big, big green eyes. Lips a dangerous red and puffy, the kind that yell, “Come and get it, I can take it, what are you waiting for?” Breasts like man oh man how did she get that on and how does she keep them in there?

But.

She was a little thing, maybe five feet two on her tiptoes. And she was another



redhead. She had lots of wild red hair the way Tinnie had wild red hair. The way my naked visitor had had wild red hair. In fact, she was a ringer for that gal but definitely not the same woman. I wondered if she was a sister. Or was that little weasel in the sky just poking me in the eye by piling on the redheads?

I didn't say anything. I couldn't. I just led her into that pretentious closet I call an office. Dean brought a pitcher without being asked. He looked numb. The way I was going to be numb if I kept getting pitchers delivered.

Another redhead. I hoped some light was going to get shed here. Real soon.

All of a sudden I was convinced that guy with the mustache had thought he was hitting this woman, or the naked one, when he'd stabbed Tinnie. I settled, drank a mug, studied her. She looked back boldly, still without having spoken. She didn't go for come-hither but, damn, it was built in, part of the package. She was the kind of woman who'd sit there and smolder while darning her grandfather's socks. The kind that makes me want to run out back and yell at the sky in sheer joy that I share the same world.

I squeaked. "I'm Garrett. I guess you want to see me." Sometimes I'm so cool I amaze even me.

"Yes."

Yes what? I took a drink so I wouldn't pant all over her. I believe in long courtships. Fifteen minutes at least. I swallowed and croaked, "So?"

"I need someone to help me. Someone like you."

I grinned from ear to ear. Could I help her? You betcha... I'd give it my best shot.... Hey! Garrett! Let's calm down a little. Let's get the chemistry under control. Anyway, I'd already begun to suspect that this wasn't a match made in heaven. She was smoldering, but that wasn't my fault. That, was just her being her. Whoever she was. "Well?"

"I need someone to find something for me."

"That's what I do. Find things. But sometimes people are sorry when I do."

She just sat there heating the place up while I started to sweat. I turned sideways and studied Eleanor out of the corner of my eye. A tall, cool, slim, ethereal blonde, Eleanor has what it takes to bring me back to earth. I talk to Eleanor when no one else will listen. She's my rock in turbulent seas. I wondered what the real Eleanor would think if she knew how I used her portrait. I didn't think she'd mind.

The redhead asked, "Is that someone special?"

"Yes. Her name was Eleanor Stantnor. She was the wife of a client. I never really met her. He murdered her twenty years before he hired me. All he got for his trouble was found out for his old crime. I took the painting for my fee. Yeah. She's special. And if she was around, she'd be as old as my mother. But I'd probably fall in love with her anyway." I faced the redhead. "Let's get down to it."

"Have I come at a bad time?"

"You've come at the perfect time. You're almost a ringer for a friend of mine somebody tried to kill out front yesterday. I have a feeling you could maybe shed some light on why."

She started to say something. What I'd said sank in. Her mouth made an o. Her eyes got even bigger. She started to get up, sank back, shook fetchingly.

"My friend's name is Tinnie Tate. She never hurt anybody. She's got hair like



yours and she's about your height. A little less rounded, here and there, near as I can tell from here, but not enough so anyone could make a case of it. She was coming to see me when some scumbag stuck a knife in her. For no damned reason I could figure till I got a look at you."

"Oh, my," she breathed. "I've got to get out of here. He knows. I've got to go."

"You aren't going anywhere, sweetheart. Not till I know what the hell is going on."

She just sat there oh-mying and heating up the room. I thought about having Dean throw cold water on her, but that would just steam the place up and cause the wallpaper to peel. I said, "Tinnie getting hurt makes me mad. Some other guys, too. Some bad people. Rich people. Her people. They want blood. You look like a gal who knows how to take care of herself. Maybe you wouldn't want to get caught in the middle of all those angry people."

Her pretty little face turned puzzled.

Was I trying to scare her? You bet I was.

She just said, "Oh," like it wasn't very important.

"I figure the guy who stuck Tinnie thought he was getting you." Sure, I was fishing. You don't throw out a hook, you never get a nibble. "That's the only way it makes any sense. He mistook her for somebody else. So let's you and me get to the point." I got up and walked around the desk.

"I made a mistake coming here." She started to get up.

I sat her down. "You made your mistake when you told somebody somewhere that you were thinking about coming here. That worried somebody. He tried to off my lady. Spill. I'm not in a good mood anymore."

Actually, I was being gentle. I had the Dead Man across the hall. All I needed to do was keep her mind frothing so he could get at anything interesting in there.

She tried to get up again. I sat her down with more force. She looked more irritated than scared. That didn't fit.

"The story, lady. Maybe starting with your name."

She looked down at her hands. Man, those were fine hands.

"My name is Carla Lindo Ramada. I'm a chambermaid in the home hold of Lord Baron Cleon Stonecipher."

"Never heard of him." But if all his help looked like this, I'd consider relocating. "Out of town, I take it. What about this baron?"

"He's kind of at the edge of the story. He's about two hundred years old and just lies in bed waiting to die. Only he has a curse on him. He can't. He just keeps getting older. But that's not important. The witch is. The one that put the curse on him. They call her the Serpent. She lives in the castle, too, only nobody ever sees her. Nobody knows what she looks like except her own men. All anybody really knows is she won't take the curse off the baron until he makes her his heir."

"Huh?"

"She wants the castle. It sits way up in the Hamadan Mountains, near the border between Karenta and Therpra. Both kingdoms claim it, but neither has any real control. The Serpent wants the castle because it's invulnerable."

I wondered if Miss Ramada could be half as slow as she sounded. I glanced at Eleanor. She didn't give me a clue. Hell. If she wasn't a genius, so what? She'd



never had to use her head. In this world women who look like that never have to work for anything. The only lesson they need to learn is how to pick the times to wag their tails.

“To the point. What’re you doing here? I want to know why Tinnie got stabbed. We’ll get into background if it seems important.”

She showed that flicker of irritation again. “The Serpent was making a book. They called it a book of dreams or a book of shadows. The Baron thought she was putting most of her powers into it. He thought if he could grab it, he would run her out of the castle. He told his men to steal it. They waited till her guard was down. They grabbed the book. There was a fight. Most of the Baron’s men were killed. So were a lot of the Serpent’s guards. A man named Holme Blaine escaped with the book, but he didn’t take it to the Baron. He brought it to TunFaire. The Baron sent me to get it back because I was the only one he trusted. When I asked around for someone who might help me your name kept coming up. I decided to see you. Here I am. But I think I made a mistake.”

I had a strong feeling she wasn’t telling me the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. But the Dead Man could straighten out the little details. “See me why?”

“I want you to find the book of dreams.”

Sure. I looked at Eleanor. She gave me a blank stare in return. Not much help there, honey. I checked the redhead again. Damn, she was a sizzler. “So who tried to kill my friend? And why?”

“The Serpent’s men, probably. I know they’re here. I’ve seen them. Did you see them?”

I described them carefully.

“The man with the mustache sounds like Elmore Flounce. Even his friends won’t mourn him. The ratman might be Keem Lost Knife. Nastier than Flounce. The ogre could be Zacher Hoe, a hunter and tracker. But the Serpent has other ogres. The dwarves... I don’t know. She had dozens around.”

“Hunh. Somewhere to start.” I hoped the Dead Man was taking her apart inside

The redhead started wringing her hands That isn’t something you see much, especially in younger people. The only wringer I know is Dean. It seemed studied. “Will you help me find Holme Blaine, Mr. Garrett? Will you help me recover the book of dreams? I’m desperate.”

All alone and desperate, battered by powerful forces. A sure way to sew Garrett up. Only I didn’t feel her desperation. I was becoming disenchanted so fast I almost had to work to pant. String her along, Garrett. What’s to lose? “I have problems of my own. But if I come across your book, I’ll snap it up.”

She gave me a look that melted my spine despite my restored cynicism. It made me want to grab up Dean and the Dead Man and toss them into the street. She took out a doeskin sack, removed five silver coins. “I have to keep a little to live on while you find the book. I’m sorry I can’t give you more. It’s all we could scrape together. The Serpent grabs all the silver she can find.”

Silver had gotten scarce since Glory Mooncalled took over the mines in the Cantard. I opened my mouth to tell her she didn’t need to beggar herself. The sucker side of me was wide-awake.

Take it



The Dead Man seldom sends a thought beyond the confines of his own quarters. If he does, I don't argue. His reasons generally stand up. But having him jump in ruined my concentration. There were a hundred questions I should have asked the woman, but instead I said, "I'll have a friend of mine see you safely to wherever you're staying" Saucerhead was hanging around somewhere.

She stood "That's not necessary

"I think it is. There's been a knife used once already. Probably meant for you. By now I expect the people who did it know they missed. Understand?"

"I suppose." That irritation again. "Thank you. I'm new at this. I don't expect people to be that way."

Really?

She was good. Give her that. She really was good. I called out, "Dean, tell Mr. Tharpe to see the lady safely tucked away home. Ask him to scout the area, see if she's being watched."

Dean stepped into the doorway, nodding. As I'd suspected, he'd been out there eavesdropping. "Miss? If you will?" He could turn on the charm for a guest, that old boy.

I didn't think about the questions I should've asked till after I heard the door close. But what the hell? I could get the answers from the Dead Man.

Dean came back from the front door as I headed across the hail. "She was lying, Mr. Garrett."

"She wasn't telling the whole truth, that's for sure

"Not telling a word of it if you ask me."

"It shouldn't matter. Let's find out what old Smiley plucked out of the air between her ears."

Dean shivered I can't figure it, After all this time he ought to be used to the Dead Man.

I added the Ramada woman's money to the pile under the Dead Man's chair. I settled into my own, glanced around. Dean had been slacking again. He gets the creeps in there, so he lets cleanup slide till I jump on him or do it myself. The bugs were ready to take over. "What did you think of my visitor?"

Will you never outgrow that adolescent sense of humor?

Crumbs. Now he was getting on me for what I was thinking "I hope not, Chuckles." There. Damned for it, I might as well say it "Grownups are so stodgy."

As Dean observed, she was lying

"So what's her real story?"

I dare not hazard a guess.

Oh-oh. This didn't sound good

I was unable to capture any but the most fleeting surface thoughts.

Oh, my. What the hell? "I thought you could read anybody." This was getting to be a bad habit. Was he getting near the end, slipping over the edge?

Only simple minds

Ouch! "And you complain about my sense of humor? What's it mean?"

That she is no chambermaid. She bears close observation—not that way—though we have no real business mixing in here. I got the distinct impression he wanted to mix.

Not in the manner you have in mind.



“What’s wrong with mixing business with pleasure? She was...

Yes. She was. And what else?

“Hey! She’s a client now. A paying client.”

And it is quite obvious why. Amaze me sometime, Garrett. Think with your brain instead of your glands. Just once. Astonish your friends and confound your enemies.

I considered sulking. I considered mentioning the fact that I hadn’t broken a sweat over Winger—though even that wouldn’t have been a definitive truth. Winger’s only distracting feature was her size. “Hell. You’re just being sour grapes because you can’t anymore.”

Which was near enough the truth that he changed the subject. How do you propose finding the book she wants? With no more information than you cozened out of her? You are such a clever interrogator.

“How was I to know you’d gone feeble?”

You have to learn to carry yourself, Garrett. I cannot do it all for you. Rather than start a quarrel, I suggest you try to overtake Mr. Tharpe and engage him to watch the woman.

“How about the book she wants? It has to be the book we heard about before. What about it?”

Nothing about it. A book of shadows, a book of dreams, you tell me. Something mystical, presumably. But the concept is unfamiliar. Knowing what that book is might well illuminate everything else. She suggested a great many dwarves were associated with the woman she called the Serpent. That is unusual. Even unlikely, I would suspect. Perhaps you should visit the local enclave and see if anyone can elucidate. I believe the dwarf Gnorst, the son of Gnorst of Gnorst, is still canton praetor. Yes. By all means. Go see him. Invoke my name. He owes me a favor.

The old bag of bones was getting going. He was more interested than I was. But he’s a sucker for a puzzle.

“Come on, Old Bones. Not even a dwarf gets stuck with a name like a hay-fever attack. Does he? And how can he owe you one? I’ve never seen any dwarves around here.”

They are long-lived, Garrett. They have excellent memories and a delicate sense for the proprieties of balance.

That was supposed to put me in my place. Water off a duck, man. Us short-lifers don’t have time to worry about gaffes.

Once you visit the dwarves, you might enlist Mr. Dotes. If Mr. Tharpe learns nothing useful, and the Squirrel person likewise, you might begin researching the woman’s story, detail by detail. Heraldry and peerage experts should know this baron and his stronghold. Traders and travelers who visit the region might cast light on events there.

“Go teach Grandma to suck eggs You’re on my turf now.”

I am? I am talking legwork here, Garrett. Remember that facet of this business to which you are allergic?

A base canard. The sour grapes of a guy who hasn’t gotten out of his chair for four hundred years. Though it is easier just to stir the pot and see what floats to the top. “Guess I’ll see if Dean will hang around. If he’ll stay late, I’ll head for Dwarf Fort.”



I went to the kitchen. hoisted me a brew. Of course Dean would stay over. Now that things were happening I couldn't run him off. Tinnie was one of his favorite people. He wanted to see somebody get hurt for hurting her "So hold the fort," I told him. "His Nibs has me off to the realm of the short and surly."

"Don't be out too late I'm making deep-dish apple cobbler. Better when it isn't reheated."

Surprise, surprise. That old boy knows how to take my mind off my troubles. One more talent and I'd marry him.

I trotted up to my special closet and dressed myself for the street, then headed out. Not for the first time I didn't have the foggiest notion what the hell I was doing. Or maybe it was the first time and it just hadn't ever stopped.

The Dead Man had suggested a stop, coming back, at the Joy House, owned and operated by one Morley Dotes, friend of mine, professional vegetarian, assassin, and elfhuman breed. I gave it a think and decided to skip it. Morley is handy when the going gets rough, but he has his liabilities. Most of them are female. No sense bringing him in where he'd face so much temptation. Besides, not having him in meant the odds were better for me.

The Joy House. Some dumb name for a restaurant with a menu fit only for livestock. How about the Manger, Morley? How about the Barn? Or the Stable? Though that kind of smacked of upscale chic.

What people call Dwarf Fort or Dwarf House sits on four square blocks behind the levee in Child's Landing. The Landing abuts the river north of the Bight, where the big water swings sharply southwest and the wharves and docks start and go on for miles, all the way to the wall. Legend says the Landing was settled when humans first came into the region. First there was a fort, then a village that grew because it lay near the confluence of three major rivers. Then there were more fortifications and a growth of industry during the Face Wars, when human insecurities compelled our ancestors to prove they could kick ass on the older races.

The Face Wars were a long time ago. Things have come full circle. Now the Landing is occupied by nonhumans come to grab at the wealth floating around because of Karenta's endless war with Venageta.

I can always work up a case of indignation about the war and its spin-offs. One is, the nonhumans are picking our pockets. Our overlords are cheering them on. Someday they'll be picking our bones.

That's not racist, either. I get along with everybody but ratmen. Our rulers, in their wisdom, in their infallible opportunism, made treaties with these other races that shield them from military service even if they've lived as Karentines for ten generations. They gobble the privileges and don't pay the price. They're getting fat making the weapons carried by youths who couldn't be conscripted if the nonhumans weren't there to replace them in the economy.

If you're human and male, you'll do five years in service. Nowadays, with the Cantard in the hands of Glory Mooncalled and his mercenaries and native allies, they're talking about making that six years. Meaning even fewer survivors coming home.

I'm bitter. I admit it. I survived my five and made it home, but I was the first of my family to do so. And nobody thanked me for my trouble when I got back.



Hell with it.

Dwarf House covers four blocks. A north-south street cuts through the middle. A canal spur runs through east to west. Rumor says the blocks are connected by tunnels. Maybe. They're connected by bridges four stories up. Make that four human stories. Dwarves are dwarves. There would be more floors.

The buildings have no outside windows and few doors. Humans seldom get inside, I had no idea what to expect. All I knew was if they let me in and didn't want me out, I was sunk. Not even my pal the King would come rescue me. Dwarf House enjoys virtual extraterritoriality.

I looked the place over before I knocked. I didn't like what I saw. I knocked anyway. Somebody has to do these things. Generally somebody too dim not to back off.

I knocked again after a reasonable wait. They weren't in any hurry in there.

I knocked a third time.

The door swung inward. "All right! All right! You don't have to break it down. I heard you the first time." The hairy runt in red and green was probably six hundred years old and had been assigned to the door because of his winning personality.

"My name is Garrett. The Dead Man sent me to talk to Gnorst Gnorst."

"Impossible. Gnorst is a busy dwarf. He doesn't have time to entertain every Tall One who wanders past. Go away."

I didn't move except to insert a foot into the doorway. The dwarf scowled. I guess. He wasn't much more than eyes inside a beard big enough to hide stork's nests. "What do you want?"

"Gnorst. He owes the Dead Man."

The dwarf sighed. What might have been a conciliatory smile stirred the brush on his face. He grunted and made noises that would be considered rude at the dinner table. "I'll inform the Gnorst." Bam! He slammed the door. I barely saved my foot. Then I snickered. These characters had to get a little more imaginative. I mean, Gnorst Gnorst, son of Gnorst, the Gnorst of Gnorst? Hell. I guess they don't have much trouble remembering who's related to who. If Gnorst lost his voice, he could answer most personal questions by blowing his nose.

I bet it makes perfect sense to dwarves.

The hair ball was back in five minutes. Probably record time for him. "Come in. Come in." Either the Dead Man's name was magic or they were short on chow for their pet rats. I hoped the character with the imaginative name was impressed with my credential. "Follow me, sir. Follow me. Mind your head, sir. There'll be low ceilings."

The door dwarf did me the added courtesy of lighting a torch off a lamp that yielded a light so feeble it would have done me no good at all. He gave me a look that said this was first-class treatment, properly reserved for visiting royalty.

Dwarf House inside was all gloom and smell, like tenements where families crowd in four to the flat. Only more so. Ventilation was nonexistent.

We trudged up stairs. We went down stairs. I stooped a lot as we marched through workshops where dwarves by the platoon worked on as many projects as there were dwarves working. The lighting was uniformly abysmal, but my guide's torch added enough to reveal that these were all proud craftsmen. Each dwarf's



product was the best he could fashion. Which would make that item the best of its kind Dagger, shield, plate armor, clock, or clockwork toy, each was a work of art. Each was unique. Each artisan was a master.

My lower back was gnawing at me before we were halfway where we were going. I breathed through my mouth because of the smell I hoped nobody took offense. The racket was incredible. Those dwarves banged and clanged and scraped and squeaked like crazy, all for the sake of maintaining an image as industrious little buggers. I bet they started loafing the second I was out of sight. The dwarf with the silly name didn't look silly. Mostly he looked hairy. I assumed a beard was an emblem of status. He was two beady black eyes peeking out of gray brush. I couldn't tell what he was wearing behind all the foliage. He did have a standard-issue sort of dwarf's hat perched on top, complete with pheasant tail feather.

Gnorst of the many Gnorsts met me in a shaded garden on top of one of the buildings. Very stylized and arty, that garden, with white marble gravel paths, teensy trees, little wooden bridges over fish ponds. The works, all in a style usually associated with high elves.

I rubbed the small of my back and gawked. Gnorst said, "An affectation of mine, Mr. Garrett. My tastes are very undwarflish. My worldly successes allow me to indulge my peculiarities." This before the introductions and amenities.

"It's restful," I said. "I'm surprised to see it atop a building."

My guide faded away. Another hairball brought refreshments. The goodies included beer. Maybe they'd heard of me. I took a long drink. "You all make beer like you do everything else."

It wasn't that good but I had to be diplomatic. Gnorst was pleased. Maybe he'd had some hand in its brewing.

Dwarves shun alcohol and drugs, so wouldn't have any real standard by which to judge the product.

"I wish I had time for a relaxed chat, Mr. Garrett. I'd love to catch up on the adventures of my old friend, your partner."

My partner?" Maybe he is but I don't go around admitting it in public. I laughed. "I'll forget you said that. I don't want to give him ideas."

"To be sure. He's stubborn at times. I'll drop in someday. It's been too long. Meanwhile, indulge my impatience. I'm pressed"

"Sure. I'm in a hurry myself."

"What brought you, then?"

"The Dead Man's idea. A friend of mine was knifed yesterday. The gang that did it were mostly dwarves."

Gnorst popped up. "Dwarves! Involved in a killing?"

"Attempted killing. So far." I explained

"Strange. Very strange." But he relaxed visibly, like maybe he'd concluded his own bunch couldn't be responsible. "I don't see how I can help you."

"The Dead Man hoped you could give me a line on those guys. The dwarf community is pretty tight."

"This one is. But there are dwarves who aren't part of this enterprise. Still... The behavior isn't to be countenanced. It aggravates prejudice. That's bad for business. I'll quiz my people. Someone may know those dwarves— though I hope



not. A dwarf gone bad is a bad dwarf indeed

That sounded like a proverb. I told him, “Thanks for your time. I didn’t think it would help. One more thing. You ever heard of something called a book of shadows? Or a book of dreams?”

He jumped like somebody goosed him with a hot poker. He stared at me a whole minute. I exaggerate not. Then he squeaked, “A book of dreams?”

“A woman came to the house before I came over here. She looked a lot like my friend who got stabbed. I think she was the intended victim. She wanted to hire me. Gave me a long story about a witch called the Serpent and a book of dreams that got stolen from her and is supposed to be in TunFaire now.”

“Excuse me, Mr. Garrett,” Gnorst scuttled off, mumbled at the guy who’d brought the beer. He stomped back over. “I just canceled some appointments. You have more time.”

“I ring a bell or something?”

“A gong. A carillon. I guess you’re unfamiliar with early dwarf history.”

“Everybody else’s, too. What’s up?”

“You’ve recalled an ancient terror.”

“Maybe you’d better explain.” Before I got dizzy.

“The Book of Dreams, more often called the Book of Shadows, is infamous in dwarfish legend. It must be unimaginably ancient to you. It dates from before men walked the earth.”

Yesterday’s breakfast is unimaginably ancient to me most of the time, but I didn’t say so. I didn’t want to seem shallower than I am. Wipe off that sneer.

“In those days dwarfish sorcerers were quite powerful, Mr. Garrett. And some were quite dark. The most powerful and darkest was Nooney Krombach, who created the Book of Shadows.”

Praise me, I kept a straight face. Nooney Krombach. I reminded myself that they probably find our names just as quaint. “Nooney Krombach?”

“Yes. Quite possibly fanciful, of course. Like so many saints in human mythologies. But he doesn’t have to have existed to have influenced his future.”

“I understand.” I did, because just a few months ago I’d survived a case involving several of TunFaire’s religions. This city is cursed with a thousand cults.

“Krombach’s legend has led thousands of would-be masters of the world to attempt to create their own Book of Shadows.”

That was fine by me but didn’t make anything clearer. “What was it?”

“A book of magic. One hundred sheets of brass hammered paper thin, bound in tooled mammoth leather, every page bearing a spell of immense potency. And every spell created and set down with our dwarfish passion for perfection.”

I began to see why people were after this book. But not why they were after me. I didn’t have any grimoires lying around the house. Gnorst mistook my frown for puzzlement.

“These spells are very specialized, Mr. Garrett. Each enchantment, one to the page, properly employed, will allow the book’s user to assume a different form and character. In other words, the book’s user is able to assume any of a hundred guises by turning to the proper page and reading aloud. He is able to become any of a hundred people—or whatever creature might be inscribed.”

“Huh?” I wasn’t being dumb. But that was a big load. My imagination grabbed



the idea and darted around. I gulped. “You saying this Serpent had the Book of Dreams and somebody stole it?”

“The Book of Shadows was destroyed, at great cost to the ancients. The characters it contained were all wicked. If your visitor told the truth, the witch she mentioned was trying to create her own book of shadows. What could she have possibly offered them?”

“Who?” I was having trouble keeping up

“Those dwarves. The ones you encountered. It isn’t possible to create a book of shadows without dwarfish craftsmen. But no sane dwarf would lend himself to an evil of that magnitude.... But you don’t care about that.”

I did and I didn’t. I was way out at sea, without a rudder, taking waves and wind on the beam.

Troubled, Gnorst started pacing. He looked like a hairy egg on stubby legs, wobbling. “This is bad, Mr. Garrett. This is very bad.” He repeated himself several times. I didn’t say anything back because I figured I’d said everything I had to say. “This is awful. This is grotesque. This is terrible.” I’d started to get the idea he thought this wasn’t good. He spun on me. “She said the book is here, this woman? Here in TunFaire?”

“She said she thought it was.”

“We have to find it and destroy it before it can be put to use. Did she say it was complete?”

“She said it was taken. Stolen by a character named Holme Blaine. That’s all. She didn’t go into details. She just wanted to hire me to find it

“Don’t. Don’t go near the thing. An evil that great Let us handle it. No human is pure enough of heart to resist.” He wasn’t talking to me anymore. He went on not talking to me. “This will ruin me. My production schedule will go to hell. But I have no choice.” He

remembered me, whirled. “You’re a cruel man, Mr. Garrett.”

“Say what?”

“You’ve made it impossible for us to get any work done while this monstrosity is loose. Our entire industry may collapse.”

Right after the moon fell into the sea. He was overreacting. “I don’t get it.”

“Imagine yourself to be deeply evil. Then imagine yourself with the power to become any of a hundred other people, each designed to your specification. One might be a super assassin. Another might be a master thief. One might be... anything. A werewolf. You see what I mean?”

“Oh. Yeah.” I’d begun to catch on but not clearly enough. The possibilities I’d imagined originally had been much too picayune.

“Armed with a completed book, that witch would be almost invincible. And as long as she lived in the Book of Shadows, she’d be immortal. If you killed the persona she was wearing, she’d still have ninety-nine lives. If she prepared properly. Plus her own. And she’d only be vulnerable in her natural form. Which she would avoid assuming because she would be vulnerable.”

I got it. Sort of. It didn’t make a lot of sense the way he said it, but nothing much about sorcery does, to me. “We’ve got big trouble, eh?”

“The biggest if the book is complete. I doubt that it can be, though. But even incomplete, it’s a powerful tool. And almost anyone who knew what it was could



use it—if she was foolish enough to write it in a language someone else could read. You wouldn't have to be a sorcerer. You'd just look up the page for sorcerer if that's what you wanted to be."

I thought about it. Hard. The more I thought, the more possibilities I saw and the less I liked this book. It sounded like a triple shot of Black Plague. "You think there's a chance it really exists? That it isn't just somebody's fancy?"

"Something exists that people are willing to kill for. But it just can't be complete." He sounded like he was whistling in the dark. "Else the thief wouldn't have gotten to it. But it would be dangerous in any state. It has to be destroyed, Mr. Garrett. Please go straight to the Dead Man. Urge him to exercise his entire intellect. My people will do everything within their power."

Tinnie's place in the mess was fading fast. The stakes seemed huge. I should've known it couldn't stay simple. My life never does. "Let me know if you come up with anything."

Gnorst nodded. He had given me more time and information than either of us had planned. Now he seemed anxious to see me go. I said, "We ought to excuse ourselves and attack our respective tasks."

"Indeed. My life has been complicated no end." He signalled. The old boy from the front door popped out of nowhere. He took me back the way we had come. Somebody scampered ahead to warn all the dwarves. They were all hard at work when I passed by.

Nobody is that industrious all the time.

I slipped out into the afternoon, leaned against the wall a dozen feet from Dwarf House's door, pondered my place in this exploding puzzle. The Book of Shadows. A real nasty. Did I have a moral obligation here? Gnorst and his gang knew how to handle it.

I understood the danger better by the minute. I was tempted by the book and didn't yet know how it could be useful to me. Pretty easy to see why Gnorst was scared of it.

If I stayed involved, I was going to have to cover my behind. There were some rough players out there. I didn't know them, but they knew me. Maybe it was time to drop by the Joy House, see if Morley had anything cooking.

I started toward his place, not hurrying, still trying to figure angles.

I didn't get there.

There was a whole gang of them but they were dwarves, so I had the reach. And for once in my young life I'd had the sense to go out dressed. I dented three heads and chucked one dwarf through a window. The owner came out and cussed and howled and threatened and kicked a dwarf I knocked down. Nobody paid him any attention. The rest of us were having too good a time.

I started out not really trying to hurt anybody. I just wanted to fend them off and get away. But they were playing for keeps. I decided I'd better argue more convincingly. My stick wasn't getting the message across.

Somebody whapped me up side the head with a house. It had to be a house. Nobody dwarf size could hit that hard. The lights went out.

Usually I come around slowly after I've been sapped. Not that I have a lot of experience with that. This time I wasn't slow, maybe because I was so excited about finding myself still alive, if a little run down.



I was bouncing along facedown. Cobblestones slid past inches from my nose. The hairy runts were taking me somewhere rolled into a wet blanket. They were skulking along through an alley. Maybe they wanted us to party some before they let me swim the river with rocks tied to my ankles.

I didn't like the situation. Naturally. Would you? But there wasn't a whole lot I could do about it. I couldn't even yell. My throat felt like I'd tried to swallow cactus.

However.

The dwarves stopped. They chattered gutturally. I strained, lifted my head, looked around. My temples throbbed. I saw red. When my eyes cleared, I saw a man blocking the alleyway ahead. He was alone and there were eight dwarves around me, but the numbers didn't bother him.

His name was Sadler. He was one of Chodo Contague's top boys, pure death on the hoof. The dwarves chattered some more. Someone was behind us, too. I couldn't twist around enough to see him, but I could guess. Where Sadler went Crask was sure to follow. And vice versa.

Those two are hard to describe. They're big men, have no consciences, will cut a throat with no more thought than stomping a bug. Maybe less. And you can read that in their eyes. They're scary. They probably eat lye for breakfast.

Sadler said, "Put him down." His voice was cold and creepy.

Crask said, "And get out of here." His voice was so much like Sadler's, people had trouble telling them apart.

The dwarves put me down, all right, but they didn't get out of there. Which made it sure they were from out of town. They might be thugs, but any thugs native to TunFaire wouldn't have argued for an instant. Nobody in his right mind bucks Chodo without he has an army behind him.

Sadler and Crask were efficient and ruthless and not even a little sporting. They didn't argue, they didn't negotiate, they didn't talk. They killed dwarves till the survivors decided to get the hell out of there. The two didn't chase anybody. They had what they had come for, which was one broken-down confidential agent named Garrett.

Crask grabbed the edge of the blanket and gave me a spin. Sadler said, "You're keeping weird company, Garrett."

"Wasn't my idea. Good thing you guys happened along." Which I said knowing they hadn't happened along at all. They probably wouldn't have lifted a finger if they hadn't been sent.

"Maybe you won't think so." That was Crask. "Chodo wants we should ask you a question."

"How'd you find me?"

"Your man told us you went to Dwarf House." Dean would. Even with the Dead Man watching over him. He isn't that brave. "We saw you get knocked down. You got to learn to control that tongue, Garrett." I didn't remember saying anything but I probably did. Probably asked for it. "We don't want to lose you." That was Sadler talking. And what he was really saying was that he didn't want me to get myself smoked before the day came when Chodo decided the world would be better for my absence. Sadler looks forward to that day like it might be for the heavyweight championship of Karenta.



“Thanks anyway. Even if you didn’t mean it.” Crask helped me to my feet. My head whirled. And ached. It was going to ache for a long time. “Maybe we’re even now.”

Sadler shrugged. Damn, he’s a big one. Two inches taller than me, fifty pounds heavier, and not an ounce wasted on flab. He was losing a little hair. I’d guess him at about forty. A real ape. A doubly scary ape because he had a brain.

Crask is the other half of a set of bookends, almost like he stepped out of some mirror where Sadler was checking his chin for zits.

Sadler shrugged because he wasn’t going to put words into the kingpin’s mouth. Chodo has the idea he owes me because a couple of my old cases helped him out in a big way. In fact, I saved his life once. I’d rather not have. The world would be a better place without Chodo Contague. But the alternative had been worse.

“Let’s us guys walk,” Crask said. He got on my left and supported me by the elbow. Sadler got on my right. They were going to ask some questions and I’d better give some answers. Or I’d be very unhappy.

There’s my life in a nutshell. Cheerfully skipping from frying pans to fires.

I couldn’t for the life of me think why they were interested in me now, though. “What’s up?”

“It ain’t what’s up, Garrett, it’s who’s down. Chodo got kind of crabby when Squirrel turned up dead.”

I stopped. “Squirrel? When did that happen?” I nearly fell on my face because they kept on going

“You tell us, Garrett That’s why we’re here. Chodo sent him down to help you. A favor, because he owes you. Next thing we know a city ratman finds him in an alley with his guts hanging out. He wasn’t much, but Chodo considered him family,”

Catch that? Always Chodo, never Mr. Contague? I’ve never figured it out. But I didn’t have time to wonder or ask. It was time to talk. “A woman came to the house. Called herself Winger. Not a local. She pulled a knife on me in the office. The Dead Man froze her.” I awarded myself a smirk when Crask and Sadler jumped. The only thing in the world that bothers them is the Dead Man. He’s a force they can’t cope with because they can’t kill him. “I was going to go get Morley Dotes to tag her after I pushed her out, but Squirrel turned up right then and volunteered. I told him to find out where she went and who she saw. The Dead Man said somebody named Lubbock sent her.”

“You know anybody named Lubbock?”

“No. I never saw the woman before, either. She was real country.”

They spread out a little. They were going to indulge me, give me the benefit of a shadow of a doubt. Maybe. Sadler asked, “This tie in with the hit on your woman?”

“Maybe. This Winger was looking for a missing book of some kind. I don’t know why she thought I had it. She didn’t say and the Dead Man couldn’t get it out of her. Later, though, another woman showed up. Wanted to hire me to find a guy called Holme Blaine who stole a book from her boss, who wanted the book back bad. She was a redhead Tinnie’s size and age and build. Maybe somebody mistook Tinnie for her.”

They thought. Crask said, “It don’t add, Garrett.” Accusing me of holding out.



"Damned straight it don't. It might start to if I can find this Holme Blaine."

They grunted. They've spent too much time around each other. They're like those married couples that get more and more alike as time goes by. Crask asked, "Why visit the dwarves?"

"There're dwarves in the thing."

"No shit. Your pals back there. You smartmouth somebody in Dwarf Fort?"

"Different gang. From out of town."

"Figured that." They're that confident of their reputation. Sadler asked, "How do you get into these weird things, Garrett?"

"If I knew, I wouldn't get into them anymore. It just sneaks up on me. You going to show me where Squirrel bought it?"

"Yeah."

I was doing something right. We were on the street now. In view of witnesses. I was a little less nervous. Not that those two would scruple against icing me in front of the whole world at high noon if they thought the time was right. Half the unresolved killings in TunFaire can be pinned on the kingpin's boys. I don't see anybody rounding them up for it.

Chodos secret of success is he don't muscle in on our overlords' rackets. He works his own end of the social scale. He's much more at peril from his own than from the vagaries of law or state.

Equal Justice for all. As long as you make it yourself.

They had me glad I'd done some running by the time we got to Squirrel. It was a hike and a half, all the way to the skirts of the Hill, where our masters have raised their fastnesses upon the heights. I knew our trek was at an end when we reached a block where a few hardcases loafed around, holding up walls, and the street was otherwise empty.

Squirrel had gone to his reward in an alley that ran downhill steeply. We entered from the high end. Sadler told me, "He got it here," about fifteen feet into the shadows. It would have been light there only briefly, around noon "You can't tell 'cause of the light, but there's blood all over He ended up down there about fifty feet. Probably tried to run after it was too late. Come on."

The body lay ten feet from the bottom end of the alley. Somebody with a sharp blade and strong, probably using a downward stroke, had sliced him from his right ear down the side of his throat and chest all the way to his bellybutton. Bone deep. "Last time I saw a wound like that was when I was in the Corps."

"Yeah," Crask said. "Two-handed dueling saber?"

Sadler demurred. "Couldn't get away with lugging one around, I say Just sharpness and strength."

Crask squatted. "Could be. But how do you get that close to hit that hard with a legal knife?"

They meandered off into a technical discussion. Crafts men of murder talking shop. I squatted to give Squirrel a closer look.

Some of us never get used to violent death. I saw plenty in the Marines and didn't get numb I've seen more than enough since. I still don't have calluses where Crask and Sadler have them. Maybe it's hereditary. Squirrel probably earned what he'd gotten, but I mourned him all the same. I noted, "He wasn't robbed or anything."



“He was plain hit,” Crask said. “Somebody wanted rid of him.”

“And him such a sweetheart. It’s a sacrilege.”

If those guys have a weakness, it’s lacking a sense of humor. Their idea of a joke is promising a guy to turn him loose if he can walk on water wearing lead boots. My crack didn’t go over.

Sadler said, “Chodo doesn’t like it, Squirrel getting offed. He wasn’t much good but he was family. Chodo wants to know who and why.”

“You guys using carrier pigeons now?” Chodo lives way the hell and gone out in the sticks, north of town. There shouldn’t have been time for all the back and forth implied here.”

They ignored me. They get that way about trade secrets—or anything they don’t think I need to know. Crask said, “You get anything here we don’t?”

I shook my head. All I could tell was that Squirrel wouldn’t be doing much dancing anymore.

Sadler said, “Bet the iceman used both hands. You’d get more on it that way.”

Crask told me, “We’re going to keep an eye on you, Garrett. Something don’t add up here. Maybe you didn’t tell us everything.”

Hell, no, I hadn’t. Some things Chodo doesn’t need to know. I shrugged. “I find out who did it, you’ll be the first to know.”

“Take it to heart, Garrett. Take it to bed with you. Get up with it in the morning. Chodo is pissed. Somebody is going to pay.” He turned to Sadler and started in on whether the killer had cut upward or downward. Ignoring me. I’d been dismissed. Warned and dismissed. Chodo owed me, but not the life of one of his men. Maybe I was nearer even with him than I’d thought.

I checked Squirrel again, but he still wasn’t sharing any secrets. So I got out of there.

Heading home, I saw something I’d never seen in TunFaire before, a centaur family trotting down the street

The fighting in the Cantard must have gone berserk if the natives were fleeing it, too. I’d never heard of centaurs ranging this far north.

Things must be going real bad for Glory Mooncalled and his hatchling Cantard republic. He’d be gone soon and the world could get back to normal, with Karentine killing Venageti in the never-ending contest for control of the mines.

I’d have to mention the centaurs to the Dead Man. Glory Mooncalled is his hobby. The mercenary turned self-crowned prince has lasted longer than even my career houseguest expected.

While walking home, I noticed that, though it was still too early for morCartha high jinks, there were plenty of fliers aloft. Like every fairy and pixie in the known universe, with a random sample of other breeds. I nearly trampled a band of gnomes while gawking at the aerobatics. The gnomes yowled and cursed and threatened mayhem upon my shinbones. The tallest didn’t reach my kneecap. They were feisty little buggers.

I stood and gawked while they stomped off, cocky because they’d intimidated one of the big people. I didn’t get around to cussing back because I was numb. You don’t often see gnomes. Not in town. They look kind of like miniature dwarves who sometimes find time to shave. “What next?” I muttered, and “Never mind! I don’t want to find out.” Just in case my guardian angel was going to grant



my every wish.

I reported to the Dead Man. He seemed more interested in the gnomes and centaurs than in what had happened to me. I held my tongue while he mulled. What I'd gotten from his pal Gnorst, then digested the news about Squirrel. Then he queried, Why do you not want the killer to have been the woman Winger?

"I liked her. In an off-the-wall sort of way. She had balls that drag the ground."

You get your priorities scrambled. You mentioned her name to Mr. Crask and Mr. Sadler.

"I did indeed. I wasn't thinking clearly at the time. A mistake, but with some justification." They would find her and ask her some hard questions. Unless she did the unlikely and headed for her home village fast. Like about the day before yesterday.

You did not mention the book.

"I was playing with pain. I managed to think a little. I thought I should keep something to myself."

Wise decision. If for the wrong reason. Consider the power of the book, then consider that in the hands of Chodo Contague.

I did. And maybe had before, unconsciously. "Not a good plan."

Not for anyone but Chodo Contague. A fancy keeps floating through your mind. It may not be as difficult as you think.

"What?" He'd blindsided me again.

To find an eyewitness to the Squirrel person's demise.

"You're kidding. Chodo's in it. People are going to sew their lips together."

He does not intimidate everyone.

"You weren't there, o Fearless One. Everybody that he don't intimidate is buried. Or soon will be."

You noted considerable aerial activity out there. How often do fairies and pixies catch your attention? More often than children and pets? Generally such remain part of the background unless they force themselves upon you. And in that you are not unique. The Squirrel person's killer probably was careful about witnesses, but did not think to check the air above.

"It's an idea. One of your more outrageous ones, but an idea. How am I supposed to con some witness into talking?"

Pass word to the fairy and pixie communities saying you will pay for information about what happened in that alley. Those people are not afraid of Chodo Contague. In fact, they hate him. They would not help him. If he has a similar notion, they will thumb their noses at his men. They can fly faster than his thugs can run.

Legwork again. He was coming up with these things just to get more hoofing around town.

Still, it might be worth a shot. If I could get the message across. It's hard to communicate with those people. They speak Karentine but somehow it isn't always the same language I speak. You have to be careful what you say and precise in how you say it. No ambiguities. No words or phrases that can be understood in more than one way. You do and ninety-nine times in a hundred they'll take you the wrong way. I think they do it on purpose, to give us a hard time.



I'd never thought much about it, but there are peoples with little to fear from Chodo. It might behoove me to find friends among them. Sure as the sun will rise in the east, there'll come a day when Chodo and I go head-to-head; I don't want that day to come and I expect he doesn't, either, but we both know our natures make it inevitable.

I said, "Crask and Sadler got me spooked."

They did more good than harm.

"I heard that. Those dwarves weren't taking me to a party."

Time to consider taking on backup.

"Yeah." He was being awful practical. "I wanted to keep the little leaf-eater out of it but I'm really not at my best when the odds are eight to one."

I sensed faint amusement over there. There are other possibilities. The groll brothers, Doris and Marsha, make effective bodyguards.

"They also tend to stick out in a crowd." Grolls being part giant, part troll, and the brothers in question being twenty feet tall and green. And they don't speak Karentine. The only man I know who speaks grollish is Morley Dotes. I'd have to enlist him anyway. "Why don't I sleep on it?"

Because if you sleep now, you may waste the chance to enjoy sleeping a few thousand times more. It is not legwork that is going to kill you, Garrett. It is lack of legwork.

"Who walked twenty miles today? And who stayed home contemplating his own genius?"

I pondered the mystery of Glory Mooncalled.

"That'll help us out." How old Chuckles preens and crows when he guesses right what the mercenary will do next. And how he cringes and whines when that sumbitch surprises him.

I hate to admit it, but I kind of long for the old days last year when Mooncalled was on our side and just gave the Venageti fits and made our generals look like simpletons.

Maybe I should worry more. Mooncalled may be the most important man alive today. The fate of his republic will shape that of Karenta and Venageta. If the two kingdoms can't squash him and regain access to the silver mines that are the object of the ancient war, sorcerers on both sides will soon be out of business. Silver is the fuel that makes their magic go.

Mooncalled's strategy is to hang on till the wizards fade. He doesn't fear our mundane generals. Most of them can't find their butts with a seeing-eye dog. They get their jobs through brilliant selection of parents, not competence. Mooncalled may not be a genius, but he can find his butt with either hand, in the dark, which is plenty good enough when dealing with Karentine generals or Venageti Warlords.

I said, "I take it you think something is about to happen down there."

Perhaps. And the news may be less than favorable to those who find hope in Mooncalled's mutiny. Both Karenta and Venageta have kept the pressure on but have not run blind into his traps. His native support appears to be dwindling. You mentioned spotting a centaur family today. A few months ago centaurs were Mooncalled's most devoted allies, vowing to fight till they were extinct if that was the price of ending foreign domination of the Cantard.



I hadn't thought about the political implications of a centaur presence here. Did it mean negotiations for a sellout? Usually I turn a deaf ear to such speculation. I have the romantic, silly idea that if I ignore politics steadfastly, maybe politicians will ignore me. You'd think I'd have learned after having spent five years helping kill people on behalf of politicians.

Don't tell anybody on the Hill, but I—like almost everybody who doesn't live up there—have rooted for Glory Mooncalled in my secret heart. If he actually manages the impossible and hangs on, he'll break the backs of the ruling classes of both of the world's greatest kingdoms. In Karenta's case that could mean the collapse of the state and either the return of the imperials from exile or evolution into something entirely new and unique, built upon a mixture of races. Enough. Whatever happens on the Hill, or in the Cantard, it won't change my life. There'll always be bad guys for me to chase.

You had better get on your horse.

"Yuk! Don't even mention those monsters." I hate horses. They hate me. I think there's a good chance they'll get me before the kingpin does. "I'm on my way."

Morley Dotes's Joy House is only a short way from my place, but by the time you get there you wonder if you haven't fallen through a hole into another world. In my neighborhood—though it's not the best—the nonhumans and baddies are mostly passing through. In Morley's, the Safety Zone, they're there all the time.

TunFaire is a human city, but just about every other species has an area of its own staked out. Some are a quarter unto themselves, like Ogre Town or Ratman Creek. Some occupy only one tenement. Even though individuals may live anywhere in town, somewhere there's a home turf that's fiercely defended. There's a lot of prejudice and a lot of friction and some races have a talent for that which makes our human bent toward prejudice look wimpy. Thus the Safety Zone evolved, of its own accord, as an area where the races can mix in relative peace, because business has to get done.

Morley's place is right in the heart of the zone, which seems to have gelled around it. It was always a favorite hangout for baddies who mix, before the zone became an accepted idea. Morley is becoming a minor power. I've heard he's turned into a sort of judge who arbitrates interracial disputes.

Useful, but he'd better not get too ambitious. Chodo might feel threatened

Chodo only tolerates Morley now because he owes him. Morley spiffed his predecessor and created a job opening at the top. But Chodo remains wary, maybe even nervous. What Morley did once he might do again, and there's no more sure an assassin than Morley Dotes.

Killing people is Morley's real line. The Joy House started out as cover. He never expected the place to become a success and probably didn't want it to.

Thus do the fates conspire to shape our lives.

It was getting on dusky, with the first morCartha out reconnoitering, as I approached Morley's place. "Well," I muttered unhappily as I turned into the street that runs past the Joy House. And "Yeah, hello," as a couple of overdeveloped bruisers fell into step beside me. "How's the world treating you guys?"

Both frowned as though trying to work through a problem too difficult for either. Then Sadler materialized out of shadow and relieved them of the frightful



and unaccustomed task of thinking. Sadler said, “Good timing, Garrett. Chodo wants to see you.”

They must have seen me coming. “Yeah. I suspected.” A big black coach stood in front of Morley’s. I knew it better than I liked. I’d ridden in it. It belonged to that well-known philanthropist, Chodo Contague. “He’s here? Chodo?” He never leaves his mansion.

Crask appeared, completed the set. I had me bookends who would strangle their own mothers not only without a qualm but who wouldn’t recall it a day later with any more remorse than recalling stomping a roach. Bad, bad people, Crask and Sadler. I wish I didn’t, but whenever I run into them I waste half my little brain worrying about how bad they are.

I’m glad they don’t make a lot like them.

Crask said, “Chodo wants to talk, Garrett.”

“I got that impression.” I kept my tongue in check. No need to mention that Sadler had told me already.

“He’s in the coach.”

They couldn’t have been sitting there waiting for me. That wasn’t their style. They must have had business with Morley and I was just a target of opportunity.

I walked to the coach, opened its door, hauled my carcass inside, settled facing the kingpin.

You take your first look at Chodo, you wonder why all the fuss. Everybody’s scared of this old geek? Why, he’s in such lousy shape he spends his whole life in a wheelchair. He can barely hold his head up, and that not for long unless he’s mad. Sometimes he can’t speak clearly enough to make himself understood. His skin has no color and it seems you can see right through it. He looks like he’s been dead five years already.

Then he works up the strength to meet your eye and you see the beast looking out at you. I’ve been there several times and still that first instant of eye contact is a shocker. The guy inside that ruined meat makes Crask and Sadler look like streetcorner do-gooders.

You get in Chodo’s way, you get hurt. He don’t need to be a ballerina. He has Crask and Sadler. Those two are more loyal to him than ever any son was to a father. That kind of loyalty is remarkable in the underworld. I wonder what hold he has on them.

He has them and a platoon of lieutenants and those have their soldiers on the street. Those have their allies and informants and tenants. Chodo flinches or frowns, somebody can die a gruesome death real sudden.

“Mr. Garrett.” He had the strength to incline his head. He was having a good day. Wiry wisps of white hair floated around.

“Mr. Contague.” I call him Mr. Contague. “I was considering coming to see you.” But not very seriously. His place is too far out. It’s a disgustingly tasteless mausoleum (sour grapes, Garrett?) that dwarfs the homes of most of our overlords. Crime pays. And for Chodo it pays very well indeed.

“I thought you might when I heard from Dotes.”

Thanks a bunch, Morley. There you go thinking for me again.

“I know how a man feels in such a situation, Mr. Garrett. I once lost a woman to a rival. A man grows impatient to restore the balance. I thought I would save time



if I came to the city.”

Huh? Didn't he know Tinnie was going to be all right? Or did he know something I didn't? That was likely, since almost everybody knows something I don't—but not about Tinnie, he shouldn't. “I appreciate it more than you know.” He had a girl once. Funny. I'd never thought of him having been anything but what he is right now.

“You're surprised. It's a pity you're so determined to maintain your independence.” That's a problem between us. I want the world to know I'm my own man. He'd like to get a hold on me. He said, “I admire you, Mr. Garrett. It would be interesting to sit and talk sometime about have-beens and might-have-beens. Yes. Even I was young once. Even I have been in love. I once considered getting out of this life because a woman caused me such despair. But she died. Much as yours did. I recall the pain vividly. For a time it left my soul as crippled as my flesh is now. If I can help, I will.”

For the first time I began to suspect there was something going on between me and Chodo that was on a level having nothing to do with antipathies and favors accidentally or knowingly done. Maybe he'd glommed me as some kind of tenuous lifeline from his shadow world to one where “higher” standards reigned. And maybe his continued attempts to seduce or coerce me into his camp had something to do with tempering that lifeline.

Whoa! Hip boots time, Garrett. “Sure. Thanks. Only, Tinnie didn't die, see? She was hurt, but they say she should get better. Squirrel was supposed to tell you, only...”

His face darkened. “Yes. Squirrel. Mr. Crask and Mr. Sadler told me what you said. I failed to make sense of it.”

“I can't, either. But the whole world is going crazy. We got morCartha fighting all night, mammoths and saber-tooth tigers roaming around, thunder-lizards maybe migrating south. Today I saw centaurs on the street and almost tromped a gang of gnomes. Nothing makes sense anymore.”

He made a feeble gesture with one hand, a sure sign his blood was up. He seldom spends the strength. “Tell me.”

“You have a professional interest?”

“Tell me about it.”

My mama didn't raise many kids dumb enough to argue with Chodo Contague while hip-deep in Chodo's headbreakers. I gave him most of the bag. Exactly what I'd given Crask and Sadler. I didn't contradict myself. The Dead Man taught me well when it comes to retaining detail. I added some speculation just to give the impression that I was making a special effort for him.

He listened, relaxed, chin against chest, gathering his strength. What went on inside that strange brain? The man was a genius. Evil, but a genius. He said, “It makes no sense in terms of the information at my disposal.”

“Not to me, either.” I arrowed to the key point. “But there're dwarves under arms roaming the streets.”

“Yes. Most unusual.”

“Is there a dwarfish underworld?”

“Yes. Every race has its hidden side, Mr. Garrett. I've had contact with it. It's trivial by human standards. Dwarves don't gamble. They are incapable of making



that mental plunge into self-delusion whereby others become convinced that they can beat the odds. They don't drink because they make fools of themselves when they're drunk and there is nothing a dwarf fears more than looking foolish. They shun weed and drugs for the same reason. There are individual exceptions, of course, but they're rare. As a breed, they have few of the usual vices. I've never known one to become excitable enough to employ lifetakers."

"Pretty dull bunch."

"By your standards or mine. All work, all business, very little play. But there is one game they do enjoy. One weakness. Exotic females. Any species will do, though they gravitate toward big-busted human women."

So do I. I made an unnecessary crack about, well, if you've taken a look at your average dwarf woman...

He shut me up with a scowl.

"They can't resist, Mr. Garrett—if you give them half a chance to convince themselves that they won't get found out. They can be as vulnerable as priests that way. In the area around Dwarf Fort there are half a dozen very discreet and exclusive hook shops catering to dwarves. They are quite successful enterprises."

Which meant they were pouring gold into Chodo's pockets. I wondered if he was trying to tell me something. Probably not. He isn't one to talk around the edges of something—unless he's handing you a gentle admonition concerning a possible catastrophic decline in the state of your health. "You make anything of the book angle?"

"They would get excited if someone got hold of one of their books of secrets. But that can't be done."

Such a flat statement. He'd tried. I flashed on what the Dead Man had said. Damn, I shouldn't have gotten him thinking about books.

He said, "There's no way to get enough leverage on a dwarf to make him turn over any secret. Those people are perfectly content to die first."

"How about a thief?" Maybe I could nudge this into safer channels.

"Their books are too well guarded to be reached." Again that flatness. He knew whereof he spoke. "That enclave is a puzzle box, a series of fortresses going inward. You need a guide to get through it. The army, backed by every wizard off the Hill, couldn't take the place fast enough to keep them from destroying whatever they don't want to get out."

"It was a notion. I thought it might explain what's been happening."

"What's going on is something else entirely. You tell me your young lady is alive and mending. Does that mean you're out of it?"

I answered honestly. "I don't know where I stand. Every time I decide I don't have any stake, something happens. Those dwarves Sadler and Crask ran off. They were out to get rid of me. It can't be sound business practice to let people get away with something like that."

He looked at me in a way that told me he knew I was holding out, but he said only, "That's true, Mr. Garrett. A first principle. Don't let anyone get away with muscling you. For the moment, let me counsel patience. Let me put my eyes out. These people have dragged me into their affairs. Someone beholden to me will know something about them. It's impossible for those people to exist in the cracks without being noticed. My people will catch some of them and ask



questions. If I learn anything of interest to you, I'll inform you immediately."

"Thank you." I couldn't tell him to get out of my face, go home, I didn't need him stomping around in my life. Even if I'd wanted to.

"I'm going to have Mr. Sadler set up headquarters here so my people have a central reporting site." He meant the Joy House. That would thrill Morley all to hell. It would shoot the guts out of his business.

Chodo read that thought in my face. He's good at reading people. "Mr. Dotes won't lose because of it."

"I don't know how to thank you, Mr. Contague." I managed to keep sarcasm from creeping in. Dean and the Dead Man would have been amazed. They don't think I can do that.

"Don't thank me. You've done me numerous good turns. This may be my chance to pay some back. Maybe to lay a little good karma on my soul."

Another surprise. That old boy is full of them. I thanked him again, climbed out of the coach. It rolled away immediately. Most of Chodo's bodyguards went with it.

Morley's place was deserted. I stepped into half the usual light and none of the usual uproar. I looked across the desert at Puddle, behind the serving counter, polishing glassware. "What the hell?"

"Not open tonight, buddy. Come back some other time."

"Hey! It's me. Garrett."

He squinted. Maybe his eyes weren't so good anymore. He was going to flab fast, but that didn't keep him from being a bad man. "Oh. Yeah. Maybe I ought to say we're double not open for you, pal. But it's too late. You done got Morley dragged in."

"Where is everybody?"

"Morley shut the place down. You think anybody's going to come in here with that circus parked out front?"

"He here?"

"Nope." He didn't volunteer any information. Most of Morley's people think I take advantage of his good nature. They're wrong. He doesn't have a good nature. And he owes me for a couple stunts he pulled on me back when he was hooked on gambling and he had to cut things fine to keep from taking that long swim in the river. "What you want him for?"

"Just talk."

"Right." His tone said I was full of it.

"He leave any word for me?"

"Yeah. Have a beer. Hang in there till he gets back."

"Beer?" Morley never has anything drinkable around except a little brandy upstairs for special guests of the female persuasion. The kind that always scurry for cover when I show up, afraid I work for their husbands.

Puddle swung a pony keg onto the bar, grabbed the biggest mug he had, drew me one. I arrived as he topped it off. I noted that the keg had been tapped already. I noted that Puddle had brew breath. I grinned. Another of Morley's bunch who didn't share his boss's religion. Puddle pretended he didn't know why I was showing my teeth

"Seen Saucerhead?"



“Nope

“Morley supposed to be back soon?”

“I don’t know.”

“Know where he went?”

He shook his head, Probably afraid he was going to get a sore throat with all this yammer. A real heavyweight conversationalist, Puddle. Always ready with a lightning riposte. Rather than subject myself to any more abuse, I went to work on my beer.

It went down smooth. Almost too smooth. I let him draw me another and finished half before I thought about all I’d put away already today. Where was the point of the running if I was going to fix myself up to look like Puddle anyway?

“You got anything back there ready to eat?”

A big, wicked grin grew on Puddle’s homely face. Before he turned toward the kitchen, I was sorry I’d asked. He was about to make me pay for my sins.

He came back with something cold smeared on a bed of soggy noodles. “Chef’s surprise.” It looked like death and didn’t taste much better

“Now I know why all those breeds are so damned mean. Can’t help it, eating like this.”

Puddle chuckled, pleased with himself.

I ate. To get through a mess like that, all I have to do is recall what I’d had to eat as a Marine. I could dig in and feel pampered.

Saucerhead ambled in. “Where you been, Garrett?”

I filled him in

“I heard about Squirrel. Can’t figure it.”

“What about the redhead?”

He frowned. “She went home meek. And disappeared.” He shook his head. “Went in the place where she stayed. Wanted to ask her a question. I looked all over. She wasn’t in there no more. And I know she never come out. Only two people ever did and she wasn’t one of them. And she never came back.” He shrugged and forgot it. Not his problem anymore. “They tried to ice you, eh?”

“Yeah.”

He sighed. “Hey. Puddle. Whup me up a double load of whatever this glop is Garrett’s got.” He asked me, “Where’s Morley?”

“I don’t know. Puddle ain’t saying.”

“Hmm. Chodo’s in it now. Account of Squirrel. What you going to do?”

“I don’t know. I have a couple grudges. And like Chodo told me, letting them slide isn’t good for business.”

“You think that Winger smoked Squirrel?”

“Maybe. I think Chodo’s going to find out.”

“Pretty pissed, eh?”

“Yeah. Probably hasn’t had a good excuse to off somebody for days.”

Saucerhead drank about a quart of beer, inhaled the food Puddle brought him, shoved back, said, “Well, it’s been an interesting day. I got to get on home. Got a little gal waiting.” Off he went.

I sat quietly for a while. It got dark outside. I waited some more. I asked Puddle, “You sure Morley didn’t say when he’d be back?”

“Nope.”



Puddle seemed to be the only body in the place. Where were all the help? Where was Sadler, who was supposed to set up his headquarters? Where the hell was Morley Dotes?

I waited some more. Then I waited some. And when I didn't have anything else to do, I waited. Then I got up and said, "I'm going home."

"See ya." Puddle grinned me out the door. He locked it behind me in case I had a change of heart.

The morCartha were zooming around, trying to undress the night. I recalled Dean saying we were going to have cobbler for dessert. I cursed. I'd eaten that sludge at Morley's place and now I wouldn't have room for decent cooking.

Story of my life.

I almost made it home without getting distracted.

I'd just crossed Wizard's Reach. I was beginning to feel optimistic. I'd decided I was going to wrap myself around another gallon of beer, then throw myself in bed and sleep till noon. The hell with running and everything else. I justified future loafing the old-fashioned way. I told me I'd earned it.

Somebody hissed at me from the shadows beside a neighbor's stoop.

I took a deep breath, sighed, looked for signs of trouble, looked at that shadow, didn't go any closer. I couldn't make out whoever was there. Mama Garrett didn't raise many fools who lived to be thirty. I didn't go over there. "Come out, come out, whoever you are. Allee allee in free."

"I can't. They might be watching."

"Too bad." Very too bad.

My mood had plunged. I didn't bother asking who might be watching.

The voice sounded a tad familiar. I couldn't place it, though.

I laid a hand on my belt. No headknocker. Still down somewhere near Dwarf Fort. I resumed walking, wondering if I'd see that billy again. I wasn't ready to go looking. Too many dwarves down there and I can't tell one from another. I don't think they'd accept a kill-them-all-and-let-the-gods-sort-them-out approach.

My egg might be scrambled some but it does me just fine, thank you.

The dark behind me moaned. Feet pitty-patted toward me, I eyed the house, wondered if I'd have time to get Dean's attention before somebody did something unpleasant and maybe left the old boy a mess to clean up.

That's the power of positive thinking there. After having had my head redesigned—it was throbbing and pounding—I saw no dawn on any horizon. Funny how one little thing can cause your mood to change so fast.

I sidestepped, dropped into a crouch, and came around with a fist meant to drive right through somebody's ribs and let me get hold of his backbone from the front. Then, if I was feeling mean, I'd shake him till his ears fell off

I tried pulling it. I fell on my face, rearranged my nose into an even less appealing mess, and still folded the little darling up around my fist

I got myself up, wobbled around a little, wiped the fuzz out of my eyes. The girl stayed down, holding herself and making strangling noises. Woo, boy. What a lady-killer, Garrett. It wasn't my week for women. If it kept up, it wasn't going to be my year.

I felt my nose to see if anything was left. Hard to tell from here, but there seemed to be a nub under the ick. It hurt enough to be my nose. I shook some



more cobwebs and knelt. “You shouldn’t ought to run up on a guy like that.”

She made noises like she was trying to heave up her stockings. I scooped her up and headed for home, caveman Garrett bringing home the goodies

She felt like a real treat, curled in my arms. It was hard to tell by eyeball in the available light. Curious morCartha cruised around as I climbed the steps, kicked the door, and hollered. They didn’t bother me. I felt the Dead Man touch me, just to make sure it wasn’t somebody trying to get past Dean disguised as a freshly slaughtered side of beef.

Dean opened the door after peeking through the spyhole. He looked at the girl. “Got lucky again, eh?” He stepped aside

I took her into the small front room, put her down on the daybed “See what you can do while I clean up.” I sketched what had happened. He gave me one of his better looks of exasperation.

“You missed supper.”

“I ate out. At Morley’s. Get a light in here so we can see. I’ll be back in a minute.” I left him and dashed upstairs faster than a wounded snail. After I washed my face and rechecked it for missing parts, I put on clean clothes and scooted downstairs and stuck my head into the Dead Man’s room “Company, Smiley.”

I am aware of that, Garrett. Try to restrain your animal urges. She may be of some help, though I cannot get anything yet. She is too frightened and confused.

“Restrain myself? I’m a paragon of restraint. I’m the guy they invented the word for. I’ve never burned the house down around you.”

It was one of those rare times when he didn’t try to get in the last word. Chalk one up in the history books. Might not happen again in my lifetime. She knows something, Garrett.

Hell. Score one for him. That was worse than one of his standard digs. It was tone rather than words. He was accusing me of goofing off.

I stomped into the small front room.

Dean was bent over the woman, blocking her from view, talking softly. I paused, looked at him with an affection I’d never show to his face. He had been the luckiest find of my life. He did everything around the house that I hated, cooked like an angel, put in absurd hours, and more often than not was as emotionally involved in my cases as I was. I couldn’t ask for much more but maybe a little less lip and a little more enthusiasm about keeping the Dead Man clean.

If he has a failing, it’s his disapproval of my work habits. Dean believes in work for its own sake, as a tonic for the soul.

I coughed gently to let him know I was there. He didn’t hear. Was he going deaf? Maybe. He had to be pushing seventy, though he wouldn’t admit it.

“How is she, Dean? Settled down any?”

He tossed a glower over his shoulder “Some. No thanks to you.”

“I should let somebody run up on me and maybe change the shape of my head?” I was getting irritable. Can’t understand why. My face hurt? My head ached? My shoulder throbbed? My legs were cramping from all the walking and running? That’s no excuse I was headed for despair mode, where you keep on fighting the fight but you’ve decided it isn’t worth it. You just can’t stop.

Facts don’t bother Dean much. He’s still fifteen years old inside. He never stopped believing in the kind of magic kids carry around inside them before



reality beats them down. He gave me another look at his glower. He was on a roll, He said, "Give me a couple more minutes."

"I'll go report, then," I went and told the Dead Man about my excursion into that world where Dean's brand of magic has died

He had no direct comment. Go see the girl. Chuckle. You will be surprised The Dead Man scores his points I was surprised.

She was gorgeous. Luscious. I'd had my suspicions, of course. I'd carried her in and there's nothing wrong with my sense of touch. But there hadn't been light enough to reveal all that red hair.

Yeah She was a ringer for the gal who'd told the Baron Stonecipher story, who was a ringer for the naked gal. This one with a difference This one had an air of innocence "It's raining redheads, Dean."

He grunted. Like he didn't care.

She was sitting up now, no longer green around the gills. She looked at me. Green eyes. Again. Gorgeous big naive green eyes. Lips like I only dream about. Freckles.

Down, boy.

I gaped. Dean gave me the evil eye. I said, "We need a name for this case. Maybe call it Too Many Redheads.

"Mr. Garrett?" Whoop! That voice! Like the last redhead's voice, but with added bells and promises. Whatever

"That's me. Garrett. Ferocious dragon fighter and unwitting stomper of damsels in distress. And that's on my good days."

She looked puzzled

"Sorry It's been a rough day. I'm on edge. Let's start over. I promise not to sock you if you promise not to run up behind me in the dark. In the street, anyway. We could put the Dead Man to sleep and run Dean off and she could chase me all over the house if she wanted. I wouldn't try too hard to get away. In the interest of science, of course. To see how closely she compared with my nudist visitor, say

She smiled. The freckles on her cheeks danced. That almost made my day worthwhile

Almost

"Dean explained," she said. Funny how he gets on a first-name basis so fast. "I should apologize. That wasn't smart. I'm not used to the city." She stood. My eyes bugged. Her movements were unpretentious and unaffected and I had to grind my teeth to keep from howling and whistling. She was a natural heart-stopper. Wherever she came from, she'd been wasted on them there. They'd been dumb enough to let her get away. Send more of her kind to TunFaire. Take our minds off poverty and war and despair. Talk about your bread and circuses. This gal was a three-ringer all by herself

She stuck out a hand. It wasn't half as big as mine. I took it. It was a chock full of warmth and life—which reminded me that Tinnie almost wasn't. That brought me back to earth. She said, "I'm Carla Lindo Ramada, Mr. Garrett. I came here from"

Oh boy "Hold it. Let me guess. The castle of Baron Stonecipher in the Harnadan Mountains. Where you're a chambermaid. The baron sent you after a guy named Holme Blaine who kyped a book from a witch called the Serpent."



Her jaw dropped.

Outside, overhead, the morCartha started up. The racket was so close and so loud it sounded like they were using my roof for landings and takeoffs I told Dean, “They’re going to make themselves unpopular if they keep that up.”

The redhead realized her pretty little mouth was open, so she closed it, but it sagged open again. She stood there like a goldfish gulping air.

I asked, “Was I close?”

“How did you...?”

I wanted to brag about what a great investigator I was. No point exaggerating, though. “Take it easy. I’m not a psychic.” He was in the other room. “You’re at least the second gorgeous redhead named Carla Ramada who turned up today. You want me to find the book, right?”

“Carla Lindo Ramada,” she said. Apparently that was important. “But... How...?”

“I don’t know.” There wasn’t any doubt in my mind that this wasn’t the woman who had been here earlier. I was pretty sure she wasn’t the naked woman, either. I couldn’t tell you what it was. A subtle clue of some kind. I had only minimal reservations about her being the real Carla Lindo Ramada. She wore the name more comfortably.

Her face went through the changes, all of them fetching. I was thinking the thing to do was get her out of town before she started riots because there was only two or three of her to go around—then I finally started wondering how come there were two or three. Or were there four or five? Was there a whole legion of her out there? Did redheads grow on trees in the Hamadan? Gods, get me into the forestry racket

Her features settled into solid fear. “It must have been her! She must have a page in the book that’s me.”

“What?” It sank in. “The villain of the piece came here masquerading as you?” Well. Well again. And she was my client. More or less. “But how? If she doesn’t have the book anymore?”

She didn’t ask how I knew what the book did. She thought about my question. “First draft? Maybe she brought draft pages with her. You couldn’t really mistake her for me, could you?”

She wasn’t that naive after all.

No. I couldn’t mistake her, having seen her. I thought back to that earlier visit. It wouldn’t come clear. That was odd. The Dead Man has taught me to pick up details and retain them. But I found only mists where I should have had clear, crisp recollections.

“Dean, make us a pot of tea. I have a feeling it’s going to be a long night.” And who could get any rest with all that racket going on outside? I was beginning to hope they’d wipe each other out. “We might as well relax before we start

He gave me the hardeye like he wondered if something so sweet would be safe if he visited the kitchen, decided maybe I could restrain myself that long, stalked out. Carla Lindo Ramada told me, “Dean is a sweet man.”

“Yeah. Sometimes we have trouble keeping the bees off him. We use him to bait our flytraps. And he’s a sucker for a girl in trouble.” But not me. Oh, no, not Garrett. Garrett is hard as nails, “How come you were hiding out there?”



“When I arrived in TunFaire, I stayed with people the Baron knows On the Hill. I asked everybody I saw who might be able to help me. Everybody recommended you.”

Gahk! I hadn't thought my name was common coin on the Hill. That could be bad news.

“They say you're honest but you do things your own way and you have a reputation as a chaser.” Her eyes sparkled She definitely wasn't as naive as she looked.

“Me? They must've been thinking about somebody else. I'm pure of heart and soul. Pure as the driven slush.”

“But maybe a little lax in mind and body?” More eye twinkle. She was coming back from her fright. Fast. I bet she kept that mountain castle simmering.

She smiled. Her freckles danced. And I knew why she stood out from the other redheads. They didn't have freckles. Even Tinnie doesn't have them. Many. Where they show.

We could've gone on like that all night, but there was a job to do. And Dean would be back any second, pushing his scowl before him. “Guilty more often than not. Let me tell you about the Carla Lindo Ramada who was here before. You tell me when her story doesn't match up with yours.”

She listened attentively. Her eyes never stopped sparkling and her freckles never stopped dancing, even when Dean brought our tea. He looked at her looking at me and sighed. He never does quite abandon hope that he can stick me with one of his nieces.

Carla Lindo sipped her tea, seemed startled. Dean had broken out one of his reserve blends. She took another sip, told me, “That's exactly the way it happened, Mr. Garrett. I think.”

“You think?”

“I wasn't there. He sent me away so I'd be safe.”

“He did? He wanted you safe from the rowdiness at home, but he packed you off to the wicked city alone?” That didn't seem consistent.

“He didn't want to send me. Probably she got here before I did because he spent so much time making up his mind. But he didn't have any choice. I was the only one left that he could trust.”

“Why?”

“The Serpent tried to enlist everybody else. Some of them had to be with her. The trustworthy ones all got killed trying to get the book. She never tried to get to me because she knew I'd never do anything against him.”

“Why not? We all can be tempted.”

“Because he's my father, Mr. Garrett. My mother was a chambermaid, too, so there was no way he could legitimize me, but their relationship wasn't any secret. He never denied me, even to his wife. She hates me and my mother. But she hasn't dared do anything.” She shivered, suddenly frightened. There was a big yet unspoken there. If Dean had been anywhere else, I would've bounced over to comfort her.

This was getting more complicated by the minute, at the far end, where the story started, but I wasn't a step nearer getting things unraveled here. “Wait up. I'm getting confused. We have a wife and a witch and a mistress and a daughter, all



for a guy who's supposed to be two hundred years old, bedridden, and under a curse that won't let him die?"

She looked at me funny. I ran past her what the other Carla Lindo had told me. Maybe she hadn't been listening the first time.

"Oh. That's not quite true. Father is old and bedridden, but he wasn't always. And he's not two hundred; she just says that. He's sixty-eight. She put the curse on him when I was four, when he stopped even pretending about my mother and sent her to live in the other tower."

"Huh?"

Dean got it first. "His wife would be the Serpent, Mr. Garrett. He exiled her to a separate part of the castle." So much for my steel-trap mind. Maybe if I was a little less pained and tired

The girl nodded.

"Oh. Right. I got it now. Should have said so." I wondered if that changed anything. I wondered why I cared. The carryings-on of the denizens of a faraway castle were no business of mine. Unless those people wouldn't leave me alone. I thought out loud, "It seems we know who and why, Dean. You think?"

"That Serpent person. Wanting to keep Miss Carla from reaching you and getting your help."

"That's one. What about Squirrel? Her doing?"

He shrugged. "That blonde woman?"

"Maybe. Now we know this, what should we do?"

Carla Lindo didn't correct Dean's lapse. So she was the kind who would let him get away with stuff.

She interrupted my thoughts. "Will you help me, Mr. Garrett?"

I wanted to tell her I wouldn't let her out of my sight. That that would be too painful, like taking away my vision. My eyes couldn't stand the darkness when she was gone. But I kept it businesslike. Barely "Yes. I think our interests run parallel." Wouldn't be the first time I'd turned on a client who turned out to be shady.

My comments puzzled Carla Lindo. I glanced at Dean. He shrugged. He hadn't told her about Tinnie or that the imposter Carla Lindo had hired me.

"Miss Ramada... I became involved in this on a personal level yesterday. A good friend was coming to visit. She's about your height and has red hair. A man tried to kill her out front. One of the Serpent's men, evidently. Mistaking her for you, I suspect. So I have a score to settle. I suppose."

The Dead Man touched me, a summons. He had something he wanted to stick in, in private. "Excuse me. I have to step out for a minute. Finish explaining, Dean."

The old man nodded. He was looking hurt all over again. Like Tinnie had just gotten hit. He'd probably tell it better than I could. He didn't pretend to be tough.

I sure didn't feel tough and invulnerable.

I slid into the Dead Man's room, starting to feel sorry for myself. I hadn't had me a good dose of that yet. I suppose it was due. Part of being human.

"What's up? This one a ringer, too?"

This one is genuine. She is an open book, easily read— though the truth be told, there is not much written there. Her light does not shine brightly. Be kind to her,



Garrett.

“Aw, hell. That ain’t playing fair.”

He filled my head with a chuckle. There is kindness and kindness, Garrett. I would not ask you to cease being human.

“Big of you.” Not much, he wouldn’t. “What’s up?” Looking at all of him here and thinking of all of Carla Lindo over there, I was headed into withdrawal.

One significant factor has escaped you. No. You need not feel slow. Indulgent of him. It escaped me until you told Miss Ramada about Miss Tate’s narrow escape.

That’s the way he is. Nothing straight out. Try to make me figure it out for myself. “Well?”

He didn’t play with me long. You related the same account to the pretender earlier. That woman, if she is indeed the Serpent—and I now believe she is—then knows that Miss Ramada had not been harmed and was in fact ignorant of that threat, so was in no danger of being scared away. Presumably she had something to do with your adventure near Dwarf House. So. Assuming the house was not watched while you were away, because you were not expected to return.

“I’ve got it. Do you think she figured out that you were here?”

That is of no consequence. It is no secret that you share the home of a Loghyr. She will know once she starts to ask questions.

I skipped his invitation to feud over whose house it was. I considered what we knew about the Serpent. Damned little, but if she was heavyweight enough to create the kind of book that was the root of the excitement, she could be heavyweight enough to cause us trouble. The Dead Man can do incredible things, but strength isn’t everything. Sometimes you have to bob and weave and he just isn’t light on his feet. There are disadvantages to being dead that even he can’t get around.

“Let’s back off and look at this. Why is she here? To get her book back. That’s the big thing. Keeping me out of her way ought to be secondary. When she was here, she got everything I knew. She gave me stuff back, but only because then she figured me to do her legwork.” But if she wanted me to do legwork, why try to hit me? “Maybe she changed her mind when she got wind I was seeing your pal Sneazy.”

Sneazy?

“Gnorst Gnorst Gnorst, and so forth. Maybe she started feeling the heat, realized how much she’d stirred up. She’s got me and Saucerhead and you and the Tates after her on account of Tinnie, as soon as we figure out she isn’t Carla Lindo. She’s got the kingpin after her because he wants whoever cut Squirrel. I visit the head dwarf, he squawks like a stuck turkey when I mention the Book of Shadows, goes into a panic, says he’s going to put his whole mob on the warpath. They’re after her, too. She’s got to make some moves. Maybe she figures if she gets rid of me, everybody will sit back for a while because I was the common denominator tying her enemies together.”

I’d gone from explaining to thinking out loud. “She’s going to push hard, going after that book. She might take another whack at me when she finds out I got away from her boys. Now I can raise the heat even more.”

Yes.

“Can there really be a book where you just read a page and turn into whoever’s



written there?”

She believes it. Gnorst believes it. The girl and those who sent her believe it. The man who stole the book believed it. Miss Tate was wounded because people believe it. What I believe does not matter. This has become a race, Garrett. You have to find that woman before she finds the book.

“How about I just find the book and wait for her to come to me?”

An admirable strategy, simple and direct. I should have seen it myself. How do you propose to execute it?

Sly, sarcastic old devil. Of course it would be easier to find the witch than the book. She was running with a strange pack. Even in TunFaire, it would stand out like pants on a mare.

“I shouldn’t be here. I should be at Morley’s, in case Sadler gets an interesting report.”

Mr. Dotes’s establishment would be convenient. I can get a message to you there. Though perhaps a modicum of rest would better serve you at the moment.

“Right.” He was. “I’m on my way.”

Dean looked expectant when I returned to the small front room. “He wanted to remind me that we told the other woman about Tinnie. Which means she knows Carla Lindo is still kicking.”

The redhead’s eyes got huge. Damned if that didn’t make me want to charge over there and set her in my lap and tell her everything was going to be all right. Even if I didn’t know everything was going to be all right. Because things would be plenty all right with me as long as she remained perched there.

I said, “We figure there’s no reason for you to worry. The cat’s out of the bag. Killing you won’t chase it back in. She’ll concentrate on finding the book.”

“You can’t let her find it!”

“Take it easy. She’ll need some fantastic luck to find it before she gets found herself. In about a minute I’m going to take a walk and tell a man about her, and before you can wink there’ll be about three thousand bad people looking for her.” I had a thought, which sometimes happens. Sometimes even before it’s too late. “What’s she look like when she’s not being you?”

Carla Lindo just looked at me.

“Well?”

“I’m trying to think. I don’t know. I don’t think I ever saw her. At least not and know it was her.”

“Say what?” The Dead Man had warned me. “You lived in the same place and you never saw her? She had to see you if she put a page in her book that was you.” Had to see her pretty damned close. About all she’d left out was the freckles.

“She stayed locked up in her tower. Nobody went in there but people she wanted in there. All those dwarves and ogres and creepy ratmen. If I ever saw her, I didn’t know it was her. I’m sure I never saw her.”

The Baron’s castle had to be some weird place. Not one where I’d like to spend a lot of time. Unless Carla Lindo had her four or five sisters. Maybe I ought to find out if there were any more at home like her.

I must’ve been showing my thoughts. She gave me a look like she was reading my mind. I stammered some, then managed to say, “You can’t give me anything to go on?”



“No. Yes. I never saw it, but they say she wears a ring. Middle finger of her right hand. She never takes it off. It’s a snake that wraps around her finger three times. It has a cobra head. They say there’s venom in the ring that can kill you instantly.”

“That’s handy to know.” I reflected. “The woman who was here wasn’t wearing a ring. I don’t think.” That was still foggy. “Did you see one, Dean?”

“No.” Good man. He refrained from mentioning the extra redhead.

“Then she will take it off in some circumstances. Is there anything else?”

Carla Lindo reddened, which was surprisingly fetching considering her coloring. But I couldn’t imagine her doing anything that wasn’t fetching. She only had to breathe.

She said, “She has a tattoo. They say. It’s how she got her name. The Serpent.”

“Huh?” Vagrant memory, of a guy in my company when I was in the Marines. He’d been stuck with the name Donkey Dick till one night he’d gotten all drunked up and had a tattoo artist go to work. After that we called him Snakeman. If he’s still alive, I’ll bet he regrets it. Unless he’s turned it into a carnival act.

The girl stood up. “The whole front of her is supposed to be a snake’s face.” She gestured. “Her breasts are supposed to be the snake’s eyes.”

Boy. There was a thought. Imagine waking up and looking over at that next to you. That would dampen your ardor. No wonder old Stonecipher took up with a chambermaid. “That’s a vivid image. Anything else?” I could just see me going around ripping open the blouses of suspects.

She shook her head. All that copper hair flying around left me with another vivid image. But this one faded to red hair against cobblestones.

I wondered if Tinnie was going to haunt me. Maybe I’d better go see how she was doing. Tomorrow.

“I have to go out, Dean. Over to Morley’s.”

His face pruned up with concern. “Is that wise?”

“It’s necessary. Put Miss Ramada in the front guest room. She’ll be safe enough there.”

His look said she’d be safe only as long as I was out of the house. I didn’t argue. I seldom do. There’s no way to change Dean’s mind. Maybe he should’ve gone ahead and become a priest. You sure can’t rattle him with facts.

He’d make a great little old lady, too.

Probably comes of having to live with all those nieces. I hate to wish them on anybody, but I do wish they’d find husbands and get out of his hair.

Dean nodded. I stepped out of the room, deaf to the girl’s appeals. I went upstairs and rearmed, then came down and stopped by the office to say good-bye to Eleanor. “Wish me luck, lady. Wish me better luck.” I hadn’t saved a soul in the case that had involved her. Unless, maybe, in a way, I’d saved me. After the hurting went, I’d found a renewed resolve to do my bit to make the world a better place.

You get wary when people have been pounding on you. Even when you’re so tired even snazzy redheads have begun to lose their appeal. Before I’d gone a block I sensed I was being watched. I’m not sure what it was. Certainly nothing I could spot. The watcher was that good. Maybe it’s a sense you develop in order to survive in this business, in this city.



I decided I'd stay out of places so tight I'd have nowhere to run, which was just common night sense anyway.

I was halfway to Morley's place, dodging low-flying morCartha, when suddenly I was no longer alone. "Shee-it! You guys got to stop doing that. My heart can't handle it." Despite my wariness, Crask and Sadler had surprised me, appearing out of nowhere. An object lesson, most likely. In case I ever became inclined to line up against them. They like to play those games.

I supposed it was their people who had tracked me from my place and sent them word I was coming.

Sadler smiled. At least I think that was supposed to be a smile. Hard to tell in the dark. "Really thought you'd appreciate some good news, Garrett. But if you ain't happy to see us."

"I'm overjoyed. I'm thrilled right down the quicks of my toenails." Thrilled like they were double pneumonia with a raging dysentery tossed in. "Why can't you guys just walk up to me like normal people? You always got to be jumping out of alleys and stuff."

Crask said, "I like to see the look on your face." He wasn't smiling. He wasn't kidding.

Sadler said, "My, my. We're crabby tonight. Did we have a bad day?"

"You got your kicks. So tell me what's the good news?"

"We found your man Blaine."

"Huh?"

Sadler said, "Come on. You ask, we deliver."

Deliver, sure, but without any guarantees about condition. It's hard to read those two, but I did get a feeling all was not well during our stroll to see Blain. So I wasn't surprised when, after we'd passed a platoon of henchmen and climbed to a third-floor one-roomer, he turned out to be in a poor state of health.

Some unaccountably thoughtful soul had covered the body with a blanket.

I glanced around. The room's door had been busted off its hinges. And I don't mean just kicked in but torn up like it had gotten in the way of a troll in a hurry who didn't want to be bothered with latches. The room itself was ripped all to hell, like a squad of werewolves had gone berserk there. But there wasn't any blood. "You guys get a little overwrought?"

Sadler shook his head. "Somebody else. We come here when he heard about the racket."

"Who did it?"

He shook his head again. "Everybody cleared out before we got here. You know how it goes. See no evil, hear no evil, you don't got to worry about comebacks. We only caught one old guy who was too slow. He didn't know nothing but the dead guy's name. Dipshit was so thick he used his own name."

"Bright." But what did that mean? None of us knew Holme Blaine. The dead guy could be anybody and we wouldn't know the difference.

I glanced around again. Looking more closely, I could see the damage wasn't just insane destruction after all. "Somebody wanted it to look like crazies did it."

Crask smiled at me like I was a dull pupil who had seen the light at last.

"Somebody was looking for something. Maybe some of them looking while some of them were asking. Then we come along unexpected, they do a quick cleanup



and fade.”

Ha! “So where are they?”

“Gone. Saw us coming.”

Huh. I wondered why anyone would bother hiding the fact that they’d searched Blaine’s place and fixed him so he couldn’t talk about it. Did we have somebody looking for the book who didn’t want somebody else looking for it to know they were looking, too?

That came to me off the wall but felt so right I went into a trance trying to figure out why.

Sadler said, “You want something to exercise your mind, check this out.” He yanked the blanket off Blaine.

I gaped. I managed a one-syllable expletive after about fifteen seconds, and a quarter of a minute later said, “That’s impossible.”

“Yeah. Prime example of a mass hallucination.”

Damn. Everybody was getting sarky.

Blaine was half-man, half-woman. Actually, more woman than man. Running from three inches above the waist on the right diagonally to his left shoulder, he was a he. Down below he was a she. Very much a she. In fact, a familiar one. I’d seen that end before.

“What do you think of that?” Crask asked.

I chewed some air. I made my eyes bug. “Looks like he had trouble making up his mind.” I made funny noises. “Bet he had trouble on dates.” They must’ve thought the circus was in town and I was practicing for my audition.

“First time I ever seen him without some wiseass remark,” Crask said. I bet he’d waited a year to pick a time to drop that one.

Sadler asked, “What you know about this, Garrett?”

“I know it’s weird. I never saw anything like it.” Well, like part of it. That bottom had been in my small front room for a while. “It’s like something out of a freak show.”

“Not what I meant.”

I knew that. “Zip.”

“You sure? You wanted this guy.”

“Because he was supposed to have the answers.”

Sadler gave me the fish-eye. “Don’t look like anybody’s going to get to empty him out, now.”

“No. I guess that’s the point.” I leaned against a wall, where nobody could get behind me, and gave the room another look. But there wasn’t anything there to see. Except that body. Whoever did the job, they left nothing of their own. And they didn’t find what they were looking for, else they wouldn’t have been there still when Crask and Sadler showed. “Nobody saw nothing, eh?”

“This’s TunFaire. What do you think?”

I thought they were lucky to have caught the old man they’d caught. I told him so. He grunted.

“You sure you ain’t got nothing to tell us, Garrett?”

“Actually, I do. But let it ride a minute. I want you to understand something. I don’t have a client. There’s no percentage in me holding out.” What’s a little white fib amongst friends?



Crask said, "Would you look at this?" He'd gotten distracted in a big way. "What?" Sadler.

Crask pointed at the body. We looked. I didn't get it till Sadler said, "It's changing." A little more of it was male than had been before.

Crask knelt, touched it. "And it's dead enough it's cooling out. This is weird."

"This is sorcery," Sadler said. "I don't like this. Garrett?"

"Don't look at me. I can't change water into ice."

They both scowled, sure I was holding out. Sure. Blame it on Garrett when weird things start to happen.

Crask said, "I don't like it. We ought to get out of here."

I said, "That sounds like a good plan." I headed for the door. "You guys rounded up any other news? You get a line on those dwarves yet?"

They both got a funny look. Sadler said, "Not yet. And that's weird, too."

Crask said, "Yeah. They got to leave a trail. They got to be staying somewhere,"

True. Curious. It bore some thought. Where could they stay and not catch the eyes of the kinds of people who work for Chodo, or who work for the people who work for Chodo? Couldn't be many places like that around.

I paused in the doorway. "Somebody really blew in here."

"Yeah," Crask said. "Hope I never have to arm-wrestle him."

I went over the fragments, looking for maybe a thread from a knit sweater that came only from one small island off the coast of Gretch, or something. You go through the motions even when you think they're pointless. A matter of discipline. They pay off sometimes, so you do them all the time. When I found a big lot of nothing, I wasn't disappointed. I'd fulfilled my expectations. If I'd found something, I'd have been overjoyed, having struck it rich beyond my wildest fancy.

Sadler said, "Let's not slide out so fast, Garrett. You had something to tell us."

"Yeah." I'd been vacillating. Information given up is advantage surrendered.

"Well?"

"Found out about another character who's got something to do with whatever's going on. Called the Serpent. She's the one this guy is supposed to have stolen a book from." Blaine was changing faster, maybe because he was getting cold.

"Well?"

Sadler ought to get together with Puddle for a gabfest. Sparkling. "The Serpent is a witch. She hangs out with dwarves." I took it from the top. They had some of it already but I didn't know how much. I gave them everything I thought they needed to know. I was real ignorant about why the book was a big deal.

"Witch, eh?" Crask eyed Blaine. That was the salient point for him.

"Tattoo?" Sadler asked. He lifted an eyebrow. "That would be a sight to see."

It would, but I was surprised he thought so. He never showed much interest along those lines. He asked, "You figure she cut Squirrel?"

"If she didn't, she knows who did."

"We'll find her. We'll ask."

"Be careful"

He gave me a look. Mostly it wondered about my smarts. He'd be careful. He'd survived his five in the Cantard. He'd survived in his line of work long enough to get to the top. Careful was his middle name, right between bad and deadly.



I took a final look at Holme Blaine, who hadn't been careful enough. He still didn't have anything to tell me. I didn't have anything to say to him, either.

I'd done my duty. It was time to get my bones moving toward a bed. If the morCartha took pity maybe I could get some sleep.

Morley's place wasn't far out of the way. I ignored my weariness and the racket overhead and the doings of a night proceeding in the streets and headed for the Joy House.

Ratmen were out doing what they do, picking up after everyone if they worked for the city, stealing anything loose if they were self-employed. There were more goblins and kobolds and whatnot out than I was used to seeing. I guess the weather had turned for the night people, too.

I still had that feeling I was being watched. And I still couldn't spot a watcher. But I didn't try hard.

Morley's place was a tomb. Nobody there but a couple of the kingpin's men. Even Puddle was gone, home or wherever. That gave me pause to reflect. I don't often think of guys like Puddle, or Crask and Sadler, in human terms. Home. Hell. The guy might have a family, kids, who knew what all. I'd never considered it. He'd always been just another bonebreaker.

Not that I wanted him to ask me over for dinner, to meet the missus and little bonebreakers coming up. I was just in one of those moods where I start wondering about people. Where they came from, what they did when I wasn't looking, like that. Probably got started when Chodo told me about his girlfriend.

It isn't a mood I enjoy. It gets me thinking about myself, my own lack of place and depth in the scheme. No family. Hardly any friends, and them I don't know that well. What I don't know about Morley or Saucerhead could fill books, probably. They don't know me any better, either. Part of being a rough, tough, he-man type, I suppose. On stage all the time, hiding carefully.

I have plenty of acquaintances. Hundreds. We're all tied together in a net of favors done and owed, all of us keeping tabs on the balance, sometimes thinking it friendship when it isn't anything but a shadow of the obsession that drives Chodo Contague.

Comes out of the war. There isn't a human male in this city who didn't do time in hell. I even have that in common with the nabobs of the Hill. Whatever privileges they claim or steal, exemptions aren't among them.

Down in the Cantard witch's cauldron, you keep track of all the little stuff and strive to keep a balance because you don't want anybody checking out owing you. And, even though you share a tent, cooking utensils, campfires, clothes, even girls, you never get too close to anybody because a lot of anybodies are going to die before it's over. You keep your distance and it don't hurt so much.

You dehumanize the enemy entirely and your comrades enough —though you'll charge into hell behind them or storm heaven to rescue them---you never open your heart and never let them open theirs.

It makes sense when you're down there in the shitstorm. And once you've survived the storm and they send you home, you're saddled with that baggage forever. Some come home like Crask and Sadler, purged of everything human.

That got me wondering what those two had done during their duty. I'd never heard. They'd never said. A lot of guys don't. They put it all behind them.



Then I started wondering why, though the night people were busier than usual, it was so quiet out. Night isn't just the time of those races who have to shun the sunshine, it's the time of the bad boys, the time when the predators come out. I wasn't seeing anybody dangerous or suspicious.

I guess Chodo had the baddies beholden to him busy, and the free-lancers, not clued in, were lying low so they wouldn't catch his attention. Or maybe it was just the morCartha being so obnoxious nobody came out who didn't have to.

The morCartha weren't that much trouble if you hugged the edge of the street and kept an eye out. They seldom risked crashing into a building just to swoop down and steal a hat.

Speaking of whom.

The tenor of their aerial pandemonium changed suddenly, radically. A violent outcry spread. It sounded like terror. Hasty wings beat the air frothy. The sky cleared. An almost total silence fell. It was so remarkable I paused to look at the sky.

A broken fragment of moon lay somewhere low in the east, out of sight, casting barely enough light to limn the peaks and spires of the skyline. But there was light enough to show a shape circling high up.

Its wings sprawled out a good thirty feet. It wasn't doing anything but making a wide, gliding turn over the city before heading back north.

A flying thunder-lizard. I hadn't known they were night hunters. I'd never seen one before. What I saw of this one made it look a lot like a prototype for all those dragons guys in tin suits are killing in old paintings. I hear they are. The dragons of story are mythical. Which makes them about the only imaginary creatures in this crazy world. Hell, I've even run into a god who thought he was real.

"Garrett."

I turned, less surprised than I expected. There must have been subconscious clues. "Winger. Kinda hoped I'd run into you again. Wanted to warn you. You got some bad people looking for you. Not in too good a mood, either."

That surprised her. "You can tell me about it on the way. Let's go."

I didn't think to ask where or why because her attitude tapped my anger. "I have a previous engagement. With my bed. You want to talk to me about something, come around in the morning. And try to ask nice."

"Garrett, you seem like a pretty good guy, considering. So let's don't butt heads. Let's don't do it the hard way. Just come on."

She had a problem. A serious problem. Now I wouldn't have gone anywhere with her even if I'd planned to before. "Winger, I kind of like you. You got balls and style. But you got an attitude problem that's going to get you hurt. You want to make it in the big city, you got to learn some street manners. You're also going to have to know who you're messing with before you mess. You cut somebody who has friends like Chodo Contague, your chances of staying healthy just aren't good."

She looked baffled. "What the hell you talking about?"

"That guy you cut in the alley off Pearl Lane. A couple thousand of his friends are looking for you. They don't plan to slap you on the back and tell you you did a great job."

"Huh? I never cut nobody."



“I hope not. But he was following you when it happened. Who else could’ve done it?”

She thought about it for half a minute. Then her frown cleared as she decided not to worry about it. “Come on.”

“Not smart, Winger. You’re pressing where you don’t know what you’re doing.”

She was one stubborn woman. And just a whole lot too confident. Maybe where she came from men wouldn’t defend themselves against a woman. Maybe she was used to them hesitating.

Hell, I might have myself. But she’d let me talk and that had given me time to get my mind right.

She got out a nightstick not unlike my headthumper. So I got out mine, a replacement for the one I’d left down by Dwarf Fort. She came in figuring to feint a few times and tap me up side the head. I didn’t cooperate. My head had taken enough dents already.

I just slipped her guard, rapped her knuckles, then her elbow when the pain froze her for an instant, then jabbed her in the breadbasket as her stick tumbled toward the street. “That’s how you use one of these things.” She wasn’t very good. All bull offense.

She didn’t seem upset because she’d been disarmed so easily, just surprised. “How’d you get so damned fast?”

“There’s two kinds of Marines, Winger. Fast ones and dead ones. Better get something through your head right now, before you run into somebody who won’t cut you some slack. There isn’t a man in this town, over twenty-three, who wasn’t tough enough and fast enough to survive five years in the Cantard. A lot of them, you make a move on them, they’ll leave you for the ratmen and not look back. Especially the bunch that are looking for you. They like to hurt people.”

“I said I didn’t cut nobody. Not yet.”

“Then you’d better be able to tell them who did. Fast.”

She raised both eyebrows. A strange woman. She wasn’t afraid. You have to worry about the sanity of somebody who doesn’t have sense enough to be afraid of Chodo Contague.

“You be careful,” I told her. “Come by in the morning if you still want to talk.” I turned to head for home.

Damned if she didn’t try again. Barehanded.

The reflexes still worked. I heard her move, pranced aside, stuck out a leg and tripped her, grabbed her by the hair on the fly. “That’s twice, Winger. Even nice guys run out of patience. So knock it off,” I turned loose, started walking.

This time she listened to the message.

Dean almost got his marching orders when he went to get me up for my morning run. He’s worse than a mom about not buying excuses. “You started it, you stick with it,” he told me. “You’re going to run, you’re going to run every day.”

Grumble grumble grikkle snackfortz. Go take a flugling fleegle at a frying forsk. I said something like that. I fought the good fight till he went for the ice water. Then my yellow stripe came out. He’d do it, the driggin droogle. I didn’t want to stay in bed that bad.

Carla Lindo was heating up the kitchen when I stumbled in. I grumbled a greeting.



“He always such a ball of sunshine in the morning?”

Dean told her, “This is one of his better mornings.” Thanks, old-timer. He plunked honeyed tea down at my place at the table. He had bacon frying, biscuits baking. The smell of the biscuits was heavenly. I gathered he hadn’t bothered to go home. Not much point. Wouldn’t have been much time to sleep.

His nieces were used to it. They’d know I was into something. Now, if they’d just forget to use him not coming home as an excuse to come hang around, cooking and baking and batting their eyes and uglying up the place.

I sipped tea and stared into a fog, nothing much else happening inside my head. Carla Lindo stared at me but didn’t say anything. She wore a teensy frown. Maybe her confidence was rattled.

You may suspect that morning isn’t my best time. You may be right. I’m waiting for some genius to figure out a way to do without it. The sad truth is, too often it sets the tone for the rest of the day.

“How do you feel this morning?” Carla Lindo finally asked.

“Black and blue. My bruises got bruises.” I hadn’t been a lovely sight when I got dressed. I’d seen corpses in better condition.

Dean took the biscuits out, set the baking sheet directly on a trivet on the table. “You ought to figure a way to trade with His Nibs. He could get out and run while you loafed all you want.”

He takes advantage of me mornings. Snipes away, knowing my brain isn’t working. The best I can do is threaten to send him job hunting. A hollow threat if ever there was one. Crafty old dink don’t play fair. He made himself indispensable.

He asked, “Did you learn anything last night?” as he brought the bacon.

“Yeah. That Winger character’s only got one oar in the water.” I told him about it.

He grinned. “I didn’t think she killed that man.”

“World’s best judge of character,” I told Carla Lindo. “Somebody sent Squirrel to the promised land, Dean. That character Blaine, too.”

That got Carla Lindo. “What?” She looked stricken.

“Somebody did him. Busted his door down, tore his place up, left him dead.”

“The book!”

“I guess.”

“Damn it! Now she has it again.” She jumped up, started pacing. I wasn’t so far gone in the morning blahs that I wasn’t distracted. “What will I do? Father was counting on me.

“Take it easy, love.” My, wasn’t she a sight when she was excited, bouncing and jiggling and... “Whoever did it didn’t find the book. If that was what they were after. They were still trying when they were interrupted.”

“Then...”

“It wasn’t there to be found. Carla Lindo, my sweet, sit down. You’re doing things to my concentration. That’s better. You sure there isn’t something you haven’t told me? You been holding back something that would make sense of what’s been happening?”

Big-eyed, looking shocked and hurt, she shook her head. I doubted she was telling the truth. Well, maybe, by her own lights, she was telling her own version.



But it sure felt like there ought to be something more.

Breakfast usually brightens my outlook. I had been known, recently, to go into my morning runs with a smile on my puss. This morning was going to be an exception. This morning my mood just got blacker. I didn't finish eating.

I pushed back from the table. Carla Lindo was still shoveling it in. Where do those little ones put it? "I'm going to see Himself." I walked out. Dean looked hurt, like I'd made some nasty remark about his cooking.

I was no bundle of sunshine falling on the Dead Man, either. I stepped into his room, grumped, "You awake?"

I am now, o Shield Against Darkness.

"Huh?"

An attempt, however futile, to cajole you away from your gloom. I abandon it forthwith. There is no hope. Review events of last night.

I reviewed events of last night. I spared no detail. I finished, said, "I'm open to suggestions." My own best notion was to lock the front door and not answer it till the world straightened itself out.

Hardly practical, Garrett. Blaine's death is a setback, yes. But, I agree, it seems unlikely his murderers obtained the Book of Dreams. Unless Mr. Crask and Mr. Sadler were not telling the whole truth.

"Huh?" I was ready to get in there and mix it up with Puddle.

I suspect that Chodo Contague would be very interested in the Book of Dreams if he became cognizant of its capacity and function. Very interested, indeed, considering his personal circumstances.

"Huh?" Again. I was on a roll.

Think! A flash of impatience. We have discussed this already!

Yell, hell. Yeah. Shoot, fire. If Chodo knew what the Book of Shadows could do, he'd be after it like an addict ratman after weed. I'd bet there wasn't a page in the whole one hundred that was a crippled old dink in a wheelchair. He could be young again. He could dance at weddings and funerals. Mainly funerals. He could chase girls and be able to do something when he caught them. Not to mention all the wonderful ways he could use it in his business.

Yeah, Chodo and the book were not meant for each other. "I got it, Smiley. I'm slow but I get there."

Excellent. So. What you really came for was to get me to tell you what to do. To avoid the unwonted labor of deciding for yourself. Very well. First, avoid contact with Mr. Chodo's people as much as possible. Try to create the appearance of disinterest in pursuing the matter further. By way of establishing a foundation for that pretense, I suggest you visit Miss Tate. Assuming, as is probable, you find her mending quickly, you have your basis for proclaiming no further interest. See to that immediately after your morning run.

"What morning run?" I had me a bad feeling here.

Off we went into a grand fuss about me maintaining my training regimen. He got in the last word. He usually does. He's more stubborn, but that's only because he has more time. He can argue for the rest of my life if he wants.

You must also reconnect with the woman Winger. An encounter with her principal could be most instructive.

"Fatal, too, maybe."



We have no idea who he is or where he fits. His very existence lends credence to your ill-formed suspicion that there are more than two parties to the search for the Book of Dreams.

I can't keep anything from him. Not in the long run. Hell. I'd thought I was covering that idea pretty cleverly.

I felt his gloating as he continued, There are two additional areas deserving pursuit. As time permits. The movements and contacts of the Blaine person before his encounter with misfortune. And the whereabouts of our friend Mr. Dotes.

I sensed a touch of concern for Morley. I was a touch concerned myself. Nobody had seen him for a while. He wouldn't disappear.... Unless he'd gone under to do a job or was sincerely concerned about his health. If his health wasn't gone already.

Seemed a little premature to start worrying, though. He hadn't been gone that long. "He probably isn't anywhere. He just hasn't been at his place when I have. No law says he's got to hang around waiting for me to drop in."

Perhaps. Even so.

"I'll check him out." It looked like another full day. I looked forward to it with the same enthusiasm I look forward to arthritis.

Go. Do your running. Visit Miss Tate. Visit Mr. Dotes's establishment. Be back in time for lunch. I will interview Miss Ramada in the interim and prepare additional suggestions.

He would, too. Probably suggestions involving trotting down to the Cantard and back.

Ah. Indeed. Thank you for reminding me. Do keep an ear open for news of Glory Mooncalled. I anticipate word of major events soon.

What? Had he figured some angle nobody else saw? Maybe. He'd anticipated Mooncalled's mutiny, more or less.

Him and his damned hobby. Why couldn't he collect coins or used nails or something?

Hell, I'd have to do the legwork there, too.

I went back to the kitchen for another cup of tea. Breakfast had started working inside me. I could appreciate Carla Lindo a little more. I indulged myself till Dean started grumbling about me being in the way. Never said a word about Carla Lindo, did he? Even though he hates having anybody help him because it disturbs his rhythm and routine.

"Well, I'm off on my campaign of self-torture."

Nobody seemed very excited.

Once on the stoop, I paused to suck in a couple of lungfuls of TunFaire's chunk-style air. Because of the warm spell, it was thinner than usual, what with nobody needing to heat their homes. Didn't have much spice at all, actually. I didn't miss it. I looked around.

Dang me. The sun wasn't even up yet, hardly, and already I knew this wasn't going to be one of my better days.

Winger was hanging out down the way, not hiding at all, just about ten yards beyond the Dead Man's usual effective range. She must've gotten around to doing some homework.



She didn't bother me nearly as much as did several other studious types hanging out trying to be invisible. There wasn't a dwarf among them. They were all human, by courtesy. Not the type you want your daughter to bring home. Bent-nose boys, collective intelligence level about that of a slow possum. There were four of them. With Winger? I couldn't tell. She didn't seem to notice them. Nor they her. Chodo's boys? They didn't have that feel. Took me a moment to figure why.

They weren't neat. In fact, they were pretty scraggly. Chodo's troops have to meet a certain minimal level of personal hygiene, dress, and grooming. These guys never heard of those words. Anyway, Chodo has more respect for me. He'd send Crask and Sadler.

Who, then? The Serpent? But she seemed to prefer dwarves and ogres and whatnot.

All that passed through my head in a couple seconds. I considered going inside and locking up and saying the hell with it all. Then I got mad.

All this time I was stretching and yawning and carrying on like I didn't see a thing. I skipped down the steps and turned right, away from Winger, skipped around a little warming up, then took off running.

Fast. It caught them off balance. The two in the direction I was headed pushed off walls, then exchanged "what now?" looks. I was past the first before anybody made a decision.

Then I started flying.

Somebody else got into the game.

Three quarrels zipped past me, plunging bolts loosed from a rooftop across the street. I don't know why they waited till I was moving to start sniping—though I wasn't all that long getting started and maybe they had to wake up first. The best-spiced quarrel passed a few inches ahead, high. I tossed a glance back, saw a little ball of hair duck out of sight atop the only flat roof on that side of the street.

I sailed past the second thug, heeling and toeing and whooping for all I was worth. People scattered like startled chickens. I bounded over piles of horse apples deposited since the ratmen passed through. The last watcher came pounding after me but it was obvious he lived a dissolute life. He couldn't keep up for a block.

I zigged into a breezeway, zagged through an alley, leaped and dodged assorted snoring drunks and weed-puffing ratmen, scavenging dogs and hunting cats and even one crippled morCartha, zoomed into always busy Wodapt Street, and faded into the crowd.

Easy as that. No problem now till I decided to go home.

Well, it did take a minute or two to really blend in. For a while I was whoofing and puffing so bad everybody backed away.

I got mad all over again. What was this crap, dwarves trying to snuff me all the time? What did I ever do to them? I don't have to put up with that. And Winger.

I had a mind to turn her over my knee. Only she was as big as me and that might take more turning than I could manage. But I'd had about enough. I was ready to start pushing back.

I ambled up to the Tate compound and spent an hour at Tinnie's bedside. She was mending fine. Full of fire and vinegar. We had us a good little spat, and



because she wasn't in any shape for making up, I went away grouchier than ever.

Barely past breakfast time and already it was a memorably lousy day.

One of the innumerable nephews caught me before I made good my escape.

"Uncle Willard wants to see you, Mr. Garrett."

"Right." Just what I needed. A fuss with the head Tate. No matter how rotten I felt, I couldn't get my heart into an argument with him. He'd suffered so much sorrow in the time I'd known him, unearned, that it just didn't seem right to give him any grief.

I went peaceably, ready to absorb whatever aggravation he wanted to give me.

He was at his workbench. Where else? He'd told me once that the family had a touch of elvish blood. I wondered if he hadn't fudged a little and it was really dwarfish. He was addicted to work.

He gave me the fish-eye, face unreadable. "Sit if you like, Mr. Garrett." Maybe I wasn't high up his list after all.

"Something on your mind?" I sat.

"I understand you're looking for the people responsible for what happened to Tinnie."

"Sort of."

"What does that mean? Sort of."

I explained. I wondered how many times I would have to tell the story, in how many versions, before the dust settled.

Tate listened closely. I know he picked out those points where I slipped past something I wanted to keep to myself. He said, "I see." He reflected for half a minute. "I'd like to meet the person who sent that man to kill Tinnie, Mr. Garrett."

"It was mistaken identity. Had to be."

"I realize that, Mr. Garrett. Even so, Tinnie was hurt. Badly. She would have been killed had not you and your friend been nearby. Had you not intervened. I've given this considerable thought. I want to meet the person responsible. I'll pay well for the opportunity."

He'd have to get in line, but why not? "I'll find her. Or him."

"Him? I was under the impression you believed this witch..."

"The Serpent? Seems likely. But, like I said, as time goes by I become more convinced there's another party involved. Somebody working against the Serpent. And anybody else who gets in the way."

"The blonde woman." He nodded. "You might question her."

"Yeah." Like she was going to let me. "Speaking of her, she says her principal's name in Lubbock. Mean anything? Ever heard the name?"

He didn't hesitate. "Lubbock Crister, tanner. Lubbock Tool, drayage. Frith Lubbock. Wholesale greengrocer. Yon Lubbock Damascen, shipping agent. All men I've done business with, one time or another. Surely there are others. Historically, you have Marshall Lubbock, the imperial general. You have Lubbock Candide, the sorcerer, and his daughter Arachne, who were so blackhearted and vicious mothers still use their names to frighten children."

"All right. All right." I'd never heard of any of them but the last two, but he had a point. "There're plenty of Lubbocks out there. And this Lubbock probably isn't named Lubbock at all. Could even be the Serpent under an assumed name."



The little old guy nodded again, his hair floating around his head. He picked up his TenHagens, perched them on his nose. The interview was over. He was going back to work. "Thank you, Mr. Garrett. Please do keep me posted, when you have the odd moment. And do make time to visit Tinnie. She hasn't many friends."

"I will."

"Leo!" He called for one of the nephew horde. "See Mr. Garrett to the gate." Just to make sure I didn't get lost somewhere along the way.

I hit the street feeling oddly relieved, like I'd taken care of an unhappy duty, comparable to a visit to an unpleasant maiden aunt, and now I could get on with work that mattered. I didn't much like me when I recognized the feeling. Tinnie was no old lady turned to vinegar in her solitude. I would have to examine my feelings toward her more closely.

I stopped walking, leaned against a wall, started the process of self-examination while considering my next move.

I don't figure I set a record for the standing high jump but I did go up like I had wings.

"Garrett!"

I came down facing Winger, knowing I'd have been dead if she'd wanted me that way.

This was a free one. The gods wouldn't hand me another chance to get away with napping on the street. "Hey, Winger." I hoped my voice didn't quaver too bad.

How had she found me so fast?

Homework. I'll bet she took my advice and did her homework. There was hope for her.

I looked around. I didn't see the guys who'd chased me. "Where are your brunos?"

"Huh?"

I'd forgotten she was from out of town. She wouldn't know the argot. Brunos are low-grade hired thugs. "The hard boys who were with you outside my place."

"They weren't with me. I didn't know they were there till you took off and they went after you."

"Oh?" The gods shield fools, all right. "Maybe you better think about getting into another line of work. You aren't going to stay alive long in this one."

She shrugged. "Maybe not. But if I go, I'll check out doing what I want to do, not worn out from pulling a plow and making babies."

She had a point. One of the reasons I do what I do is because I get to be my own boss, not a creature caught up in a web of commitments and responsibilities. "I got you."

"It's tomorrow, Garrett. And Lubbock is getting impatient."

Tough, I thought. I said, "All right. Lead on."

She headed toward the Hill. I let her lead and set the pace, kept my mouth shut. She walked like she was still behind a plow. Kind of a waste. If you took time to look her over, you saw she wasn't a bad-looking woman at all, just put together on a large scale. Way too big for my taste. I figured she would clean up pretty nice. If she wanted.

I asked, "You happen to get a look at those clowns who were sniping at me off that roof?"



She grinned. “I did better than that, Garrett. I ambushed them when they came down. Kicked their butts and broke their toys.”

“All of them?”

“There was only four of them. Little hairy fellas. Stubborn. Trick with them is, stay in too close for them to use them crossbows but don’t get so close they can reach you. Work on them with your feet.” She skipped, kicked a foot high. I hadn’t seen boots like those since I got out of the Marines. Those would do a job on somebody. If you had the strength to lift them.

“How come you did that?”

“They was horning in on my game. You ain’t no good to me full of them little arrows.”

“I wouldn’t be much good to me, either. Wish I knew where they came from.”

“Them fuzzballs?”

“The very ones, Winger. That makes three times they’ve come after me.”

Recalling that I started watching my surroundings with more enthusiasm.

We were headed toward the Hill. Her principal had to be a stormwarden or firelord or... I tried to recall which of our sorcerer elite might be in town. I couldn’t think of a one. Everybody who was anybody and old enough was down in the Cantard helping hunt Glory Mooncalled.

If I was the political type, I’d figure this was a great time for an uprising. Our masters hadn’t left anyone to keep us in line. But I’m not a political type. And neither is anyone else. So we’ll just keep going on going on the way we’ve always gone on—unless Mooncalled pulls off his greatest coup yet and arranges it so none of them come home.

After deliberating, Winger told me, “I don’t know where they come from, Garrett. But I got a good idea where they went.”

“Ah?” Turn up the charm and cunning, Garrett. Shuck and jive this rube right out of her socks.

“Twenty marks. Silver. After you see Lubbock.”

I’m nothing if not adaptable. “I’ll give you three.” I wasn’t carrying much more than that.

“It’s your ass. You don’t figure it’s worth twenty marks, I’m not going to argue with you.”

Some of these rubes have a certain low cunning and a nose for sniffing profit out of disaster. “Make it five, then.”

She didn’t say anything, just led me on toward the Hill. All right. She’d come around. Five marks was a lot of money to a country girl.

A couple of dwarves ambled across an intersection ahead. I blurted, “Ten.” And they hadn’t even looked our way. Hell, they never did. They were just a couple of short businessmen.

Winger ignored me.

All right. I know. I gave myself away there. But I was nervous. You’d be nervous if you had dwarves trying to poop you every time you stuck your head out of the house.

Dean doesn’t let me do the marketing, either.

I didn’t let up on keeping a lookout. Not for a second. I didn’t see anything disturbing, either, except once I caught a glimpse of a guy who could have been



Crask, but he was a block away and I couldn't be sure. I did grin, though. That might be something to bargain with.

I stopped, studied our destination.

"Come on, Garrett. Quit farting around."

"I want to look it over first." The place looked like some nut's idea of a haunted castle, in miniature, a hangout for runt werewolves and vampires too limp of wrist to fly. It was a castle, all right, but no bigger than the surrounding mansions. About quarter scale. All black stone and dirty. "Cheerful little bungalow. This where Lubbock lives?" I'd seen the place before but hadn't paid attention. Just another hangout for some nut on the Hill. I knew nothing about it.

"Yeah. He owns it. Only, tell you the truth, I don't think his name is really Lubbock."

"No! Really?"

She gave me a double dirty look.

"What do you know about him?"

"He's in metals smelting. That's his business, I mean. Royal contracts. Very rich. I picked that up keeping my ears open. He's a little peculiar."

"I'll say."

"Try to keep a straight face."

I started moving again. Slowly.

I expected zombie guards at the gate. Maybe gnome zombies, since the place was so shrunk down.

Black steel bars covered its few windows. A toy drawbridge spanned a toy moat five feet wide. Nonhuman, fangy skulls hung over the gate. Smoke dribbled out of their nose holes. Oily torches burned in broad daylight. Somewhere a group of musicians played spooky music. A dozen morCartha perched on the battlements, living gargoyles. I'll say somebody was peculiar.

A guy who goes to live on the Hill usually buys or builds his dream house there

I stopped, considered the morCartha. They seemed lethargic beyond what was to be explained by the fact that it was daytime. Winger said, "Let's don't stand around in the street." She crossed the drawbridge without a qualm. "You coming?"

"Yeah. But I'm beginning to wonder if this is such a bright idea."

She laughed. "Stop worrying. It's all for show. He's a crackpot. He likes to dress up and play sorcerer but the only magic he can do is make food disappear."

Probably so. If he had any real talent, he'd be in the Cantard trying to outwaltz Glory Mooncalled.

A cadaverous old guy met us. Without a word he led us to a small, spooky receiving room. The walls were decorated with whips and chains and antique instruments whose function I didn't even want to guess. By way of art there was a rogue's gallery of demonic portraiture. Also a couple of real people I probably should have known, did I pay much attention to history. They looked like they'd shaped our past.

Lubbock joined us.

He made the Dead Man look slim and trim. He had to go six hundred pounds if he went a stone. He wore a silly black wizard's outfit that looked like he'd made it himself. It had enough material in it to provide tents for a battalion. The powers



that he got wind of it, they'd have him up on charges of hoarding.

Lubbock smiled a smile that got lost in the ruddy landscape of his face. It made me think of the wax dripping down around the top of a candle. "Ah, Winger. You've managed to get the man here at last. Pay her, Pestilence." A woman who looked like she might be the old guide's grandmother brought Winger a small leather bag. Winger made it disappear fast.

"Mr. Garrett." Lubbock tried to bow. I tried to keep a straight face. Neither of us was completely successful, though I managed well enough.

That old boy had one spooky voice. It sent chills scampering around my back. I bet he spent hours practicing to get that effect. "I had begun to wonder if I hadn't made a mistake employing you."

I thought she'd made the mistake, taking him on as an employer. But sometimes you have to do what you have to do to keep body and soul together. I asked, "How you doing, Lubbock?"

He threw up his hands and crossed his wrists in front of his heart, palms toward me. He made fists but left his little fingers standing. He wagged his pinkies furiously. He had nails almost two inches long. I guessed that was some kind of sorcerer's move. I think I was supposed to be impressed.

And some people I know say I belong in the Bledsoe cackle factory because I don't have a firm grasp on reality.

Winger whispered, "At least pretend to be courteous, Garrett."

"I asked him how he was when I don't care, didn't I? What more do you want?" Blame it on nerves. When people give me the creeps, I get flip. "Get him talking." I wanted answers from Lubbock but had the heebiejeebies bad enough to think of walking.

He got himself started. "Mr. Garrett," again. "Good day. I have awaited our meeting anxiously."

"Pleased to meet you. Whoever you are." See? Courteous. I could have said whatever you are.

Another smile tried to break through and died young, smothered by fat. "Yes. As you surmise, my name is not Lubbock. No sir. That is merely wishful thinking, the heartfelt desire to walk the same path as the great Lubbocks of centuries past."

He rolled his fists over heel to heel with their backs toward me, looked at me between raised forefingers that, more or less, made the ancient sign against the evil eye. "Unfortunately, my dream is denied me by harsh reality."

I recalled Willard Tate mentioning a couple of dead double nasties named Lubbock. Sorcerer types. This guy obviously had less talent than I do. His harsh reality. So he was playing some whacky game.

If you're rich enough, you're allowed

"As you surmise, sir," he repeated, "my name is not Lubbock. Hiding the truth from a man of your profession would be foolish. You need but poll the neighbors to learn that madman Fido Easterman lives here."

"Fido?" People don't even name their dogs Fido anymore.

"It means Faithful, Mr. Garrett. Yes sir. Faithful My father, rest his soul, was an aficionado of imperial history. Fido was an imperial honorarium. Rather like a knighthood today. Though it could be bestowed upon anyone, not just those



nobly born. Yes sir. The man whose name I took in vain, like a momentary domino, my kinsman Lubbock Candide, attained that very distinction. He was an ancestor of mine, you know. The glittering star atop my family tree. Yes sir. But the power in the blood failed after his daughter, Arachne. How I abuse the gods for that jest.”

Man. This clown was a one-man gale. “What’s that got to do with me?” Trying to get to the point. “Why am I here?” I tried to figure the color of his eyes. I couldn’t make them out behind all that fat.

“Patience, my boy. Patience. One never hurries the headsman.” He chuckled wickedly. “Just my little joke, sir. Just my little joke. You are in no danger here

Like hell. Wouldn’t take too much of this to get me foaming at the mouth and talking to little men who weren’t there.

I kept an eye on the staff. They came and went in the background, eager to see their boss in action. He was a real three-ringer. They all wore costumes and spooky makeup. Easterman could afford to pay people to pretend that he was bad.

Hell, maybe he was. In a more mundane way. Amongst the remote voyeurs I spotted one of the men who had chased me away from my place. Don’t call him crazy, though. The Eastermans of the world are never crazy. When you have money, you’re eccentric

“Fido Easterman, yes sir.” He put all his fingers together and made a spider doing push-ups on a mirror.

Then he pulled his hands apart slowly, as though he was pulling against tremendous forces. His fingers shook like he was coming down with a disease.

“I’ve been hearing rumors about a marvelous book, Mr. Garrett. Yes sir, a masterpiece. I wish to obtain that book, sir. I will pay very well indeed to obtain it. Winger has been doing my legwork for me, searching. As you can see, I am not cut out for strenuous effort, however much I might wish it to be otherwise. She has been hunting diligently, of course hoping to separate me from a substantial portion of my wealth. But fortune has not been kind to her. Her only success has been to discover that you may have some knowledge of the book’s whereabouts.” He beamed at me. Before I could get a word in, he continued, “Well, then, sir, from what I have learned of your situation, it’s likely you could use a substantial sum. Paid in the metal of your choice.”

“I sure could. I wish I had something to sell. I don’t know where she got the idea I know anything about any book.”

“Come, sir. Come. Let us not play games with one another. Let us not bandy words I have said that I will pay well to obtain that book, and I will. My word is good, as any fool can discover by posing a few questions in the ores and metals community. But if you do go asking about me there, you will also discover that I have a reputation for getting what I want.”

I didn’t doubt it a bit “All I can tell you about the book is that it exists, maybe, supposedly incomplete. But I don’t have the faintest idea where.”

“Come, sir. Surely you don’t expect me to...”

“I don’t expect you to do anything but stay out of my hair.”

“Sir...”

“I told you I don’t know where it is. You did some checking on me, eh? I tell the



truth? The truth is, I was looking for it myself. For a client. I succeeded only in finding the man who stole it.”

“Ah, sir. Now we’re getting somewhere.”

“We’re getting nowhere. The guy was dead.”

He chuckled. “Unfortunate. Most unfortunate.” I got the feeling this wasn’t news.

I spotted another of those guys who had chased me. It finally sank in. Here was my third force. This nut and his brunos. Those guys probably sent Blaine to the promised land. Maybe they’d done the same with Squirrel. I said, “I don’t want anything more to do with this book. It’s gotten a bunch of people killed already. It’s got the Dwarf Fort dwarves on the warpath. It’s got Chodo Contague out for blood because one of his men got cut.” That got a small reaction. “It’s got a witch called the Serpent and a bunch of renegade dwarves running around the city sniping with crossbows. I don’t need to get in the middle of any of that.”

Easterman closed his eyes and started talking. Actually, he made some kind of speech, but it wasn’t in Karentine. I’d guess Old Forens, which is still around as a liturgical language amongst some of the more staid of TunFaire’s thousand cults. I don’t know ten words of Old Forens but I’ve heard it used and this had that cadence.

Good old Fido was a linguist like he was a sorcerer. But what he lacked in talent he made up in enthusiasm. He howled and foamed at the mouth.

I’d come with Winger hoping to ask some questions. Now I didn’t care. All I wanted was out. Things were sane outside. There were thunder-lizards in the air for the first time since TunFaire’s founding. There were thunder-lizards at the gates. There were centaurs in the streets. There were saber-tooth tigers and mammoths and morCartha and gnomes. My friends had disappeared. Crask and Sadler were acting spookier than ever. But it was sane out there. I could survive in that world out there I told Winger, “I’m thinking about becoming a bricklayer. Bricklayers don’t have these problems.”

She shrugged, kept staring at Easterman like he was a genius revealing the secrets of the universe. Maybe she understood him. She was a little bit twitchy herself.

I gave up and more or less went to sleep on my feet, paying just enough attention so nobody walked up and bopped me with a battle-ax without me noticing. I stayed only because Winger wasn’t ready to leave. I couldn’t leave her with this spook. He might hold a virgin sacrifice, figuring, hell, she used to be and maybe that was close enough. Also, she knew something I wanted to know.

Easterman finished having his fit. “Well, sir. Well,” he said, not the least embarrassed. “Do we have an understanding, then?”

His people did manage to be embarrassed. But they covered it and didn’t walk out. I suppose he paid very well indeed. He’d have to.

He looked puzzled. As much as he could with all that fat to mask expression “I thought I made myself crystal clear, sir.”

“If you made a lick of sense somewhere, I missed it in the smoke.”

“Garrett!” Winger cried

Easterman smiled again. I think that was a smile back in there “Very well, sir. In words even you will understand, then. I want that book. I mean to have that book.



I get what I want. Those who help me to obtain it will be well rewarded. Those who attempt to thwart me will not be so fortunate. Is that clear enough?"

"I got it." I returned his smile. "I'll pass the word to Chodo Contague and the Serpent if I run into them I'm sure it'll set them to shaking in their boots so bad they'll scurry out of the way so you'll have an open field." Threat and counter. All very friendly, with knives held behind our backs.

Winger started apologizing for my barbarism. The more I saw of her, the more I couldn't figure her out.

"No matter, child. No matter. The man has an image to maintain. As we all do, of course. As we all do. Very well, sir. I think our business is quite concluded. We understand one another. I was about to dine. Will you join me? I do set a fine table

I pleaded press of business. I didn't want to see what kind of table this creep set. Could be hazardous. Wasn't lunch time, anyway.

"Very well, sir. As you will. I hope to be seeing you again soon, in circumstances profitable to us all. Plague."

He gestured at the cadaverous old man. "Escort our guests, if you will."

The old man bowed, then led me and Winger to the castle gate. I kept a sharp eye on the old boy. I didn't need to get pushed through any secret doors. I tried making conversation about his boss. He wasn't having any. Maybe that wasn't smart for a guy in his position.

Winger took up the slack. "I'm disappointed in you."

"I'm disappointed in me a lot, too. What did I do to break your heart?"

"That guy is a ripe fruit."

"A whole orchard."

"Worked right..."

"I couldn't take the clown. He could probably tell me something I need to know, but I'd like to hold his toes in a fire for a while."

"Garrett!"

"You got yourself tied in with a loony, Winger. He'll get you killed. I'll take your word you weren't working with those guys who chased me a while back. But I noticed some of them were there, hanging around in the background. You better keep your eyes open." I had a feeling they'd been dogging her since Easterman hired her. A character like him would use a tactic like that.

I had no sympathy for Fido. I didn't owe him squat. And now I had an idea who'd done Squirrel. I'd pass it on next time I saw Crask or Sadler.

We got out of that bughouse. I didn't look back. "Winger, you know anything about the book?"

"Only that it's supposed to be about so by so and weigh fifteen to twenty pounds. The pages are brass."

"Brass. Brass shadows. It's what the dwarves call a book of shadows. Each page has a character described on it. Whoever reads the page can become the character written there."

"Say what?"

We were safely away, without any tail I could spot. I led her to the steps of a public building. They still consider public buildings public here. For now. Subjects gather on the steps. Sometimes they live there in good weather. We could plant



ourselves and talk without getting bashed over the head and told to move along by the hired thugs who police the Hill's streets. "Think about it, sweetheart."

"About what? How?"

"Say a guy has a dream. No matter how crazy the guy or how insane the dream. Eh? Then all of a sudden he gets a real chance to grab it. Eh?"

"You lost me, Garrett."

I didn't think she was that slow. I played it out, explained a little more about what the book was supposed to be. "That creep Fido wants to be a wicked wizard more than anything in the world. But he doesn't have the talent it takes to trip over his own feet. He's so bad at what he wants it's almost easy to feel sorry for him. Almost. But I can't when it comes to the Book of Shadows. A nut like him gets it..."

Her eyes widened. "Oh."

"Oh. Yeah. You got it. But he doesn't have the book. Yet. We know that for sure because he's so crazy he'd be taking his wicked-wizard act all over town if he did."

"Let me think about this, Garrett."

"You know him better than I do."

"I said let me think." Her face furrowed up exactly the way Saucerheads does when he concentrates. I had a feeling she was like Tharpe in ways other than size. She'd be one of those who think slow but steady, sometimes getting there more surely than those of us who are quicker of wit.

After a while I said, "He must have been in touch with Blaine sometime. Else how would he know about the book?"

"Yeah. Blaine did offer to sell it to him, I think. But something happened. He backed off."

"And got killed for his trouble."

"My fault, probably I found Blaine for Lubbock."

"Huh?"

"I told you, I'm a manhunter. He wanted Blaine found, I found Blaine."

I glimmed Easterman's hangout. It wasn't far away. Not far enough. Somebody was up top trying to lure a flying thunder-lizard down. I guess Fido wanted to catch him his very own dragon.

"But he didn't get the book."

"I guess not. I don't know why. Unless Blaine spotted me and guessed who I was."

Curious. Blaine hadn't had the book when they'd killed him, logically. But he'd had it earlier, and had tried to use it, because he'd been Carla Undo when he'd stumbled into my house. The Serpent couldn't have it any more than Fido did, else she wouldn't be trying to kill me. She'd be headed out of town.

Gnorst? I'd seen no evidence he was even looking. I'd guess he didn't have it, either.

So where the hell did it go?

Why should I care? Tinnie was going to be all right.

I asked, "You think anybody ought to have that kind of power?"

"Me, I could handle it. But I don't know nobody else I'd trust."

"And I don't know about you."

"How much you pay me not to find it?"



“What?”

“I come to the city for the money, Garrett. Not to save the world.”

“I like a straightforward thinker. I like a girl who has her priorities straight and knows what she wants. I’ll give you a straight answer. Not a copper. You don’t have a glimmer where it is.”

“But I will I find things real good. Tell you what. When I find it, I’ll give you a chance to outbid Lubbock.”

“And the Serpent? You maybe ought to think about that some. While you’re at it, think about what happened to Blaine.”

“That’s no problem.”

“Look, Winger, it’s stupid not to be scared. There’s some bad people in this town. And you got some of the baddest looking for you. On account of Squirrel. If they catch up with you, you can kiss your tail good-bye.” I mentioned it because once again I’d glimpsed somebody who looked like Crask.

“I can take care of myself.”

“I saw, when you tried to jump me.”

“Damn it, Garrett, I’m not your responsibility. Back off”

Something about the way she flared there, and her choice of words, made me wonder if the Winger I was seeing was the real Winger. “All right. All right. Tell me where those dwarves went.”

“Twenty marks.”

“Mercenary bitch. You’d sell your own mother.”

“If the price was right. Two marks. To cover expenses. Won’t do you much good. She’s dead.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Oh, she’s still breathing. She’s just been dead from the chin up for the last thirty years. All she knows how to do is whine and bitch and make babies. Sixteen, last time I counted. Probably a couple more by now. Her almost bleeding to death having the fourteenth, then keeping on pumping them out, was what made up my mind I didn’t want to be like her”

“Twenty marks.” I didn’t blame her. Peasants live short and ugly lives, uglier for the women. Maybe she didn’t have anything to lose, considering. “But I don’t have it on me right now.”

“I’ll trust you. They say your word is good. Just don’t get yourself croaked before I can collect.”

“So talk to me. Where are they?”

“You going there right now?”

“Yeah. If you tell me.”

“Mind if I just show you? Might find me something interesting, too.”

We’d hardly begun walking. Suddenly people started running around cackling at each other like the world’s biggest chicken herd. They didn’t act scared, they just wanted to know what was happening. Me too, you bet. I got no sense from the confusion till everybody stopped, faced the same way, and pointed.

The shadows came first, rippling over us. Then came the monsters, out of the morning sun, a good dozen of them. Instead of drifting way up high, they were down at rooftop level, wing tip to wing tip, necks snaky and heads darting around. They screeched as they went over. MorCartha appeared from nowhere,



diving for safety below.

Nobody panicked. There was no cause. Those things were big but not massive. They couldn't carry anyone off. Maybe a cat or small dog. They didn't have the wing power to go flapping away with anything heavier.

Somebody nearby observed, "They're cleaning out the pigeons." Which was why their heads were darting around. "One comes along ahead of the others and flushes those feathered rats, then the rest get them on the fly."

Somebody else said, "I hear they's a bunch of the big meat-eaters in the hills up north."

Grimmer news, that. Some of those critters stand thirty feet tall, weigh a dozen tons, and snack on mammoths. The farmers would be in for some excitement. I told Winger, "There you go, you want to make money. I know a guy pays prime rates for thunder-lizard hides." Willard Tate used thunder-lizard leather for the soles of army boots.

Winger spat. "Easier money here." Like I'd made a serious suggestion. Not subtle, friend Winger.

We started moving again. When we hit a quiet stretch, she said, "I didn't know you had those things around here."

"We don't. Usually. Something must be pushing them south. They don't like it down here. Too cold and unfriendly."

Which sparked a thought. If there were big carnivores rampaging through the hills, they wouldn't last. One chilly night and that would be that. The farmers would sneak around and feed them a few hundred pounds of poisoned steel while they were too sluggish to protect themselves. Then Old Man Tate would find himself with more hides than he could handle.

One reason thunder-lizards stay away from the sapient races is they always get the dirty end. They're pretty dim, but they've learned that teeth and claws and mass are only so much use against brains and sorcery and sharp, poisoned steel.

Which is another reason we didn't see much fear. Not to mention the fact that TunFaire is surrounded by a wall no thunder-lizard could climb.

The excitement made it difficult to tell if we were being tailed, by Fido's boys or Chodo's. I took it for granted we had company. I worried more about Easterman's clowns than Chodo's troops. The latter would be pros. They'd be predictable. All I knew about the brunos was that they could be deadly.

As we walked I hammered away at Winger, trying to get through. She couldn't believe things were as black as I claimed. She didn't understand how potent the Book of Dreams could be. Or she didn't want to.

We'd just passed Lettie Faren's cathouse, which clings to the skirts of the Hill like a malignant parasite, and I'd started telling Winger a story about something that had happened there. I was worried about the woman. She didn't get the chuckle she should have.... Sadler stepped out of an alley. Just for a second. Nothing special to someone who didn't know him. But I knew him. I glanced back. I doubted any tail would have spotted him.

He wanted to talk to me. Did I want to talk to him? Particularly, did I want to walk down a dark alley with him?

Well, maybe I could get him off my tail. "Winger, I got to see a man about a dog. Hang on a minute." I headed toward that alley hitching my pants. Watchers



would buy it if I didn't take all day.

I was at a disadvantage stepping out of the brightness into shadow. If Sadler wanted me, he had me. I said, "Make it fast."

"Right. Heard you had a close scrape."

"Yeah. Dwarves. Again."

"I heard. That the woman we been looking for?"

"The very one. Only she didn't cut Squirrel. I think I know who did. Brunos who work for a guy called Fido Easterman."

He snickered. "Fido?"

"It's an imperial title. Don't make mock. Yeah. He's crazy as a platoon of loons. Real candidate for the ha-ha house. Got a place up the Hill looks like a haunted castle. Wants to be an evil sorcerer."

"He isn't?"

"Like a stone isn't. He's just crazy. Maybe it's his business. Metal smelting. Maybe he's breathed too many fumes off the crucibles. He's got four brunos that I spotted. Not first water. I think he went for cheap over competent."

Sadler clicked his tongue, looked thoughtful. He seemed distracted. Odd. He'd wanted to talk to me, not the other way around.

I said, "There's a good chance they offed Blaine, too."

Sadler clicked again, looked even more thoughtful. Maybe he was turning into a philosophical cricket. It could happen. Stranger things have.

"What?" I asked. Impatient me. Just because a whiz don't take twenty minutes.

"These guys are second rate, eh?"

"Looked it to me." Was he paying attention?

"What about that door? Who cut Squirrel so deep? Somebody with a little strength, eh?"

I hadn't thought of that. "Yeah. I guess."

"You guess. That's you, Garrett. Guessing and stumbling around in the dark till you fall over something. Reason I wanted to talk to you, we got a line on some dwarves. Probably won't do you no good. They was in a big dust-up down on the Landing. Dwarfish gang fight. One bunch jumped another bunch. After, some headed for Dwarf Fort, some headed toward the Bledsoe. I'd call it a draw, far as how it turned out. I got some guys trying to track the ones went toward the hospital. Thought you'd want to know."

"Yeah. Thanks." I forgot to mention Winger and I were on a trail. Better to have the hard boys headed somewhere else. "This is turning into the longest leak in history. Anybody was watching me they'd be getting suspicious."

"You worry too much. Crask can handle them. But go on. Catch you later." He drifted into shadow, taking his aura of menace with him.

"Yeah. Later." I stomped out of there hitching my pants and shaking my head.

Winger said, "You must have a five-gallon bladder, Garrett." She was breathing heavy.

"Yeah. Something happen?"

She gave me a mocking smile. "Nothing I couldn't handle. Some guy tried to pick me up. I discouraged him."

"Oh. Let's move." I wanted to see what I could see before Chodo's boys stumbled into my way. Always seemed to be people turning up dead when they did.



Winger seemed disappointed that I didn't have any banter or follow-up questions about her encounter. I shrugged it off.

It was hard to make any speed. The streets had filled with people gawking at the pigeon exterminators. One glided over, pathfinding I said, "I hear those things only go thirty, forty pounds." This one went right over the Tate compound, which wasn't far away. I wondered if Tinnie was watching, too. For no reason I could finger I was feeling blue.

"Cheer up, Garrett. We'll find that book and get rich."

Or dead. Lots more likely dead.

The longer we walked the more certain I became that I'd have to renegotiate with Winger. I glanced at her, big as me, strutting along like she dared the world to take its best shot. Something about her unjustified cockiness appealed to me. Give her a dose of sense, she might be all right.

"Hey, Winger. That twenty isn't an open offer. I won't buy a pig in a poke. You got to deliver dwarves."

"No cat in this bag, Garrett. You'll get dwarves."

Cat and pig, both expressions come from an old country con. Once upon a time peasants took piglets to market in a 'poke.' Some grifter got the idea of stuffing the bag with a cat and selling it to somebody gullible enough not to look inside before he handed over his money. So. Pig in a poke, cat out of the bag.

I wanted dwarves. I got them. But not exactly in mint condition.

"What's going on?" Winger muttered. People were milling around a tenement that had seen its best days a hundred years before I was born. People who weren't interested in the ongoing airshow.

"Trouble," I told her. "Past tense. Else we'd have a desert here."

"Ghouls?"

"You could say that."

She pushed through the crowd, not caring who she shoved or elbowed. She was mad, perfectly willing to get in a fight. I wondered if I ought to be around somebody who had herself a war on with the whole world.

The first dead dwarf lay sprawled in the tenement entrance, hacked and stabbed and twisted up into an unnatural position. He clutched the hilt of a broken knife. "Got swamped in a rush, looks like," I said. "Anybody see it happen?" I'm a dreamer.

The nearest vultures looked at me like I was crazy. I shrugged, pushed inside. No crowd in there, which suggested the folks outside expected city busybodies any minute. People not worried about the Watch would have been inside collecting anything the dead couldn't use anymore.

The Watch seldom bothers doing much policing or chasing, but they do grab folks found on the scene, then make life miserable for them. I told Winger, "We'd better do this quick."

"Do what?" She sounded depressed. I supposed she was thinking about all the things she couldn't buy with the money I wasn't going to pay her.

"Look the place over. See what's to be seen."

"Why? All you're going to see is more dead guys."

She had a point. There was another on the first floor landing and three in the hallway on the second. Two of those may have been attackers. They were better



kempt, better clad. Gnorst's bunch.

The fight had proceeded along the hallway, scourged a half-dozen sleeping rooms, and tumbled down a cramped rear stairwell. None of the rooms had doors. Most had been torn apart by somebody in a hurry looking for something. We found a ratman and a dwarf, both critically wounded and a lot of nothing else. I asked, "Was this the place you wanted to sell me?"

"Sure was." Still depressed.

"You tried."

"That don't put money in my pocket. What's that racket?" She meant the yelling out front.

"Watch must be coming. People telling each other to make themselves invisible. Which isn't such a bad idea." I stomped down the back stairway. Behind me, Winger muttered about her luck couldn't turn worse if she prayed. Her vocabulary wasn't unique or imaginative, but it was colorful.

The back way out featured a broken door. I squeezed through. The mess beyond suggested somebody tried to hold Gnorst's dwarves there while the renegades made their getaway. One of Gnorst's dwarves lay partially buried in litter, alive enough to groan. I tried asking him questions. If he spoke any Karentine, he was too involved in his own misery to respond. He did manage one dwarfish outburst filled with fireworks, the only word of which I caught was "ogre." I told Winger, "This one will be all right. If the Watch don't lynch him just to make believe they're doing something useful."

"I think they're in the building." There was a racket inside.

"Time to go. Watch your step." TunFaire's alleys serve many unplanned uses, especially those of trash dump and public relief facility. The quality of cleanup attention they get from the city ratmen declines as one moves farther from the Hill. What the lords don't see don't exist. We were far from the hub of the wheel here, in a stretch so foul it boasted no homeless tenants.

A Watchman stepped into our path as we approached the street. Being a naturally courteous kind of guy, I'd let Winger go first. The Watchman was about five six and tricked out in those gaudy blues and reds, a pretty little devil who got him a nasty grin when he saw he had somebody boxed. He started to say something.

What did he want to say? Who the hell knows? Winger grabbed him by the throat, planted one on his nose, hoisted him up, and flipped him into the mess behind us. Like he weighed about six pounds. I wanted to gawk but knew it wouldn't work. He had friends. "Bright move, Winger. Real bright." I hoped he hadn't seen me well enough to know me if we met again.

I put the old heels and toes to work doing what the gods intended and didn't slow down till I was ten blocks away. Huffing, puffing, snorting like a bilious dragon, I looked for Winger. Not a sign of her. She'd gone her own way. Which was maybe an excellent idea and one I ought to hope she'd pursue indefinitely. A guy could get hurt hanging around with people like her.

I trust the light was feeble there, the Dead Man sent. Winger's behavior amused him. Is there any likelihood the Watchman recognized you?

"Why should he?"

You are a known character.



That sack of petrified lard was worried about losing his free ride!

He wouldn't have admitted it if I'd set a fire under him but the truth smoldered through. If he lost me, he might actually have to work to keep a roof over his head. There's nothing in this world he loathes more than work.

The fact that he was worried worried me. It was out of character. I take my life in my hands every time I go sniffing around after the bad boys. That never bothered him before. It got me thinking and that's always dangerous. Wondering if he hadn't had some premonition. Wouldn't surprise me to find he could peek into the future. Especially after the way he'd been guessing what Glory Mooncalled would do.

"What's happened?" I thought it a perfectly reasonable query. He ignored it. "Be that way, then." I took my question to Dean.

"Nothing," Dean told me "Except that he did hint that he was getting something like a black vibration out of the Cantard. I think he meant he felt something happening down there."

"Oh, my. It'd have to be big." Oh, my, oh, my.

I couldn't believe it was anything but imagination. Dead men got nothing to do but fantasize. But... If something that big was happening, it had to involve Glory Mooncalled.

When the going gets tough, the tough get going. When the going gets tough, Garrett puts his feet up and has a beer. I took a pitcher into the office and snuggled up with Eleanor. We had us a chat about whether or not I had any obligation, anywhere, now I could be sure Tinnie was going to be all right. Eleanor didn't have much to say, but somewhere along the way, after things got a little dizzy, I recalled that I'd taken on a client, a wee lovely who thought me finding an improbable book could save her father's bacon.

I didn't want to believe in the thing, but people and dwarves were dropping like flies. We were playing morCartha down here on the ground. I was caught in it, like it or not. Somebody wanted me to join the flies.

Dean brought beer and a stern look I asked, "Where's Carla Lindo?"

"Guest room. Worrying." He assumed his human roadblock stance. "She doesn't need comforting. She needs help."

"Yeah. Sure. So do I. You don't see me getting any. Hell. I'm done waiting for it to come to me. I'll go round it up." I drained another mug of courage, checked my portable arsenal, headed for the door. Dean trotted along behind grinning like an old death's-head.

His romantic notions would be the death of me yet.

I'm immune to romantic notions, of course I'm a block of heavy metal unshakably planted at the center of a plain of common sense, illuminated by the sun of reason.

Right. Look up. See the swarms of pigs flying south for the winter? I hadn't been inside, isolated from the city ambience, for long, but something had changed. Some new level of tension had been reached. There were fewer people out. Those who were seemed nervous. I could see no real reason.

I visited Morley's place but found no Morley. I went away puzzled, headed for Saucerhead's shabby den.

Tharpe was out, too. Not one of his mouse-size lady friends was there to clue me



where he'd gone, either. 'Twas a puzzlement

I went away frowning. Something had to be going on. Especially with Morley. He faded from sight sometimes, but I'd never known him to take his whole crew with him. There'd always been some way to get in touch.

I headed for home.

I got the news from a neighbor moments before I reached the house.

"Big roughhouse in the Cantard, Old Bones," I told the Dead Man. "Word's just in. All mixed up. Sounds like our troops and the Venageti caught up with Mooncalled at the same time, some place called Broken Back Canyon. No word how it came out yet, though." All the neighbor knew was that the battle had been all-time big. I assumed the northbound dispatches had been sent immediately on contact. The mere catching of Mooncalled was news of major importance.

I suspected as much. To yield vibrational energies I can detect here... It must be the battle of battles and still going on I would not have expected Mooncalled to be capable of so violent a defense.

"Cornered rats But Mooncalled always did the unexpected.

Perhaps. Let us not concern ourselves overmuch before more coherent informatton arrives. I sense that you are troubled.

"What a gernus. Amazing how you figure things out." I told him about my day, such as it was so far.

Go eat. Let me think.

I did that, without a squabble. I was that down, feeling that inadequate.

"He's had an hour," I told Dean, who was thoroughly sick of me hanging around the kitchen. "That ought to be long enough for even a genius." Stomach full, now optimistic enough to have put aside thoughts of suicide, I hit the hallway.

Carla Lindo stepped out of the Dead Man's room. She carried a broom and dustpan. I stopped to gape. Behind me, Dean started apologizing.

"She wanted to do something, Mr. Garrett. And he doesn't bother her."

"Fine." No broom ever took my breath away. No. She'd just turned my spine to jelly with a look that should have gotten the fire bells sounding all over town.

I grabbed myself by the collar and dragged me into the Dead Man's room before I soaked the carpet with drool.

She is attractive, is she not?

"Huh? You too?" We lived in an age of wonders indeed. The millennium was at hand. He never said anything nice about persons of the opposite sex. But maybe Carla Lindo was opposite enough to touch even the dead.

You have something to report?

Report, it may help you avoid hyperventilation.

"I already told you everything."

Oh. So you did.

Somebody started pounding on the front door. The Dead Man didn't appear interested. I ignored it. Whoever might go away. It was time to uncomplicate my life.

I have been thinking, Garrett.

"Hey, that's great I'm glad to hear it. Especially since that's what you get paid for."



Garrett! Time is of the essence.

"So quit wasting it. I've only got maybe thirty years left."

I have been mulling this Book of Dreams. It occurs to me that Chodo Contague must soon, if he has not already, discover the nature of the root of all this excitement. It occurs to me that, then, his interest will intensify, passing beyond professional revenge.

"Huh?" He does go on like that "You lost me." Not really, but he does like to feel smarter than the rest of us and the best way to keep him moving is to appeal to his ego.

The more I consider this Book of Shadows, the more sinister and seductive it seems.

I made appropriate noises indicating awed curiosity

We all play roles all the time, Garrett. We all develop multiple faces we don't according to the situation and companion of the moment and, perhaps, according to the advantage we hope to acquire. How terribly convenient it would be to have the ability to become whatever we wanted, filling the role to perfection, whenever that suited our whim. He sounded wistful. Having a Carla Lindo around can do that to anybody. How very convenient if we happen to be afflicted with terrible handicaps.

Like being dead, maybe? "I get you. But my inclination is just to squat here till we see how the wind's blowing"

Unacceptable. There is a balance that must be rectified. Not to mention the fact that we have undertaken to aid Miss Ramada. I must do some additional thinking on how best to proceed. While I do so, I suggest you cross the hall Dean has installed Mr. Tate in your office. He appears to need reassurances.

"Willard Tate? Here?"

The same.

"The old boy never leaves his compound. What the hell is he doing here?"

You might ask.

Nothing like a subtle hint. "Yeah. Right." I headed for the office.

Tate had taken the guest chair. He didn't fit. Too small. Like a wispy, gray old gnome. Dean had settled him with a pitcher He was working on that and flirting with Eleanor. I said, "Three minutes more and you wouldn't have caught me home." Just to suggest that I was a busy man.

He glowered. "Tinnie's taken a bad turn, Garrett." He gestured reassuringly, though. "Won't kill her, they tell me. But it's enough to leave me an emotional wreck. I came here to find out if you've learned anything new"

"Not a lot." I told him about my day

He shook his head slowly, angrily, looked at Eleanor as though he was talking to her "I'm wasting my time and yours. I know that. But I couldn't work. Couldn't sit still." As he spoke he changed, gaining an edge of steel "I want to meet this woman who calls herself the Serpent. I want to tell her a thing or two."

"She's a witch, Mr. Tate. And not any tealeaf reader, either. Not easy to reach and big trouble if you do. Moreover, my partner has cautioned me that Chodo Contague should be developing a more than passing interest in her." I explained why.

Tate rose. He would have paced had there been room. "I don't like seeing Tinnie



hurt, Garrett. Nor any Tate. Especially not for no reason. I won't endure it. Chodo isn't a problem. I have money. I have proven connections. I can buy myself a stormwarden if I care to."

"Sounds like the frying pan to the fire to me. Suppose you do buy you one. What happens when he figures out what the book is?"

"I don't much care."

"You ought to. I do. We have obligations that transcend—"

"Crap."

"It's not quite law of the jungle and survival of the fittest out there, Mr. Tate. Not yet. And that's mainly because some of us do what's right. Listen to me. That book is evil incarnate. Even if every character recorded in it is as sweet and naive as Tinnie, the book is an instrument of darkness. Its only use can be to do evil."

Was this me speechifying? My oh my.

I'd started thinking about how I could use the book myself. I suspected anybody who heard about it would do the same. Human nature. How could anyone who possessed it resist abusing the power it would confer?

"Think about this. If the Book of Shadows didn't exist, would Tinnie be a step from death's door? How about all the people who've already died because of it? It's pure evil because it brings out the worst in everybody."

In his best moments Tate looks like he's noshing lemons. This wasn't one of his best times. "I think you're splitting hairs, Garrett. That book didn't kill anybody. People made decisions and acted on them. Only then did people die."

"Those decisions were warped by knowledge of the existence of the book."

"You're quibbling. We're quibbling. Why? Are you trying to get money out of me? Why on earth are you sitting there talking to me at all?"

Best question he'd asked so far. "Courtesy, Mr. Tate. Courtesy."

"Why don't you toss me out? I'm just an old pain in the ass who's keeping you from doing something useful."

He was in a mood, he was. "You have a suggestion, what? Maybe I should rent a horse and go galloping around yelling 'Come out, come out, wherever you are.'"

His control had grown ragged, but he actually gave my question consideration.

"I'd like to do something, Mr. Tate. I want to do something. My style is to grab loose ends and keep picking till things unravel. But I'm having trouble finding any loose threads. All I can do is keep getting in the way and hope that leads somewhere. Meantime, I keep tripping over all these other people who're looking themselves."

Willard Tate wasn't a wealthy man because he let his emotions rule him. He clamped down. He thought. He told me. "You have resources. The girl. The dwarf chieftain. Those men who work for Contague. Find those two. Keep an eye on them. Let them do your hunting."

He was a storehouse of ideas, all right. Crazy ideas. Follow Crask and Sadler around? Why not just tie boulders to my toes and go for a swim? Save us all time and trouble.

"They're only men, Garrett. Chodo's just a man. You've faced down stormwardens. You've invaded a vampire nest. Did those things use up all your courage and leave you a crippled old man, too?"

He was a manipulator, that guy. "No. What did he want, really?" I hadn't yet



gotten a real grip on the fact that he was here. Had he slipped his moorings?

“Money and contacts, Garrett. I’ve got them Chodo Contague doesn’t intimidate me. I want this Serpent creature. Get her for me. Destroy her book if you want. It means nothing to me. Just get me her. My mind is set. I’ll pay whatever it costs. If you have to work through Chodo Contague, do it. Tell me what you need and I’ll provide the tools. But don’t sit there cringing.”

I wasn’t cringing, but wasn’t going to argue. He’d started sounding like a candidate for the cackle academy. Having him behind me was all right but preferably far behind and not on any crusade.

How do I get into these messes? I glanced at Eleanor. “Why me?”

Hell. I should get out of this racket. Weider still wants me at the brewery. I could handle security there, work regular hours, and never worry about getting caught up in any wackiness.

A book of shadows that lets somebody change characters like I change socks. Come on. I don’t need it.

Tate and I looked at each other for a while. We drank some beer. He had his anger worked out now and seemed abashed. I’d never seen him that way, but in this world anything can happen.

The pitcher went dry. I called Dean. Carla Lindo came. Tate squeaked. The resemblance to Tinnie was strong in the weak light. I said, “This is Carla Lindo Ramada, Mr. Tate. The lady the assassins were after.”

He stared. “I understand their mistake. Speaking of which, I made a big one coming here. Made a real fool of myself, eh? Let me get out of your way, Mr. Garrett.” He rose, still staring. Carla Lindo was embarrassed.

His sudden change of attitude left me twitchy. I didn’t believe it but didn’t know him well enough to guess what he was thinking.

But I had the Dead Man to explain it to me. I said, “I’ll see you to the door.”

Tate was still looking at Carla Lindo when I closed the front door. A platoon of his relatives awaited him out there. Tinnie was the only Tate who went around alone. I wished that just the once, she’d clung to family custom. I’d just as soon I’d never heard of the Book of Dreams.

I joined my permanent houseguest. “What was that all about?”

He wished to discover if you had learned anything new. He is considering taking matters into his own hands. Miss Tate’s relapse appears to have unhinged him.

“You ask me, his hinges never were on tight. Damn. He’s one stubborn runt. He could cause a lot of grief.”

That appears to be his intent.

“You get anything useful out of that thick head?”

The best time to purchase leather futures. Should you care to get into the shoe and boot trade.

“You’re a scream, Old Bones. Har-har.”

Gnorst has been in the thick of it lately. Go see if he will tell you anything.

“Right.” it was getting dark out. I really wanted to take a stroll amongst the screeching morCartha and lurking dwarves. “Hell, why not? I still got places that don’t have bumps and bruises. Maybe if I get out there fast enough, I can even get myself killed.”



He knew no mercy. Do not forget to inquire after the latest from the Cantard.

Probably had a bet on with himself. Loghyr can do stuff like that if they're inclined. They have multiple brains and sometimes multiple personalities.

I huffed out of there and told Dean I was going for a walk. Carla Lindo was there with him. I salivated all over the place. She smiled and posed. Saucy. That was a good word for her. Along with about twenty others.

Dean hammered me with dirty looks. That old boy knows me too damned well, I ought to fire him and get somebody less opinionated. But where could I luck onto somebody who'd do half the job he does?

I checked the street good before I stepped outside. I checked again after I stepped out. I saw nothing obvious but stayed ready to duck. No bolts came whispering death. The only noise was that of the aerial circus. The morCartha had taken their show to the riverfront tonight.

I headed for the Safety Zone. It wasn't out of my way. Morley's place was closed up and dark. I went around back. Nothing. Amazing. Even when the front door is closed, there's always somebody in the kitchen.

I was getting worried.

I tried Saucerhead's place next. This time I got an answer but not from Tharpe. A little blonde about big enough to sit on his palm told me she hadn't seen him all day. She got worried because it was me looking for him. She thought he was with me. I told her to relax, we'd just missed each other. She didn't relax.

I didn't either. There was something going on. And I was zooming around in the middle of it like a blind moth amongst a thousand candles.

A sane moth would have landed and saved his wings.

Speaking of flames. I'd accumulated a tail again. I sensed it as I moved away from Saucerhead's place. I didn't run any games on him. Let him think I didn't know. Let him relax. I'd move fast when I wanted to shake him.

I did change my mind about where I'd go next. I'd been thinking of making the rounds of every shady character I knew willing to sell somebody for a copper. None of those people were friends, but they did trust me not to bring down any heat. I'd lose a lot of sources if I went around fingering them even by accident.

So I headed for Dwarf Fort. Gnorst's crowd could take care of themselves.

I went to the same door. The same old boy—or his evil twin—answered my knock. "I'm Garrett," I reminded him, in case his memory was feeble or a different dwarf had taken up residence behind all the facial brush. "I need to see the Gnorst again." I figured if this wasn't the same dwarf, he'd at least have heard of my previous visit.

Same dwarf or not, he had the same talent for public relations. "You Tall Ones are all alike. Think nobody's got nothing better to do than hop when you say frog, even in the middle of the night. All right. All right. If you must. If you insist. Himself, the very Gnorst, said bring you if you turn up again." His manner suggested he thought his boss was a damned fool.

I stepped inside. "Whoa. Let me close that." I pushed the door shut, to a crack, peeked outside.

Whoever was out there didn't show himself. This was starting to spook me. I'd known only one man that good. He'd died. And there wasn't any doubt he was still dead.



Gnorst met me in the same garden Maybe that was the only place outsiders were entertained. “How can I help you tonight, Mr. Garrett?”

“Just checking in I wondered if you’d learned anything since we talked.”

He shook his head. “Not one damned thing.” Man. He lied with such style. I wanted to believe him anyway. You got to admire a character who can jerk you around and make you like it. Only I didn’t like it. He almost snarled as he said, “I would have sent a message if I had. I thought I told you I would.”

Oh really? When? “None of your people knew anything?”

“No”

“That’s curious.”

“How so?”

“There’ve been fights amongst dwarves all day. We’ve had dead dwarves turning up everywhere. I’d have sworn some were yours.”

“You’re a victim of your prejudices and preconceptions, Mr. Garrett. Gods bring on the hour when you stop thinking we all look alike,”

I could plead guilty except the little clown was trying to divert attention. He was lying. I knew he was lying. He knew I knew he was lying. He knew I knew he knew, and so forth. But this was his house and no place to challenge him.

I said, “When I came here before, I didn’t know anything about any Book of Shadows or what dwarves might have to do with making one. Right?”

Gnorst nodded. “Agreed. So?”

“You think finding out would make me more dangerous to somebody?”

“Possibly. Not many nondwarves know the story. Even among us it’s mostly forgotten. It has been said by the wise, knowledge is dangerous.”

“That’s what I thought

“Sneaking up on something, Mr. Garrett?”

I thought some before I explained. I wanted it to stay airborne when I shoved it out of the nest, though it would never soar. “The bad boys paid me no attention before I came down here. They’ve been trying to kill me ever since I walked back out. Makes a guy wonder. How was I different? How did they know? Not to mention how come is it that all these skirmishes between dwarf gangs keep turning out inconclusive?”

Gnorst darkened behind his face fur. He started pacing. “I did hear about you being attacked up the street. I didn’t put it together before. Yes. I see your point. One of your points. They weren’t keeping an eye on you, but all of a sudden, they knew you’d seen me and had become a danger. Though it leaves me embarrassed and ashamed, Mr. Garrett, I must admit that it looks like one of my people is an informer.”

Putting it mildly. “That’s my guess.”

“Out of curiosity, Mr. Garrett, how is it that you’re alive to visit me again? I would think that dwarfish efficiency would extend to setting an ambush.

“I got lucky. Chodo Contague’s men turned up the first time. Second time I started running before they started sniping. I hope there won’t be a next time. I hope they’re on the run from whoever has been hitting their hideouts.”

He chuckled. It wasn’t a nice sound. It was a noise something like the glug-glug of water coming from a ten-gallon bottle crossed with fingernails scraping a slate board.



“I don’t find any of this amusing.”

“I’m sure you don’t, Mr. Garrett. What are you doing?”

I was sneaking toward the edge of the roof. “Somebody’s been following me I thought I might get a look at him from here.”

I didn’t, though. It was so damned dark down there he could have danced in the street without me getting a look. I lied, “So that’s mainly the reason I came by. To let you know I think you’ve got a spy on board.”

Gnorst grunted irritably. My experience is, his kind are naturally crabby. Gnorst was a paragon of manners and patience. Maybe that was why he was the local boss dwarf. He told me, “You didn’t bring me any news I wanted to hear. Now I have to deal with it.”

It’s hard to read a being who grew up in an alien culture yet looks human enough to make you jump to conclusions. But I had a strong suspicion Gnorst was a lot less unhappy than he wanted me to believe. Maybe he thought having a renegade handy was an asset. I could think of ways that would be true.

“I know what you mean. I’ve been a regular fountain of bad news all day. Everywhere I go I’m telling somebody something they don’t want to hear.”

We fenced awhile with words. He wouldn’t give up a thing I could use. I surrendered to the inevitable, told him I was going to go dump it all on the Dead Man. He let me go without another word. He wasn’t as gracious as he’d been. That questionable attitude infected my guide. The dwarf took no pains to make my passage through the place a comfort.

I froze the moment I hit the street, looked around carefully. Garrett don't get bitten by the same snake twice. I saw nothing. Even so, I moved away ready for anything.

Nothing ever happens when you’re ready.

The silence overhead seemed almost ominous. The morCartha had retired, for whatever reason. I almost missed them. They had become part of city life.

I had the night to myself. Unless you count sharing with a tail. It wasn’t a happy feeling. Empty streets always mean trouble to me.

Whoever was after me was spooky. I only ever knew one guy that good, Pokey Pigotta. Maybe this was Pokey’s ghost.

I’d outthought Pokey once when had been on me. Maybe I could use the trick again. It was hard to beat for a guy working alone. I looked for a busy tavern I knew would have a back door.

Not my day. It didn’t work. I didn’t catch anybody sliding in the front door by sprinting around from the back. It was like the guy was psychic. All I accomplished was to let whoever know I knew he was there. Go match wits with a rock, Garrett. Chances are the rock will come out ahead.

Having somebody dog you works on your head. You start out wondering who and why. Pretty soon you’re into what if and then imagination flares and you’ve got a vampire or werewolf or ghoulish pack just waiting for you to walk down a dark alley with your eyes closed.

There ain’t no comforting thoughts, come a dark night.

Hell with the clown. Let him walk his behind off. He didn’t seem interested in messing with me, just in seeing what I got me up to. If I kept moving, he’d have no rime to report to whoever sicked him on me.



I was tired and depressed and short on zest for life. Maybe even a little cranky. I get that way when things keep on not going my way. Call me spoiled.

I was near the Bledsoe Infirmary, a charity hospital supported by surviving descendants of the old imperial family, when I sensed a change in the night. It wasn't obvious, just a difference. Nothing I could pin down. My shadow was there still. The morCartha weren't making much racket. Random flying thunder-lizards still ghosted overhead, chasing bats. The streets remained underpopulated. I wondered if it might not be some holiday among the night people

I paused to consider the Bledsoe, a monument to good intentions having become a symbol of despair. A place of fear, where the poor went to die and the mad screamed out their souls in overcrowded, locked wards. The imperial family did all they could, but their best wasn't enough. Their money and donations of labor barely kept it from falling down. It was huge, gray, ugly, and may have been imposing in its prime, a couple of hundred years ago. Now it was just another shabby old building, bigger than but no better than ten thousand others in TunFaire.

I shook my head, startled by an original thought. I couldn't recall ever having seen new construction anywhere in the city. Was the war that big a drain on resources?

The war is the most important thing in all our lives, whether or not we're directly involved. It shapes our selves and surroundings and forges our futures as every minute passes.

Whatever was happening in the Cantard, so heroic the Dead Man could sense it from here, would have a crashing impact on all our lives.

That scared me. I'm not fond of things the way they are, but the only changes I can see will be for the worse. The bigger the change, the more for the worse.

Some tiny sound reached me, some ghostly flicker of motion teased the corner of my vision. I'd been a step too far away from here and now realized it, and my reaction was maybe more vigorous than it should have been. I did me a wild roundhouse kick toward the movement, brought my foot down, ducked and pivoted and lashed the air with a knife.

Crask was saved by the fact that my tippytoe brushed his chin lightly, pushing him back. He'd thrown himself away at the same time. Now he sat on his duff looking up at me with a goofy expression.

"Say..." he said. "Say. what's wrong with you?"

I had so much juice in me so sudden I started shaking. I'd blown it, really. I took some deep breaths to calm me down, put the knife away, extended a hand.

"Sorry. You startled me bad."

"Yeah? Well, you got no call..." I shut up as he reached with his left hand. I didn't like the look in his eye. I pulled my hand back before he grabbed it and went to chewing on it.

He got up slowly, using only his left hand. I noticed he had his right arm strapped to his stomach. "What happened to you?" Hard to tell in that light but his face looked a little worse for wear, too. He looked less intimidating than usual.

He got up slowly, rubbed his behind. Damn, he looked embarrassed! Maybe it was the light leaking from the Bledsoe... He didn't have an answer.

I leaped to a conclusion. He'd been the guy Winger had discouraged when



Sadler had me in that alley. No proof, and he'd never tell, but by damn I'd put money on it. A copper or two, anyway. I grinned. "You shouldn't ought to sneak up that way."

"I didn't sneak. I walked right into you, Garrett."

I didn't argue. You don't with a Crask or Sadler. "What you doing here?"

"Looking for you. Your man said you were headed for Dwarf Fort. I come down this way figuring you'd be headed back by now."

I was going to have to have a talk with Dean. Though it was understandable he'd answer Crask's questions if Crask put on his nasty face. "What's up?"

"Couple things. You seen Sadler?"

"Not since... Not for a long time. Why?"

"Disappeared." Crask didn't waste many words. "Come to see Chodo right after..." He wasn't going to talk about the incident. "Talked some, then went away. Nobody seen him go. Wasn't told he was supposed to. Nobody's seen him since. Chodo's concerned."

Chodo was concerned. That would be an understatement, as were most statements about the kingpin. In language the rest of us would use, it meant Chodo was mightily pissed.

I don't usually volunteer information, especially to the kingpin's people, but I made an exception. "Guys have been disappearing all over I can't find a trace of Morley Dotes. Likewise Saucerhead Tharpe. You might say I'm concerned, too. I don't hear anything on the street. You?"

He shook his head first, some top skin flashing in the hospital light. "I thought Dotes was sulking on account of we used his place."

"I thought so, too. At first. Only that wouldn't be his style, would it?"

"Nah. Feisty as he is, he'd have busted our heads and kicked our asses out of there if he was really pissed."

"He'd have tried, anyway."

Crask smiled. He did that so seldom it was startling. "Yeah. Tried. I got some business I got to get on with, Garrett. I'm late, I been chasing all over after you to find out about Sadler. I want you should walk along, talk to me. Maybe we can brainstorm out where people are disappearing."

I didn't feel like it but didn't argue. It wasn't that I was afraid of offending him. I thought I might learn something. Call it intuition.

The first thing I learned was that Crask wasn't, for the moment at least, the man I knew and loathed. He was so busy working on something inside him that some of his barriers against the world leaked. He seemed almost human at moments—though not so much I'd want my sister to marry him if I had a sister. I don't and I'm glad. My friends are hostages enough for fortune.

For some hours I'd entertained the notion that Chodo had eliminated Morley and Saucerhead in order to deprive me of resources should I discover he'd become interested in the Book of Dreams. Sometimes you get that way, thinking you're the center of the universe. But once I ran into Crask, the speculation collapsed under the weight of reason.

You grab straws when nothing makes sense.

Morley had dropped out before Chodo could have discovered the book's nature. Even now I had no real reason to suspect he knew about the book. Him looking



for a missing Sadler only made everything murkier.

Who might be making people disappear? The Serpent shouldn't be interested in those guys. She was after the Book of Dreams. Headhunting wouldn't help. The same reasoning applied to happy old Fido Easterman.

So who had reason to eliminate my acquaintances?

Plenty of people, if you took them individually. But nobody was the only answer when you considered them as a group. They didn't share many enemies

Crask agreed.

We trudged along, me leaning into the bitter wind and grumbling about not having a clue. Then about having so many clues I didn't know which had to do with what.

"Where we headed?" I asked. This wasn't helping me any yet. I glanced back I still felt the presence of that shadow that had been with me off and on. I didn't see anything. Like I'd maybe expected I would?

"Tenderloin," Crask mumbled. The wind was getting to him, too. He was trying to shelter his injured arm. "Got an appointment with some dwarves."

Ah. So, "Why didn't I think of that?"

The Tenderloin is sin's homeland in TunFaire. Anything goes, nobody asks questions, nobody interferes with anybody else. Missionaries not welcome. Reformers enter at your own risk. Likewise everybody else. The Serpent's whole gang could hide there in plain sight easy, despite everyone and everything being owned by Chodo. They'd just need to remember not to run in a pack.

I really should have thought of it. The Tenderloin isn't far from Dwarf Fort. It's just a few blocks past the Bledsoe and I'd been told the renegade dwarves had fled that way after one of their skirmishes with Gnorst's bunch. Had I been from out of town and needed to hide, that's where I'd have gone to ground.

So why hadn't I thought to come poke around? I must be getting senile

The Tenderloin never sleeps, it just slows down late. When we arrived, lamplighters were out snuffing lights, conserving oil. During peak hours the area is awash with light, a carnival, but the management doesn't waste a copper that won't return ten. This was the hour of the diehard, when light and darkness were irrelevant.

The Tenderloin is like the whores who are its chief commodity, all paint and makeup on the outside. Behind the flash lies rot and stink and human despair. Even where they could, they don't put makeup on that. By the time you look it in the eye, they've already gotten your money and are interested only in processing you through as fast as can be managed.

The wind grew more bitter by the minute. Maybe that was why the morCartha had taken the night off. Their native valleys are much warmer. The lamplighters hunched inside their ragged coats and cursed into their beards. The barkers for various establishments watched the street through doors cracked scant inches, waited till we drew abreast to jump out and wax rhapsodic about wonders unimaginable available within. They retreated when we signaled Jack of interest. Nobody pressed. They all recognized Crask.

I let him show the way, wandered off inside me in search of one good reason why I kept charging around looking for the Book of Dreams. I'd begun to distrust me. I feared there was a part of me that wanted it the way the Serpent and



Easterman wanted it. The way maybe even the local prince of dwarves wanted it.

There was a new idea. It deserved a look. It might explain why Gnorst was uncommunicative. He might be thinking of trying on Nooney Krombach's shoes.

"Uh-oh," While I was scouting the badlands within, the outer landscape had changed. The streets had emptied. Crask had stopped hurrying. Now he tread softly, clung to shadows.

Something was about to go down.

Crask had a few steps on me. I zagged to the side, up stairs that climbed the face of an old tenement He didn't notice. His attention was focused ahead. I flattened out on the landing in front of a second-story doorway.

I trust my hunches, usually I'd had a sudden, strong one that this was no time for Garrett to be out in the open and a worse one to dive into shadowed alleys. I thought shadow and tried to become one with the chilly darkness, nothing but watching eyes

My hunch was good. I'd barely flattened myself out when every alley in sight barfed hard boys. Crask made hand signals. They all headed for the place that was the target of Crask's good hand.

About then he noticed I wasn't with him anymore. He looked around, startled, spat, cursed, and I knew I'd come one step short of stepping into a big pile of it, maybe.

Had he been leading me to the slaughter?

Joining his party sure didn't look like a brilliant move. I stayed where I was and froze my tail and wondered.

What was wrong with the Serpent? I'd been told and told that somebody who could make a book of shadows was a real heavyweight in the sorcery game. But she didn't act like a heavyweight. Her sort, when they have any weight at all, aren't bashful about throwing it around. But she did her pushing and shoving with second-string hired hands. It was confusing.

The state TunFaire was in, with all our witches and wizards and whatnot off to chase Glory Mooncalled, somebody like the Serpent ought to be able to do whatever she damned well pleased. But she was going about her search like she had no more power than crazy Fido.

Had she put it all into her book, then let that get away?

Sounded good. Sounded like she would be one desperate witch, cranky as a dragon with bad teeth.

Chodo's hordes swept silently toward a tenement. The silence didn't last. A big uproar broke out as soon as a couple got inside. There were enough illegal weapons in evidence to arm a company. The uproar inside reached battle pitch. People were getting hurt in there.

It didn't last. The kingpin's men started dragging captives outside, began forcing them to undress

Uh-oh. The Dead Man's prophecy had come true.

I couldn't hear the orders and threats Crask issued but didn't need to. He had to be looking for tattoos.

I didn't see the Serpent among the prisoners. Neither did Crask. He stomped around and cursed theatrically. I rested my chin on my forearms, shivered, and wondered how he'd known about the tattoos. Had I mentioned them? I couldn't



recall. I guess I must have when I was trying to direct Chodo's attention toward the Serpent.

Crask didn't accept defeat. He had his troops drag out the dead and wounded, lined everybody up, started his inspection all over again. The prisoners shivered and whimpered. The wind was merciless.

He found her. She'd assumed the form of a ratman. Short fur hid her tattoo. The second he made her he popped her upside the head, got a gag stuffed in her mouth and about forty-three miles of rope wrapped around her. She looked like a mummy. He wasn't going to take no chances with a witch

He barked orders, The wind stole them away I didn't need to hear them. The hard boys started marching prisoners toward the river. I had a suspicion their life expectancies weren't those of immortals.

Chodo isn't a forgiving sort. These people had stomped on his toes, sort of.... He has no trouble conjuring justifications.

A half-dozen thugs shuffled off with the Serpent. Crask and a few buddies hung around.

Well. I thought to me, I thought, I guess this means Chodo wants him a little light reading, just to pass those chilly winter nights. A little something to peruse beside the fire.

He wouldn't get the book from the Serpent. She didn't have the foggiest where it was. But he'd get something. He always did. And she had managed to become a credible ratman... Ah There Crask went, back into that tenement, shoulders set like he meant to find something.

That would have been a good time to stroll on out of there—if about four of Crask's buddies hadn't been hanging out, keeping a wary eye.

I got me comfortable in a good position for shivering and thought about Holme Blaine. Why had he come to me as Carla Lindo? Why had he come at all? How had he known to come to me? Through contact with Easterman I could pursue that. Come morning. After a good sleep. If I thawed out enough. Sure be nice to head for bed. Why wouldn't Crask's clowns clear the street?

They didn't do me any favors. In fact, I was getting suspicious that they had something on their pea brains besides the Serpent and her improbable book. They spread out, started poking into shadows and alleys. So.

Crask passed below me, massaging his arm. He muttered something about the cold and "I don't get it. One second he's right there beside me, the next he's gone. He ain't no spook. How'd he disappear?"

Who? Bet you guessed as fast as I did. What a bunch of guys.

I'd suspected it for a while. The kingpin's boys don't generally do you many favors I'd tried setting it aside because I didn't want it to be true. But there it was. Chodo had something special in mind for a guy named Garrett. Maybe just a fancy dinner, a dip in the inside pool he's got out to his place, with the hot and cold running blondes Maybe. Maybe just a friendly chat, old times, like he'd mentioned in the coach. I didn't want to find out. The streets aren't filled with guys who have had chats with Chodo.

One of Crask's boys came over and mumbled something I couldn't catch Crask cussed and growled. "Keep looking!" Then he did an odd thing, for him. He went and perched on the steps of the raided tenement, rubbed his arm for a minute,



rested his chin on his good fist, went away somewhere inside. If he hadn't been Crask of the Crask and Sadler torture show, I'd have pegged him for a man wrestling with his conscience.

He stuck with it till all his boys had given up and gone away. Naturally, I stayed put. Me and my frozen fanny. Ever have yours up in the air with a winter breeze tickling it? I wasn't in any shape to outrun or outfight Crask, or even somebody's granny, had no interest in trying and even less interest in visiting Chodo or maybe checking out the attractions on the bottom of the river. Frostbite can have its attractions.

Garrett is tough and patient. I outstubborned Crask. He finally had enough and went away. I pried my stiff bones loose from that porch and did the same. In another direction.

Boy, was I glad people never think to look up. I swung through the Safety Zone, found exactly what I expected to find. A big nothing. Morley's place was dead and dark. I was beginning to wonder if it wasn't time to start thinking about a wake.

I approached my place carefully. Crask might have it staked out.

Here was a problem that deserved some thought. I was too dependent on my home. If the bad boys wanted to hand me real trouble sometime, they'd just have to cut me off from my base.

Didn't seem to be anybody around. Even that off-and-on presence behind me was absent. Nice that whoever that was occasionally slipped up or needed rest.

I hustled to the door and banged away. Dean opened up. I crabbed, "What took so long?" He answered me with one of his better glowers. He hadn't taken long at all. The house was quiet. "Carla gone to bed?"

"Yes. I shall do so myself, now."

"Where? Across her door?"

"The daybed."

He didn't give me what I deserved for my crack. Oh, well. "Sleep well." I clumped into the Dead Man's room. "Awake there, Old Bones?" It would be like him to take a two-week nap in the middle of things.

Yes. I gather you were frustrated again.

"It just gets worse," I told him. "Any suggestions?"

Get some sleep. While the implications are disturbing, the information is tenuous. I will have to do considerable thinking.

"Get some sleep? That's the best idea you've had in years."

Do not allow frustration to embitter you, Garrett. We all suffer our unproductive days.

Easy for him to say. He had unproductive centuries. "Your talent for noting the obvious remains unblunted."

Indeed. But we cannot indefinitely continue to be in the wrong place or to arrive too late.

"We can't? Want to bet?"

Despair does not become you, Garrett. Dawn follows the darkest hour as surely as the rains fall to earth. Put Chodo Contague out of mind. Rest. That is the most useful thing you can do at this point. Relax. And rejoice. He does not have the book itself.

He was right. The dead fat genius usually is. Sometimes he can't be wrong if he



wants. But: “No. He’s just got somebody who knows how to make a book. That son of a bitch would write his own.” I was in one of those moods where you’re contrary for contrariness’s sake. But maybe I’ve grown up some. I didn’t overindulge. “While you’re pondering, conjure me up a theory that explains the disappearances of Morley Dotes, Saucerhead Tharpe, and Sadler. And figure out who’s following me like a ghost, so good I’ve never caught a glimpse.”

As to those disappearances, I do have a hypothesis. Two, in fact. But they must be tested. And I refuse to discuss them till you have slept.

I knew better but wasted time trying to pry something out of him. He wouldn’t budge. Does anybody ever budge? I don’t think they can. They only don’t or won’t. It’s always negative. How come?

See what kind of mind is out there leading the war on evil? Tsk-tsk.

He wouldn’t budge. And even a boulder anchored to bedrock is less stubborn than a dead Loghyr.

I gave up, shambled toward the doorway.

What news from the Cantard, Garrett? As though he hadn’t read my mind and found that I hadn’t bothered asking around. Just a little nudge, there—nudge, unfortunately, being one of those words that doesn’t come standardly negative. Old Bones nudges me a lot. Hinting that maybe if I cooperated more with him, he’d help me more. Right. Laziness is his reason for hanging around. He’s too damned lazy to finish dying.

I didn’t answer him. I tramped upstairs and threw myself into bed still clad, lay there searching my soul, tossing and turning, for at least seventeen seconds.

Dean wouldn’t let me sleep in. I got four hours of the kind of sleep that fires and earthquakes can’t interrupt, then he arrived. The ultimate disaster.

I cracked one eye a hundredth of an inch, heaved one leg over the side of the bed. That seemed good enough for a day’s work, but that old man wasn’t satisfied. He went for a bucket of water he had cooling out back. He found me sitting up when he got back. I grumped, “How come you couldn’t send Carla?”

“Because you wouldn’t get up. The sausages would burn, the biscuits would blacken, the kettle would boil dry while you tried to lead her astray.”

“You’re one suspicious and negative old goat.” I made an epic attempt to stand up. It didn’t work.

Dean chuckled. “I know you. If I don’t stay between you and Miss Carla, nothing will get done around here for the next two weeks.”

“I’m hurt. I’m in pain. Why don’t you just bring breakfast up here?”

He hefted the bucket of ice water.

“Whoa!” I blinked several times, taking my morning exercise. Dean eased over to a better spot, started to wind up. The man doesn’t know the meaning of mercy.

He sneered. “Maybe that’s not such a bad idea.”

“Huh?”

“My niece Ruth brought me fresh clothing. She’s downstairs. She’d love to serve you breakfast in bed.”

I groaned. The man won’t play fair. Talk about your double-whammy threat. Ruth is a nice kid. Lots of personality. You know how that translates. Dogs don’t howl when she goes by, they whimper and slink, hoping she won’t notice them. “I’m out of my class now.”



He chuckled again. Evil old man.

Then I didn't think well of myself for a minute. Ruth was nice. She couldn't help her looks.

I got completely vertical and wobbled toward the hall. I made it downstairs without killing myself. I even pasted on a wan smile for the ladies in the kitchen. Carla and Ruth had a contest to see who could beam back the brightest. It was like staring into the rising sun. I dropped into a chair and shielded my eyes.

Dean was a prophet. Breakfast was sausages and biscuits, with hot tea. My condition improved radically, though I never achieved sparkle. I staggered up and made the song march to the Dead Man's room. "I'm here, Chuckles." Plop into the chair.

Barely.

"Huh?" I had to figure it out. I'm not at my best in the morning. You may have noticed.

We have only one real option left. We have to be the first to find the book. I consider that imperative now. If we fail, it could mean disaster for TunFaire.

"Eh?" It was too early. I'd left my brain upstairs snoozing.

After sustained reflection I have come to distrust the motives of my friend the Gnorst. The cues are small but there. He has succumbed to temptation.

"I thought so."

We can, for the moment, ignore the Serpent. She has been neutralized. Easterman is of little account.

"You think? He's got Winger playing for him."

She is lucky to slay alive. Her luck will not last. No, Chodo Contague is the hunter who concerns me. The focus has shifted to his forces and those of the Gnorst. Both parties are far more formidable than the originals commanded by the witch and the madman. We now have the potential for a substantial conflict, perhaps fired by some personal animus, considering hints you picked up during your interview with the kingpin.

I had to slap me upside the head to get the clockwork ticking well enough to understand what he was saying.

"Yeah Chodo had sounded bitter about dwarves and Dwarf Fort. He hadn't been able to corrupt the place. Knowing him, he'd like to get in there and kick some ass. He don't like it when folks aren't afraid.

"We're off to a scintillating start today, aren't we? With your brains and my brawn I just know we'll wrap it all up before lunch."

You appear to be coming to life.

"Easy for you to say. All I got to do is breathe."

We do have a lead, Garrett. An oblique angle that should not be difficult to pursue

"Could have fooled me."

Assume our unclad guest was Holme Blaine.

"We know that for a fact."

Not exactly, though it is highly probable. Now. Listen. You have spent considerable energy trying to guess why he came here but none on why he chose us in particular.

I was coming around. I could see both fragments of the hair he was splitting. "I



thought about that.” But not very much.

You thought of the lead, too. The possibility that he came because he knew Miss Ramada was going to come.

“So you think I should see the people she talked to, find out if he talked to them, too, see if he left something with somebody.”

Exactly

“Guess I might as well ask her, then get cleaned up and changed and climb on my horse. The house being watched?”

Not obviously.

“You got any idea who’s been following me?”

No.

“Great. Well, what’s become of everybody who’s disappeared?”

You have not yet reasoned that out?

“No. I have not yet reasoned that out. Would I ask if I had?”

You remain as lazy as ever.

“Damned straight. I got you to figure for me. So give me the benefit of your wisdom. Without the standard shilly-shally.”

Dotes and Tharpe have gone underground because they expect you to bestride your white horse and charge Chodo Contague. I suspect. They read the signs early and moved quickly, seizing the head start.

“Wonderful friends I have.”

I have doubts myself. But I am not as mobile as they. My options are reduced. I am at your mercy. I have to stand and fight.

I grumped.

That is but a hypothesis, Garrett. Though a good one, I think. They know you. You are wont to fly in the face of good sense. Do you truly believe that it is your duty to rescue the world from Chodo Contague?

I grumped some more. How come everybody assumes whenever some baddy poots I’ll grab me my rusty sword? Hell. Considering how Crask wanted to round me up last night, even Chodo thinks that way. Hell again. I don’t want to think I’m predictable any more than the next guy does.

“What about Sadler?”

More difficult, as I have not had as many exposures to Mr. Sadler’s thought processes. My best guess is that he saw the implications of Mr. Contague obtaining the book and exhausted his patience.

“Say what?”

Have you never wondered about his unswerving loyalty?

“Only about a million times. Along with anybody else who ever had anything to do with the underworld.”

Reflect on that patient loyalty in light of what you suspect Mr. Contague might do with the Book of Dreams.

It took me a minute. Hell, it was still early in the morning, remember? I had an excuse. “Say what?” Tell me black is white. Tell me princes of the church are saints, our overlords are philanthropists, lawyers have consciences. I might believe you. I might give individuals the benefit of a doubt. But don’t try to sell me the notion that Sadler would turn on Chodo. “I don’t believe it.”

Have I not yet convinced you that what you believe is of no consequence? It is



obvious, based on his questions, that Mr. Crask suspects a defection. If he acts upon that, the truth and your belief will not matter. My own inclination is to believe he would be correct in his assumption, considering hints underlying your last discussion with Mr. Sadler.

It's a fact, perceptions have more impact than absolute truths. We humans belong to a tribe steadfast in its refusal to be confused by the facts. Still... "Yeah, but Sadler just wouldn't." Would he? Even if the cripple he expected to replace any day came up with a way not only to evade death but to get healthy in the bargain?

Ah. You begin to use your head for something besides a device which keeps your hair from getting in the way when you eat. Excellent.

"Even I have a thought sometimes." Not much of a comeback Hell. It was still morning.

There is some excitement outside. Perhaps news from the Cantard, long overdue. You might investigate.

Him and his hobby. "Sure. Why not? I'll have plenty of time. Hell, I'll borrow Dean's broom and help the ratmen clean streets in my spare time."

Mental sneer. Sometimes he has a higher estimate of my abilities than I do.

I was losing the war there. Just too damned early. I retreated to the kitchen. "Carla Lindo, my lovely, I need your help. The Dead Man says Holme Blaine must have been in touch with some of the people you were in touch with when you were looking for somebody to help you. I need to talk to them. Soon as you tell me who they were."

She eyed me about ten seconds, smoldering and crackling. The homely Miss Ruth lost her smile. I didn't blame her. It plain wasn't fair that the gods would give one woman so much advantage over another.

They ought to make them all gorgeous. Right?

"Actually, I only asked at the place where I was staying, with friends of my father. Everyone there who could think of anyone mentioned you."

Oh, wonderful. Now I'm a household name. "So where do I go? Who do I see?" I'll get the Dead Man one of these days. He knew already.

"I'd better go with you. They're a little odd there."

"Wouldn't be safe."

"Why not? Your friend Chodo Contague captured the Serpent, didn't he?"

Oh, boy. There just aren't any secrets around my house.

I tried arguing. Carla Lindo turned deaf as a post. She wasn't telling me nothing. It was show me or nothing. "I'll be ready in a minute, Garrett." She breezed out, leaving some sort of vacuum there in the kitchen. Dean grinned at me. He enjoys seeing me nonplussed.

Actually more than nonplussed. Very minused. Even Ruth got a kick out of it, though I could see she envied Carla her power.

I never had a chance once Carla Lindo went to work on me. Someday, in about a thousand years, I'm going to develop an immunity to female charm. I don't know if I look forward to that or not.

I made a tactical error. I was the one who took a while getting cleaned up and changed. They never let you forget.

Sometimes I have to wonder if I'm as smart as I think. I Carla gave me some



pretty good hints, but I didn't tumble to the facts till we'd damned near walked through old Fido's front door.

I stopped dead, stared at that bughouse, and thought I wasn't going in there never again.

"Garrett? What's the matter?" Carla Lindo was a couple steps ahead now, looking back, smoldering. How the hell did she do that? I stared at her some, too. I got a little less reluctant to head that way.

There wasn't much traffic, but what there was seemed determined to run over any guys who stood around with their mouths hanging open, staring at pretty women.

I gobbled, "I've had it, babe. All I can take of this mess. I'm up to here with running around like a short-necked chicken, not knowing what the hell is going on, who's going to do what to who, or why, always being a step too late." I couldn't tell her I was afraid to go back in there with that lunatic Easterman. Hell, I wasn't going to admit that part to me. I just told me the same stuff I told her and added that I don't much like hanging out with guys whose brains are off in fairyland.

Without a word she turned up the heat, piled on the come-hither, stacked up the promises. I kept the drool off my chin, but she did get me shivering. "You sure you're no witch yourself?" She couldn't be that old and crafty. She couldn't have discovered my weakness that quick.

She just smiled and tossed another sack of coal on the fire.

I muttered, "You're going to carrot me right into somebody's whipping stick, woman."

"What?"

"Yo! Garrett! Just the clown I want to see."

Oh, hell. Winger. Coming on like a galleon under full sail. Right behind her was the cadaverous old butler guy with the absurd name. I wondered if they were running a race. The old guy had stamina.

Carla Lindo gave Winger a look all trimmed up with daggers but lost it in about a second. Then she just gaped and tried to keep a straight face.

"Picked you up some new duds, eh, Winger?"

Winger stopped to do a pirouette. The old guy gained on her. "What do you think?"

"Colorful." Old Mom Garrett's favorite boy is shooting for another forty years. He tries to stay neutral when somebody as mean as that dressed like that asks a question like that.

"Knew you'd like it." Her eyes narrowed suspiciously.

Colorful was understating the truth.

Nobody has lousier taste and a worse idea how to dress than an ogre. This outfit would have stunned a nearsighted ogre. Splashes and panels of howling purples and screaming oranges and a limish green so virulent it fried your eyes. Some other colors in there that swirled venomously when she so much as breathed. Which meant what you saw was changing all the time. The total picture was so awesomely ugly it was almost hypnotic.

"Bet you're surprised to see me in a dress."

"Yeah." Kind of a half-breed croak and squeak. I was in pain. I didn't dare beg



for mercy. That outfit should have been illegal. It was a deadly weapon.

“A dress? Is that what that is?” Carla Lindo asked.

Winger’s grin vanished. I got between the women fast. “Peace. Child’s new in town.”

“Who is that dung beetle, Garrett? Just so I can apologize polite like after I squish her into frog food.”

“Easy. She’s a friend of your boss.”

“He ain’t got no friends. That old spook—”

The old man caught up with her. He grabbed on to her arm and hung there puffing like he’d sprinted six miles. However dire his message, he couldn’t squeeze it out. In fact, he lost his grip and started to go down on his beak.

Winger caught him by the scruff and hoisted him up. “Watch out you don’t kill yourself, Pop.”

Carla Lindo stared at the old man. She wanted to say something, too, but couldn’t

“You come to see the boss, Garrett?”

“Yes.”

“Right. Then what I got can wait a couple. Maybe when we don’t got so many mouse ears around.” She turned the old man around and headed for home, holding him up with one hand. He kept trying to say something but couldn’t get it out. His collar was choking him.

“What was that?” Carla Lindo finally managed.

“That was Winger. Try not to aggravate her. She’s kind of like an earthquake. Not a whole lot of self-restraint.”

“I believe it,” in a tone of total disbelief. Then, “Look at that!” as excited as a little kid. Her attention span wasn’t much longer than Winger’s.

I looked.

Easterman had him a dragon.

A flying thunder-lizard was tethered atop the battlements of the runt black castle. It was being tended by a whole gang of morCartha doing their best to look like little devils. Easterman had them outfitted in some kind of suits but I couldn’t make out details. When they realized we were watching, they started howling and carrying on. The thunder-lizard started screeching. It seemed more bewildered than put out.

Carla asked, “Isn’t that neat?”

I was beginning to wonder about that girl. “The loonies have taken over. Maybe I ought to start cutting out paper dolls and practicing talking backward.”

Carla Lindo didn’t get it.

Winger dropped the old man inside the entrance. He had caught his breath and, despite all, had lost none of his dignity “If you will follow me, sir? And madame.” Some kind of look passed between him and Carla Lindo.

What now?

He led us to the room where I’d met Easterman before. The place had changed. A wall or two had been knocked out to make it bigger and it had been redecorated in black and red. They’d brought in a big ugly black throne carved all over with the ugly sisters of those gals you wake up with the morning after a night when you drank one gallon of popskull too many. There



was a lot of indirect, shifting red light that was supposed to make you think it had been piped in from Hell itself. And the resident mental basket case had added some new employees to the payroll. They included six of the biggest, ugliest, fangiest ogres I've ever seen. Tittering morCartha in formal evening wear were all over the place.

Easterman's regulars, the old thugs with seniority, seemed embarrassed by the company they were keeping. One actually whispered, "He pays real good."

"God, I hope so." I began to wonder if Fido hadn't picked out Winger's wardrobe.

Easterman waited till he could make an entrance.

The fat man had him a new outfit, too. He'd chosen a few square miles of red accented with acres of black, I realized the black consisted entirely of little eyes.

Oh, my. Every eye was alive and looking around, blinking, or maybe winking over some private joke.

Easterman struggled up the steps of his throne, finally fell into its seat. There's why I'm running, I told myself. So I don't get like that... Oh, my, all over again. When his well-larded behind hit the seat, all those uglies carved on the throne got excited and started whispering to each other.

I gaped and gawked and wondered how he had come up with all this when he couldn't enchant a rock into falling down. Then I got worried. Had he won the race? Had he grabbed the Book of Dreams?

I'd almost rather Chodo laid hands on it first. Chodo was predictable.

Fido got himself settled. He beamed down benevolently. More or less. "Mr. Garrett. I'm so happy you came calling, sir. What do you think, sir?" He gestured. "Is this not an impressive setting?"

"Yeah. It's that." It was. "But I'm kind of partial to the old setup. Know what I mean?" It was only ninety percent whacko before.

"We must change with the times, sir. We must change with the times. These present changing times are intriguing, are they not, sir? Here you are, an appellant, when but a short time ago you turned your back on me, a strutting cock. Yes sir, changing times

Carla Lindo gave me a puzzled look. I guess she didn't know about my earlier chat with Fido. I asked, "Where did you get the idea I came here to beg for something?" That fat clown had my nerves frayed already. I should have been amused, should have had trouble keeping a straight face, but something kept making me want to hop up there and plant a boot in his face.

Not a smart move with all those ogres there to save his jowls.

"Plague!"

The old man did the hopping.

Easterman and the old guy traded melodramatic whispers while taking turns staring at me. Fido's gaze flicked to Carla Lindo. He started looking puzzled. I had the impression he'd expected me to drop on my knees and crawl. I wasn't and didn't look like I would and maybe had no idea why I was supposed to.

Puzzled turned to troubled, Easterman stared at me, eyes narrowed more than seemed possible. "Are you making mock, sir?"

"I'm not doing anything but standing here. I don't know what your problem is, Fido. Sorry I'm not doing what you expect. I just dropped by with my friend Carla



Lindo to ask who all you told about her business here in town.”

“What?”

“Miss Ramada stayed here when she first came to TunFaire, right?” She asked who could help her find a little bauble somebody swiped from her dad...

“I’ve never seen this woman before, sir.”

“People told her to come to me. Right? So...” I stopped chattering.

Fido popped up and glared around. He eyeballed Carla Lindo. He sputtered. Spit flew. For a second I thought he was going to have a seizure

I didn’t really get it till Carla Lindo unfroze and started tugging on my arm and shaking her head Long after the whole herd of cats had flown out of the bag. She maybe stayed here, but old Fido hadn’t been in on it.

Easterman started roaring endearing sobriquets like Famine, War, and Pestilence. He took a moment out to tell his ogres, “Get that man out of here! I don’t want to look at his ugly face another second.” Then he went to foaming at the mouth.

Well. I never. Ugly? Maybe a little battered around the edges, but the dogs don’t howl.... I didn’t wait for the ogres. I latched on to Carla Lindo and headed for the exit. No sense dancing with those boys. The mood I was in, suddenly I’d have tried to break a head or three. I wouldn’t have been able to do the job justice before the sky collapsed on me.

“That was real bright, Garrett,” Carla Lindo said as soon as we hit the street. “You have a real golden tongue.”

“You could have told me something up front. You could have given me one teensy hint. The Dead Man is the mind reader, not me.” I spun around and dared an ogre to bring it out into the street. He looked over his shoulder to see how much help he’d get. He had no cavalry on the way. He just waved bye-bye. An ogre with sense. The times they are a-changing.

I faced Carla Lindo. “So what else haven’t you told me, sweetheart? You want me to help, you got to give me the tools. What the hell was that all about in there, anyway?”

She shrugged, stared at the pavement. “I didn’t know.... I never saw any of that before. I stayed with my uncle. My mother’s brother. One of the servants. When they took us to that room... I only ever saw that man from a distance before. My uncle just said he was a little potty.”

“A little, yeah. Here you had me thinking you had an in with some Hill bigwigs.” I added another score to the list needing settling with the Dead Man. He could have warned me. His idea of a joke, probably, letting me find out the hard way.

“I sort of wanted you to think...”

“I figured that out.”

A shadow fell on the conversation, which was about to sneak on toward making up. Making up is always full of promise when a guy and a gal are doing it.

“Yo, Garrett! That was some brilliant show you put on in there. You foxed the old boy right out of his garters.”

“Don’t you start on me, Winger. You want something, spit it out. If you don’t, you better scoot back in there and make sure old Fido don’t choke on his rug. You might miss a payday.”

“Hey. Here I come trying to be friendly, trying to build some bridges, and all



you want is to start a fight.”

“Want to build a bridge?” I grumbled “Tell me what’s with the new look in there. What’s with the zoo on the roof?”

“Old goof is getting set for the new era. Getting his props together so he’ll have the right look once he gets hold of the Book of Dreams.”

“Huh?” That’s Garrett. Swift on the uptake.

“Claims he knows where it is.”

“Where?”

“He didn’t tell me. He don’t trust me.”

Couldn’t say I blamed him for that. Winger would sell him out to the highest bidder if she got the chance. “Any hints?”

She shook her head. “Just said it’s there for the taking soon as he figures how to get past one big obstacle.”

Probably like not knowing where it was. “The Serpent? Chodo Contague grabbed her last night.” Finding some guile at last, I figured maybe I could keep an eye on Fido, grab the book from him after he grabbed it, before he could start using it.

“We heard. Who cares? He isn’t interested in her, except to stay out of her way and grab the book before she does.”

All hell broke loose overhead. Daytime or not, the morCartha from Fido’s roof went on the warpath. Easterman’s human servants yelled at them to come back or get fired. I asked, “What the hell?”

Winger said, “They do that. Probably spotted a critter from another tribe.”

“I should’ve stayed in bed.” This was all Dean’s fault.

“You know where the book is, Garrett?”

“If I did, I wouldn’t be here, would I? I’d be waving bye-bye to my friend at the west gate.” I gave Carla Lindo a one-armed hug I’d at least be trying to collect a suitable reward.

Winger ignored Carla Lindo. “We got to have a sit-down, see what we can come up with if we put our heads together.”

“Right.”

She didn’t catch my sarcasm. I think she was immune to it, or at least deaf. Besides being color-blind. She said, “That thing’s still worth a fortune, Garrett. Word is, there’s a dwarf willing to put up big money for it. More than Easterman would”

“You going to turn on him?”

“If there’s money in it.” Like maybe I had that kind of cash. Sure. In my sock. She said, “He never did nothing to make me want to stay loyal. He treats them damned ogres better than me and they don’t have my seniority.”

I chuckled. “You’re one in a million, Winger.”

“I know. But don’t let it get to you. I ain’t ready to settle down. But you’ll be first on my list when I am.”

I don’t often get caught without something to say. I did that time. I just stood there with my mouth open wondering if maybe she wasn’t a whole lot sharper than I thought.

She said, “You get a line on that book and you need some help, get in touch. I’ll go in for a split.” She marched back toward Easterman’s hovel.

Carla Lindo snickered. “You’ve made a conquest.”



I bellowed. She took off, giggling. I took off after her. People stared. She didn't run too fast. I didn't either. The view was much too entertaining from second place.

This was more like life ought to be.

I caught her. She leaned against me, panting, making it plain she was willing to be caught. Hell. There we were in the middle of a street with nowhere to go.

That's the story of my life. Whenever I do win the prize, I can't collect. "Let's go home and try to figure out where the hell Easterman thinks that book is." I had a feeling he was sure he knew where it was. Thinking that gave me an idea. "Any chance this uncle of yours would know what his boss is thinking?"

"No." She looked sad. "And if he did he wouldn't tell. He's really afraid he'd never get another job if Easterman throws him out. He's too old."

"Wonderful." We walked a ways, snuggling. I felt just a touch guilty doing that only a couple of blocks from Tinnie. Must be getting old. "You really still need the book? Chodo's got the Serpent. I'd say it's a safe bet she won't be back to haunt your dad"

She had to think about that awhile. Most of the way home, in fact. Then she said, "I could go home without it, I guess. But only if I was sure it'd been destroyed. My father would never forgive me if I didn't."

Well, hell.

I was still explaining to the Dead Man and getting hell for not having snatched Fido by the short hairs and twisted till he sang when Dean stuck his head in the room. "There's a gentleman to see you, Mr. Garrett."

I'd heard the knock. I'd hoped it was for me. The Dead Man was way up on his high horse, really smoking. I couldn't get a word in to suggest he consider the facts of the situation. I guess I was supposed to have taken care of Fido's troops with my free hand while I was twisting and yanking and humming along.

The gentleman at the door wasn't. That was Dean's way of making a snide social observation. The guy was a mixed-breed kid of obscure antecedents sneaking up on adolescence. His outstanding feature was the most awful set of teeth I've ever seen. He could pass as an ugly ogre or uglier human if you needed a stand-in for one of those. He said, sneering, "You Garrett?" Like he'd heard of me and wasn't impressed.

"Last time I checked."

"Got a paper for you." He shoved something at me and lit out before he saw if I had a grip on it. I didn't, It fell onto the stoop, started tumbling on the breeze. I dashed out and hunted it down. Naturally, the door swung shut behind me. The latch fell and caught. I cursed it and kicked and pounded till Dean let me in. He didn't say anything, just smirked, "Go scrub a pot or something," I grumbled.

I took myself to my office, planted me in my chair. I asked Eleanor, "Why the hell don't I take that job at the brewery? There something wrong with me? I enjoy abuse?"

I could get me a room right there in the plant. You and me. I could go tap a vat whenever the mood hit me. I could spend the rest of my life holed up there."

Eleanor didn't have any answers. She just gave me her enigmatic look Nobody was on my side anymore. I uncrumpled the wad of paper.

It was a note, but it took me a while to decipher the primitive printing. Before it



became a vehicle for deathless prose, it had been used to wrap fried fish or something.

We got to talk. Sinkler. Statue. Soon. Sadler.

Interesting. I hadn't thought he could read or write. He wasn't a threat to anybody doing illuminated manuscripts but he was a match for any educated seven-year-old. And he had all the words spelled right. Amazing.

Sadler. One of my many missing men. I couldn't turn him down.

But when to meet? He didn't state a time.

I didn't jump up and run over, though. Despite my interest. That sort of thing isn't done if you care to survive in this line. There are proprieties one observes when dealing with mysterious messages. Like sending some sucker... er, friend... to scout the terrain. "Hey, Dean." I didn't have anybody else left.

"I have dishes and laundry to do, Mr. Garrett. One extra body seems to triple the workload around here." This from the kitchen, shouted.

"Wait a minute

"I don't have time to run any errands."

Who the hell is the mind reader around here? "How did you know..."

"That's your favor-asking voice. Perhaps you could send Miss Ramada."

He sucked me in there. I wouldn't send Carla Lindo. And because I wouldn't, he'd know I hadn't been about to send him after rutabagas so we could have rutabaga pie tonight. In the following silence I could almost hear his brain creaking and squeaking as he mulled over how to get even for me even considering getting him involved in something chancy.

I caught the edge of a mental chuckle from across the hall. I was everybody's entertainment. I got up and plodded into the kitchen, drew me a beer. "You're going to stay on after I get married, aren't you? We're going to need all the help we can get."

Dean's face brightened. He forgot all about me thinking of sending him out where the bad winds blow. He knew he wasn't going to get rid of one of his nieces but having me shackled to any woman was the next best thing. He was a born-again advocate of marriage, though he'd managed to evade martyrdom himself. "It would be an honor to serve Miss Tinnie, Mr. Garrett."

I felt almost bad, digging at him like that. Almost. "Not who I've got in mind."

"Miss Maya certainly is devoted to you, but don't you think she's a bit young for a man of your years?"

My years? He'd get no mercy now. "Not Maya. I'm thinking about asking Winger. You got to admit, she's more my type. We'd make a hell of a team out on those mean streets."

He looked scandalized, horrified, proceeded rapidly toward apoplectic. His face got red. He gulped for air. I poured it on. "I'm not really cut out for these sleek little beauties, Dean. I need somebody who can be a real partner. A pal. A real man's man everywhere but in the dark. I think Winger is the gal I've been waiting for. She's a take-charge type. She'd get things straightened out around here."

Garrett!

I must have overdone it. That squeak of horror came from up front.

I'm used to Dean taking everything too serious, to him taking forever to figure out he's being ribbed. But not the Dead Man. I finished up, "Don't you think?"



Dean just stood there with a pan dangling from one hand, his mouth open and his eyes crossed. He looked so forlorn I almost let up. If Carla Lindo hadn't been upstairs, I would have. Instead, I headed for the front door.

"I'd better take care of it right away."

Does anybody know who this guy Sinkler was? Does anybody care? Somebody put up a statue, didn't they?

Hell, maybe that ugly hunk of rock was there when they built the city. It looks worn out enough. If anybody does know, they haven't been talking. Whatever Sinkler did, it's a secret from me. Only the pigeons have much use for him. They perch on his upraised arms and tricorner hat and wait for primo targets to come by. Once upon a time he was covered with copper. Thieves took care of that ages before I was hatched.

Sinkler stands in the center of a small square where five streets butt heads, maybe half a mile northwest of my place. His main significance to me is he marks the frontier between your ordinarily dreadful city and the Bustee, which makes any part of town you care to name look like a suburb of heaven. The Bustee is where the real poor folks live. The Bustee is a quarter Chodo Contague wouldn't enter without an army, let alone wimps like the Watch. Hell, it's gotten so bad lately some of the landlords have gotten chicken to collect their rents.

Of course, a Chodo wouldn't bother going into the Bustee. People there are so poor they can't afford names. They survive by looking poorer than their neighbors.

Hell on earth. In the Marines I met guys out of there. They thought the Corps was great, despite the war. They got food to eat, clothes to wear, shoes on their feet, their life expectancies were better in the Cantard than at home, and they even got paid. So how come you rich boys are all pissing and moaning?

My folks never had a pot to pee in, but I'd grown up rich compared to those guys.

You'd think those people would bust out and go berserk. They never have. Like nobody is taking advantage of the fact that all the lords of the Hill are off to catch Glory Mooncalled. People have a sense of order and place and caste. Most figure if they're poor and dying of starvation, the gods want it that way. Probably they earned it in a former life.

It's a strange world. It's people are stranger.

What am I on about? What's this got to do with Sadler or the Book of Dreams? Not a damned thing. Just indulging the social observer within.

Speaking of Glory Mooncalled, there was a lot of talk. News had come north. People were telling perfect strangers. They'd grab you by the shirt to get you to hold still long enough so they could get the thrill of being first to tell you.

Mooncalled had engineered some apocalyptic collision between the massed Karentine and Venageti armies but lost most of his own making it happen. He was on the run. Or maybe not, depending on your informant. I hung out with Sinkler and absorbed stories. I'd hand them all to the Dead Man when opportunity arose. If ever it did.

I'd spent an hour perched on the pedestal where Sinkler stood, spreading his benevolence. I was beginning to suspect I'd been tricked. At best Sadler wasn't making it easy. Whatever he had in mind. If it was Sadler who sent that message.



It was. He showed eventually. He came creeping out looking around like he was into the loan sharks for half a million and hadn't made his vigorish in a year. I didn't recognize him till he was almost in my lap. He looked like a bum. He wasn't the lethal character I knew and loathed.

He settled beside me, all scrunched up so his size wouldn't give him away. He started throwing crumbs to the pigeons. Nobody would recognize him doing that.

"Where you been?"

"Underground. Had to do some thinking. Couldn't just keep on after I knew why Chodo wanted that book."

"Um?"

"Think what he could do with it."

"I have been. One reason I'm not fond of the idea of him glomming on to it."

"Me neither. Crask too."

"Crask?"

"Took him a little longer but he figured it out. He got a message to me. We met up and talked. We decided we got to do something. We want to bring you in."

His crumbs had brought in pigeons from miles around. They'd been climbing over each other. Now they exploded off the pavement. I glanced up, figuring a flight of thunder-lizards was coming in. But the birds had panicked because of one lone morCartha who appeared to be drunk. Sadler expressed my sentiments for me. "Out in the daytime now, too. Somebody ought to do something. Put a bounty on them, maybe. Give the kids something to do besides cut purses and roll drunks."

Yeah. Things just aren't the way they were in the old days. We had us some respect when we were kids. And so forth. I knew that routine by heart. "How come you're coming to me?"

"You just said you don't want Chodo getting that book."

"I don't want anybody to get it. Not him, not you, not Crask, not the Serpent, not Gnorst Gnorst or Fido Easterman. Hell, I wouldn't trust the old guy who keeps house for me with it. There isn't anybody alive who could resist the temptation."

He thought a minute. "Maybe. I can figure all I could do with it if I could read for shit."

"You can't?"

"My name. A few signs and things I seen all my life. I never got a chance to learn. In the army they didn't teach guys like they did you Marines."

"That was luck." That was something I'd brought away with me. I suspect, though, that I'd been more motivated than Sadler had. "But you sent a note."

"Crask wrote it. He picked up a little here and there. I been thinking we could get us a tutor after Chodo croaks and we take over. Only now it don't look like he plans on checking out, ever."

"So you're figuring on helping him along."

"Something like that."

"I don't do assassinations."

"You was in on the old kingpin biting the big one."

"He didn't bite it, it bit him. And you know how it went down. Morley Dotes set me up. If Saucerhead or I had known what was happening, we'd have been on the other side of town instead of helping Dotes lug his vampire."



“You help us, Garrett, you’d have friends could help you back.”

“How? Chodo embarrasses me now, carrying on like I was his favorite kid.”

Sadler was startled. Why? He grinned but didn’t say. He had lousy teeth “Maybe so. But he sure as hell ain’t never going to give you that book.”

“Would you?”

“I can’t read and Crask ain’t much better. You figure we could hire somebody to read it for us? You figure we could have that thing and hang on song enough to learn how to read? Without everybody in the world coming after us?”

“You have a point. But I have a problem.” I don’t do assassinations. I didn’t have much use for Chodo but didn’t want in on sending him to the big rackets in the sky. He hadn’t earned it from me.

I didn’t not want in badly enough to tell Sadler no, though. He might decide I had to be put to sleep so I wouldn’t tell anybody his plan. “It don’t look like I have too many options. How you going to do it?” It’s called temporizing.

“Old Chodo, he’s going to be partying tonight. Going to be distracted. His daughter is in town for the wingding he throws her every year.”

“His what?”

“His daughter.” Sadler laughed. “Not a lot of people know about her. You’d like her. She’s a looker. Must take after her old lady. I never saw the broad. Before my time, Chodo put her away himself ‘cause he caught her screwing the guy who was the boss back then. So what? History is history. Important thing is, he’s throwing a birthday party tonight. Goes on like they have before, everybody will drink themselves blind and pass out. Me and Crask figure if we hit about three in the morning, it’ll be a walk.”

“Why do you need me, then?”

He grinned again He was doing more of that than in all the time I’d known him. “Garrett, you do that innocent so damned good. Man, I wish I could do that.”

“Glad you get a kick out of it. Because I really don’t know what the hell you’re yapping about.”

“Sour today. Little chickie tell you no? Okay. You remember a while back we all had us a problem with that thing that thought it was a dead god? Wanted to bring itself back to life?”

That wasn’t all that long ago I didn’t want to remember. That had been a hairy one. There’d been some sick people involved. Only good that came out of it was Maya. “I remember.”

“No wisecrack? You must be getting old. So one day you come out to the house. Dotes was with you. We gived you a little stone. An amulet, like, Eh? Maybe you thought we forgot to take it back”

I’d been hoping. That stone was hidden in the Dead Man’s room with our most precious possessions. I’d expected to have to use it someday.

It was a magical gizmo that kept the thunder-lizards away, Chodo isn't fond of unannounced visitors. To discourage them, he has his grounds walled. Behind the walls he keeps whole herds of small, carnivorous thunder-lizards. They’re more efficient than dogs, though he has packs of those, too. Thunder-lizards don’t leave much evidence laying around. No telling how many valiant adventurers have scaled Chodo’s wall only to become monster munchies.

“You set me up.”



“We thought it might be handy someday, having one on the outside.”

“You guys are too damned smart for me

“That’s a fact.”

I doubted it, but he and Crask were a lot smarter than they let on. “So you need the stone to get through to the house, where everybody’s going to be polluted. Then what?”

“Then Chodo expires in his sleep. Maybe because they’re all drunk and not watching what they’re doing, a couple thunder-lizards get inside and gobble up a few guys who been trying to take over me and Crask’s spots.”

“You think you can run the outfit?”

“Between us we can. It don’t take a lot of running. We got the machine all oiled up. We go break somebody’s head once a month or so, it keeps running smooth. We can handle that.”

No doubt. “And I get the book, eh?”

“Soon as we find out where it is. That’s a promise. And we’ll find it. You know that.”

They would if they wanted. But would they really deliver? That is, would they bother collecting it if it turned out to be in the clutches of a Fido Easterman or would they just point me in the right direction? “Three in the morning, eh?”

“I know you been keeping regular hours. But that’s the way it is.”

Another night without much sleep. And no nap between now and then because I’d be trying to think of a way to slide out of being part of a gangland killing.

Morley would say this was an opportunity to show I wasn’t under Chodo’s thumb, forgetting it would give Crask and Sadler a rather ferocious hold on me. Speaking of Morley Dotes, where was he? Now I needed a helpful hand. Not to mention Saucerhead. “Hey, you got any idea what’s become of Dotes and Tharpe?”

“Nope. Still sulking?”

“Looks like.” Something about his answer told me he really didn’t know. Probably it was the fact that his tone said he didn’t care

He asked, “You aren’t thinking about bringing them guys with you?”

I caught the edge of something there. “No.” This deserved some thought. “Just haven’t seen them since this mess started. I’m concerned.”

“Um. I been sitting still too long. Got to keep moving. Don’t want to let anything catch up. We’ll meet you at the milestone on the hill down the road from Chodo’s place. Two o’clock. Bring that amulet stone.”

“Sure.”

Sadler went away, stooped like he was a hundred and ten. He did it pretty good. I wouldn’t have recognized him from a distance.

I wondered what they would do if I didn’t show.

He’d left his packet of crumbs. I fed the pigeons while I mused, till some jerk came up and pounced, wanting to tell me all the latest from the Cantard.

I hadn’t gone a block when Winger fell into step beside me “Must be my lucky day.”

She asked, “What was that about?” No sensitivity, Winger I wondered if she could be insulted.

“What’s what about?”



“Your little cheek-to-cheek with Chodo’s boy Sadler.”

So she had an eye. His disguise hadn’t fooled her. “You’re too nosy, along with all your other charms.”

“That’s what they tell me.” She gave me a big grin, followed with a comradely punch to the shoulder. Would I ever get used to her? Tell the truth, I hoped I didn’t have to. There were moments when I wished the odds would hustle up and overtake her. “Bet I can figure it.”

“Go right ahead.” I did my surly best to lengthen my stride till she couldn’t keep up. Lot of good it did me. She cruised along, had me huffing and puffing before I was halfway home. Big old country girl.

“How’s this, Garrett? Sadler and his boyfriend figure out their hopes for moving up ain’t worth squat if their boss grabs that book. Eh?” Big chuckle, up from the gut, like a Saucerhead Tharpe chuckle. “They put in their time, played it straight, figure they deserve better. Eh?”

“That you been following me all over?” I hadn’t sensed her presence at all. Nor that other presence, if that hadn’t been her... Scary, her that close and me not feeling a thing. And her in that outfit.

“Only since you left Easterman’s hangout. Them guys want you to help them promote themselves, don’t they?”

Was I giving myself away? Usually I do good hiding my thoughts. She laughed. “Yeah. I thought so. When they going to do it?”

“What’re you babbling about? You been smoking weed?”

“Sure. My imagination’s gone berserk. You ever seen that place that Chodo lives?”

“I’ve been there.”

“Bet whoever cleans that out would be set for life.”

“Be a short life if somebody tried.”

“Them thunder-lizards? No problem. Your pals got some way to get past them. I ride in on their coattails, stay low while they’re doing the dirty deed, grab a sackful of the best loot, hightail out in the confusion afterward. No big deal.”

Incurable optimism. “When did you get out to look at the place?”

“I get around. You made a big deal about the guy being bad, I figured I had to check him out.”

“You ever sleep?”

“I got a lot of energy. You do when you got ambition. You, you’re an old box turtle. Never move unless you’re starving and then only far enough to get yourself fed. You’re never going to amount to anything, Garrett.”

Was she taking lessons from Dean? “I manage. I have my own house. Not many can say that.”

“I heard about how you made the money, too. People kept sticking pins in your ass till you did something. Then you fell in the shit and came up with a sack of gold.”

It really was something like that. But I do think I gave value for money. I stomped up the steps to my front door. Winger invited herself along. I thought about tossing her hack when I recalled my little joke on Dean. What the hell? It would do his old heart good to get to pounding. I knocked.

Dean opened up. He took a look at Winger. His face scrunched up but he didn’t



say anything. Winger said, “How you doing, Pops? You got any more of that good beer? I’m dry as a mummy.” She gave him a friendly thump on the chest. He almost went down. He regained his balance, took off down the hall shaking his head.

Only after I shut the door behind her did I recall how things had gone last time Winger visited. I had to see the Dead Man and couldn’t let her run amuck while I did. No telling what would leap into her pockets. “Come on. It’s time you met my partner. I shouldn’t use that word so close to him. He’d make a point of bringing it up.

My partner was as thrilled to meet her as he’d be to be the star at a witch burning. Carla Lindo could charm him some, but even she was a woman, and I’d not be forgiven for having her around so long. Winger was something else. Say she lacked Carla Lindo’s grace.

“What the hell is that thing?”

“The Dead Man. My sidekick. Not as frisky as some, but he does his part. If you light a fire under him.”

“That ain’t no man, Garrett. That’s some kind of thing. Gots it a snoot like a mammoth. Gods, it’s ugly. Kind of ripe, too.” Like I said, a real charmer. All the sensitivity of a dire wolf.

Garrett!

We must have caught him dozing. I expected him to get peckish sooner. “News from the Cantard, Old Bones. Your boy maybe weaseled out one more time. Got the big boys butting heads...” He wasn’t going to buy.

This time you have gone too far! Why have you brought that creature into my home?

Oh-oh. He was piqued. He’s very precise in his word choices. If he had used my house, he’d just have wanted to squabble to kill time. My home... Well, he was not pleased. He felt violated.

“So I can keep an eye on her. Wouldn’t want some unscrupulous rake making a move on her before

Stuff that nonsense. Play that game with Dean if you like, but I know you better.

“Had you going there, didn’t I?”

Do what needs doing, then get her out.

Hey! He was willing to work to get shut of her. All right. I’d finally found a way to twist his arm.

Garrett!

“Right.”

Winger looked at me like I was foaming at the mouth.

The Dead Man wasn’t giving her his half of the conversation. She asked, “You talking to that thing?”

“Sure. He’s just dead, he isn’t gone.”

Report, Garrett! Get on with it.

I did. Every little detail.

I suggest you play along for the time being. He let Winger catch that. She jumped about a foot, grabbed the sides of her head. Her eyes got big as she wondered if he could look inside there as easily as he put thoughts in. I think she would’ve attacked him if she hadn’t been so shocked.



“Play along. Right. My sharpest skill. And when the crunch comes, how do I get out of committing murder? Or at least becoming a heavyweight accessory to same?”

The Dead Man sent the mental equivalent of a shrug. You will manage. You always do. Tell me more about what has happened in the Cantard.

Back to normal. He had his bluff in again. He thought. How about you suggest a way I can keep them from killing me once I’ve helped with the dirty work.”

Really, Garrett. Your stubborn refusal to think for yourself is becoming a burden. He paused. Since you have developed a fondness for this Winger person, and she has the intent anyway, why not take her along? She has shown herself capable of handling one of them already. I foresee an unbeatable team here.

Did I walk into that one? I sprinted. And did all the setup work, too. I couldn’t raise a fuss without Winger maybe getting upset and busting me upside the head.

A hint of mental snicker, private, for me alone. The devil.

It wasn’t my day. It wasn’t my week. If I went along to help ice Chodo, it might not be my lifetime.

“Sounds good to me,” Winger said. It would. She’d already invited herself along once. Now she had the Dead Man’s blessing.

I noted that she had caught her balance fast. The Dead Man had become old news. She watched me expectantly, like she wondered how much originality I’d show trying to weasel out.

“I should’ve been a clown,” I grumbled. “I’m everybody’s entertainment anyhow.”

The Dead Man’s laughter was silent but evil.

Winger’s wasn’t silent.

I heard a sound, glanced back. Dean was in the doorway. Grinning.

My get-even list was getting too long to keep in my head. I was going to have to get me a diary to keep track.

I don’t know why I left the house after I got rid of Winger. I guess because the Dead Man was riding me with spurs on, digging them in deep. My joke about Winger had turned on me. I didn’t dare go to the kitchen without Dean ragging me, too.

Out seemed like a good idea at the time. Especially when the Dead Man said he’d like to know what Gnorst was up to now. I grabbed the out.

So I went to see the sneeze man. Actually, I just left a message at the door. Gnorst wasn’t receiving. I suspect he especially wasn’t receiving people with connections to old pals.

I headed for home. I got the notion I could root Carla Lindo out of her room and weep on her shoulder. She hadn’t ridden me. She’d been especially understanding, in fact. The more I thought about it, the more I was sure we were going to become great friends real soon now. I started getting high on anticipation.

You may have noticed that things have a way of catching up with me whenever I feel too positive. The god who hands out the towels in the heavenly loo has a sideline. Messing with Garrett. He’s such a puny, useless god they couldn’t find anything better for him to do. But he’s really good at messing with me. He works at it so hard I think he’s bucking for a promotion.



I was a block from my place, trotting toward Macunado on Wizard's Reach. I stopped suddenly.

They came out of nowhere. They closed in carefully.

There were six of them. I didn't know them but they had to be Chodo's boys.

The street cleared magically. I struck some martial-arts poses, made me some nifty yells. That just kept them from getting overconfident.

They were good. They would be, of course. Otherwise they wouldn't be on the first team. And they'd been briefed on what to expect, which was to expect the unexpected. I've been known to yank tricks out of my sleeves.

Today I was fresh out, not counting the old-fashioned lie. I got one guy to turn his head by yelling, "Hey! Morley! Just in time for the party."

That was the only good Morley did me all week, and he wasn't even there. I laid that guy out with a flying kick and just kept going for about six feet. Then I was out of running room. A building jumped in my way.

They closed in. I hauled out my stick. We mixed it up. I dinged two pretty good. I wasn't worrying about how bad I hurt them. They apparently wanted me alive. At least a little. Nobody bothered explaining anything to anyone.

The scuffle lasted longer than they planned. Our dancing and prancing brought some of the bolder neighbors back outside, especially the kids. Some were kids I knew. Did they lend a hand? Did they run to the house to tell somebody I was in trouble? They did not.

These are the little people, the ones I thought needed a champion when I outfitted myself with creaky idealistic armor. Sometimes people make it damned hard to care about people. Sometimes they do their damndest to make it seem they deserve whatever they get.

Oh, well. I made a showing till somebody got my stick away from me and tried it out on my skull.

A black pool opened at my feet...

I didn't dive in. I sort of belly-flopped and floated there with my nose above the surface. I vaguely recall sagging between two thugs while a third summoned a waiting coach. The coach came. My buddies helped me dive inside. Somebody did a drumroll on my noggin, then they dumped their injured in on top of me.

My head stuck out of the pile. The guy with my stick tapped it every little bit, like he was trying out different patterns of lumps. I would fix him with some patterns of his own if I got the chance.

Even my skull has limits. I went off to dreamland.

The sandman isn't all bad. Before we left the city, before I wakened with an all-time headache, he got rid of the three guys piled on top of me. Hell. I had it whipped. I outnumbered them now.

The headache was a memorable effort. At least I remembered it better than any I had before. I'd been thumped hard enough to generate a small concussion. I'd puked all over the coach floor. Recently, too. The guy with the stick was still cussing me. His partner, riding with his back to the horses, observed, "You bopped him too many times. What you expect?"

"Hell, we'll probably just end up croaking him. Why'd he got to go make a mess?"

"Inconsiderate of him."



“Sure as hell was. I’m gonna gotta clean it up. I always get stuck with the shit jobs.”

A philosopher and a complainer. The philosopher said, “You don’t plan to go messy when your turn comes? You just going to take the hit and fold politely?”

“I ain’t going.” Sullenly.

The philosopher chuckled. How could a guy with his realist’s outlook stay in the niche he’d chosen? He said, “Least we know he ain’t dead yet. I never saw a stiff puke. I was worried Chodo’d have a litter if we delivered a deader.”

“Why? He’s gonna be dead anyway.”

“We don’t know that. He didn’t say that.”

“Shit.”

“All right. There ain’t much doubt. But Chodo wants to talk to him first. To apologize, maybe. They used to be buddies or something.”

Or something. I’d never counted on Chodo’s gratitude being bottomless. I wondered if there was a connection between this and my chat with Sadler.

“Shit. He’s crazy,” the complainer said.

“Sure. And he’s the kingpin, too.”

Grumble grumble. Lots of use of that favorite four-letter word. I wondered if they knew I was awake. I wondered if I was being snookered.

The philosopher began rhapsodizing on the passing scenery. A nature lover. Some city boys get that way in the country. A plain old willow is a cause for wonder. His observations suggested we were on the road to Chodo’s place already. We were in some wooded hills. That meant we weren’t more than a mile or two from the place I was supposed to meet Crask and Sadler later. The woods would give way to vineyards on the north slopes, though there would still be patches of trees alongside the road. If I wanted to stay healthy, I ought to do something before we reached the vineyards. There wasn’t cover enough to make an escape over there.

Only my body didn’t feel like doing anything. Maybe next week. Maybe after the swelling went down.

It’s real hard to find much ambition after you’ve had your noggin used for a drum.

The way the horses were straining I guessed we were climbing Hornet Nest Hill, a long steep climb. Near the top the road makes a backward S-curve, climbing what amounts to a bluff, before it leaps the ridge and heads for the end of the woods. Perfect. I could dive out the door and over the side, roll down the hill, and disappear before these thugs could get their mouths closed. I told my body to get ready.

My body said go to hell. It wasn’t moving. Moving hurt.

The carriage stopped.

The complainer opened a door, asked, “What’s up?”

“I don’t know,” the driver told him. “The horses don’t want to go any farther

Say what? Me and horses don’t get along. If there’s any way for them to mess me around, they will. I couldn’t picture them not galloping all the way to carry me to my execution. Unless they wanted to mess with me some themselves before letting Chodo have me.... Hell. I couldn’t keep that game going. I felt too lousy.

The philosopher edged the complainer out of the doorway. “Hang on, Mace.



Don't push them. Maybe they know something." He got out of the coach. His buddy followed him. "Could be that shoemaker's bunch. Was I to set an ambush, I'd put it right up there, just before the top. Where the cut is, with the drop on the right. Leaves you nowhere to duck

They debated. The sullen one tossed in two seats worth of let's get rolling, there ain't no damned ambush. The philosopher suggested, "Why don't you go up and look?"

They argued. The complainer sneered. "Candyass! I'll show you." I heard his feet crunch the road surface. He sent opinions back meant to keep the curl in the philosopher's hair.

Come on, Garrett! This is it. They've handed it to you. All you have to do is fall through a door and roll down a hill. Or the other way around. You have the necessary skills.

My body told me, all right, I'll let you open one eye.

I did. I couldn't see squat because I wasn't facing the door.

The driver observed, "Something's up. He's slowing down "Like maybe the philosopher had bad eyes.

The philosopher called, "What is it, Winsome?"

I wished I had the energy to laugh Winsome? Was that a nickname?

Did I have a death wish? The philosopher was talking from near the head of the team. They were handing me it on a platter and all I could do was turn my head enough to look outside and see that we were exactly where I'd guessed

Come on, Garrett!

I reached back for the old reserves and found I had enough to lever myself up enough to see that they hadn't dressed me up in ropes or shackles. I could leap up and dash away after leaving my dreaded mark slashed into the property of the evildoers.

Winsome yelled something about a bad smell.

I heard a footstep. Cunning me, I lay down where I'd been and made like a guy who was going to snore for another week. The philosopher must not have watched many guys come back from a thumping. He bought it.

He pulled an illegal sword from beneath his seat, told the driver, "Don't move," and went stomping up the road.

The driver cursed the horses. The animals were getting restless.

My body began to yield to my will. I got onto my knees slowly so as not to rock the coach and alert the driver. I looked out the open door at the woods. I don't usually have much use for the country, but from where I knelt at that moment ticks and chiggers and poison ivy didn't sound bad at all. I eased forward, poked my head out far enough to look uphill.

One guy was almost to the top. He seemed uncomfortable. Only his brags were keeping him up there. The other was striding toward him, sword in hand.

One quick dive over the edge, Garrett. Your best chance.

Ha! said my body. No you don't.

I was recovering. And they were giving me time I could use to recover some more, talking up there. I wondered what was going on. I wondered even more about that reference to a shoemaker.

Maybe if I lived, I'd figure it out.



If I didn't get off my ass soon, I was going to lose a lot of respect for me. Not to mention aforesaid ass. I'd regret it the rest of my life. So I did something, on the old Corps theory that doing anything is better than doing nothing at all.

I swung my feet over the side and settled them on the road. That took most of my energy. Unfortunately, it also wakened the driver. I'd hoped to have another minute before I went down the hill. But the guy up top yelled.

Winsome spotted me. He roared. The philosopher yelled. You'd have thought we'd won the war. They started running downhill.

The driver hollered again, but he wasn't worried about me now.

I heaved myself upright and tottered forward. I didn't look where I was going. I was too busy gawking at the scaly green barrel of a head, sleepy-eyed, that had risen above the ridge line. The monster made a puzzled whuffing noise, then grinned a grin filled with about ten thousand gigantic teeth, got up from where it had been napping. And got up and got up and got up.

The bottom went out from under me as the horses began a brief debate about the quickest way to get the hell out of there.

The slope was steeper than I'd remembered it. I couldn't control my descent. I went down ass over appetite, sliding, rolling, ricocheting off trees, bouncing through underbrush. Every stick and stone autographed my body. I ended up spread-eagle in a patch of last year's thistles. I wondered if it was worth it.

Up top, the horses had found a way to turn around and were headed south. The driver cracked his whip like maybe they needed encouragement. The philosopher and Winsome were fifty feet behind hollering for the driver to wait up. Big Ugly had gotten all of himself upright and over the ridge and was fixing to put on a burst of speed.

The whole thing would have been amusing had I not been part of it, down there in the ravine trying to blend into the landscape so I wouldn't look killable or edible either one.

No team and no men are going to outrun a critter that makes its living chasing things and has legs fifteen feet long. On the other hand, no critter thirty feet tall will have a lot of luck sprinting down a twisty road less than eight feet wide in the turns. The thunder-lizard over hauled Winsome as the man headed into a sharp turn with a cut on one side and a forty-foot drop on the other. The critter smacked into the hillside, rebounded, and off the road he went. He cussed in thunder-lizard all the way to the bottom.

The big greenie had stick-to-it-ivity, I'll give him that. He got up, shook himself off, tore up some timber just to express himself, then got rolling again. He wanted to catch something for all his trouble. He limped a little. Maybe he'd twisted an ankle, or whatever thunder-lizards have.

I barely breathed till the excitement took itself out of hearing. Then I moved carefully. I've heard that those things sometimes run in packs. And maybe he'd spotted me going over the side. Maybe he was waiting for a Garrett snack to come to him. Probably what he was doing up there on the ridge—just letting breakfast, lunch, and dinner come trotting up from town.

I glanced up the slope I'd descended "I got to find another line of work." I started limping. "People don't want to be saved anyway." Weider's standing offer at the brewery looked better all the time. Nobody to beat on me, no hills to fall



down, nobody wanting to take me for a ride, all the beer I could drink. Just lean back and pour it down until I was as fat as the Dead Man. What a life.

The job would look good till the hurting stopped.

My myriad aches and bruises wakened the anger that had grown feeble since I'd learned that Tinnie was going to make it. I remembered her lying in the street with a knife sticking out of her, and that reminded me that complain as I might, I did have an interest in all this confusion and insanity. A very personal interest.

There will be Serpents with us always. With the best will it can muster, the race wouldn't be able to exterminate them all. And the race, of course, has no universal will to see them become extinct. We all have a bit of the Serpent in us, just waiting for the right moment to bloom.

Witness all these characters who wanted the Book of Dreams. Not all of them had been bad to begin.

I'd even begun to doubt Carla Lindo's honorable intentions.

We can't get shut of the Serpents but we can sure as hell lower the price in pain by snipping one off the social bush now and then. My attitude underwent adjustment as I limped along. My get-even list rearranged itself. Sometime during my trek homeward, my resistance toward participating in Crask and Sadler's adventure evaporated I donned my pain like a badge, let it flow through me, refused to be daunted by anything.

It's only six miles from Hornet Nest Hill to my place. A couple hours, loafing along. I didn't loaf but I didn't make that good a time. Too many injuries slowing me down

I never saw the nest for which the hill is named. I never saw a hornet. I didn't see friend Winsome or the philosopher again, either. I did, at a distance, spy some busted black wood that might have been fancy coachwork. I didn't go look for survivors.

By the time I got home I was mad at myself for letting the Dead Man get my goat and run me out to see the head dwarf. I'd known it was a pointless exercise when I left.

Dean let me in. He saw I was in no mood or shape for any discussion. He did a fade. I went into my office, shut the door, wouldn't even let Dean bring my beer. I communed with Eleanor We made a pact. Despite the pain and discouragement, I'd keep plugging. I'd get that book, one way or another. I'd thin the ranks of the villains. Eleanor gave me one of her rare smiles.

"Hell, honey, I guess I can't help being Garrett, anyway." I headed upstairs, paused halfway to tell Dean to bring the pitcher and our first-aid stuff to my room.

It had been a full day and it wasn't yet suppertime I decided to eat light then lie down. Maybe my subconscious would produce a miracle while I napped and I'd end up turning the adventure against Chodo into a coup for the good guys. Assuming I didn't get so stiff and swollen I couldn't move at all.

That's how I figured. The rest of the world didn't share my vision.

Dean wakened me before I was completely asleep. "His Nibs wants you. He accused you of neglect."

So I hadn't taken time to report. He feels no pain. He doesn't get physically tired. He forgets that the rest of us do. Poor spirits and defeatism he understands



better. His existence is entirely cerebral.

I went down to report.

Carla Lindo was just slipping out. She gave me a smile that set my backbone vibrating despite my state. Old Bones was chuckling to himself. She had his ego puffed up enough to swamp small cities I wondered if she'd goaded him into disturbing me. She did seem to be getting impatient.

He took a quick ruffle through my mind, saved me the trouble of talking. Any doubt that those were Chodo Contague's men?

I couldn't give the answer he wanted to hear. "None."

I hoped it would never come to this.

"You and me both. I was lucky. I got a pass. The bastard was sentimental enough to want to explain why he had to send me off. I won't get that option again." As soon as Chodo was sure things had soured he'd put the word out. Maybe even an open contract.

It is premature for that. First he will have to learn that you were not devoured with the others. Then, considering the highly public nature of his past favor, he will want to avoid a public reversal because he cannot yet answer questions sure to arise and threaten his credibility. He is proud and vain and his power in great part rests upon a widespread belief that he is an honorable man within criminal heights. To tell the world he wants you dead would compel him to provide reasons. He cannot tell the truth. It would bury him

"That wouldn't keep the hard boys from carving me up for the bounty."

No, he admitted

"So? Suggestions?"

Survival now heads our priorities. Finding the Book of Dreams has become secondary

And people wonder why he's considered a genius. Would I have thought of that myself? "Only way out is to take out Chodo first."

Indeed.

"I've never deliberately set out to kill somebody."

I know. He wasn't taking it lightly

"Is being able to live my life the way I want worth another man's life?" I could get out of town. Permanently. Because if I went, there'd be no one else to slow Chodo down-unless Crask and Sadler got lucky without me.

That is a decision you must make

"You and Dean have a say."

I survived for centuries before we met. Whatever you decide, I will get by.

No doubt "You really know how to pump a guy up" But his welfare was only one consideration. My ego was going to take a whipping whatever I did. Run and I'd spend the rest of my life questioning my courage. Kill Chodo and I'd have to endure big dents in my self-image. "I can't win"

There is no question of winning or losing. Nor one of right or wrong. If you have one fatal weakness, it is your thinking too much. Your insistence upon viewing any choice as a moral decision. It is not immoral to fight for your life. Stop posing. Cease overcomplicating. Decide if you would prefer to spend your remaining days in TunFaire or elsewhere, then act to support your preference.

He can strip a thing to its bones when he wants. And he's damned good at



twisting something till it looks like something else.

Dean stuck his head into the room. "There's a person to see you, Mr. Garrett
"Who?"

Hint of a smile. "A most unusual person."

I looked at the Dead Man. He didn't give me a clue. I went into the hall. "At the door?"

"I couldn't make up my mind whether or not to let her in. Personally, I don't feel she's your type."

"Huh?" My type is female, in the three primary colors, blonde, brunette, and redhead

"Ordinarily you do tend toward a certain physical type, Mr. Garrett. Mr. Dotes once observed that they could all wear the same underwear."

"Oh?" I thought of myself as an eclectic. I opened the door.

"About damned time," Winger said.

I gaped Dean laughed I'd forgotten events earlier.

Winger said, "I got to thinking. We ought to get an early start. We let them bozos Crask and Sadler call all the shots, then we only got ourselves to blame if we get hit by a stray bolt."

She had a point, but I didn't feel like conceding it.

"You going to leave me out in the weather or you going to invite me in for a brew?"

Joking aside, Dean was right Winger wasn't my type. She wasn't anybody's type. I led her to my office, suggested Dean bring beer. I planted myself. Winger took the other chair, looked at Eleanor like she could read the truths of the painting. Maybe she could.

"One slick character painted that, Garrett."

"An unsung genius named Snake Bradon. A total lunatic. How come you're early?" I'd set a time figuring I could slide out earlier. She probably figured that's what I'd try. The woman wasn't stupid.

"Nice place you got."

"A couple of big cases broke right. You sneaking around before you get to something?"

"Broke right? Word on you is you're lucky, but it's dangerous to be your friend

"Huh?"

"You got a sharp line of patter, don't you? Word's going around that somebody wants to take you down. Word is, stay away. It might rub off."

So, maybe just to keep myself awake, I told her about my adventures since we'd parted.

Carla Lindo brought the beer for Dean. That woman was turning into a spook, around sometimes, but more invisible than not. She looked at Winger like she'd stumbled into the men's loo Winger looked back at Carla Lindo like she was trying to figure out what she was. Carla Lindo lost the staring match She deposited the supplies and deserted. "You got something going there?" Winger asked.

"Just a client."

"Not much to her."

Debatable. Highly debatable, from where I sat. But I didn't feel like debating. I



felt like finding out what Winger was up to. Even more, I felt like taking a nap. The beer didn't help.

Winger said, "Interesting Chodo should take a poke at you right after you talked to his renegade. Think he'll be looking for company tonight?"

I shrugged. "He's no fool."

"Um. I got to thinking about them pets of his. Went out looking for some thunder-lizard hunters, figured on buying them a few drinks, pumping them for tricks of the trade. Know what? Ain't a whole lot of them around. Somebody's been hiring them up. Some shoemaker."

Shoemaker, eh? I could guess which one. That damned fool. "Shoemakers use a lot of thunder-lizard hides making army boots."

She said, "You know you got somebody watching you?"

"I've had that feeling for several days. I thought it might be you."

"Not me. Dwarves. Every time I come around here, there's dwarves. And morCartha. Somebody's hired one of the morCartha tribes to keep track of you. I couldn't find out who."

"MorCartha?" Things fell into place. No wonder I'd never been able to spot anyone following me. I hadn't looked up any more than anyone else does. If I had, I'd've accepted the morCartha the way I accept pigeons. One of the inevitable nuisances that are part of life.

MorCartha tails would explain the erratic nature of my intuitions about being watched, too. MorCartha are neither organized nor responsible. The watching would go on only when somebody actually felt like watching.

"Want me to take them off you? Ten marks, I'll do a job that'll have them staying ten miles from you."

"Not before I find out who wants me watched." I had ideas. Gnorst Gnorst seemed a likely candidate. Backup for his ground-bound dwarves. The kind of thing a dwarf would do. Cover every angle possible. I figured Chodo a likely candidate, too. He was cunning enough to see that morCartha would go unsuspected.

There had been morCartha aloft when I'd met with Sadler. Maybe Chodo ought to be number one on my list. "Thanks for the tip."

"One on me. For letting me come along tonight."

I hadn't planned it to go that way, but now I knew that I had to take a legitimate shot at Chodo I didn't mind as much. Any friend is better than no friend.

Again I wondered where the hell Morley and Saucerhead were. That was becoming a big worry, but events kept pushing it further and further down my list.

Winger considered Eleanor again. "You had something going with her, didn't you?"

How to answer that one? If I said yes, there might be more questions and I might end up mentioning that she'd been dead twenty years before I'd met her—and not like the Dead Man is dead. How to explain an affair of the heart with the ghost of someone who died when you were a child? "Something. I don't know what you'd call it and I sure can't explain it."

"That picture explains it good enough."

She was seeing everything that madman Bradon put into it. Would she ever stop



surprising me?

"I can understand you not wanting to talk about it. So. What say we get going? I got some things lined up, give us an edge. You got to have an edge. You in any shape for this?"

She was nervous. She was getting close to chattering, which was how it showed. "Hell, no, I'm not. But I have to take my shot. If people haven't lied to me too much, tonight's the only night I'll ever have half a chance of doing what I've got to do." I told her about the supposed party.

"There's our edge right there. Even if the guy knows we're coming, he's giving up some advantage if he doesn't cancel his party."

Chodo wouldn't. He was a character who wouldn't let the gods themselves nudge him into changing his plans. "Guess we take what we can get." I was getting more down by the minute.

"Won't get nothing done sitting here."

"Sure. Back in a jiffy." I went across and got the amulet stone from the Dead Man's room, wondering what the hell a jiffy was. He didn't have anything to say. I rolled upstairs and outfitted myself as well as I could from my depleted arsenal. I included the little padded case with the bottles. This was no time to wimp out. I'd do what I had to.

Winger awaited me in the office doorway, eyes sort of glazed. I frowned. She'd had another run-in with the Dead Man. What now? I didn't ask.

Being a born gentleman, I opened and held the front door for her. Even if she was a Saucerhead type in physical drag. She stepped outside. "You hang on here."

"What?"

She eyed the street. "Wait here." She took off down the steps and up the street fast. She ran without throwing her arms and legs all over, the way so many women do.

I closed the door and leaned against the wall, trying to stay awake, trying to avoid thinking about my aches and pains.

A knock. I peeked. Winger's eye stared back at me. She backed off only far enough for me to see her grin. I opened up.

She had a dwarf slung over her shoulder, out cold. "He was a feisty little bugger."

"Huh?"

"He was watching your place. Thought you might want to talk to him before we shove off."

"Bring him back here." I led the way to the Dead Man's room. "Hey, Chuckles. You want to take a look at this and tell me what we've got?"

A dwarf.

"What an eye. Could you maybe give me a little something more?"

He has been watching the house for about three hours. My old friend Gnorst sent him. I will send him back bearing a strong protest.

"Wonderful. You do that. Why was he on us?"

In case you locate the Book of Dreams, I presume.

"Anything else useful?"

He was selected for his lack of direct knowledge.

Naturally. Gnorst knew the Dead Man. Wasn't much point putting the little hairball through the wringer. "See you later, then."



Have you come to an accommodation with your conscience?

“A man’s got to do what a man’s got to do.” He got a chuckle out of that. Right. My moral discomfitures always amuse him. He’d have no trouble slicing Chodo into cold cuts.

“I can do it. The alternative is unacceptable.”

A sneer radiated from that pile of lifeless lard.

“He’s the one made it him or me.”

You need not justify. The day has been inevitable for some time. He and I knew. Mr. Dotes and Mr. Tharpe knew. Mr. Crask and Mr. Sadler knew. Only you insisted on pretending otherwise.

Hell, I’d known it, too. I’d hoped it would come to a more clear-cut case of good guy against bad guy, though.

Take care, Garrett,

“I plan to.”

I followed Winger once we hit the street, lost in my own thoughts. After a few blocks, she asked, “You scared?”

“Yes.” I was. Nothing to be ashamed of. A body who wasn’t afraid of a Chodo Contague was a damned fool. Or worse.

“Thought you were a heavyweight tough guy.”

“I eat nails with acid on them for breakfast, Then I kick thunder-lizards around for my morning workout. Hell, I’m so tough I don’t change my socks but once a month. But tough don’t help when the kingpin is after you and your only pal can’t get out of his chair to help.”

She was amused

I asked, “You sure you know who Chodo is?”

“Sure. Bad mojo” She laughed. “Doing him will be good for my reputation.”

“His reputation doesn’t bother you?”

“Who needs to live forever?”

I slipped the little padded case out of my pocket. I eyed those little bottles. The red one, the deadliest, seemed to sparkle all by itself.

“What’s that?”

“Something left over from another job. Might come in handy.”

“So don’t tell me

“I won’t. Knowing you, you might knock me over the head and grab them. This way I can feel confident that if you pull something, you’ll kill yourself messing with them.”

“You’re a suspicious wart

“Helped me reach the ripe old age of thirty. Where the hell are we going?” She was headed south instead of north.

“I told you, I made arrangements. Figured we’d come in from a direction nobody’ll expect.”

“Like what?”

“I got us a boat. We’ll go up the river to the Portage. From there it’s four miles over a range of hills, mostly through vineyards, to Chodo’s place.”

I groaned. I was dragging already. Every ache and pain was still with me. I’d taken a powder for those and the headache, but relief was marginal.

“I take it you ain’t overwhelmed by my brilliance.”



“Ha. That’s the trouble with being a boss, Winger. Whatever you do, you’re always in the wrong. Whatever you do is dumb and could be done better, faster, cheaper, by your minions.”

She got a laugh out of that. “I noticed that when I went to work for Easterman. My smarts level went way up.”

“Probably because you knew he had to be dumb to hire you.”

“You got such a line of sweet talk.”

The boat was one of those usually devoted to ferrying people to the east bank, to the side sometimes called Nether TunFaire. Winger had chosen one run by a breed family with no prejudice against rowing upriver if we paid in advance. I paid up and snuggled down amongst cargo and sails and closed my eyes. I might still get my nap.

Winger seemed content to do the same.

The chief ferryman stirred me with his toe. His name was Skid. He was about a hundred years old but spry. The river life was healthy. I snorted and gurgled and otherwise made it seem my intelligence approximated that of a turtle, cracked an eye, and asked, “We there already?”

“Nope. Got a boat following us. Shouldn’t be.” Maybe Skid was still alive because he hadn’t used up his ration of words

Winger was one of those freaks of nature who just open their eyes and are wide-awake. She was upright, looking aft, before I managed to sit up.

“Where?” I could see lights back there, sure. On about two hundred boats, most of them just like our own, what landlubbers politely call bumboats, home and business for the families operating them

Skid got down so I could sight along his arm. “Skylar Zed’s tub. Works the east-west, same as us. Don’t come north.”

“Oh.” I couldn’t see the boat he wanted me to see, let alone tell who owned it. I faked it. I told Winger, “This is getting irritating.”

She grunted. She’d sprawled out again, completely without self-consciousness. She reminded me of Saucerhead more and more. Yet she was different. Less intense, more relaxed. Tharpe does worry about what people might think. Winger plain didn’t care—or faked that so well it made no difference, I guess when you’re as oversize as she is, you make adjustments.

I looked some more. At least in the light of the running lamps there was nothing wrong with the way she looked. She was just big. “Hey. Tell me about Winger.” I wasn’t sleepy anymore.

“What’s to tell? I was born and I’m still around. What you see is what you get.”

“The usual stuff. Where are you from? Who were your people? How come you’re out here with me instead of holed up somewhere with a house full of little Wingers?”

“Where’d you come from, Garrett? Who’re your people? How come you’re here instead of back to your place with a pack of little Garretts?”

“I see. Only I don’t mind telling.” I told her about my family, none of whom are alive. I told about my years in the fleet Marines. I tried but couldn’t really explain what I was doing on the boat. Not in terms she understood. “As for kids, I like them fine but I think I’d make a lousy father. I still have some growing up to do myself, at least by the accepted standards.”



“That ain’t fair, Garrett

“Hey, I was just passing the time. You don’t have to tell me anything.”

“We going to be friends, Garrett?”

“I don’t know. Could be. Hasn’t a lot gotten in the way so far.”

She chewed that some, leaned back, spat over the side, turned to check our tail, laid down again. “How old you figure me for?”

“My age. A little younger, maybe. Twenty-eight?”

“You’re more generous than most. I’m twenty-six. I do have a kid. Be almost twelve now. I couldn’t handle that life. I walked. It’s usually the man leaves the woman with the brats.”

I didn’t say anything. Not much you can say when somebody tells you something like that. Nothing that doesn’t sound judgmental or insincere.

“I lug around a lot of guilt. But no regrets. Funny, huh?”

“Things turn out that way sometimes. I’ve been through some of that.”

“Like this little jaunt?”

“Huh?”

“You don’t hide so well behind the smart mouth and weary attitude, Garrett. We ice this Chodo, you’re going to take on a shitload of guilt.”

“But no regrets.”

“Yeah. And you know something? That’s why I wanted in. The money and the rep I can use, but it wasn’t just for that. It’s ‘cause I figure you for one of the good guys.”

“I try.” Probably too hard. “But when you get down to it, there isn’t much difference between the good guys and the bad guys.” I used some of my cases to illustrate.

She told me how she’d become a bounty hunter. Mostly by accident. Right after she’d left her family she’d killed a much-wanted thug who’d tried to rape her. She traded the remains for a reward and had found herself with a reputation for having more guts than sense and a big chip on her shoulder

“The rep’s the thing, Garrett. You build it right, you nurture it, you save a lot of trouble. You take this Chodo. Nobody bucks him because of his reputation.”

“He backs it up.”

“You got to do that. Ruthlessness is the key. You, now, your rep is wishy-washy except for keeping your word and not letting people mess your clients around. You might be tough, but you ain’t hard. You get what I’m saying? Somebody hires you to get him out from under blackmail, you don’t just go cut some bastard’s throat and have done with it. You try to finagle it so nobody gets hurt. Lot of people figure you for soft in the center, you go that way. Figure they’ve got an edge.”

“Yeah.” I understood. But I didn’t make any sudden New Year’s resolutions.

“I figure you’ll waste this chance. You off Chodo, you’ll never let anybody know.”

“You’re beginning to depress me

She laughed. “You heard the one about the nuns, the bear, and the missing honey?” She told the story. It was about what I expected. She followed it with another. She kept telling them. She knew every bad, off-color joke ever invented and this world, with all its tribes, offers plenty of absurd possibilities.



"I surrender," I said "I won't be depressed if you won't tell any more stories."

"Great. So now let's figure out what we're going to do about that other boat."

I glanced downriver. I still couldn't tell anything. "Skid. Can you run inshore and let us off without them back there knowing?"

He reflected. "Around Miller Point, up ahead. Be out of their sight maybe twenty minutes. But I thought you wanted to go to the Portage."

"You go ahead upriver after we get off. Lead that boat along with you."

"You're paying the freight. You heard the man, laddies. Cut it close going around the point. Lucky for you," he said to me "Channel's close in there."

When the time came, we did it fast. It worked. Skid headed upriver Winger and I heard the second boat creak past as we worked our way through the dense growth beside the river. She punched my arm, grinned.

We started our hike cross-country. My body kept threatening to put a curse on me for mistreating it so.

I guessed it was just past midnight. We were a mile from Chodo's place, which was easy to see. "Party must be roaring," I observed. "Either that or there's a forest fire over there."

"We're coming in from the north, we better head over there, move in closer later."

"Yeah. Better stay behind this ridge, too. Never know who might spot us if we don't." We were in a vineyard. There were grapegrowers' houses nearby.

"You said that already."

"You said that about heading north three times, too."

"You nervous, Garrett?"

"Yeah. You?"

She seemed cool. "Scared shitless."

"It doesn't show."

"You learn."

The sky went berserk toward Chodo's place. I said, "Sounds like the morCartha brought their show to the country." We couldn't see them, light or no, with the ridge in the way. We decided not to go over and look. Everybody at the kingpin's place would be out gawking.

We found us a comfortable jump-off place fifty yards north of Chodo's property line. The morCartha were still at it, off and on. "Those flying rats could wake the dead," I grumbled.

"We got time to kill. We're ahead of schedule." The plan was to wait for Crask and Sadler to draw the thunderlizards around front once they gave up on me and decided to take their best shot. Then we'd move, hoping my amulet still worked.

"Yeah." I tried making sense of the racket. "I don't like that." I stood up. Standing, I could see the occasional dot swoop through the light over the kingpin's house. A deadly battle over there, near as I could tell. "Why did they bring it out here?"

"Oh, sit down and sweat blood like I am."

If there was no attack by Crask and Sadler, or none we could detect, we would move about three o'clock, the coolest hour of the night, when the thunder-lizards would be sluggish. With them slow and maybe ignoring us on account of my amulet, we'd only need to worry about dogs, armed guards, booby traps, and



whatever I didn't know about.

Winger laid back and stared at the stars. "Be enough light, anyway. I can handle the dogs. Better hope those morCartha clear off, though."

I grunted. Dogs make me nervous. Not afraid, just nervous.

"You got a special woman, Garrett? That little Sparky, hanging around your place?"

"Sparky?"

"The carrot top. I put the name Sparky on her in my own head."

"Oh. Yeah. I have one or two."

"One or two?"

"Tinnie Tate. The one who got stabbed. And one named Maya I kind of like. I haven't seen her lately."

"I heard some about her. People talk. Besides them two. Anything going? You got kind of a rep that way, you know."

"Highly exaggerated, I'm sure. Those things have a way of getting blown out of proportion. Nah. Nobody else special. Except maybe Eleanor."

"That Sparky?"

"No. The blonde on my office wall. She's a good listener."

"Nothing going with Sparky, eh?"

"Just wishful thinking. Why?"

"No reason. Just wondering. We got time to kill..."

What? "Oh." Sometimes I'm real slow. I started fumbling for excuses that wouldn't leave any hurt feelings. "I don't know. Condition I'm in."

Boy, howdy! Who'd a thunk it...?

Winger started grabbing stuff. "Somebody coming. And we're running late."

No lie. Me, the mission-oriented old Marine, forgot why I was out in the middle of a grape orchard freezing my aching body in the wee hours. You betcha. My weakness again. When that Winger decided to be a woman, she popped and sizzled. Sparky... Carla Lindo had nothing on her then.

Amazing. Utterly amazing

"Easy, Garrett." Dark shapes drifted closer. "Crask and Sadler."

Winger and I finished our scrambling around. Those two settled on the hillside. Crask said, "Sneaky, sneaky Garrett. You was supposed to meet us around front. We'd've never found you, wasn't for all the puffing and snorting."

"Easy, lady," Sadler said "Easy. Ain't gonna be no trouble. I don't blame you for not showing, Garrett. Not after this afternoon."

"You heard, eh?"

"Yeah. Some. We was too late to save your ass. We did try. We figured you was gone and counted you out when we heard about the coach and the thunder-lizard."

Crask said, "Bunch of farmers took it down right after sundown, you care about that. They was still skinning it when we come out."

Sadler continued, "Along about sundown we heard from a friend what seen you talking to the sheila here. We counted you out anyhow."

Crask said, "You got to be the luckiest bastard that ever lived. We changed the whole plan when we heard about the coach. Then we changed it again when we heard you was alive."



Sadler said, "We figured we wouldn't show where you was supposed to meet us, just in case you did. But we'd watch, and then we'd follow you in when you went."

"Follow me? What made you think I'd do it on my own?"

"You got to. Chodo's after your ass. You got to get his first or kiss yours good-bye. You're mush on the inside, but you ain't stupid. You do what you got to."

Crask chuckled. What a pair of bastards. And not the least bit ashamed of themselves. Crask said, "We changed the plan again. Now we figure we ought to hit in a bunch. Something weird's going on over there."

Sadler asked, "You guys got any idea what the hell all that racket's about?"

"MorCartha wars."

"At Chodo's place?"

I shrugged. "They hold them wherever they can get enough of them together."

"Sounded like more than that to me. You miss it?" He kept a straight face Crask did, too. Those guys were inhuman

Winger said, "Ready when you are, Garrett."

No kidding. I dreaded having the Dead Man find out about tonight. I'd never hear the end. Probably deserved it, too. "You guys want to rest up first?" I wasn't going to tell them they couldn't horn in. Not here. Not now.

"We're ready," Sadler replied. "You bring the stone?"

"I'm slow but I'm not stupid. Winger says she can handle the dogs"

"They shouldn't be no problem. We came prepared." I could see him well enough to tell he thought I hadn't.

He and Crask carried military spears and Venageti two handed sabers. They were loaded down with enough other hardware to start their own war. "Whenever you want," he added.

"Let's do it. Winger," We started walking.

Chodo's north wall wasn't much. Was that intentional?

"Yeah," Crask told me. "Farther to the house here. Most of them that try come this way. Sets them up so the dogs and lizards got more time to work."

Wonderful. Being a genius, I'd selected exactly the course Chodo wanted me to choose.

Sadler said, "It's sure turned quiet." He was right. The morCartha had moved on.

"Gone dark, too," Crask said

It took me a moment to understand. The lights round the house had been extinguished "What about armed patrols?" We'd have trouble spotting them in the dark.

"Maybe." That was Sadler. "But they'll stay near the house. The lizards get unpredictable when they're excited."

"Glad you warned me." Like I'd really counted on the amulet stone to turn the beasts blind.

We moved ahead a quarter mile, those two leading. They knew their way. Then Crask stopped. Sadler stopped. Crask said, "Something's up. We should've run into a dog or lizard by now

I told him, "I'm not going to complain."

"Watch out."

We moved again. Seconds later I tripped, fell on my face. Just what I needed.



Bruises on my bruises. I did manage to go down without hollering. "Hey!" I hissed "Check this."

This was a dead thunderlizard. Healthy, it would have been my size. Cause of its poor health seemed to be a bunch of crossbow bolts. Hard to tell how long it had been unhealthy because those things are cold to begin with.

Crask and Sadler were not pleased. Sadler speculated, "Somebody got here before us."

Crask muttered, "That explains the quiet."

I asked, "You think somebody did our job for us?"

"Maybe. Maybe not. One lizard is down. That ain't the whole pack. Maybe the rest are curled up with full bellies."

Real helpful, those guys.

We found two more thunder-lizards turned into pin-cushions. Then a dead dog. "Something strange here," I said. "I was a scout in the Marines. One guy couldn't do this. It would take a gang. But they didn't leave any sign. The only grass down was put that way by the animals."

Crask and Sadler grunted. Winger observed, "The arrows are all in the back."

They were. "So?"

She jerked a thumb skyward. The morCartha?

We were halfway to the house. Despite the absence of light, I could sense a hulking darkness where it stood.

The silence ended. So did the darkness.

An uproar broke out around the house, suddenly. Heavy fighting. The light developed more slowly. Sadler suggested, "Let's don't get in a hurry just yet, Garrett."

I'd started moving. He was right. No sense galloping into something. We advanced slowly. The crash and clang declined.

The animals came out of nowhere. Crask and Sadler each skewered a thunder-lizard. Winger moved like a bullfighter, slashed a dog's throat on the fly. Blood flew everywhere. It was over before I could decide who to help. I gurgled, "Don't look like the stone is much good."

Sadler snapped, "They didn't come after you."

Crask muttered, "Now we know they ain't all dead." We reached a barn. Crask said, "Let's scope it out from the loft."

We did, but that didn't help much. Most of the light had faded. We saw two armed men directly opposite us, beside the house. Six more were doing something along the side of the house, toward its front. Winger said, "I see bodies."

There were a lot of them. The men toward the front were moving some inside. Chodo must have brought a small army in for the festivities. Not mentioning the men down, there were thunder-lizards and dogs and morCartha all over the place. It had been ferocious out.

"Whatever happened, it's over now," I said

So naturally the gods had to make me out a liar before I even finished talking. One of Chodo's men took an arrow in the chest. The rest charged the darkness. After some noise and screaming most of them came back. Apparently they decided not to do any more picking up.



“Dwarves,” Sadler decided.

“Huh?” My repartee was up to standard

“Dwarves attacked the place. Some of those stiffs are dwarves

What the hell was going on?

Either the Serpent’s buddies had tried to rescue her or Gnorst had taken a shot at getting her away from the kingpin. I put my money on Gnorst But that didn’t explain the morCartha I didn’t think.

I said, “I hope Chodo is as confused as I am. And drunk, too.”

Sadler said, “They ought to all be sobered up by now.”

“Don’t count on it. You remember how ripped they got last year.”

“I don’t see any more animals,” Winger said.

“No patrols, either,” Crask observed. “That’d mean he’s used up all the men he can afford. He’s keeping the rest in close.”

I said, “He’ll have the entrances covered. How do we get inside?”

“From up top. We climb the stonework on the northwest corner, swing out onto those beams, get onto the roof. We move across there, drop onto that balcony in the middle. See it? It shouldn’t be covered if he’s short on bodies and is thinking dwarves. Dwarves couldn’t get up there.”

“One of my favorite hobbies, climbing unfamiliar buildings in the dark.”

Sadler told me, “You done it before. I was there I brought a rope. I’ll go first.” He sounded like he had serious reservations about me.

Hell, I had serious reservations about me. I didn’t think I could get to the roof up a ladder, all the pains I had. I thought about calling everything off. Didn’t seem too bright, charging in when we didn’t know what the hell was going on.

We moved across to the house unchallenged. Sadler monkeyed up the northwest corner, dropped the rope. Winger went up like climbing was her calling. Crask told me, “After you, sir. Age before beauty.”

“Right. I’ll just tie it around my neck and let them hoist me up.” I grabbed the rope and went at it, I got to the top somehow, though I had my eyes closed half the time. Crask arrived right behind me.

Sadler told him, “I’m starting to get a good feeling about this, Bob.”

Crask had a first name? Amazing. I figured even his mommy called him Crask.

“Yeah, looking good. Let’s slide on over there.”

We were getting set to drop to the balcony when the morCartha returned. One, singular. It whispered down out of the night, zipped past, nearly panicked us all. We figured it was a scout and a herd would be right behind it. But nothing happened.

We were trying to get inside when the excitement brewed up again around front. We paused, listened. Winger said, “That’s weird.”

“What?” I think I squeaked.

“Chodo’s guys are all inside. So who’s fighting who?”

I didn’t know and at the moment I didn’t care. “Let them have fun. Let’s get on with it.”

To my complete astonishment we broke in without any trouble at all.

We were on the highest of three floors. Crask and Sadler insisted on checking every room there before we started down. They didn’t want to leave anybody behind us. Winger and I took one end of a long hail, those two the other half. We



met again at the head of a stair in the center.

“Find anybody?” Sadler asked.

I told the truth. “A few drunks so far out of it they’re barely alive.” I’d recognized some and had been surprised by a couple supposedly honest men, big in business or society. Chodo’s reach seemed infinite.

“Same over there. Nobody who has the balls to do anything but squeal, anyway. Party must really have roared before the shit came down.”

“Head downstairs now?”

He nodded. “Stay low. Part of the stair can be seen from the ballroom.”

I’d never visited this wing before. I’d never been off the ground floor, up front, except to visit a guy locked up in what passed for Chodo’s dungeon.

We listened before we moved. There was a racket toward the front of the house. Men cursed down below, angry and scared. It had nothing to do with us.

Crask led off, still encumbered with his arsenal. It seemed impossible that he should move silently carrying all that clutter, but he managed. As did Sadler and even Winger. Me, carrying next to nothing and a trained Marine sneak, I felt like I was banging a drum.

We found no one on the second floor, just plenty of small sleeping rooms with no one home. “Bodyguards and staff,” Sadler explained.

“They’ll be sober and near Chodo—if they’re still alive.”

“Where’ll he be?”

“In his office.”

Meant nothing to me. I’d never visited his office.

Crask dropped. I did, too, pushed my nose against the banister. A half-dozen colorful, shaggy dwarves light-footed past below, headed toward the front of the house. An uproar broke out as soon as they disappeared. Crask chuckled.

“Ambushed them little shits.”

One dwarf hustled back bent over, holding his guts in. A limping man overtook him, cut him apart with a heavy naval sword. I asked, “Can we get around that ambush?”

“Nope.”

“You’re a Marine,” Sadler said. “Hey diddle diddle, straight up the middle.”

That didn’t sound any more appetizing now than it had back then.

Crask said, “The runts used it up. Or there’d have been more guys after the dwarf.”

We moved down to the ground floor, passed the dwarf, headed toward the ballroom and possible ambush. To our right were kitchens and laundries and whatnot. To our left, too, I assumed. I’d heard, during one of my visits, that such took up most of the ground floor, except the showy stuff up front and the ballroom and pool area.

The ambush was pretty basic. Crask and Sadler sprang it entering the ballroom. The guy who’d slaughtered the dwarf was the healthier of the two trying to hold the fort. Crask bopped his head with the haft of his spear.

Winger whistled. “Some party room. Some party, too.” The ballroom was a cozy eighty-by-one-hundred feet and three stories high. Party detritus lay everywhere. Looked like the celebration had run its course before the bloodletting started.



Crask and Sadler tied the victims. They were going to need soldiers when they took over. Sadler said, "Straight to the pool."

"I'll take rearguard," Winger said. When I glanced back, she was slipping something inside her shirt.

The pool room dwarfed the ballroom. The pool itself was that big. There was nobody there. Except Chodo's dead. Had to be thirty of those laid out amidst the party debris. We skirted the flotsam-covered pool and headed for the reception hall.

That hall runs to the front door through the front wing of the house, though wing isn't the right word. The house is a huge box with the center, inner court roofed to form the ballroom and pool areas. We took turns peeking into the hall. Several men were guarding the front door. They were all scared and they were all injured.

"Not many left," Sadler observed.

I grumbled, "Maybe we've just jumped into a trap with the kingpin."

"Maybe. Let's check his office." He trotted to a closed door that would let us into the east wing, leaned against it, listened. "Not that way. Mob in there." He headed for the rear of the house. Back the way we had come.

I looked at Winger, shrugged, followed. But I was considering fading away. Things had gotten too deadly and mysterious.

We entered the east wing by means of second-floor halls built for the cleaning staff Sadler led us into a residential suite. "Chodo's kid uses this when she's in town."

"Nobody's home now." I wondered if most of the house was a mystery to Chodo. He wouldn't get to see the upper floors unless his men carried him.

"Don't look like."

Crask and Sadler started poking around in closets and tapping walls. They found what they were hunting before I became mystified enough to ask. A panel opened beside a fireplace. Of course. Chodo would have his hidden passages and whatnot. Sadler said, "We're going down to a room hidden off Chodo's office. Be real quiet." Like we needed warning.

Our destination was big for a secret room, a good eight by twelve. Winger's eyes bulged when she saw it. Stacks of moneybags lay against one wall. She gulped air and chewed it. Impressive pile, I thought, but only Chodo's day-to-day working capital His petty cash.

A racket developed while we were crawling through the walls, the mob from outside attacking again.

Crask and Sadler moved directly to a wall, opened peepholes Crask indicated one I could use. I'd always suspected that the kingpin employed hidden watchers during his meetings. I pulled a cork out of a hole, peeked into a room about twenty-five by forty. There were only two men in the room, Chodo and a character who provided the power to move the kingpin's chair. Chodo sat in the middle of the room, facing an open door. He looked content, not afraid. Behind him, piled furniture barricaded two outside windows.

I pictured Chodo as a big trapdoor spider calmly awaiting a victim.

Sounds of fighting came from elsewhere in the house. Chodo's pusher tensed up. Then he relaxed as two men entered the room. They supported a naked, bound



woman between them.

“Ha!” I muttered. “That’s her.”

“Who?” Winger asked.

“The Serpent. Check out that tattoo.” It was uglier than I’d imagined. The witch herself was not a disaster, but she’d begun to show the ravages of time. More evident were the ravages of stubbornness. It looked like Chodo had asked a few polite questions, and when it had come time to answer, she’d demurred.

She was lucky he’d had a birthday party to preoccupy him. He might have gotten serious otherwise.

Chodo examined her critically from a few feet away. “Five pages? These are all?” He strained to lift several sheets of brass out of his lap. He seemed unaware that his place was being invaded.

“That’s it, old man.” The Serpent wasn’t bothered by her situation, either. It seemed.

“They’re damaged. Useless.”

“Of course.”

“Where is the book?”

A huge thug leaned in the door. “They’re in the house.” My heart jumped. But he didn’t mean us. “Too many of them. Can’t hold them off.”

“Hold them in the hall out there, then. You ought to be able to handle a few dwarves. Don’t kill Gnorst. I need him alive.”

“Yes sir.” Like if Chodo said do it, it could be done.

I watched the witch. Damned if she wasn’t happy about the way things were going.

So was Chodo.

Interesting.

The kingpin eyed the witch again “Where is the book? I won’t ask again.”

“Fine. Then I won’t have to listen to you anymore.”

Chodo didn’t get mad. He smiled, said, “Take her into that corner there.” He murmured something to the man behind his chair, who moved him over behind a big barricade of a desk to my left I couldn’t see him anymore.

Crask gave Sadler a thumbs-up

The uproar from the rest of the house had been moving closer. Now the huge thug stumbled into Chodo’s office. “I’m sorry, sir.” He collapsed Chodo still didn’t get upset.

A bunch of dwarves galloped in, Gnorst in their midst. He took in the setup, barked orders in dwarfish. For a moment there were a good thirty of them in there. Then some started drifting out. Most didn’t want to go and a few flat refused Gnorst smoldered. I guessed he didn’t want anyone figuring out that he had visions of becoming the new Nooney Krombach.

There were a dozen left when the flow stopped. Gnorst strutted over to the kingpin. His beard waggled like he was fixing to say something.

Chodo trampled his line. Amazing. Put a little pressure on that old boy and he found all kinds of energy reserves. “Looks like six of one and half a dozen of the other, eh, Chet?”

Chet was one of the guys holding the Serpent. “Maybe seven to five.”

The dwarves were baffled. Chodo was supposed to be dribbling in fear.



“I’ve waited a long time, Gnorst,” Chodo said. “But patience pays. Today I get to see you die.”

Dwarves peered around nervously. Gnorst’s wicked little eyes went squinty. He wondered if he’d walked into a trap.

Chodo managed a little chuckle. “You’re going to do it to yourselves. Because half of you are her creatures and half are Gnorst’s.” He continued, stirring them up. The old boy had balls that dragged the ground. And he was telling the truth. That was obvious. You could tell as soon as the short folks started eyeballing each other.

The witch yelled, “Don’t!”

Chodo laughed.

The fur started flying

How’d he set them off so easy? One second they were calculating their chances, the next flying around hooting and hollering and stabbing.

The men holding the witch eased along the outside wall, toward Chodo. She didn’t look so chipper now. Chet paused once to stick a shiv into some short guy who thought he’d be a hero and rescue the maiden not so fair.

It wasn’t all dwarf hacking dwarf into chop meat, though. Chet got his before he could get behind the desk with Chodo and his coolie.

Crask made another thumbs-up sign. He and Sadler moved over some, got set.

Gnorst’s loyalists were getting the best of the witch’s boys. The last two broke for the doorway. The rest whooped in pursuit. I heard Chodo laugh again, softly, now through a gap opening in the wall of the secret room.

Gnorst caught on a step too late. Chodo made good his escape.... Only it wasn’t so good, was it?

Crask and Sadler bopped the two guys with Chodo, cracked the witch a good one, made sure the wall was solidly in place. Gnorst had him a fit on the other side.

Crask said, “Hi, Boss.”

Chodo was fresh out of good humor. He sighed. “You place your bets and take your chances, don’t you, Mr. Garrett? But you can’t beat the house forever. The wheel is fixed”

“You ought to know.”

“I’ve rigged it often enough. I knew I should have tried harder to find that missing stone.”

I tossed it into his lap. “I didn’t need it. They killed all your pets.” I nodded toward the wall. The dwarves out there had gotten awful quiet. I went to peek.

They were quiet, but there were a good forty of them out there now. Most just stood there staring at Gnorst. Gnorst didn’t look a whole lot like Gnorst anymore. He was scared shitless.

His buddies had caught onto him. He’d been using them so he could grab the Book of Shadows and turn himself into another Nooney Krombach. And he’d given himself away here. His pals had fallen into what you might call an unforgiving mood.

He’d told me what dwarves thought about Nooney and his book.

He started trying to yak his way out, but there was no hope in his voice and nobody was listening. Short folks started edging toward him, growling. I put the



plug back in the wall.

“Well?” Chodo said, like he was in a hurry to get it over. Like he wanted to see if I had what it would take.

The witch wobbled to her feet. “Let’s get a leash on her,” I suggested. “Chodo asked a question I never heard answered. I’d like to know myself.”

Chodo smiled feebly. “I knew you had a price, Mr. Garrett. It’s a high one, admittedly, but it turns out you’re human.”

“I want to destroy it. If I have to lug it up to thunder-lizard country and dump it into a volcano.”

He eyed me while Crask and Sadler rummaged for a choker for the Serpent. His smile faded, then returned. “You really would.” He shook his head. “You understand about this afternoon?”

“Not really.”

“I believe you. My error. I appear to have been misinformed and thereby have moved to a false conclusion. But more than one source suggested you knew the whereabouts of the book. I wanted to ask about that. All I accomplished was to activate your enmity. Well. You can’t beat the house.”

“Why the hell would anybody think I’d know where the damned book is? I’ve been running myself crazy trying to get a lead on it.”

Winger muttered, “We going to stand around jawing all night? We’re going to have those runts out there after us real soon now. Let’s do what we got to do and get.”

“I think they’re done. I don’t think they’ll be any more trouble.”

She went to check through the peephole.

I looked at Chodo.

I couldn’t do it. And he knew I couldn’t. He smiled. And not like he’d won some victory but like I’d won one and he was pleased. He smiled even knowing he wasn’t going to get out of anything. Crask and Sadler didn’t have my sensibilities. They wouldn’t forgive and forget.

Bigger smile on a devil’s ugly face. “Look out for my baby, Mr. Garrett.”

I nodded.

“She’ll be fine,” Crask said. And she would. That’s the way those people worked. They counted women and children out, untouchable.

“Gods,” Winger said from the peephole. She turned away pale, shocked. I decided I didn’t want to see anything that would shock Winger.

Crask and Sadler eyed her, responding to the grim awe edging her voice...

The Serpent let Crask have it in the crotch. He folded up. She leaped at Chodo...

I like to make out that I’m fast on my mental feet, but usually I’m no quicker than anybody else. When a woman is involved, I can be frightfully slow. But I do have a knack for seeing right and doing right when my tail is on the line.

Everything seemed to slow down as the Serpent lunged toward the kingpin. I noted that she was not totally naked. She wore a ring. A big ugly snake thing probably still on her because they hadn’t wanted to chop her finger off till after she died. I started to yell but it was too late.

She hit Chodo while Crask was still folding and Sadler was turning to see. She didn’t know where she was going but knew she couldn’t stay. Anywhere would be safer than here.



I yelled, “Winger! Come on! Let’s get her!”

She responded without thinking. Good for her.

It had occurred to me that this was the ideal moment to separate ourselves from Crask and Sadler. Before they started considering who ought to follow the kingpin down that dark road.

The witch had a good sense of where to run. We couldn’t corner her. She found her way out of the hidden passages. She fled the house from the rear. And gained on us while doing it.

I pounded around the side of the house just as she reached the front and almost landed in the middle of the departing dwarves. She whirled and headed east, toward the false dawn just beginning to define the vineyard hills.

Now Winger and I gained ground. We had longer legs and no need to worry about scratches from weeds and brush.

A winged shape dropped out of nowhere, brushed the Serpent’s right shoulder, staggered her. Another followed it, then another, forcing her to change course.

Winger grabbed my arm. “Slow down. We might not ought to catch up.”

“Huh?” I’d stopped thinking much.

“They’re steering her.”

They were indeed. I slowed to a trot and tried getting my brain to perking again. But I’d used my daily ration of smarts in Chodo’s secret room.

The Serpent scrambled over the estate wall, raced for the cover of a woodlot following a small creek. MorCartha swarmed around her as Winger and I cleared the wall. They ignored us completely. The witch stopped just short of the trees, looked around wildly. MorCartha were there to cut off any attempt at retreat.

Men came out of the woods. Little guys, all of them, but men, not elves or dwarves or whatever. They surrounded the Serpent. A little old guy with glasses hobbled after them.

Willard Tate.

“Whoa,” I said. “Stop right there, Winger. Good. Now, real careful, let’s stroll toward the road.” In half a second I’d overcome an impulse to go down and talk some sense into the Tates. That might not be any healthier than going back to hang around with Crask and Sadler. Willard Tate appeared demonic in the feeble light. He was set to get even with the world.

“What’s happening?” Winger asked.

“You don’t really want to know.” Old Man Tate had his tools with him. I kept easing toward the road, hoping I wouldn’t catch anyone’s eye. “That old man there. His niece was the one the Serpent’s thugs hit by mistake.” I wondered how much he’d spent to arrange this encounter I wondered how much had been engineered and how much was pure luck. I didn’t have any urge to go ask. Uncle Willard might decide it was a fine time to un-complicate Tinnie’s life by removing her favorite ex-Marine.

The Serpent screamed.

“You going to do something?”

“Yeah. Get my dearly beloved ass out of here. Too many people with their blood up in this neighborhood. I’m going to go home and lock myself in for a month, then I’ll start trying to figure out what the hell became of that damned Book of Shadows.”



I had an idea. It weighed five hundred pounds and was mad as a hatter. Process of elimination. Everybody else who had the slightest interest didn't have the book. Therefore, Easterman did or knew where it was. Maybe he wanted the excitement to settle down some before he started playing Fido the Terrible.

The Serpent had one hell of a set of lungs. She howled steadily. I didn't look back.

I'd make my peace with me about that later. After I got used to the idea of still being healthy.

Six hundred yards southwest of Chodo's gate the road to TunFaire crosses a small stone bridge over the creek that supports the woodlot where the Tates had waited in ambush. A pair of unsavory sorts were perched on the sides of that bridge. Seedy morCartha inhabited the trees overhead, for once uncontentious. Presumably they belonged to the same tribe, perhaps the same family.

The shorter character stood, dusted his seat, gave me a big smile filled with pointy dark-elf teeth. "Everything come out, Garrett?" He was a handsome devil.

I kept cool. Cucumber Garrett, they call me; icicles for bones. "You see before you the infamous Morley Dotes," I told Winger. Obviously, he wanted me to ply him with questions. I didn't. I'd show him. I'd spoil his whole day.

"He sure don't look like much."

"That's what the girls all say."

Saucerhead, still seated, grinned, spat into the creek. He glanced upstream. "Some excitement, huh?"

"Routine. They never had a chance once I got rolling. I'd love to hang around and swap lies, but I haven't had my breakfast."

Saucerhead got up. He and Morley tagged along after us. Dotes sounded wounded when he said, "Routine? Your tail was an inch short of going down for the last time all the way. If I hadn't had you covered every step..."

Saucerhead told me, "We hired these morCartha to watch and report so we could jump in if you got in too deep."

"Oh. It was you guys that got me away from Chodo's kidnappers and that thunder-lizard?"

Morley hemmed and hawed. "You know the morCartha. Short attention spans. They kind of lost you that time. But your luck held. We were on you the rest of the time."

"Maybe half the time," Saucerhead admitted. "Well, maybe a quarter of the time. People got to sleep some."

"My pals," I told Winger. "They look out for me."

"Hey," Morley protested. "Don't be that way. I set it up so it came out in the end, didn't I?"

"I don't know. Did you?"

Morley isn't one to blow his own horn, not any louder than the trumps of doom, anyway, so he let Saucerhead explain. Seems Morley smelled something in the wind early, something that would get me and Chodo butting heads. He'd stopped hiding and sulking over Chodo's having commandeered his place, had made arrangements. He'd gotten in touch with most everyone looking for the book and offered to become their warlord. Gnorst's bunch had no practical experience hunting and fighting. Likewise the Tates. And his reputation was dark enough to



endear him to the witch's gang. Naturally, he'd gotten all parties to pay him in advance. Then he'd nudged everybody together for the final free-for-all.

"I thought it was pretty slick," Morley grumbled.

"Yeah," Saucerhead said. "Way it came out, it even halfway solved the morCartha problem." He looked around to see if any hired hands were following. They'd lost interest. He was relieved.

Morley chuckled. "Don't worry about them. They're back there cleaning out Chodo's place."

I didn't have much to say. Let Morley think he'd covered me. He was a friend, sort of, and he'd tried. I guess it was his morCartha I'd sensed when I'd had that feeling of being watched. It had been him and Tharpe and the Tates in the boat that had followed me and Winger up the river. Let him think what he wanted. I was sure his contribution didn't mean much. Things couldn't have turned out much different, the nature of the greedy beast being what it is.

As we entered the city I asked Winger, "You still on Fido's payroll? I still have to go after that book."

"I don't think so." She was puffing.

I chuckled. "Want we should stop somewhere, get you a mule?"

"For what?" She did a good puzzled look.

"So you don't collapse. You must be lugging a hundred pounds of loot. I was amazed you kept up when we were chasing the Serpent."

She got huffy but denied nothing.

Hell, she clanked when she moved.

Morley was thoughtful. He observed, "We may be in for interesting times, what with the kingpin's spot up for grabs."

"Crask and Sadler are smarter than they act. Who could challenge them?"

"Each other."

Winger eyed him hard. "Is he that naive, Garrett?" I skipped answering because I'd figured those two out only recently myself. "Power changes people. Some get greedy."

"They're going to worry about the world, not each other."

"Whatever," Morley said. And: "All's well that ends well." We were in the Safety Zone then. "I've got to go see if I have a place left."

"Yeah," Saucerhead said "I better check in with Molly. She maybe might be a little worried. I never let her know what was up."

As he headed for his place a flight of thunder-lizards swept over. Only the pigeons got excited. Folk in the street scarcely noticed. That was TunFaire. Anything can happen so everyone gets used to everything quickly.

Winger clanked a little closer. She looked as bad as I felt. "Your friend was right. All's well that ends well."

"But this isn't over. I haven't taken care of that damned Book of Shadows."

"Let's get some shut-eye first, though. Eh?"

"I could handle a few weeks of that." I didn't have much energy left but there were loose ends. Tinnie. Carla Lindo. The book. Maybe Fido Easterman. Not to mention Crask and Sadler. But I couldn't concentrate on them. With home and bed so near, I was fading fast.

So. Trudge trudge, drag drag, off Wizard's Reach into Macunado Street... "Oh,



hell! Now what?" I drifted over and parked the back of my lap on a neighbor's steps.

There was a crowd in front of my place, oohing and ahing. But the attraction wasn't anything as commonplace as flying thunder-lizards.

A huge character in star-spangled black floated twenty feet above the street, twisting and spinning and making motions like he was trying to swim. He didn't get anywhere. Fido Easterman.

He spotted Winger, started bellowing like a potato auctioneer.

I dragged myself to my feet, ambled closer. I noted that Fido's whole gang was with him, though no one else was airborne. The rest were in the street, stiff as hardened leather. Some, caught in midstride, had toppled.

"What the hell?" Winger said. "What the hell?"

"He pissed the Dead Man off somehow."

There were ogres on my stoop, also rigid. My door was open. Busted open. No wonder Old Bones was peckish.

I didn't hurt myself getting in a hurry. The Dead Man had it under control. I slithered through the crowd, stopped to eyeball Easterman.

"Get me down!"

"Why? You want more trouble than you've got?"

Easterman flailed at the air, snarled something about somebody was getting away, then started laying on the threats.

He popped up fifteen feet, then fell, howling. People scattered. He started darting around like a feeding bat. People clapped and cheered and yelled suggestions about what he should try next. He really had the Dead Man's goat.

I shouted, "What did you do? Try to break in? Why do a dumb thing like that?"

Fido glowered as he whizzed by.

The Dead Man tossed him high and let him fall till his nose was four inches from the pavement, then flipped him up again. How long had this been going on? The Dead Man's powers are amazing, but there are limits to his endurance.

"The book!" Easterman wailed. "I meant to snatch the book."

"I can understand that. I'd like to snatch it myself. But why bust up my place?"

He didn't have anything more to say. Not yet. The Dead Man set him spinning. He got busy dumping his last six meals. People scattered again, grumbling. This part of the show wasn't so attractive.

Winger told me, "He's always been convinced that you have the book hidden at home. That's why he sent me in the first place. To root around."

"Huh? Then he's even crazier than I thought. Don't go away, Fido." I headed for the house. Mounting the steps, I removed the big green litter there, tossing it into the gutter where it belonged.

They'd chopped my door all to hell. Dean could use it for kindling. I wasn't pleased.

The door to the small front room stood ajar. Had the Dead Man let them get that far before he reacted? No. Dean was in there. "Dean? What's the matter?" He was seated on the daybed, sniffing, fiddling with gray burlap he had wrapped around one hand.

He needed time to respond. "Oh! Mr. Garrett!" It was shock. "I tried to stop her. I couldn't."



Winger had invited herself aboard. She said, "He's been cut, Garrett. Yes. The floor between his feet was bloody.

I moved then, thinking he was badly hurt. But he wasn't. His left hand had been laid open to the bone, though, like he'd grabbed a blade. "What happened?"

"She took the book, Mr. Garrett. Right after those creatures tried to break in. I caught her unwrapping it. I tried to take it away

What was he babbling about? "What are you babbling about?" Then I spotted a torn brass page under his foot. The page that had cut his hand.

"That Book of Shadows. It was here all the time. Under the daybed. And she knew it."

She knew it? How did she know it? How come he hadn't found it while he was cleaning? We were maybe going to have to have a talk about his housekeeping. Under the daybed? How the hell did it get under there?

"Oh, my." I recalled a certain naked vision of a morning past. She'd carried a bundle wrapped in cloth like that wrapped around Dean's hand. I'd paid no attention because there'd been distractions. If I'd thought of that package at all, I'd assumed she'd taken it with her when she'd done her fade. "Carla Lindo grabbed it? She knew where it was and took off with it?"

Dean nodded.

I catch on real quick. "Winger, see what you can do about that hand. I need to go yell at my partner."

You had best not, the Dead Man sent as I charged into his den. I was as surprised as Dean.

"You couldn't be. You know the inside of everybody's head. You playing some kind of game?"

I was ignorant of what was happening at deeper levels of her mind, though now it is obvious that her principal motive for staying here was to locate and remain near the Book of Shadows. Note that I was unable to read the mind of the Serpent and unaware of the presence of the other while they were here in the guise of Carla Lindo Ramada. This suggests that there is something quite unusual about that young woman.

"Really?" I was angry. Needless to say. One half-wit thought after the naked woman's departure and I could have saved us all a peck of trouble. I could have poked around, found the book, and destroyed it publicly. End of excitement. But no! I had to let myself get distracted by acres and acres of redheads.

I am doing my part here, Garrett. But I have no legs.

"Say what?"

It has not been twenty minutes since the little devil fled. You know where she is going.

I thought I knew where I was going. Upstairs. To bed. "More power to her."

Garrett! It has been demonstrated to my satisfaction that that woman is not one of the good people either. I suggest you consider what use she or her father might have for the Book of Shadows. Take into consideration theft supposed base of operations, an unassailable fortress.

His feelings were hurt because he'd been taken in. He wanted Blood. "All right. All right." I needed this like I needed another vacation at the kingpin's place. What I



did need was rest, about thirty quarts of cold beer, a ten-pound steak, rare and smothered in mushrooms. A long soak in a tub wouldn't hurt, either. "I'm on my way." Why do I do these things to me?

On my way where? There was a whole world out there.

She has to head west, Garrett.

That narrowed it down. There's only one way out of the city if you're headed west

Winger invited herself along. I didn't argue. She could stick pins in me, keep me awake.

We set our watch against the wall, outside the west gate, among the most optimistic beggars in the world. I mean, half the people inbound are destitute peasants looking for the streets of gold.

"Think we got here in time, Garrett?"

I'd taken our lives in my hands and cut through the Bustee, following the most direct route. "She doesn't know the city. Even if she hired a coach, she couldn't have gotten here first." True, logically, but I was whistling in the dark. After recent events, logic didn't seem very trustworthy

I mean, the Dead Man getting swindled not once but three times? That was damned hard to swallow, though for the sake of peace in the house I'd take his word.

I suspected wishful thinking had helped Carla Lindo sucker him. He'd been exposed long enough to have smelled something. He'd overlooked it because she'd charmed him... Hell. I should talk?

"She have any money?" Winger asked.

"I don't think so. Why?"

"I wondered if she could hire a coach or buy a horse."

"She gave us everything she had to hire us."

"She'll be walking, then. Can she read?"

"Why?"

"If I was her and I could read, I'd open that book and turn me into somebody else in case somebody came after me."

I hadn't thought of that. I couldn't recall if she could read or not. My memory plays tricks when I'm tired. "Assume the worst. Watch for anybody with something that might be the book."

"How big?"

I made gestures, as best I could recall what I'd seen in the naked woman's arms

Winger scrunched down in the shade of the wall, ignoring the glower of the beggar next to her. She closed one eye like she was going Halfway to sleep. "Think there'll be trouble because of what sour sidekick did to Easterman?"

"Nah. Shit happens. Pretty often around our place. The neighbors will be happy it was just entertaining this time. One time half the houses got busted up. That's why all the new brickwork and stuff. People that don't like excitement moved out. Nobody else gives a damn. They don't own, they rent."

"I noticed that about TunFaire. Nobody gives a damn about anything but themselves."

Not entirely true, but close



Nothing happened for a while. I got into a discussion with a bum who was a fellow ex-Marine, mostly about Glory Mooncalled's exploits in the Cantard. During the night, while I was preoccupied, word had come that Mooncalled's magnificent maneuver down there hadn't panned pure gold. Our fearless leaders had, in fact, anticipated it. They'd gone ahead and jumped into a brawl with the Venageti but had held back powerful reserves. Those had continued the pursuit of Mooncalled and had carved him up pretty good.

From the sound of it, once the dust settled there would be no predominant force in the Cantard. We'd be back to the old endless terror, only now with the balance teetering three ways instead of two. That should make the situation there crazier than ever.

I was glad I was past all that.

Winger nudged me.

One gorgeous redhead had come hiking out the gate. She was dressed for rough travel and carried a big pack.

She was in a hurry. Literate or not, she hadn't changed her appearance.

She was in too much of a hurry. Thus, she didn't notice us or know that she'd acquired other admirers, city thugs who thought they had them an easy mark. They cruised along behind, knowing the road ahead would provide ample opportunity. Three miles past west gate you're into wild country already. The hills out there are better suited to raising sheep than to grape growing.

Winger rose with me. She understood the situation without my pointing it out "I got a suggestion you ain't going to like."

"Which is?"

"Let those three clowns have first crack, then take the book from them."

"You're right. I don't like it."

"Think about it. No telling what's up her sleeve. Right? So why not let somebody else take the lumps?" She did have her own style of thinking. She had a point, too.

I was in a foul enough temper to accept it. "You come to TunFaire this way?"

"Yeah. So?"

"There's a big curve in the road a couple miles ahead. Runs around the end of that ridge yonder, to a town called Switchback."

"I remember."

"If somebody was to go over the ridge, they could save a mile and a half, get ahead, and come back this way. We could come at them from two directions. My guess is they'll jump her at the knee of the ridge, Maiden Angel Shrine, or the spring just past there."

"Does somebody mean me?"

"There's a thought."

"Here's another one. She going to be watching behind her or ahead? She running to or from? Who's she going to recognize?"

Damn her black heart. She was right Carla Lindo would recognize me in a second. I bellyached a lot, but when the time came I headed uphill, cussing all the way.

It wasn't so bad going down the far side. I tripped and rolled part of the way. No work at all, that. But I didn't make the time I should have. I was late getting to the Shrine of the Maiden Angel.



The bad boys had had time to catch Carla Lindo and Winger had had time to catch them in an indelicately exposed posture. When I came puffing along, one was dead and another working on it while the third was unconscious. Winger had just finished tying a half-naked Carla Lindo to a sapling. “You stop for a couple of beers, Garrett?”

“My pins aren’t short enough for running down hills.” A westbound peasant family studiously ignored us. They would report us at Hellwalker Station, the cavalry barracks two miles beyond Switchback. Riders would come to investigate. Highwaymen aren’t tolerated the way criminals are in the city.

Carla Lindo had gotten batted around some. It took her a while to recognize me and turn on the heat. I gaped. Winger spat, shook her head, grabbed Carla Lindo’s pack in one hand and my arm in the other. “You going to stand there drooling or are you going to haul ass?”

I shuddered and shivered and broke the spell. “Haul ass. One minute.” I squatted, told Carla Lindo, “The cavalry will be here soon, sweetheart. They’ll turn you loose. If you don’t want to spend the rest of your life explaining to every firelord and stormwarden there is, tell the soldiers that these guys jumped you, then some travelers came along and broke it up. But they took off before anybody thought of cutting you loose.”

“Garrett! Please.” Could she ever turn on the heat. She wasn’t human. I turned to hot wax. “I have to have the book. I can’t go home without it.”

I repeated my shudder-and-shiver routine. I can withstand them when I have to. “No way, darling. It’s too wicked. It’s killed too many people already. It’s got to be destroyed. And I don’t trust anybody to do that. Maybe not even me.” I wasn’t tempted anymore, though. I’d suffered too much. I just wanted to put an end to the damned thing.

I touched Carla Lindo’s cheek. “I’m sorry, sweetheart. It could have been something.”

“Garrett, you can’t do this to me. You loved me. Didn’t you?”

“Maybe I did, some. That don’t mean I’ll let you use me. That don’t mean I’m going to go to hell for you. I wouldn’t do that for anybody.

“Except maybe Tinnie. I’d skipped through a suburb of hell for her trying to get this straightened out. I had to go see her again.

Carla Lindo changed. She stopped being that delicious little morsel, turned into a wildcat with a mouth like a dock wallop, speaking the true shadows in her heart. She became the real Carla Lindo Ramada, no better than the other two who’d worn her face.

Winger grumbled, “You ready now? Or you want to hang around and put yourself through some more punishment?”

Right. I put a cap on my hurt, turned my back on Carla Lindo Ramada, walked toward TunFaire. Winger and I didn’t talk much. Wasn’t much to say. I told myself it could have been worse. I could have gotten involved with Carla Lindo. That wouldn’t have been hard. But events had conspired to keep me distanced. Lucky me, I’d ended up just getting another lesson revealing the basic blackness lying below the human heart. Once again I’d seen that, given incentive and opportunity, most anybody will jump at the chance to turn wicked. And the wicked will turn wicked still.



Priests of a thousand cults proclaim the essential goodness of Man. They must be fools. All I see is people flinging themselves at the chance to do evil.

I said a lot of that out loud. Winger told me, "You're depressing."

"So they tell me. If they run into me at a time like this. Afterwards. Hang around me much longer, you'll see me really black."

I wondered how black it would get. She had Carla Lindo's pack. She might get a notion to cash in off Eastermarl.

I'm not sure where the idea came from. Maybe it was spur-of-the-moment. Maybe it was in there all along because the route I picked through the west end was not the fastest. Whatever, suddenly we were at the corner of Blaize and Eldoro. Across the way, alone, hunched, as though shunned by its neighbors, aware of that, cringing, stood a building of ocher brick. Most TunFaire brick is red. Smoke wisped from a stack. The idea hit me. "Come on over here."

I pushed through the front door of that place. A cowbell arrangement announced me. A wizened kobold appeared. A squirrel on two feet. His hands permanently washed one another over his heart. "How may I help you, sir and madam?" His smirk told us he knew. All his kind have a fawning companionship with death.

"I saw smoke from your chimney. You all fired up?"

Puzzled, he replied, "No sir. We keep the fire burning so we don't have to spend time preheating the kiln."

"Let me have the pack," I told Winger. She gave it up reluctantly. She was puzzled, too. She came from an area where they had few nonhumans. If she'd known what was up, she might have resisted. I told the kobold, "I want to run this through." I let him look at the pack.

"Sir?"

"I'll pay the usual fee."

"Very well, sir." Even kobolds don't usually argue with money, whether or not they understand. He reached for the pack.

"I'd rather send it off myself. So I'm absolutely sure. You know?"

"As you wish." He didn't move. Time to show him the color of my money. I did. He smiled, put it into a cash box that appeared magically, and disappeared even more quickly. He washed his hands some more, suggested, "If you'll follow me, then?"

"What the hell we doing, Garrett? What is this place? It has a weird smell."

"You'll see."

We went down a hall that passed between several small rooms. In one a kobold family kept vigil over an old, still form on a stone table. Winger got it then.

Many of the races, and even some humans, prefer not to bury their dead. The reasons vary. For kobolds and some others burial supposedly leaves the dead the option of getting up and walking again. Or so they fear. For us humans expense is usually the major consideration. TunFaire is short on cemeteries. Burial ground is expensive.

The kobold took us to the kiln room. He shouted in his own language More kobolds, likely family, popped up, threw coal into the kiln's firebox, pumped bellows furiously. In seconds waves of heat beat at us.

"You're going to burn it?" Winger asked.



“Going to chuck it in there and cremate it. Won’t be anything left but slag.” It gets hot in those kilns. Has to, to reduce bone.

The little folk shoveled coal and pumped. The whole place got toasty warm. Winger argued with herself. She wasn’t much at hiding her thoughts. “Garrett... I got to go outside. I can’t handle the smell.” It was a bit thick in there but she just needed an excuse to remove herself from temptation. If she could stand herself, she could stand a crematorium.

Soon enough the old kobold told me the kiln was ready. I wrestled with myself a little, finally managed to pin the dark side of me long enough. I tossed the bundle in onto the rack where they usually parked the bodies. I leaned my nose against a mica porthole and watched.

Carla Lindo’s pack burned quickly, exposing the book. First time I’d seen it. It was pretty much as described, big, thick, bound in leather that went fast. Its brass pages started to curl.

I’m sure it was imagination. I don’t know what else it might have been, but as those pages yielded to the fire I thought I heard tiny, distant screams. I thought I saw frantic shadows scurrying over the glowing coals.

I stepped out of the crematorium. “Well, that’s the end of that.” A young couple passing spared a wide-eyed look for a goof who carried on conversations with thin air. I clammed. Winger wasn’t there. I hung around half a minute, probably looking as silly as I felt. Then I shrugged. What the hell? She had work to do, Chodo’s plunder to pawn while the pawning was good.

Now what?

I figured my best bet was to go home and catch up on my sleep. So naturally I decided to punish myself a little by delaying gratification. I headed for the Tate compound.

It would be just a quick stop, just a minute to see how Tinnie was doing. If I could weasel my way around the Tate at the gate. After last night they’d be less friendly than ever.

But they did let me inside. I did see Tinnie. She was all better, full of vinegar. The old redhead again. She put on a big, wicked grin and threatened to try visiting again, as soon as I did a little recovering myself. “You might even try getting near some warm water, fella. I think your fleas have all died and started to ripen.”

I gave her a little peck on the lips, about ten minutes’ worth, on account, and a grin for interest, and said, “I’ll run all the way. Don’t let me get too old before you...”

“You’re already too old but I like you anyway I’ll probably give in to my baser nature... You’d better scoot before Uncle Willard finds out you’re here.”

I scooted I didn’t exactly run home, but I didn’t waste much time. People tell me I was humming. I went straight to bed.

Which is probably where I ought to stay, and say good-bye to running and redheads and whatever else. If I had the sense to stay in bed and keep my head under the covers, I wouldn’t get into these crazy things.