

Guardians of The Flame 3-To Home And Ehvenor

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Guardians of The Flame 3: To Home And Ehvenor

Joel Rosenberg

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Dedication

*This one is for
Mary Kittredge*

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Prologue

The Dream Is the Same

The nightmare is always the same:

We're trying to make our escape from Hell, a whole crowd of us running through the slimy corridors. Everybody I've ever loved is there, along with strange faces, some of which I know should be familiar.

Behind us, there's a screaming pack of demons, some in cartoony shapes, some that look like misshapen wolves, all of whom have me scared so bad I can hardly breathe the scalding, stinking air. The walls keep trying to close in on me, but I push the hot, slime-covered surface away.

The exit is up ahead, a gash in the wall, and the crowd starts to push through. I can't tell who's gone through, but I can only hope that my kids are among them. Please.

Some have made their escape, but there's no way for the rest of us: the demons are approaching too quickly, and they're going to catch us.

And then I see him: Karl Cullinane, Jason's father, standing tall, face beaming, his hands, chest, and beard streaked with blood and gore.

"We're going to have to hold the corridor," Karl says. "Who's with me?" He smiles, as though he's been waiting his whole life for this, the fucking idiot.

Figures push out of the crowd, all of them bloodied, some of them bent. I guess I notice Kosciuszko and Copernicus first, although both of them are shorter than I thought they'd be.

A buddha-faced Chinese steps forward, his face shiny with sweat that he doesn't seem to notice. "A bodhisattva," he says, "is one who pledges not to attain heaven until the rest of humanity does."

Another man stands tall, lean as a sword, not seeming to notice that the right side of his chest is cut open, slashed to the grayish liver. "Of course," he says, taking his place next to a slim, hawk-faced woman in what looks like a burial robe. Her robe is burning so hard I can hear her flesh crackle, and she winces in pain, but it doesn't stop her.

"Moi aussi," she says.

Two nondescript men push forward together. "Once more, Master Ridley," the first says, his accent clipped and British.

The other shakes his head and smiles wearily. "I'd thought—but no: once more, then."

A heavy-bearded, heavy-set man, still wearing his hangman's noose, his eyes wide in madness, pushes forward, shoulder to shoulder with Georgie Patton himself.

Humanity streams by us, and it's all I can do not to be swept along with it.

The corridor has always seemed tight, maybe twenty feet across, but the line of them—thousands of them, arms linked tightly—can't quite stretch across it.

They need one more to close the ranks, or it's all for nothing, and the demons are fast approaching.

One more. They always need one more.

Karl looks at me—they all look at me: Brown, Ridley, Joan, Ahira, Horatius, all of them—his bloody face puzzled. "Walter? What are you waiting for?"

* * *

Then I wake up.

PART ONE

HOMEWORK

CHAPTER ONE

*In Which I Spend
a Morning at
Castle Cullinane*

If you don't think that sex is violent, next time try thrashing around a bit.

—WILL SHETTERLY

My name is Walter Slovotsky.

As near as I can figure, I should be turning forty-three in the next tenday or so, and maybe it's time I grew up. I've spent the past couple of decades as, variously, a hero, a trader, a farming consultant, a thief, and a Jeffersonian political fanatic. Oh. And a killer. Both retail and wholesale. I'm sort of a jack of all trades.

In addition, I've managed to father two daughters (that I know of; I, er, get around a bit), generate a few hundred interesting aphorisms, and sleep with an even more interesting variety of women than I did in college (see above), including my second-best-friend's wife-to-be (we weren't all that friendly at the time. When he found out about it he almost killed me, but we all ended up as friends) and, some years later, his adopted daughter (he never found out about it; I'm not sure how that turned out, not yet).

But here I am, getting on in years, about to make some major changes in my life, and I thought I'd do it this way. May as well start with food.

Food's an important part of my life.

* * *

The early morning crowd, plus me, was gathering for breakfast.

Settling into a new castle makes for long hours and hefty appetites. I've always had the latter, anyway, hangover or no.

"Please pass the bacon," I said. I don't miss the taste of nitrites; they do good things with smoking pig parts in Bieme. Just the thought of beans and hocks, Biemestren style, makes my mouth water.

"In a hurry?" Jason Cullinane gestured with an eating prong. "Father used to say that death is always willing to wait until after breakfast." He looked disgustingly fresh for this pre-goddamn-dawn hour of the morning: face washed, dark brown hair damp and combed back, eyes bright. I wouldn't have been surprised if he sprouted a bushy tail.

My mouth tasted of bile and stale whiskey, and my head ached. I'd had a bit too much to drink the night before, but only a bit, I decided: my head was only thumping, not pounding.

It's a sin to let good food go to waste, and I like to pick my sins carefully—I chomped into a thick piece of ham, then washed it down with a swallow of milk from a glazed mug. The milk was fresh, but not nearly cold enough. Milk should be cold enough to make your teeth hurt.

"Kid," I said, "your father stole that line from me. Like most of his good ones."

I was rewarded with a flash of teeth, the sort of smile that his father used to have.

Despite the tenday's growth of beard darkening his cheek and chin, it was hard to think of him as an adult. He looked so damn young.

His gaze went distant, as though he was thinking about something, and just for a moment a flash of the other side of his father crossed his face, and there was something distant and cold in his expression. But the moment passed, and he looked about fifteen again, even though he was a couple of years older. Good kid.

Jason Cullinane favored his mother, mainly. I could see Andrea's genes in his cheekbones and the widow's peak, and in the warm dark eyes. But there was more than a little of Karl Cullinane visible—in the set of his chin and shoulders, mainly. I'd say that it frightened me, sometimes, but everybody knows that the great Walter Slovotsky doesn't frighten.

Which only goes to show that everybody doesn't know a whole lot.

"The bacon?" I gestured at the platter.

Tennetty finally passed it. "What's the hurry this morning?"

"Who said there's a hurry? I'm hungry."

The first time I'd seen Tennetty, years ago, when Karl and I were running a team of Home raiders, she had just staggered out of a slave wagon, a plain skinny woman of the sort your eye tends to skip over. No character lines in her face, no interesting scars.

Even from such a start, Tennetty hadn't worn well as the years had gone by; her bony face sagged in the

morning, and the patch fit loosely over her empty left eye socket. She rubbed at the scar that snaked around her good eye, then tossed her head to clear her bangs from her eyes—well, *eye*. Tennyty was getting sloppy, maybe; in the old days, she wouldn't have let her bangs grow that long.

The old days. The trouble with old people is that they always talk about the old days like they were the good days. I don't buy it. Maybe because my memory is too good—there were too many days out on the road, sleeping on rocks, never sleeping fully, because there's always trouble ahead. Hell, we were looking for trouble, then. Part of the plan.

"So?" Jason said. "What are you up to this morning?"

"I've got a date with a bow and some rabbits, maybe a deer," I said. Or maybe not. More likely, my date was with the limb of an oak tree. No, not to hang from it—to put some arrows into it.

Tennyty nodded judiciously. "You and the dwarf?"

I shouldn't have been surprised. Even after twenty years, Tennyty still hadn't noticed that Ahira didn't like to go hunting. Not for food, unless absolutely necessary; not for sport, ever.

"Not his cup of tea. Ahira's still asleep."

There had been many late hours of late, and the sun wasn't quite up. I didn't blame it. The time before dawn is when I like to start staggering toward a bed to sleep in, not staggering out of it. It was uncharacteristic of me to be awake at this hour, but one thing I learned a long time ago is to do things that are uncharacteristic—keeps you young, maybe, and alive, sometimes.

Or maybe I'm just kidding myself. I've never been good at consistency. Maybe I was up because of the damn dreams, and because of Kirah.

I poured myself another cup of tea. I don't know what U'len was putting in the mix, but it had a nice nutty smell that I had gotten very fond of. Not the sort of thing I'd dare have on the road—you can smell it in the sweat for a day or so; when you're on the road, eat what the locals eat, or keep it bland—but very nice.

Jason eyed me quizzically over his mug. "Are you feeling okay?"

"Just fine," I said, easily. Lying always comes easy to me. I had been having a lot of trouble sleeping of late. Not the only kind of trouble. After several years of getting better, Kirah was getting worse. Some things even time doesn't cure. Some things just lie beneath the surface and fester.

Damn it all. It wasn't my fault.

Back before I met her, before Karl and I freed her, Kirah had been ill-used. One of her owners was worse than simply brutal, and while there were no scars on her body—believe me; in happier days, we explored that matter *very* thoroughly—the scars on her mind had festered over the years.

A miracle was needed, and I didn't have one handy.

We Other Siders have seemed to work wonders at times, but it's only a matter of seeming to—we've just used the skills we brought with us, or acquired in the transition. Of the original seven of us, I was an ag major; Karl a dilettante; James Michael Finnegan a computer science major; Andrea, English; Doria,

home ec; Louis Riccetti, engineering; the late Jason Parker (R.I.P.; he didn't make it through even twenty-four hours on this side), history.

The real treatment for what was ailing Kirah wasn't available on This Side and whether it was available on the Other Side was debatable, if you like debating useless questions. Psychotherapy can help, but it can't work miracles.

The real treatment for what was ailing *me* could probably, as of last night, be found two rooms down from Kirah's and mine—in the bed of Jason's adopted sister, Aeia. Assuming, of course, that Aeia wanted to pick up where we left off.

Alternately, it was time to go out on the road.

I didn't like either option much. Resuming my relationship with Aeia would be dangerous, and it made sense to stay put in Jason's new barony for the time being, keeping in shape, waiting to hear some word about Mikyn.

I also didn't like the idea of Bren, Baron Adahan being under the same roof, whether he really was there to help the family settle in or to pay court to Aeia.

Most of all, I didn't like the fact that the universe doesn't appear to give a fuck what I do and don't like.

Jason speared the last piece of bacon and set it on my plate. "We could use some more food out here," he called out, not getting an immediate answer. Service was less than wonderful.

Tennetty shook her head. "Not like the old days at the castle. Used to be you could hear a servitor jump."

He made a be-still motion. Unsurprisingly, it worked, at least for now. After years as Karl's bodyguard (that's the nice word for it) Tennetty had fallen into the same pattern with Karl's son.

It was just the three of us alone around the small round table in what had been the old cook's nook in the castle, a small room between the kitchens and the formal dining room, its mottled glass windows covered with bars on both inside and outside.

The table and room could handle as many as eight or ten people, so Jason had coopted it as a breakfast room for the family three weeks—pardon me: two tendays—before, when we'd arrived to take over what had been Castle Furnael and now was Castle Cullinane.

Over the clatter of cups and saucers out in the kitchen, I could hear U'len berating one of the younger cooks, her voice rising in simulated anger, then falling into real, grumbled curses.

Pick your theory: if you assume that what you need in staff is experience with the people living there, I would have been tempted to do a complete staff switch with Thomen Furnael—excuse me, with the Emperor Thomen. Plan A: screw it—pay the two dollars. Plan B would be to keep almost everybody in place, under the theory that experience with the local facilities is the main issue. The baronial keep didn't need a quarter the staff that the castle did, after all.

Either way would have been reasonable, either way would have worked, but nobody was asking Walter Slovotsky's opinion. Ahira and I were teaching the boy about what we tend to call the family business, but running a castle has never really been part of that, and we'd kept our opinions largely to ourselves.

Unsurprising, really, that Jason had settled on an untheoretical compromise: bring in a few of his own people, keep on all but a few of the locals, and let them bump into each other all over the damn place.

Which is why the rolls were blackened on the bottom, my rooms hadn't been swept out in a week—although the flowers were changed daily—and hot baths were just plain not available without special arrangement and a lot of effort.

Tennetty gave a quick glance at Jason; he nodded, and she turned back to me. "Need some company?"

"Eh?"

"Need some company? Hunting?" She cocked her head to one side. "We were talking about hunting, no?"

"Yeah. And not really, no company needed," I said, then changed my mind. "Well, come to think of it, if you've got nothing better to do, sure." Unless you're burdening yourself like the White Knight, it's just as well to carry an extra weapon, and that's what Tennetty was. Pretty good one, too.

She smiled. "Nothing to kill here but time."

I would have been a lot happier if she hadn't meant it. I was going to spend the morning bowhunting, in part to stay out of trouble, but mainly for practice, and effect. I don't mind killing my own food—back when I was majoring in meat science, I slaughtered and butchered more than a lot of cows—but it doesn't give me any thrill. It did give Tennetty a lot of pleasure, which is why I was nervous about going hunting with her.

Frankly, I'd just as soon have skipped it all. Playing with weapons is an inadequate Freudian substitute, no matter how big and manly the bow is, or how far and fast it can shoot.

Jason frowned. Sometimes I can almost read minds: giving Tennetty permission had been easy, but it was harder for him to decide whether his sense of duty prevented, permitted, or demanded that he go along.

He finally came down on the side of having fun, although from which angle I wouldn't have wanted to bet.

"I haven't been hunting in a long time," Jason said, tossing the weight of the world from his shoulders for a moment. He relaxed, just a trifle.

I was tempted to turn this into a lesson about not assuming an invitation, but decided to let it pass. Ever since Jason had traded the silver crown of the Emperor of Holtun-Bieme in on the barony, he hadn't had a lot of time to relax, and he deserved a morning off.

"Sure," I said. "Come on."

"Good morning," Aeia Cullinane said as she walked into the breakfast room, my daughter Janie at her side, the two of them complicating my day while they brightened it.

"Morning, Daddy. Morning, all." Janie bent to kiss me on the cheek. Short black hair and bangs that always try to cover the eyes, thin limbs fleshing out almost daily, mannish leather breeches covered by a

muslin shirt belted tight to show slim waist and slender curves: my teenage daughter. Sixteen, barely, but This Side sixteen, not Other Side sixteen. They seem to grow up faster here than I remember them doing there.

"Morning, sweetness," I said.

She slipped into the chair next to Jason and reached for a hunk of bread while Aeia struck a pose while pretending to decide where to sit. I didn't mind; I was enjoying the view.

There's a sharp mind behind the bright eyes that have just a touch of a slant to them. Part of her sunbleached hair was bound behind her in a ponytail, leaving the rest to frame her face, wisps of hair touching at high cheekbones. She was dressed, to the extent that she *was* dressed, in a short white silk robe, its hem cut diagonally, about knee-length on the left side, mid-thigh on the right. It was a great view, but a bad idea, probably; the guards were a rough lot.

Jason frowned at his adopted sister. "Do me a favor?"

She tilted her head to the side. "Depends."

"Put some clothes on before you come out of your room, eh?" The master-of-the-house voice didn't quite fit, not yet, but it was getting better.

"What do you call this?" she brushed a hand down one side.

"Trouble. I don't know what you've been doing in Biemestren, but that doesn't go here."

"Oh," she said, dismissing the point rather than acknowledging it. She smiled at me as she sat down next to me, resting warm fingers on my arm for a moment as she pressed her leg up against mine. Not teasing, just touching.

Explain something to me: why are women two degrees warmer than men are?

And why do I keep getting in trouble over women?

It's real simple, most of it: *I like* the ones I sleep with, whether or not they've got their clothes on, whether or not they're willing to take them off. Add to that a certain amount of grooming and, er, charm, and subtract the sense of desperation that most men have around pretty women, and I do okay, or get into trouble, depending how you look at it.

Tennetty eyed her own fingernails. "I wouldn't worry. If there's anybody here who doesn't know what happens if he lays a hand on Aeia or Janie, I'll explain it—"

"Thanks much, Ten," Janie said from around a bite of bread, "but I can explain things myself."

"—and if I need help, Dunne, Kethol, and Pirojil are always available." Tennetty considered the edge of a knife I hadn't seen her draw. Like I say, I'm too slow in the morning. "I don't think I'll need help."

Jason brushed the objection away. "That wasn't what I meant. I don't want to have Bren jumping up and down every time somebody looks crosswise at her."

"Not to worry." Aeia smiled, amused by the thought of Bren Adahan being jealous. "Maybe he'll be too

busy watching me to put his hands on Janie's bottom. It's important to keep the menfolk busy, Janie told me last night."

She glanced over at Jason, then turned to me, to see if I noticed. I pretended not to, which only made her smile more.

Jason didn't quite blush. Janie, on the other hand, had a great poker face; she had taken the smile from her face by the time she had turned back to him.

I guess I was supposed to be upset, but there's part of being a parent that appears to have been left out of my makeup: the thought of my daughter having sex doesn't bother me. Sorry. Long as she visits the Spider or the Eareven priest twice a year and gets herself taken care of—something I made sure she did for the first year after menarche—I just hope she has fun.

Somebody trying to force her or hurt her would be different, but that's not sex, dammit. I'd do to that kind of slime the same thing I did to the last ones that raped her mother. (And no, I wouldn't do it slower. Doesn't make it any better, and it doesn't make them any deadier.)

I wasn't supposed to know what was going on between Janie and Jason, though. It made things simpler. Jason and I already had enough to argue about.

Aeia went on: "But if I need any help with my social life, I'll be sure to let you know."

Jason didn't suspect anything; he wasn't good enough an actor not to glance from face to face if he knew. Janie didn't seem to pick up on it, either, which meant nothing.

I smiled back at Aeia in a sort of avuncular way, I hoped. We needed a long talk, her and me, and that would have to be orchestrated just right.

Forget the orchestra, though—what tune did I want to play?

A friend of mine who was an acting major used to say there was an old saying in the theatre: "Drunk and on the road don't count." We hadn't been drunk, but we had been on the road. And, if the truth be known, it had been awfully good, for both of us.

Compare that to a woman who didn't let me touch her anymore, who claimed that she loved me but never laughed or smiled in my presence, whose shoulders shook in the night with silent weeping. You tell me how you'd rather sleep next to *that* than to one who sleeps in your arms, her breath warm on your neck, her legs intertwined with yours, matching you heartbeat for heartbeat.

But you don't leave your wife of almost two decades because she's an emotional cripple, and you don't dump her for a younger woman just because when you touch her, it makes you feel twice as alive.

All that seems reasonable. I don't know what you actually *do*, though. That makes me feel awfully old.

When I was younger, I always knew what to do.

I pushed back from the table; that seemed right for the moment. The ground didn't open up and swallow me. Always a good sign.

"Jason, Tenny, and I are going hunting," I said to Aeia.

She either didn't take the hint, or dismissed the idea. "Have fun." She made a moue as she reached for a sweetroll. "Bren up yet?"

I shook my head. "Haven't seen him."

I wondered for a moment if that was a red herring for my benefit, if she was sneaking off to sleep with Bren the way that Janie was to be with Jason, then decided that I wasn't going to get anywhere guessing. I don't care who plays musical beds, as long as I don't have to sleep alone. Which had been the trouble, of late. One of them.

Besides, there's Slovotsky's Law something-or-other: Don't accuse your mistress of cheating on you with her future fiancé.

To hell with it. I was spending too much time musing about musical beds. I stood up. "I'm out of here, folks."

Tennetty hacked off a fist-sized hunk of bread, dipped it in honey, and stood. "Let's go kill something."

* * *

The castle was quiet in the golden morning light, probably a holdover on the part of Karl's staff. He used to insist on—well, try to insist on—sleeping late, and U'len was probably keeping things quiet in his memory, or maybe just out of habit.

"Meet you at the stables," I told Tennetty and Jason.

She nodded and sprinted for the back staircase, while Jason maintained a dignified walk. I headed up to the two-room suite my wife and I shared. Well, maybe it was a three-room suite, if you included the secret passage to the room next door, although the room next door was unoccupied, and the passage was barred from our side. I like the idea of having a back way out; I'm cautious enough that I don't want anybody else to have a back way in.

Kirah lay stretched out on the bed, the blankets having slid aside, revealing one long leg almost to the hip. Sunlight splashed on her long, golden hair, her breasts rising and falling with her gentle breathing, her arms spread wide, her mouth just barely parted, all trusting and innocent and vulnerable and lovely.

I felt cheated: I wanted to reach over and hold her for a moment before I left, but I couldn't. Not while she was sleeping, ever. One of the rules. Not mine. Kirah has her own way of enforcing her rules. Call it passive-aggressive, if you like—but it *hurts* her when I push things.

Damn.

I exchanged my cotton trousers for leather ones—you can get cut by the brush—and after I'd buttoned the fly I shrugged into a hunting vest, and then the double shoulder holster that Kirah had made for me. I belted my shortsword around my waist, tucked an extra brace of throwing knives never mind exactly where.

An oak box with a trick catch—you have to push down on the top of the box while you press up on the latch—held my two best pistols, loaded, oil-patched, and ready to go; I slipped them into the holster. A nice design: it held one pistol a bit too high, but the other, held in place by a U-shaped spring hidden in the leather, was held slantwise under the armpit, butt-forward. Draw, cock, and bang.

Me, I'd rather store most of my guns safely unloaded, and eventually I'd be able to. Jason's twin sixguns were the first on this side, but they wouldn't be the last. With Jason's revolver and speedloader, it's flip, slip, slam, and blam—flip the cylinder out, slip the Riccetti-made speedloader into place, slam the cylinder shut, letting the outer shell of the speedloader fly where it may, and then *blam*. And that's worst-case; most of time, I'd keep the revolver loaded, trusting Lou Riccetti's unlicensed modification of the Ruger transfer-bar safety to keep the gun from going *bang* unexpectedly.

On the other hand, it takes more than a minute to load a flintlock, and I've never, *ever* been in a situation where I've said to myself, "Gee, it'd be nice to have a loaded gun in about a minute."

Never. It's either *nah*, or it's *snow*.

A small gunmetal flask of extract of dragonbane sat on the bureau, carefully sealed with wax, secondly because I don't like the reek of the gooey stuff, but mainly because a good friend of mine is highly allergic to it, being a dragon. While creatures with the sort of magical metabolisms that can be harmed by dragonbane had long been driven away from the Eren regions—humans and magical creatures tend not to get along—there had been rumors about things coming out of Faerie, and out on the Cirric Jason had seen a few creatures he couldn't identify.

So I slipped the flask into my vest.

Last but not least, I tucked two Therranji garrottes into their separate, leather-lined pockets. Vicious things—the slim cables were made with springy barbed wire, the barbs canted backwards so that the garrotte could only be tightened. Just tuck the handle through the loop, then slip the barbed-wire noose over a head, give the wooden handle one hard jerk, and let go—in order to get it off, the poor slob would have to remove the handle, then slip the loop off the butt end.

Can't get it over the head? No problem—whip it around the neck, put the handle through the loop, and pull. Trust the Therranji to come up with a weapon that mean—elves can be nasty—and somebody like me to carry two of them on his person.

Still, peace is nice. You don't have to take a lot of precautions before going out for a simple walk in the woods.

I wanted to take one last look at Kirah sleeping, and I wanted not to take one last look at her, so I hung a quiver from my shoulder, grabbed my best longbow and a couple of spare strings, and headed down to the stables.

* * *

Jason was already in the saddle of a huge red gelding—another one of Carrot's foals, I think—and the stableboy was finishing saddling a stocky roan for Tenny. I picked a smallish piebald mare and saddled her myself, earning a broad, gap-toothed smile from the stableboy, touched that the great Walter Slovotsky would handle his own horse.

Well, it didn't hurt for him to think that.

Water and field rations are always kept ready in the stables. Until they string the telegraph to Biemestren and out to Little Pittsburgh, there's no way to know when a messenger will have to be dispatched in a hurry. I slipped a canteen over the saddlehorn, and a pair of saddlebags in front of it.

We rode out through the main gate and into the day.

The gently rolling land around the former Castle Furnael, now Castle Cullinane, had been cleared at least a mile in each direction, in part to give the baron some farmland of his own, I suppose, but mainly to prevent any large force from sneaking up on the castle. The western road cut through at least two miles of wheat fields before it swung north toward the woods that countless Furnael barons had used as their private hunting preserve. That was down the road almost two miles away, just enough distance to warm the horses.

Hooves clotted quietly on the unpaved road, while above, soft white clouds scudded across a deep blue sky, something that only soft white clouds ever do. Below, waist-high stalks of young green wheat bowed gently in the breeze. The air was still cool from the night, with none of the afternoon tang of sunbaked fields, but the day was young.

"Nice day," Jason said.

"That it is," I said, hitching at my holsters. Nice days make me nervous.

Jason had one of his twin revolvers in a holster on the left side of his chest, the butt facing forward, just about even with his left elbow. Not a bad placement, actually—it would be a bit clumsy to get at it with his left hand, but it could be done.

I envied him the weapons. If a messenger from Home didn't show up soon with a pair for me, I'd have to ride over and have a word with Lou. After all, I was the one who built the first flintlock on This Side, and seniority should count for something, no?

Tennetty chuckled. "Always ingratiating yourself with the help, eh?"

"Eh?"

"The horse," she said. "You saddled it yourself." She snorted. "That dung-footed stableboy looked at you like you were, I don't know, something special."

"Well . . ." I shrugged, as modestly as possible, under the circumstances. "I am, Tennetty."

She was disposed to leave it be, but Jason couldn't. "So why did you do it?"

I shrugged. "I used to trust other folks to saddle my horse, but I've found that I take a more active interest in my cinch straps than any stableboy possibly can."

Tennetty nodded. Jason frowned. We set off in a fast walk down the road.

"So," he finally said. "You think we're settled in enough, yet?"

I nodded. "Sure. You're going to have to let the staff problems sort themselves out, but looks like everything's okay here. You itchy to get back on the road?"

He nodded. "Ellegon's due tomorrow, or maybe the day after. I think we'd best go find Mikyn's trail. I'm worried about him."

Mikyn was a good kid, but he was on his own, as far as I was concerned. Yes, he was one of Jason's

childhood friends, but it was more important to me that he was *agotterdammerung* looking for a place to happen, and I've been around enough of those in my time. No rush, thanks. Besides . . .

"Let's hang on for a while," I said. "Ahira had a word with Danagar before we left Biemestren—he's put some more feelers out."

Mikyn was somewhere, perhaps in the Middle Lands, perhaps elsewhere in the Eren regions, searching for the man who had enslaved his family. The odds were poor that Mikyn was on a warm trail; they were only fair that his disguise as a traveling farrier would hold up.

Odds wouldn't stop him from looking, the young idiot. Well, hell, odds wouldn't have stopped me, either.

Jason pursed his lips. "I should have done that."

"Maybe." Actually, it would have been a bad idea; the last thing that Emperor Thomen Furnael needed was for Jason to be telling his best field agent what to do. Thomen's seat on the throne was probably precarious enough as it was; his only title to it was as a gift from the usurper's son. I'm not condemning, mind; *usurper* is a technical term, and Karl was my second best friend.

"In any case," I said, "we're probably best off waiting until we hear something, then hitching a ride on Ellegon. It'll likely save time. Besides, truth to tell, I'd like at least a few more days of rest, food, and good light exercise before we go back in harm's way." Still, I wondered about Mikyn. "You know if he's any good with fire and iron?"

Jason nodded. "Better than me. Nehera gave a bunch of us the short course, a few years ago. I don't think anybody would confuse either of the two of us with a master farrier, but I could do a good, clean, quick job, and Mikyn was better."

"In any case, we wait. We'll hear soon enough." Or more than soon enough.

"Very well." He nodded. "Wouldn't we be better off waiting at Biemestren?"

Tennetty snickered. "Oh, a great idea." She drew her sword, a short, cross-hiked rapier, and gave a few tentative swipes through the air. "Why not just hack Thomen's legs off for real?" She slipped the rapier back into the sheath with a decided *snap*.

"Eh?" Jason was bright, but he was still young.

"Think about it," I said. "Imagine yourself riding up to the castle. In Biemestren. What happens?"

"What do you mean, what happens?"

"Just what I said. Tell me what happens. What's the first thing you do?"

He shrugged. "I'd pay a call on Thomen. I'd ride through the gate, and leave my horse out front."

"Right," I said. "You'd ride right through the gate. Without asking permission, because you spent most of your childhood living there, and it still feels like home to you, and nobody there would think of stopping you, right?"

He caught it. There was nothing wrong with Jason that a few years of growing up wouldn't cure, assuming he had the time to grow up.

His lips twisted. "And what his royal highness, the Emperor Thomen, formerly Baron Furnael, doesn't need is Karl Cullinane's son suggesting that the throne doesn't really belong to him."

"Exactly." I nodded. "You stay the hell out of Biemestren until and unless you're sent for, just like all the other barons. And when you go, you walk just a bit more humbly than they do."

He smiled. "And, say, occasionally flash a bit of temper, only to be silenced by a single look from the Emperor."

Tennetty laughed. "He catches on fast." She turned to him. "Now, in the interim?"

He raised his hands in surrender. "I guess we stay here, eh?"

"For the time being," I said.

"Good.—Now let's get some exercise." Without a polite word of warning, or even a curt one, Tennetty kicked her horse into a canter; it took a good half mile for the two of us to catch up.

Where the road swung north to give a wide berth to Benai Hill, a path into the forest broke through the plowed ground and met the road.

The path was well-maintained, even after it entered the forest—overhead branches were hacked off, some brush cleared by the side. I wouldn't have wanted to gallop down it in the dark, or even canter in the light, but it was perfectly fine for a nice, quick walk.

Kind of pleasant, really: stately oaks and elms arching high above, keeping things all cool and green and musty, even though the day was already heating up. My hearing's awfully good, for a human, but I couldn't hear any animal sounds over the clopping of the horses' hooves.

A nice quiet day.

Something rustled in the bush toward the side of the road.

I had a throwing knife in my left hand and a cocked pistol in my right as a rabbit scampered across the path, losing itself in the woods.

Tennetty was only a little slower with a flintlock; Jason was third, his revolver, one of the only two that existed, carefully pointed toward the sky.

"What—?"

"Ta havath," Tennetty said. *Take it easy.* "Just a rabbit." Tennetty glared at me as she carefully holstered her pistol and slipped her rapier back into its sheath. "What was *that* about?"

I shrugged an apology as I reholstered my own pistol and slipped my throwing knife back into its sheath. "Sorry."

The two of them were kind enough to let the matter drop.

It was a nice day, so why was I coming close to jumping out of my skin at every sound? Yes, there were those rumors of things coming out of Faerie, but we were solidly in the Middle Lands, far from Faerie.

Not good enough. I mean, it was true, but it wasn't an excuse.

I could have argued that Tenny and Jason were just as jumpy as I was, but that would have been just for the sake of arguing—the two of them were operating under the sound principle that when somebody quickly draws a weapon, he's got a good reason. Which I hadn't. A rabbit within shooting range is a good reason to draw a hunting weapon slowly, carefully, without alarming the rest of your party. It *is not* a reason to suggest by word or action that the shit's about to hit the fan.

We rode in silence and I kept my jumpiness under control as we followed the path in for maybe half an hour—remember, every step you take in has to be taken out—until we came to a small clearing, where I called for a break.

I dismounted, more stiffly than I liked, and rubbed at the base of my spine.

Getting a bit older every year, Walter.

Tenny either didn't hurt or didn't want to show it. I wouldn't have bet either way.

"Leave the horses?" she asked, sliding out of the saddle as she did.

"Sure." I uncinched the saddle and set it on the spread-out horse blanket, slipped the bridle, and tied the horse to a tree, just the rope and hackamore to hold him there. Jason did the same.

Tenny just slipped the bridle and dropped the reins. "Stay," she said. I guess that if her horse couldn't stay ground-hitched, she was willing for it to be her problem.

I slipped into my shooting gloves and leathers—I'll cut my fingers and scrape my arm when it's for real, but not when it's practice, thank you very much—then strung my bow, a fine Therranji composite that had cost me more than I like to think about. I'd have to show this to Lou; I doubted even he could have improved on it. Nicely, elegantly recurved, it was made from three pieces of almost black wood, a long strip of reddened horn sinew-bound to its belly, the whole thing covered with a smooth lacquer. The grip was soft, thick leather, gradually molding itself to my fingers with each use. About a fifty-pound pull—which is plenty, really.

"I've always seen you favor a crossbow," Jason said, stringing his own longbow. He slung his quiver over his head, then hitched at his swordbelt. He thought about it for a moment, then unhooked the swordbelt, leaving it around the pommel of his saddle.

I nodded. "Usually do," I said. "Hey, Jason?"

"Yes?"

"What would you say," I said, quietly, "if I told you that there's six Holtish rebels hiding behind those trees over there and that they're about to jump us?"

He started to edge toward his horse.

Tennetty snickered. "What you should say is, 'I'm sorry, Holtish rebels, let me drop my pants and bend over for you, so you can stick my sword up my backside,' that's what you should say." She jerked a thumb toward his horse. "Wear the sword."

He buckled the sword on with good grace. I've known people who take direction worse than Jason. Lots of them. I've seen one of them in a mirror, every now and then.

I fitted a practice arrow to the bowstring—I don't waste killing broadheads on trees.

Now, I like crossbows. You can fire them with one hand, from the saddle, or from a prone position, three things that you can't do with a longbow. You can do two out of those three things with a short bow, but you give up range and striking power. Not a good compromise. A longbow has greater range than any crossbow without a good winding gear, and a much greater rate of fire.

The only trouble is that it takes a lot of practice to get good at it, and more practice to stay good at it.

Across the meadow, maybe, twenty yards away, an oily crow sat on a limb, considering the silly humans below.

Well, let's see if I can still do zen archery. The trouble with being a stranger in a strange land is that you have to be your own zen master. I brought the bow up, keeping my form perfect, not aiming with my eyes, not exactly, and visualized the release, the string leaving my finger in perfect form—smoothly, evenly, instantly, not with a plucking loose.

I let go, and in less than a heartbeat, the arrow was quivering in the limb, a full three feet to the right of where the crow had taken flight.

Jason snickered. "Off by a full arrow's-length. Not too good, Uncle Walter."

Tennetty caught my eye; the corners of her lips were turned up. If it had been anybody else, I'd call the expression a smile. "See how close you can come to his arrow, Jason Cullinane. I'm curious."

Jason brought up his bow and loosed too soon, the string loud against his leathers. The arrow disappeared into the forest.

Tennetty laughed out loud, and Jason started to bristle, but caught himself.

"Well," he said, "let's say we start hunting in that direction."

"After," I said. "Let's fire some more practice arrows first."

* * *

Hunting, like fishing—and sex, for that matter—is one of those things where you really have to be there to understand it.

Except for the killing part, I like it, a lot. At least the way we did it. You stalk across the floor of the dark forest, the comforting rot of leaves and humus in your nostrils, listening, watching intently—and without worrying about somebody jumping out from behind a tree and killing you. It's a good thing.

At my side were people I trusted, because I don't go hunting with people I don't trust.

There are other ways to do it. One of the best ways to actually catch food involves finding a good spot and waiting for the game to pass by. You sit, conserving energy, and wait. Eventually, if you've picked your spot right, your rabbit comes into view, or your deer, or antelope or whatever. But that's survival hunting.

This was more fun. Back on the Other Side, I never could move this quietly. I'm not complaining, mind, but being one of the big guys isn't all that it's cracked up to be. Trust me.

Besides, we weren't really hunting. What we were doing was relaxing, and by the time we'd worked our way into the forest, firing a few practice shots here and there, I'd managed to get rid of my jumpiness. For now.

Just as well. "Jason, you see that stump over there?" I asked, pointing to one about forty yards away.

"The one just behind that fallen tree?"

"Right. Bet I can put an arrow into that root, the one that bends up to the right."

He shrugged. "So can I."

"From here?" I raised an eyebrow. "A silver mark to who gets closer?"

He nodded. "Sure."

"Tennetty?"

"No, I don't need to donate to the cause," she said.

"No. We need a referee and judge."

"Yeah, sure." She took up a drill instructor's stance. "Awright. Nock your arrows. Draw your bows. Three. Two. One. *Loose*."

It was a tricky shot, trickier than it looked, if I was right—the leaves from a lower branch of an old oak blocked the top of the parabolic flight of the arrow. You have to remember that your shot does not travel in a straight line, but in an arc. The trick was to aim so that the arrow's flight would take it through a gap in the leaves . . .

I released, smoothly. I was a bit off, but more lucky than off: it barely nicked a couple of leaves, not slowing it enough to make it miss. *Itthwok* ed comfortably into the root, while Jason's arrow buried itself in the ground, easily a foot short.

"Pay me," I said.

"Put it on account," he said.

"Sure."

I retrieved my arrow, and nocked it, looking for another target.

"Er, Uncle Walter?" Jason frowned as he examined the head of his arrow, but I didn't think he was

frowning at it.

"Yeah?"

"How come I get the feeling that we're not really after deer?"

Tennetty chuckled. "Maybe because we're too busy shooting up the trees?"

"There's a perfectly good archery range behind the barracks," Jason said.

"If you know anything more boring than spending a morning firing arrows at a bull's-eye, you be sure and don't let me know."

Me, I'd much rather pretend to go hunting and shoot up a few trees. I never really practice with my throwing knives—I just use them, every once in a long while, to assure me that I still have the Talent for it. But that's deeply imprinted. I don't have to practice that any more than a fish has to practice his scales.

My learned skills are different; if I don't put in at least a few hours with the longbow every tenday or so, I start to go real sour, and there have been more than a few times that would have been unfortunate. Unfortunate in the sense of Stash and Emma Slovotsky's baby boy getting himself dead. As Woody Allen would say, death is one of the worst things that can happen to somebody in our line of work, and many of us simply prefer to pay a small fine.

So I practice. I've spent far too much of my life practicing at how to shoot with some things and cut with some others, but there you have it. Part of the dues.

But you don't tell anybody everything.

"I like this better," I said. "Out on a nice day with some good company, clean air, maybe the chance of making a few marks . . ."

". . . off some sucker," Tennetty said, with a smile.

But it wasn't a nice smile, and it almost ruined the morning.

CHAPTER TWO

In Which I Discuss Some Family Matters

Chi fa ingiuria no perdona mai. (He never forgives those he injures.)

—ITALIAN PROVERB

Most of the time, things go from bad to worse, but every now and then the human universe shifts for the

better: it's clear that something bad's going to happen, but then something else entirely does, something gentler.

Sometimes it's nice; sometimes it's just something bad that declines to happen. Either is just fine with me.

The first time I remember it, I was about seven, I guess. My parents had gone out for the evening, and my brother, Steven, had a date, so they'd hired a baby-sitter. Mrs. Kleinman, her name was; she lived on some sort of widow's pension in a set of funny-smelling rooms in the red brick apartment building down the block from our house. Ugly old biddy, who really didn't like kids. Never wanted to play, or talk; all she wanted to do was turn on the television, take off her shoes, and fall asleep on the couch with one hand in a bowl of potato chips.

Well? What would you do? I'd done the obvious thing, and there had been trouble when Stash and Emma got home. Whenever old Stash—it's an old Polish nickname, okay?—got angry, there was this tic in his right cheek; it would twitch with every pulsebeat.

He came into my room, the light in the hall casting half his face into shadow, his fists unclenching. Stash was a short, broad man, but he had huge hands, and they made huge fists.

He wouldn't have punched me, but he was going to spank me. His face was so red from the chin to the top of his balding that I thought he was going to blow up, and the tic was pulsing two to the second, the speed of a fast walk. I was worried about him more than me, I swear, as he loomed over my bed.

"Walter . . ." he always called me Cricket, except when he was angry at me, and he was furious.

And then he swept me up in his huge arms. I could smell the whiskey on his breath. Gales of laughter rocked me. *His* laughter.

"God, Cricket, I guess that old biddy *did* deserve to have her shoes nailed to the floor."

I guess that's why the smell of whiskey on somebody's breath doesn't bother me.

* * *

I was currying the mare when I heard Bren's footsteps behind me. The cleaning stalls at Castle Furnael—Castle Cullinane, that is—were well designed, with a low, calf-high open wooden box in the center of the stall. You stand the horse in the box, which inhibits it from moving around, and prevents you from getting kicked.

I wasn't worried about being kicked. There wasn't any good reason to be concerned about anything at all. One of the stableboys and two of the horse soldiers were just outside, reshoeing a stubborn gelding; the other stableboy was across the way, working on Jason's horse, and the house guard was within a quick shout. If we were going to have a problem, it wasn't going to be here.

Besides, Bren Adahan would hardly be here to give me a problem, eh?

"Hello, Baron," I said, turning slowly, resting my hand on the partition separating the cleaning stalls. It's reflex—ever since my first day on This Side, I've always looked for a place to run. I've always had a reason. I haven't always *had* a place to run, mind, but I've always looked for one. "Where've you been keeping yourself?"

"All over, Walter Slovotsky," he said. "I spent the morning at two of the tenant farms. Then I came in

and did an inventory at the farm. Then the kennels, and now here."

"Inventorying the baron's livestock?" A good idea, and something I should have thought of. I tended to think of the walled keep itself as being Jason's new home, although really it was the keep and the huge chunk of land it sat upon, including the livestock managed at the clump of buildings down by the pastures, a couple of miles away.

"Somebody ought to," he said. He was in tan today, in a pale, almost snowy doeskin tunic and leggings, the effect picked up by an antler clip that held back the hair that otherwise would have fallen over his right ear.

Very stylish, but then again, Bren, Baron Adahan was always very stylish. I've always been more fond of substance, myself. No, that's not fair. I had been out in the field with him, and he had gotten as down and dirty as the rest of us. A good man to have at your back in a fight, something both Jason and I knew from experience.

Perhaps to remind me of that, he wore a very ordinary leather combo belt tight on his hips, his shortsword on the left, a dagger and a flintlock on the right.

"Have you a moment?" he asked.

"For you, Baron, I've always got a moment," I said, not meaning it.

He smiled, as though there was no hypocrisy in his voice, or in mine. "I'll be leaving tomorrow; there are matters in my barony that need my attention."

"Little Pittsburgh?" I said. There's always something happening in the steel town.

"Yes. Not just that, but yes." He nodded, and then, for no reason or other, it happened: we were friends again, even if only for the moment. "Let me give you a hand." He stripped off his tunic, then unbuckled his sword and hung it on a post. I had the brush ready for him before he had his hand out.

He stroked the harsh bristles with his thumb. "Ranella's devoting her attention to the railroad, and somebody has to take care of the administration," he said, as he ran the brush down the other side of the horse, steadying her with sure fingers in her mane as she whickered and pranced just a little. "Something I was trained for, no?"

"Each to his own, Bren."

His smile was forced. "I'm going to ask Aeia to come with me."

"Don't blame you at all," I said. "I would, if I were you."

He was silent for a long time. We sometimes have to live on the silences. "Maybe she'd be better off here, with the others."

I nodded. "Maybe. She's going to have to decide for herself."

"There is that." He dropped the subject. "I see you didn't come back with any game today. Enjoy your hunt nonetheless?" he asked, taking up a firm grip in the mare's mane with one hand while he reassuringly stroked her neck with the other.

"It was pleasant enough."

"The doing, not the prey, eh?"

"Something like that." I tucked the hoof pick under my left arm, then stooped to pick up the mare's front hoof and scraped it out. It was packed full of horseshit and dirt, much like life itself. I would have liked to let it slide by—I am a lazy bastard, and there are standards to maintain—but all sorts of hoof diseases can get started if you don't clean them out properly.

Bren held out his hand for the pick. I handed it over and steadied the horse while he did the right front hoof, then moved back to do the rear one on that side. I finished with the final hoof, then gave the horse a solid pat on the flank as I closed the stall door.

"Leave her there, in the grooming stall, an' it please you," the stableboy called out. He was working on Tenny's horse across the way. "I've got to muck out her own stall, and I'll do it just as soon as I finish with this horse, Walter Slovotsky."

"She'll need some fresh straw," Bren said.

"I'll get it, Baron—" the stableboy cut himself off; Bren was already partly up the ladder toward the loft. I swarmed up after him.

There was a skittering at our approach, but you almost never see the rats.

Stables are stables: bales, tied with twine, lay brick-stacked against the front wall, four rows deep. Bren hacked through the twine with a hayknife while I used the pitchfork to pitch it to the stone floor below.

"It's difficult," he said, standing at the edge, considering the edge of the hayknife, "to be a disciple of the late, great Karl Cullinane."

"So I hear."

"You have to change, you see." His smile wasn't friendly anymore. "In the old days, it would have been simple. Nobody not of my station would have thought to take, oh, anything I wanted. But if someone did, there wouldn't be a problem." He patted the spot of his belly where the hilt of his sword would have been. "'All men are created equal,' eh? Didn't used to be that way. Anybody short of my class wouldn't have had the time to get as good with a sword as I was. Am."

He thought about it for a long time, then he turned and stuck the hayknife back in a bale, and vanished down the ladder. He had gotten some horsehair and sweat and dirt on his chest and breeches, I guess, which was why he left carrying his tunic in his hands, without looking back for a moment.

I looked at his retreating back for a long time, even after it wasn't there.

* * *

I went up to our rooms to find Kirah, but she was gone and hadn't left a note as to where she was going to be. I came to This Side illiterate in Erendra, and put in a lot of effort first changing that, then teaching my wife her letters. Damn inconsiderate of her not to even leave a note.

I probably should have gone looking for Kirah, but I looked for a couple of friends instead.

* * *

I found Doria with the dwarf and my younger daughter over in the blacksmith's shop, next to the bathhouse.

"Daddy!" My baby daughter's face lit up and she ran for me; a father is always a hero to his daughter, even if he doesn't deserve it.

I swept Dorann up in my arms. "Whatcha doin', kiddo?"

"Aunt Doria and Uncle 'hira are showing me how to smith," she said, suddenly becoming serious as she raised a finger. They're very serious at three and a half. "Now don't you touch the metal. It's *hot*."

"Okay, Dorann," I said, giving her a quick kiss on the top of her head. "I'll be careful." My daughters are always watching out for me. It's nice. I ran my fingers through her hair. "Isn't it about your nap time?"

"Don't need a nap," she said. Which settled that.

Both my daughters run to stubbornness, once they get their minds made up. Kirah used to claim that it came from me, and I used to claim that it came from her, and we used to argue about it constantly, if never angrily, until she finally gave up; so I guess I was always right, and the stubbornness *does* come from Kirah's side of the family.

"What's that in your ear, sweetie?" I palmed a piece of rock sugar from my pouch as I set her down. It was wrapped in a twist of paper, so it was easy to trap it with the back of my forefinger and middle finger as I clapped my hands to show that they were empty, then pretended to pull it from her ear. "You hiding candy again?"

Sleight of hand is related to pickpocketry, and the latter is one of my talents. It's never gotten me a jewel brighter than Dorann's white smile and squeal of delight as she popped it into her mouth.

Ahira had chased the smith out—or more likely, given him the day off—and was bent over the forge, doing some minor repairs to a mail shirt. Tricky work—you want to be sure to weld each ring tightly shut without welding any ring to the other. During the time we were working for King Maherralen over in Endell, he had picked up some of the art.

So had I, actually, although not as much as he had, which isn't fair, given my head start—back on the Other Side, before all this started, I spent a summer apprenticing at Sturbridge Village. It would say something about genetics versus environment, but with Ahira, it was pretty hard to decide what was what.

I'm not sure whether Doria was legitimately interested, or just being sociable. Dorann, on the other hand, was interested in everything.

I remember when Doria used to wear her Hand cloak: a big, bulky dull white thing that made her look old and shapeless. I hadn't seen her wear it since Melawei; she probably put it away with all of her other Hand memorabilia, and maybe memories.

Today, Doria had tucked the hem of a white cotton pullover shirt into her tight pair of Home jeans, and was looking fresh and immaculate as she held Doria Andrea's hand.

"Looking cute today, Dore," I said.

Doria and Ahira looked too young. He had stripped to the waist for the work, and the muscles beneath the skin of his hairy, barreled chest were like rope beneath the scars. One weal on his right shoulder still stood out, red and angry, and it looked like somebody clumsy had played tic-tac-toe with the point of a knife just under his left nipple. Which was pretty close to what had happened, so I understand. He didn't talk about it much.

If you ignored the scars, though, Ahira hadn't changed one whit in the years we had been on this side: while the top of his head barely came to the middle of my chest, the shock of thick brown hair—thick both ways—held no trace of gray. It probably wouldn't for a while; dwarves live long lives.

The fingers that held the tongs in the forge were thick and strong, the joints like walnuts. His face was flushed almost crimson from the heat, and sweat poured down his forehead and dripped down his cheeks; with his free hand he took a dipper of water from the cooling trough and dumped it on his head, to an accompaniment of giggles from Dorann.

Save for the eyes, Doria still looked like she was in her early twenties: her skin was still creamy smooth, her short blond hair shiny with youth. Beneath the mannish shirt, firm breasts bobbed invitingly. (Okay, I admit it: I like women. Sue me.)

Doria slipped her free arm around my waist. "*A-hi-ra's get -tingtwit -chy*," she sang, leaning her head against my shoulder. "Too much coming-out-of-retirement, I think."

"Too much above-ground, maybe." Shaking his head to clear the last of the water from his face, he pulled the tongs out of the forge, and considered the color of the glowing ring before clamping it into place and hammering it down. *Wham. Wham.* "Truth to tell, we haven't been making enough trouble of late."

Dona's eyes twinkled. "Not major trouble."

The dwarf smiled. "Oh, that. Well."

The phrasing and timing were off, just a trifle; they weren't hinting that they'd been sleeping together, but up to some innocent devilry.

The major-trouble theory was Ahira's theory, not mine. He thought that Lou Riccetti, the Engineer, was the real revolutionary, that the technological advances coming out of the Home colony in the Valley of Varnath were the real challenges to the established order, that everything that the rest of us did was just a distraction, a diversion to keep everybody's mind off the real game. Karl had agreed.

I'm not sure. What put an end to slavery in the United States? Was it the Union army, or the industrial revolution?

Me, I don't know; I only *act* like I know everything. I like things complicated, a lot of the time, but not always. Far as I'm concerned, we should have been sticking to the original plan: kill off the slave traders, thereby raising the price of human chattels to the point where they become prohibitively expensive.

So far, so good. It gets harder every year, but slaves get more expensive every year, too.

Part of the plan is to make it look doable, and that means staying alive. I've always thought that my

personal survival is the centerpiece of any good plan.

I laughed. "Hey, we got half the world thinking that Karl's still alive and out there, somewhere."

"True." The dwarf pursed his thick lips for a moment. "I guess it still makes sense, though, to wait around here until we get some word about Mikyn." His broad face split in a smile. "We dwarves are patient folks."

"Shows." Sarcasm is wasted on Ahira. I don't mean that he doesn't get it—he does—but it doesn't bother him. "Still . . . Mikyn's bitten off a big chunk; he might need help chewing."

"Possibly, but I'm in no rush." Ahira picked up another piece of wire stock, about six inches long, and tossed it into the forge. "If Ellegon's available, though, we might want to hop over to the coast and snoop around Ehvenor." He said it casually, as though it was something he was just considering, but he and I had been friends for too many years for it to go over my head. Ahira wanted to investigate, and was going to try to talk me into it.

He looked at me, and smiled weakly, then rubbed at his shoulder.

Doria has the bad habit of asking questions when she already knows the answer. "Perhaps you want to look up whoever did that to you as well?"

He shook his head. "Life's too short."

For a moment, a dark cloud passed over his face, and I knew that something important had happened to him after we split up outside of Ehvenor, but one thing I learned long ago about James Michael Finnegan is that he will talk about his problems only when he wants to. I doubt that there's anybody he trusts more than me, but even I would hear about it some other time, if ever.

"Life's too short, and so are you." Doria's mouth twitched. "I'm not sure that whatever's going on near Ehvenor is any of our concern."

It could have been anything, or nothing. There had been stories of some strange killings closer to Ehvenor, of animal mutilations that reminded me of ones we had in the western states on the Other Side, of more dragons issuing from Faerie, of other large magical creatures, most of whom had been gone from the Eren regions since the coming of Man.

Some of the stories were probably true—Jason and his crew had killed some huge creature while they were in the Shattered Islands. It didn't sound like anything I'd ever heard of.

He looked up at me. "What do you think?"

"I think Doria's right; I think we have enough to do without biting off some magical problem."

And, besides, he wasn't thinking it through. A magical problem wasn't something that just he and I could look into by ourselves.

In the center of the city of Ehvenor has long stood a building that has been an outpost of Faerie in the Eren regions—probably the only outpost of Faerie in the Eren regions. I'd seen it a couple of times, from a distance, a huge, glowing white building that seemed to have a subtly different shape every time you looked at it. I hadn't tried to get close, and didn't want to. Call it the Faerie embassy, or the Faerie

outpost, or whatever—call it whatever you want; it's nothing I had any need to rub up against. There's something about being around Faerie that drives people crazy, and the outskirts of Ehvenor are wild and crazy enough. Trust me.

I rubbed at the back of my left hand, at the place where a long-healed scar should have been, would have been, if I hadn't had a flask of healing draughts handy that last time.

He wasn't thinking it through—it wouldn't be just the dwarf and me. Add Jason, and we were still short. But enough of that for now. If we could put it off long enough, maybe we wouldn't have to do it. Let it be somebody else's problem.

"Think it over and let me know," he said.

"I can tell you now," I said. "It's none of our concern, and we have enough else to do."

"Perhaps," he said, Doria echoing him with a curt nod, Dorann holding out her arms for Doria to pick her up. It was a dismissal.

Doria, my baby daughter, and my best friend had been having a fine day without me.

* * *

I found Andrea Cullinane in her new workshop, unpacking.

Ideally, a wizard's workshop should have been built up against the wall of the keep, somewhere out of the way. I'd done that when Lou and I were laying out Home, and Karl and Andy had had something similar done in Biemestren, but Castle Cullinane was small, and most of the space within the walls was claimed.

Andrea had taken the last one in a row of continuous storerooms in the dungeon, a dank, cold end room of a series lit only by barred windows, simple unglazed openings at the juncture of ceiling and wall. The only way in was through the storerooms, weaving my way through musty stacked barrels of wine, past plump bags of grain, ducking underneath green-crustured hams hanging from ceiling hooks, walking through the sunlight-striped dark and damp.

I don't like basements. Back home, back when I was a kid, I could always hear the scrabbling of rats every time I went downstairs. I remember going after one with a baseball bat once, but I swear it reared back and hissed at me and chased me the hell upstairs.

Cellars and dungeons on This Side tended to be worse than home—some special efforts I'd taken to cut down on the Endell rat population long justified what King Maherralen of Endell used to pay me.

But there weren't any rats here. Or mice. Just musty, damp, cold silence.

I shivered.

I stopped at what passed for the door to her workshop: a sheet of undyed muslin hung across the opening, damp to the touch.

"Andrea? It's me."

A pause. "Just a moment, Walter," she said. I listened hard for the sound of syllables that I could only

hear and not remember, but there weren't any. Just a rustling, as though of paper and then cloth. Then:
"You might as well come in."

I pushed through the muslin, shuddering at the touch of it. The room was lit by several sputtering lamps in addition to the barred sunlight streaming down, although none of the light managed to dispel the gloom. Wooden boxes, some open, others still nailed shut, stood stacked on the stone floor or on tables. I don't care where you are—This Side, the Other Side—moving cuts into work seriously.

Skin damp from a sponge bath—some of the water was still heating in a blackened copper vessel over a lamp—she was just finishing buttoning her fly.

I would have been happy to help her with her clothes. On or off. Andrea Andropolous Cullinane: black hair, no longer salted with gray; high cheekbones; elegant nose; tongue playing with the lower full lip; slick black leather vest cut high and matching black leather jeans that looked like they'd been applied with a fine brush (I admit it: I imprinted young on women in tight jeans)—all tight at full breasts and trim waist, leaving her long midriff bare.

I could see vague lines of stretch marks on her flat belly if I looked real hard. Not that I minded looking hard; even so, she looked *good*. Maybe too good.

I fingered the amulet hanging from the leather thong around my neck. The diamond-cut crystal was pulsing through a superficially reassuring progression of dull green and amber. No red, no indigo, no bright colors.

Which didn't mean anything, not really. Andy had built all of our amulets, and could have defeated any of them.

"How's the work coming?" I asked, with just the slightest overemphasis on "work."

She smiled. "Unpacking gets you dirty. No sense in getting clothes dirty, too."

Even if that meant working naked in the cold and damp of a dungeon? Just maybe, catching a quick glimpse of herself from a shiny surface or two wouldn't bother her.

I reached for her crystal ball, stopped myself, and then continued the motion at her quick nod of permission. A neat bit of equipment: its stand was a brass snake, impaled on the pole.

Colder to the touch than it should have been, and heavier. Like life itself, don't you know.

I looked into the perfect crystal, but all I saw was my own reflection, widened and distorted. I hadn't expected anything more, and didn't get it.

Just as well.

"We could try to get him out here by way of having him inspect Little Pittsburgh," she said.

It took me a moment to realize that Andy had picked up our conversation from the night before, about how to get Lou Riccetti, the Engineer, out for a visit. Lou hadn't been out of the Home settlement in years and years, and it would probably do him some good to travel a bit, see the world. Her new idea was to invite him to inspect Little Pittsburgh, the steel-making town in Barony Adahan, the next barony to the east.

Not a bad idea, but I hate that sort of parenthetical leap, when she assumes that I'll follow the train of thought back to the previous conversation.

"Possible," I said. I wasn't going to try to change Andy, not over something just irritating. Better to change the subject. "What have you been up to?"

Her smile was a little too knowing. "Sleeping. Dreaming. Working. Unpacking. The usual, you know?"

Her voice was just a hair too light, too casual, or maybe my own bad dream had oversensitized me, which would be a first; nobody's ever accused me of even being sensitive.

"Dreams?" I asked.

"Dreams," she said. "You know: stories that you tell yourself when you fall asleep. Sausages chasing bagels through tunnels, stuff like that."

"Is that all?" Look: my dreams are just dreams, Jungian archetypes cut open and dribbled into the creases of my mind. But I deal with magic and a wizard's dreams as little as I can.

"No," she said, raising a hand to dismiss the subject, then letting it drop. "No, that's not all. I've been having dreams of running through endless streets, always lost, always looking for a way out. Not good." She sighed. "But they're just dreams." She looked down at a book and stroked a short nail against its plain leather cover. "I probably shouldn't drink wine before bed. It makes me dream too much." She looked down at the book again.

There is a way for a wizard to enter somebody else's dream. It's risky for both parties; it's also one of the classic ways for wizards to duel, for one to try to bend another's will.

She looked up at me. "What aren't you asking me?"

I pursed my lips. "I'm not sure whether you're worried about somebody attacking you through your dreams, or whether you're wishing there was another wizard around to dream with you."

Her smile might not have been irresistible, but I wouldn't have wanted to bet. "Neither. I'm wondering something else entirely." She fingered the book. "I'm wondering why I'm getting interested in location spells again, in direction magic. I was already pretty good at them, but lately I've had a real taste for the stuff." She toyed with a slim steel needle. "If you want to put this into a haystack, I can give you a good demonstration."

"Thank you, no."

That was not good; trying too hard to locate Karl—a wizard can bash his or her head against the wall of death as much as he or she pleases—was what had driven Andy to exhaustion, and she was just barely recovering. Alternately, perhaps it had driven her near madness, and she never would recover, but merely learn to hide it better.

I changed the subject. "Have you seen my wife today?"

She nodded. "She was somewhere around," she said, gesturing vaguely. "Is that why you're down here?" she asked. "What's going on?"

It felt like I was missing something, but I wasn't sure what. "I was just talking to Ahira. Just for the sake of discussion, how would you feel about a field trip?" I asked, hoping she would say no.

If we were going to look into whatever was happening on the edge of Faerie, we'd need somebody capable of working magic. If I could get Andy to turn us down, it shouldn't be a problem turning Ahira's notion off—there were perhaps half a dozen minor wizards in Holtun-Bieme, all of whom had the typical wizard's nervousness about going in harm's way, none of whom I'd trust anyway. That would leave Henrad, formerly Andy's apprentice, but Henrad had been out in the field with Ahira and me before; I suspected that he hadn't regained any taste for it. Things had gotten a bit messy for sensitive types like Henrad—and me, for that matter.

"Where?" she asked.

"Toward Faerie, maybe as far as Ehvenor."

"Check out the rumors?" she asked, just a touch too eager. At my nod, she smiled. "I'd love to." She reached over to her worktable and fingered a gem, working it between thumb and forefinger. "With some study, I could work up the spells that would let me take some readings and, just maybe, see what's going on. But it wouldn't be a good idea—I've been trying to cut down, and you know how that goes."

There Are Some Things Man Is Not Meant To Do. You can tell which they are because they're bad either for you or for somebody else. Nobody ever is better off by doing heroin, and doing magic seems to affect some people about the same way: they get hooked on it, go crazy for it. Stable magicians can hold themselves to a maintenance dose, but maybe Andy had overdone it, trying to Locate Karl. More likely grief—compounded by lack of exercise, food, and sleep—had overwhelmed her.

Still, she was looking good.

"You're wondering if it's a seeming," she said, standing hand on hip.

"No." Not if she had been working naked—a fascinating notion in and of itself. I didn't know enough about magic to know if her seeming would delude her as well as others, but it didn't matter. I knew Andrea: she wouldn't have been working without clothes if the sight of her real body bothered her, and even if she had put up a seeming, she would know what she really looked like.

I guess I didn't sound convincing: she shook her head, denying an accusation I hadn't made. "It's no seeming, Walter. Rest, food, exercise, and—"

"The hair didn't come from exercise."

"—*anda* bit of dye," she said, taking a step toward me. "I don't like the look of gray. Turns the men off." She reached up and touched my temple, just where I was going rather, well, handsomely gray. "It looks better on you."

I guess that was my cue to reach for her, but I'm not sure that either of us really wanted to. We'd been lovers—once, or twice, or five times, depending on what you're counting; I'd rather enjoy than count—almost twenty years before, and there was still something between us.

I was tempted, for a lot of reasons. Forget hormones for a moment—although I think I spend too much time thinking with my testicles for my own good. Andy and I had quite properly loved each other for

years and years, and her husband, my friend, was dead, and maybe we needed to celebrate his life in a very private and personal way.

But not under the same roof as my wife.

It occurred to me that I was being noble, silly as that idea sounds, in trying to talk her into staying off the road. Both Andy and I knew what was likely to happen if and when we were out in the field together, and perhaps I had just persuaded her, albeit indirectly, to stay safely home.

I took her hand in mine, her fingers soft and warm, and brought them to my lips.

"Old friend," I said, "it's good to see you looking good."

Screw nobility. Just remember that Walter Slovotsky is somebody who cares about his friends. Andy was, apparently for the first time since Karl was reported dead, doing well. I wasn't going to fuck around with that. In any sense.

* * *

Well, when you don't know what to do, it's probably a good idea to take a nap, eat a meal, or go to bed with somebody you like. Some combinations work well, too.

Kirah's and my rooms were empty; I stripped to the buff and stretched out under the down comforter and fell asleep.

Interlude:

The Dream Is the Same

The nightmare is always the same:

We're trying to make our escape from Hell, millions of us streaming across the vast plain. Everybody I've ever loved is there, along with faces familiar and strange.

Behind us, stretching across the horizon, there's a screaming pack of demons, some in cartoony shapes, some that look like misshapen wolves, all of whom have me scared so bad I can hardly breathe the freezing air.

The exit is up ahead, the gold ladder up through the clouds, and already there are people climbing it, a steady stream that reaches up into the fluffy whiteness, and beyond. I can't tell who's gone through, but I can only hope that my kids are among them. Please let it be my kids.

Some have already climbed through the clouds, but there's no way that all of us are going to: the demons are approaching too quickly, and they're going to catch some of us.

And then I see him: Karl Cullinane, Jason's father, standing tall, face beaming, his hands, chest, and beard streaked with blood and gore.

"We're going to have to hold the perimeter," Karl says. "Who's with me?"

He smiles, as though he's been waiting his whole life for this, the fucking idiot.

"I'm with you," somebody says.

Figures push out of the crowd, some bloodied, some bent.

Jefferson and Franklin work their way through, accompanied by a thick old black woman, her shoulders stooped from too many years of hard labor, her hair bound back in a blue kerchief. Or maybe it isn't Jefferson—his hair is kind of a dusty red instead of white. Doesn't matter—he belongs here.

"Please, Madame," he says, his voice tight, "go with the others."

She snorts. "I only spent thirty-seven years on my knees scrubbing white folks' floors to put food on the table fo' six children, and put those six children through school." Her fingers clench into fists. "Think I let them get at my babies, motherfucker?"

Franklin chuckles. "He begs your pardon, Madame."

Jefferson bows deeply. "Indeed, I do."

Another man, massive brows looming over eyes that see everything, his walrus mustache white as snow, bites his cigar through, then discards it with a muttered oath. "We can hold it," he said, his voice squeakier than I thought it would be. But he sounds like himself, not Hal Holbrook. "But we need more."

Karl looks at me—they all look at me: Jefferson, Twain, Ahira, mad old Semmelweis, all of them look at me—his bloody face puzzled. "Walter? What are you waiting for?"

* * *

Then I wake up.

CHAPTER THREE

*In Which Hiccups Are Cured,
Dinner Is Eaten, and an Excursion
Is Arranged*

The blazing evidence of immortality is our dissatisfaction with any other solution.

—RALPH WALDO EMERSON

Wanting it doesn't make it so. If it did, we'd all learn to want harder. I can already want quite vigorously, thank you very much.

—WALTER SLOVOTSKY

It's called the pathetic fallacy, but that's only the technical term; nothing pathetic about it.

I remember when I started personalizing things—I was about five, or six.

It runs in the family. Stash—I thought of him as Daddy, then—still had the Big Car, the 1957 Buick Starfire 98 he had bought in Las Vegas, on his one and only trip there. It was among the last and absolutely the best of the standard American bigmobiles, a huge car pulled around by a three-hundred-horsepower V8, easily enough for the job—a monster engine, it would roar like a lion. Two-toned, black and yellow like a bumblebee, wraparound windshield, curved fenders, and a rear deck large enough to camp out on.

The Big Car had bench seats like a couch. It was big as a house, and when I rode in it, held down by the big-buckled seat belts Daddy and his friend Mike had spent a weekend putting in, I felt as safe as I did on a couch in my house.

Sometimes, people in Volkswagens would honk at us, derisively.

Daddy would just chuckle. "They don't get it, eh, Em?"

And then Mom would give out her sigh, the deep one that meant *there he goes again*, and then she'd say, "What don't they get?"

He'd say something like, "How this metal all around us protects us, how if we're in a crash with one of them little shitmobiles—"

"*Stash. Shhh.*"

"—it's going to spray them all over the landscape, but old Beauty here's gonna protect us."

It was kind of a mantra for the two of them, although I doubt that either of them would have recognized the word.

They stopped repeating the mantra the day that some idiot in a blue Corvair plowed into us head-on as we were coming home, just about to pull into our driveway. We were jerked *hard*—windshield starred all over in an instant; full ashtray flung its contents into the air, blinding me until I could cry the ashes out; the buckle of my seat belt left bruises on my right hip that flared purple and yellow for weeks—but we were okay. The worst hurt of us was Steve, my brother—he had gotten bashed against the back of the front seat—and all he had was a bloody nose.

The idiot in the Corvair got taken away in an ambulance, so badly battered that I can't to this day decide whether it was a man or a woman.

Blood was everywhere, and the harsh smells of gasoline and smoldering oil hung in the air. Mom, one hand on the back of Steve's neck, had taken him inside the house, but nobody thought to chase me away.

I waited with Daddy while the man with the wrecker hauled away our car. Our car.

God, it was mangled. It wasn't just that the fender and hood had been crumpled, and the glass broken, but the front wheels twisted out at funny angles, as though the axle had been smashed, and the body

overhung the frame on one side.

The wrecker man shook his head as he pulled the lever that lifted the front of the car up and into the air.

"Buy it new, Mr. Slovotsky?" he asked, over the futile protest of the metal.

"Stash," Daddy said, absently. "Everybody calls me Stash. Short for Stanislaus. And yeah," Daddy said. "I bought it new. Ten years ago." He patted the mutilated steel, then pulled his hand away as though embarrassed.

The wrecker man shook his head once, quickly, jerkily, as though to say, *It's okay. I understand.* "Yeah. Good machines. Wish they still made them," he said, starting to turn away.

"It's just a machine."

"Sure, Stash." The wrecker man smiled. He didn't believe Daddy any more than I did.

Or any more than Daddy believed himself. Stash ran blunt, gentle fingers through my hair. "I drove your mother to the hospital in this car when we were having you, Cricket."

"Can they fix it, Daddy?" I asked, still clutching at my side, rubbing at my hip.

He shook his head, tears he didn't notice working their way down through the five-o'clock shadow on his cheeks.

"No," he said. "It's broken too bad to fix. But you and Steve and Mom are okay, Cricket, and that's what matters. That's the only damn thing that ever matters." He gripped my hand tight.

"No, I'm not okay," I said, probably whining. "I'm *hurt*."

"Yeah. Just hurt. Bruised maybe. And I'm real sorry about that, Cricket, honest I am, but we all could be dead, dead, dead."

Muttering something in Polish, he let go of my hand and gently stroked the car's metal flank as the wrecker pulled it away from the curb. I never learned much Polish, and I don't remember the words, but I know what they meant.

They meant: "Thank you, thou good and faithful servant."

We watched until the wrecker turned the corner and the Big Car was gone, and then we just stood there and watched a long while longer, until our eyes were dry.

* * *

When I woke, Kirah was across from the bed, watching me.

I had already been vaguely aware of her, but, suspicious though it is, my hindbrain didn't want to wake me for that.

A bit spooky: she was sitting in an overstuffed armchair by the window, her legs curled up beneath her, the sun through the bars striping her face in gold and dark. Only one corner of her mouth was visible, upturned in a smile that could have been friendly or forced. I couldn't tell; my wife learned her

dissimulation skills before she ever met me.

"Good afternoon, darling," she said. She was sewing: white cloth heaped in her lap, needle darting in and out.

I stretched, then wiped at my eyes. "Hi there." I took a pair of shorts from the bureau next to the bed and slipped into them before I levered myself out of bed and padded across the carpet to bend over—slowly, gently, carefully—and kiss her, careful to clasp my hands behind me. She couldn't help it; and I had to.

She tossed her head, perhaps for display, perhaps in nervousness; I backed off a half-step and was saddened at the way the tension flowed out of her.

"Sleep well?" she asked me, in her ever-so-slightly-halting English.

"Nah. I've never been very good at it," I said. It was an old joke between us. Sometimes, when the center falls apart, you hold onto the forms.

"You cried out a couple of times," she said. "I couldn't make it out."

That was just as well. "Bad dream," I said.

I went to the washbasin and splashed some water on my face and chest, then toweled off my face in front of the closet while I picked out some clothes for a semi-formal supper, quickly settling on a short, loose-cut jacket of brown and silver over a ruffled tan shirt, and taupe trousers with silver piping down the seam. I like my formal clothes comfortable, and besides, the cut of the sleeves kept the throwing knife strapped to my left arm handy. Not the sort of thing I've ever needed at a formal dinner, but you never know.

I buckled my formal sword belt tightly around my waist, decided that it fit fine, then unbuckled it and slung the belt over a shoulder.

"Where have you been keeping yourself today?" I asked.

She shrugged. "Around." She bit off a thread and slipped the needle into the cloth, then carefully set down her work before she stood and came to me, gathering her long, golden hair at the nape of her neck.

She stopped just in front of me, not quite touching.

It wasn't just the dress, although that was spectacular: Kirah was in a long gown of white lace over red silk, scooped low in front and cut deeply in back, revealing a lot of soft, creamy skin. I swear, my wife was more beautiful every year. There's a richness of beauty that can come on in a woman's thirties, after all the traces of baby fat and innocence have gone, but before the years have dragged the elasticity from her skin and muscle.

And it was all for show.

No, that wasn't fair. "Really, where were you?"

"I spent the morning helping Andrea."

So, that was what Andy had been keeping from me. I didn't like the sound of any of this, but kept my disapproval off my face, I hope.

Andy was *supposed* to be keeping her use of magic to a minimum, on Doria's orders. Andy had spent far too much energy in her obsessive need to try to locate Karl, and it's not good for humans, wizard or not, to be around magic a whole lot. Power is dangerous, even when you think you're controlling it.

Now, my own opinion was that Doria was being a bit too much of a Jewish mother, something she was only half equipped for. But even if Doria was right about the danger, it should be relatively safe for Kirah: she couldn't read magic. A page out of Andrea's spellbook would be the same blurry mess to her that it was to me. If you don't have the genes for it, you can't do wizard magic; if you don't have the right relationship with the gods or powers or faerie, you can't do clerical magic, like Doria used to do.

She cocked her head to one side. "I was just starting to debate whether or not to wake you for dinner, or just let you sleep through." She smiled as she took a step back, then one closer, every move a step in a dance.

"Dinner soon?"

She shook her head. "Not for a while yet. But you always take so long to wake up."

I reached for her and felt her stiffen in my arms. "Sorry." I let my arms fall to my side.

She put her arms around me and laid her head against my chest. That's okay under the rules, sometimes. "No. I'm sorry, Walter."

"You can't help it." I started to bring my arms up, but caught myself. It wasn't her fault. I had to keep reminding her of that.

My hands clenched. It wasn't her fault. It wasn't her fault that if I held her, she'd tense, and if I reached for her she'd scream. But it wasn't mine, either. I've always done my best by her, but whatever I am, I'm not a healer of psyche and spirit. At best, I'm an observer of psyche and spirit.

" 'This, too, shall pass,' " she said, quoting me accurately, not Abe Lincoln inaccurately. I used to say it when she was pregnant, kind of as a mantra.

Kind of funny, really: I'm always politically incorrect. Here, for suggesting that women ought to have roughly the same rights as men; on the Other Side, for—only rarely, rarely, and usually with bad results—pointing out that pregnant women go crazy for about a year, or longer.

Maybe it's not their fault. Maybe nothing's nobody's fault.

"Sure." It could happen. I'm skeptical, mind, but it could happen.

Slowly, carefully, I put my arms around her, not quite holding her, and kissed her on the side of the neck. She took it well: she flinched, but she didn't cry out or push me away.

Some victory, eh? I let my arms drop. "I'll see you at dinner."

It hadn't always been this way. Back in the beginning we'd spent more time in bed than out, in my

memory if not possible in reality.

Hell, our first time had been within a couple of hours after Karl and I had pulled her out of the slaver wagon and freed her, along with the rest of that bunch of slaves. Like I always said, this business has always had its fringe benefits.

Even in the early days, though, there had been hints—times when I reached for her in the night and she would shrink away, only to explain that she was just tired, other times when I would come up behind her and put my arms around her affectionately and she would stifle a scream, only to smile in apology for being startled so easily.

But those times had been few and far between, then.

It had come on slowly, few and far between becoming occasional becoming not infrequent and then frequent so gradually until I realized that we hadn't made love for almost a year, and that she couldn't bear to be touched.

I needed a drink.

* * *

I found a shiny gray ceramic bottle of Holtish brandy and a pair of earthenware brandy mugs in the sitting room on the second floor.

Well, the staff called it the sitting room—I thought of it as a brag room. The rug covering the floor was a patchwork of pelts, the walls decorated with heads of various beasts that various Furnael barons had killed: a few seven-point bucks, several decent wolf- and boar-heads, and one huge brown bear, its jaw opened wide, yellow teeth ready to chomp. I doubt that the teeth were as polished and shiny in real life as they were now.

Among all the predators, high up on one wall, was one small rabbit—the whole thing, mounted on a plaque sideways, stretched out as though frozen in mid-bound. I'm sure that there's a family story behind the last, but I've never found out what it is.

A spooky place, but not because the animals looked like they were ready to come alive. They didn't; Biemish taxidermy was substandard, and there's never been great glass-work in most of the Eren regions. Instead of glass eyes, there were the here-traditional white spheres of polished bone. It was like having a room full of Little Orphan Annie's pets staring down at me. Takes some getting used to. Brandy helps.

Only trouble was, I had started hiccupping, and I hate drinking with the hiccups. Gets up the nose.

I had a fire going in the fireplace, and had settled myself comfortably into a low chair in front of the flickering flames when Doria tapped a fingernail against the doorframe.

She had dressed for dinner in a long purple dress made from a cloth I always think of as velour, although I know that's not the right name for it. The top was fitted tightly from low-cut bosom to her hips, where a pleated skirt flared out underneath a woven golden belt, the golden theme picked up by filigree on the bosom and arms of her dress and the strap of her pouch.

"Well?" she said.

"Nice," I said. "Pull up a throne."

She looked at the two brandy mugs warming on the flat stones in front of the fire.

"Expecting me?" she said, as I stretched out a lazy arm and gave each mug a half-turn.

I hiccuped as I shook my head. "Nah. But it doesn't cost anything to heat two mugs. You never know when a friend's going to stop for a drink."

"Or to cure your hiccups." She smiled as she folded herself into the chair and leaned her head against the high back.

"Yeah." I was a bit sarcastic.

She pulled what looked like a piece of quartz out of her pouch. "Suck on this for awhile."

I shrugged and popped it into my mouth. Sweet— "Rock candy," I said, from around the piece. Demosthenes, eat your heart out.

"Very clever, Watson."

I raised an eyebrow, as though to say, *And this is going to cure the hiccups?*

She nodded. "Ninety percent. Hiccups are caused by an electrolyte imbalance in the blood; sends the diaphragm into spasms. Usually acidosis. Sugar or salt will push things the other way; if this doesn't work, it means you're alkalotic, and a bit of lemon will do. Hang on a moment."

I was going to argue with her, but the hiccups went away, probably of their own volition. "Where did you hear about this? From the Hand?"

"No. It's an Other Side thing. Friend of mine named Diane. Don't know if you ever met her."

"Mmmm . . . maybe. I don't know."

"Nah; you never met her." She smiled. "You'd remember.—How are the mugs?"

"Hang on a sec." The mugs were warm enough: just this side of too hot to hold, the ideal temperature for drinking Holtish brandy. I uncorked the bottle and poured each of us a healthy slug. I was going to get up and give hers to her, but she rose instead and settled herself down on the arm of my chair, her arm around my shoulders. She smelled of soap and flowers.

"L'chaim," I said, almost gargling on the Hebrew *ch*- sound.

That earned a smile. "L'chaim," she repeated, then drank. I did, too. The brandy burned my throat and warmed my belly. Not a bad trade.

"Something bothering you?" she asked.

"Just the usual," I said, keeping my voice light. "You're not the only one who worries, you know."

She chuckled. "What are you worrying about now? Your chances with the upstairs maid?" Her fingers played gently with my hair.

I faked a shudder. "Have you *seen* the upstairs maid?"

"Seriously."

I shrugged, gently enough not to dislodge her. "I shouldn't complain. Things are going well. Andy's looking a lot better, and the dwarf is pretty much healed up. Jason's a good kid. Greener than the Hulk, but—"

She silenced me with a finger to my lips. "We are going to get to Kirah, aren't we?"

I didn't answer.

Doria waited. She was better at waiting than I was.

"Not her fault," I said, finally. "What would you call it, post-traumatic stress disorder?"

She shrugged. "Two years of psychology classes, and you'd have me be the local psychiatrist?"

"I won't tell the AMA." I raised my little finger. "Pinky swear."

"Well, there is that." She considered the problem as she sipped, then dismissed it with a shrug. "It doesn't matter, Walter. Slapping a label on it doesn't mean you understand it, or know how to fix it. She's in bad shape . . . or at least your relationship is." Doria sipped, then sighed.

I raised an eyebrow. "I didn't know that it showed. You've still got enough power to detect it?"

"No." She shook her head. Had the Matriarch stripped her of all of her power, or were there a few spells left in the back of her soul, awaiting need? Doria wouldn't say. "But I always thought of spells as a way of augmenting other sensitivities, not as a substitute. How long has it been for the two of you?"

"Since what?"

One side of her mouth twisted into a wry frown. "Guess."

"Hey, I don't tell. Remember?"

"Yes." She smiled. "Usually."

I thought of the last time, and tried to forget it, remembering instead one wild, warm night at Home, years ago, shortly after Karl and I had gotten back from a raid. I think it was the second night—the first was Karl's Day Off, so it must have been. We'd left Janie, then just a baby, with Karl and Andy, and taken blankets away from the settlement, through the woods, and up the side of a hill. We had gotten incredibly drunk on a small bottle of wild huckleberry wine, and made love under the stars all night long.

I mean, really, no shit, my hand to God: all night long.

If I close my eyes, I can still see her, her hair floating in the breeze above me, framed in starlight. . . .

But that was a long time ago, in another country, and the wench would rather be dead than warm in my arms again.

I changed the subject. "Andy's looking a lot better, lately. I don't think it's a seeming."

Doria sat silently for a moment, then smiled, dropping the matter of Kirah and me. "It's amazing what a bit of exercise and food and general activity can do, eh? Not to mention laying off the magic."

"She—" I stopped myself.

"She hasn't given it up?" Doria shrugged. "I'm not surprised. The disease model *neverquite* worked for alcoholism, and putting it all on magical addiction probably isn't exactly right."

I was surprised to hear her talk like that. Doria had been beating the drum for keeping Andy the hell out of her workshop, by anything this side of force.

"But it's *close*," she said. "I wish the rest of you would believe me. There's a seduction there, a constant temptation. I was an awfully chubby girl," she said, as though changing the subject, although she wasn't. "I finally managed to, most of the time, keep my weight down to something acceptable by controlling what and how I ate. Just so much—and always so much; if you starve yourself now, you'll binge later—and no more."

I took her hand in mine and kissed it. Gently, gently; you always have to touch Doria gently, and that's the way it's always been, and one of the things I've always liked about her. "You had other problems, but you've come a long way, kid."

She sighed. "One would hope so." Her fingers toyed with my collar and then with my mustache. "We'd better go down to dinner, eh?"

* * *

The trials of the life of the ruling class are something you learn to bear up with after a while, even if you're only a member of the ruling class by association. Everything's a trade-off. You tend to eat well, but you can be interrupted for or dragooned to help out on any of a number of things.

In this case, I was helping entertain two newly arrived village wardens on a formal visit. Not a bad idea, really, having the village wardens come in to be wined and dined; I'm glad I'd suggested it to Jason.

We took our seats formally around the table: Jason at the head; Andrea at the foot; Ritelen, the senior of the two wardens, at Jason's right; then Kirah, Dorann, and Janie down the side; Doria, me, Aeia, Bren Adahan, and finally Benen, the other warden, down the other, giving each warden a seat of honor at the right of either Jason or Andrea. It gave Kirah a chance to engage in some formal chitchat with Ritelen, a barrel-chested, walrus-mustached man, as only she and Jason were within quiet conversation range of him.

It looked silly, is what it did. The formal dining table was meant to seat thirty, and less than a dozen people were spread too thinly.

Personally, I would have liked to set us down in two clumps, one at each end. Four to six is about the right number for a dinner conversation. Any more and the group will tend to split into several conversations, and most people will have the deep suspicion that they're in the wrong one. (Not me, mind. The conversation with me in it is by definition the most interesting.)

Or it can turn into a monologue.

Naturally, it didn't turn into a monologue from either of the two village wardens; that would have been too sensible, and too interesting. I would have liked to hear more about the wheat rot they were having in Teleren village, and would have wanted to pitch both of the wardens on the value of mung bean sprouts as a nutritional supplement.

But it didn't work out that way. Over the soup course—a thick, meaty turtle soup, heavily laden with cracked pepper and pieces of carrot that were just barely firm to the bite, served with hot rolls, still warm, firm, and chewy-crustled from the steamer; U'len does good work—Bren Adahan was holding forth on some fine point of horsemanship.

"—the trick is to get the animal not to anticipate, but to react instantly. Any idiot can canter a horse at a fence and find himself taking it without wanting to; most good horsemen can anticipate early that the horse is going to want to go; but for the very best, nothing happens until you tell it to. I remember a time . . ."

Aeia and Janie paid very close attention, and all of the other women were listening almost as closely.

Except for Andrea. Gorgeous in a long dress of jet and crimson, she tented her fingers in front of her mouth and barely pretended to listen.

I think I understand the connection between women and horses, but I don't care for it. It's almost sexual—or maybe I should drop the "almost," and no, I don't mean any crass joke about women and stallions. (In fact, all of the women I know have the sense to stay the hell away from stallions, as do I. An uncut male horse goes absolutely apeshit if he smells a mare in heat, or gets too close to a menstruating woman.)

Look: I don't have anything against horses. During the last twenty years I've walked thousands of miles and ridden easily twice as much, and I wouldn't want it the other way around, honest. I'd prefer cars, and *Imuch* prefer traveling on Ellegon when he's available, but I don't have anything against horses, not really.

On the other hand, they're remarkably dumb animals. They don't have any sense at all—you can ride them to death if you push them too hard, and you don't dare get too attached to them, because when it all hits the fan *you have* to be able to leave them behind. I once spent a full day hiding crouched in a rain barrel, breathing shallowly through a piece of tubing. I don't think a horse would have fit in there with me, and if I hadn't been willing to abandon my horse—a sweet little mare who used to nuzzle me affectionately, like a dog; I hope she found a caring owner—at a moment's notice, I would have been dead, dead, dead.

So don't talk to me about horses.

Particularly not about taking a fence when you didn't intend to. I almost broke my fucking neck.

Ahira's lips quirked into a smile. "Possibly we could talk about something else at dinner?" he asked, as U'len entered, bearing the next course on a silver salver.

"By all means, talk instead of eating my fine capons," U'len said. She was an immense woman, all sweat and fat and muscles, an almost permanent sneer on her face.

I'm not impressed with the local tradition of serving the meat course before the fish course, but I was impressed with the three birds resting on the huge serving plate: they were huge, plump, and brown,

starred with cloves and bits of garlic and onion, crispy skin still crackling from the oven.

They smelled like heaven ought to.

"Take it easy on me," Jason said, easily slipping into his father's role as U'len's verbal sparring partner. "I know good food when I taste it. We'll see if this is."

"Hmph." She set the bird platter down in front of Jason, then began to wield the carving knife and fork herself.

Aeia was unusually lovely tonight in a ruffled blouse over a long, bright Melawei sarong that left her left leg bare from ankle to mid-thigh. She smiled over her wine glass at me, earning me a glare from Bren Adahan, but no particular glance from my wife.

Sit still, Bren, I thought. You're going to make life difficult for all of us.

"What do you think of the wine?" she asked.

I took another sip. "Not bad." It would have been nice to sit close to her, to feel her leg against mine, to feel a woman press harder against me instead of pull away.

I drank some more wine. A bit too tannic for my taste, but it was still young—the Biemish style of winemaking gives you wine that needs long cellaring, although the result can be worth it. Winemaking was one of the things Bieme had to give up during the war years, and almost all of what the Furnaels had put down had been drunk during the siege. In the whole country there was nothing really ready to drink.

U'len started carving. I don't know about you, but I've always had a fondness for watching anybody do just about anything they're good at.

Blade flashing in the candlelight, in less time than it takes to tell it she had the first bird cut up, Eren-style: skin cut into palm-sized squares, each topped with a spoon-molded hunk of stuffing; breast sliced into thick chunks; thigh separated from drumstick; top part of the drumstick neatly removed from the meat; back and the rest of the carcass on its way to the kitchen for soup stock, while a pair of her assistants brought in the turnip greens and chotte to accompany the birds.

While she started in on carving the second bird, Jason speared a piece of skin and stuffing, and took a tentative bite.

"Well?" she asked, not pausing in her slicing, no trace of deference or even respect in her harsh voice. "How is it?"

"Not very good," he said.

I thought Benen's jaw was going to drop off and fall on his plate, although Ritelen, having figured out what was going on, hid a smile behind his walrus mustache and napkin.

"It isn't, *eh*?" U'len set her massive fists on her even more massive hips.

He looked at her for a long moment. "Nah. We, er, can save everybody else the, uh, problem of eating this. I'll just take care of it all."

"Uncle Jason's ly-ing, ly-ing," Dorann chanted, silenced momentarily, a moment later, by a mouthful of stuffing. Kirah's timing is sometimes very good.

* * *

U'len had served out the fish course—stream trout baked in sorrel and cream; okay, but I know a much better way to cook fresh trout—and was in the process of serving dessert when Kethol, Durine, and Pirojil walked in.

Not exactly the three musketeers. Kethol: lean, raw-boned, red-headed; Pirojil, chunky and pleasantly ugly; Durine, a quiet bear of a man. They had been Karl's surviving companions in what was becoming known as the legendary Last Ride, and two of the three of them had been with Jason in the search for Karl, the one that had turned up, well, me.

Pirojil spoke for the three of them. "Baron, we got a peasant outside, says he wants to see you. There's been some trouble out toward Velen."

I guess it was the night for Benen to be shocked, first at three soldiers interrupting the baron's formal dinner without so much as a with-your-permission; second, at the reason they'd interrupted the dinner; and third, at the way Jason was already out of his chair, and buckling on his swordbelt as he walked toward the far entryway.

"Well, let's see what the problem is," he said. "Baron Adahan, please take my place."

I would have been impressed with Jason's courtesy to the Holt, but I sort of figured it was more an attempt to keep Adahan's nose out of the problem than to avoid getting it out of joint.

"Be right with you," Tennyty said from around a final bite of trout, seemingly unbothered; Tennyty's never been much for desserts. She stood, reflexively feeling for the hilt of her knife before belting her sword about her waist.

I wasn't disposed to accompany them—the three musketeers knew enough to search the peasant, and Tennyty was along. Besides, I was looking forward to U'len's raspberry tart, even though the seeds always get caught between my teeth. But Jason was leaving, and Ahira was following him, so I did, too.

* * *

I guess my own sense of egalitarianism would have called for inviting him in, but nobody had asked.

We met with him in the courtyard, under the watchful eye of the keep guard, a dozen flickering torches, and a starry night sky.

The peasant wasn't what I'd expected, although I should have thought it through. Velen was a good two days' walk away—the peasant farmer had sent a son, not gone himself. Yes, he was short, dirty, smelly, and not too bright, and not so stupid as to not be nervous. He knuckled his forehead incessantly as he spoke, grunting out his complaint that somebody or something had killed his father's cow.

He actually wept.

Yeah. A cow. Not a big deal, right? Wrong. To a one-plot, two-cow peasant family, it probably represented the difference between getting by and starving. A good milk cow would go a long way to keeping a small family fed, between the milk and a calf every year or two. Cows aren't a terribly efficient way to deal with edible grain—if you know enough about balancing proteins, vegetarianism is more

efficient by an order of magnitude—but a lot of what they can get by on just fine isn't edible for humans.

Grazing rights on some of the baron's pasture wouldn't help out the peasant's family. Peasants don't eat grass.

"Sounds like wolves to me," Jason said. His lips twisted into a frown. "The population went way up during the war."

Ruling classes are good for something; keeping the number of other predators low is one of them. In Bieme, it's also one of the traditional jobs of the baron.

Tennetty shrugged. "We can handle wolves," she said. "The four-legged kind, or the two-legged. Shotguns all around?"

Durine nodded. "Not for chasing them down, but for chasing them away."

"Took the cow out of his paddock?" Ahira shrugged. "Possible." He looked at me and raised an eyebrow about halfway, spreading his palms just so.

I pursed my lips and shook my head. "Nah."

Ahira nodded.

"You don't think it's a wolf pack?" Jason was irritated.

I sighed. "You missed it. Ahira just asked me if I thought it was too likely to be a trap, or if we ought to go out and take a look at the corpse before the wolves finish it off."

"You did?" he said, turning to the dwarf.

Ahira nodded. "Actually, I did." He smiled. "Pretty disgusting, eh?"

Jason frowned; I smiled.

It happens with old friends: you spend a lot of time with somebody over a number of years, you have some of the same discussions over and over again. Then one day you realize that when you're doing some things, or talking about others, you're leaving out most of the words, or even all of the words. You don't need to guess how they're going to deal with a situation: *you know*. A gesture, a word, or even less than that—and it's clear.

But that's not something you can explain to a seventeen-year-old, even a very responsible, precocious seventeen-year-old. They won't believe you.

In this case, though, it was easy. It wasn't necessary for Ahira and me to involve ourselves in an ordinary wolf hunt, but if it was something else, it could be connected to those stories of things coming out of Faerie, and anything involving magic could involve Arta Myrdhyn, and us.

Look: I don't know why Arta Myrdhyn—yes, *the* Arta Myrdhyn of tale and legend—sent us across. It's even barely possible he did it so that we'd open the Gate for his return, as he claimed. Me, I'm skeptical. I guess it's partly that I don't like people I don't like pushing me around—my friends do enough of that. I've never liked jigsaw puzzles, and like even less being a piece in one.

Or I'm afraid that the universe might do to me what I was always tempted to do: bash the piece into place, even if it doesn't quite fit.

Tends to be hard on the piece.

The trouble with life is that none of it comes with a manual, and you always have to decide what involves you and what doesn't. After more than twenty years of friendship, I knew that this was the sort of thing that Ahira would sleep better after checking out, and that he wouldn't want to sleep until we were closer to checking it out.

As usual, he was nagging me into doing something that I had misgivings about.

Well, we were trying to teach the kid about life and such, so I might as well continue the lesson.

"Equipment," I said to Ahira. "Tell him what I think we'll bring."

He nodded, and beckoned Jason over, whispering in his ear.

Actually, this might be a bit tough.

"Okay," I said. "Figure one flatbed wagon and a team to draw it." That was easy; everybody knows I prefer a padded bench to a hard saddle. "Rations, and standard road gear—just grab a couple of packs in the stables. But we'll take a quick run up to the supply closet and grab one net hammock each." They were of elven silk, light as a feather and strong. Given the right geometry, I'd much rather sleep a few feet off the cold, cold ground than on it. Or in it, for that matter. "Signal rockets, five fast horses—just in case. Boar spears, grenades, shotguns plus personal weapons for all. But I bet he forgot the sprouting box."

Ahira's smile widened. "A lot you know. I told him two."

"Fine." One of my less-than-crazy theories is that for people eating peasant food anywhere—which is largely pick-your-starch-and-beans—taking some of those beans and sprouting them is going to increase the nutrition they're getting significantly, at little effort and no extra cost.

Hence the sprouting box. Johnny Appleseed, eat your heart out. "That isn't all."

"So I told him." Ahira laughed. "Go on."

"All that's too utilitarian—you told him to be sure to throw a couple of extra blankets in the flatbed, so I don't have to rest my tender butt on a hard bench. Add *aclean* teapot, and some tea. And a bottle of Riccetti's Best." I don't tend to get drunk on the road, but an occasional swig of good, smooth corn whiskey before bed cuts the dirt real well.

Ahira nudged the boy. "See?"

Jason frowned. I think he was looking for the trick, but there wasn't one, other than twenty years of being friends. I'm tricky, honest, but I hadn't set this up.

Tennetty snickered.

The peasant wasn't following any of this, which was reasonable—a lot of the conversation had been in

English, and he probably only spoke Erendra.

Jason turned to him. "You can show us where?"

"Yes, Lord, I think—certainly come daylight."

Jason beckoned to Durine. "Find Maduc dinner, and a place to sleep for the night, see that he's fed and ready to leave at dawn."

"Yes, Baron Fur—Cullinane."

"Yup," Jason said, with a smile. "Baron Furcullinane, that's me. Your other cow? How do you know it's safe?"

A good deduction: the peasant, young or old, wouldn't leave his only other cow endangered for the day and a half it had taken him to walk in.

"My father keeps it in the hut with them, Lord."

Ahira looked at me, spreading his hands. Durine led the peasant away.

"You'd better go get some sleep, Jason," I said. "Going to be a long day for you, tomorrow." Andrea was busy sneaking up behind us in the dark, trying not to be noticed, so I didn't notice her. Let her have her fun.

"You, too."

Ahira shook his head. "Nope. It's a bright enough night. Walter and I are heading out now."

"Missing a night's sleep," I said.

He shrugged. "Won't be the first time. We'll say good night to the family and be off." He turned to Tenny. "You coming along?"

"Sure." Tenny sighed. "Probably won't be anything to kill." She turned to me. "How do you expect to find it in the dark?"

Ahira shrugged for me. "We won't be there before dawn, and by then it'll be well marked. Buzzards." He thought about it for a moment. "The three of us ought to do."

Jason cleared his throat. "And how about me?"

I smiled. "But you're leaving tomorrow, aren't you?"

He spread his hands. "Fine. I'm being taught a lesson. May one inquire as to what it is?"

"I thought it was obvious." Ahira sighed. "When we're *here*, you are Baron Cullinane, and we're guests in your house. Fine. No problem. But once we step outside that house, or even plan on doing it, we're not your guests, or your servants, or anything less than your partners."

"Make that 'senior partners,'" I added. "And add 'teachers.' The dwarf and I don't just have a few years

on you; there's a lot of experience, too."

He stood silent for a moment, and I honestly wondered how it would go. I mean, when I was seventeen, I didn't take being chastened in public all that well.

Come to think of it, I still don't. I don't even much take to being corrected in private.

"Have a good trip," he said, turning and walking away.

Tennetty spat on the ground. "Asshole." I was curious about whether that was addressed to Jason or to Ahira and me, but I didn't ask. Don't ask a question if you don't want to hear the answer.

"Not fair," Andrea Cullinane said from behind me. "But thank you."

I jumped a bit, as though she had startled me. Tennetty cocked her head suspiciously, and Ahira didn't have to.

I chuckled. "I didn't do it so you could have him around a bit longer. I did it for my own tender skin. If Jason's going to be working with us, he's going to have to be reliable." Besides, he had the village wardens to keep entertained.

And maybe I was still remembering that the boy had once bolted when it counted—okay, right after it counted—and that had brought a whole world of trouble down on a lot of heads.

She was in her new leathers again, covered by a matching black leather trailcoat, its surface dark without being glossy. She had a bag slung across one shoulder, and beneath the open buttons of the coat, a flintlock pistol was holstered on each hip, the one on the left hip butt-forward.

"What are you dressed up for?" I asked, as though I didn't know.

Her eyes went all vague and distant, a look I didn't like. "I need to get out of here; I'm going stir-crazy." She shook her head as though to clear it.

"There've been stories," she went on, "about things coming out of Faerie, about animals bit in half. And then there was that huge thing, whatever it was, that Jason and Tennetty ran into on one of the Shattered Islands. You may need me."

"Wolf pack sounds a lot more likely."

Magical creatures and humans don't tend to get along, and few at all remain in the Eren regions. There are always stories, but most of the time they're just stories. I've been in on the creation of enough legends to know what nonsense they can be.

She cocked her head to one side. "What if it isn't just a wolf pack? What will you do then?"

What the fuck did she *think* I'd do? "I'll run like hell, that's what I'll do."

I had worked this all through earlier in the day, and everything had come down on the side of leaving Andy out of it. Forget Doria's theories.

Look: given the world we live in and the situations we've been in, it's no coincidence that a lot of the

women I know have been raped. Relative freedom from the likelihood of that kind of assault is a relatively modern invention—in most societies, the only question is who, other than the woman, has been affronted. (It's customary for us to talk about the Other Side as though everything worked right and well there, but in the country where I was born, assaults are a crime against the state, not the person, and it's the state that decides whether or not to prosecute it. Yeah, I know.)

Everything leaves scars. Kirah has her troubles; it turned Tenny into a barely controlled psychopath; Doria came damn close to ending up permanently between the lettuce and the broccoli, if you catch my drift; and while I think she's made the best adjustment of them all, there's a trace of madness around the edges of Aeia's eyes. Just like the trace around Andrea's.

No. One crazy, Tenny, was bad enough on the field—even if we were only going to be chasing down a few skinny, scared wolves. We didn't need somebody else marginal, and we particularly didn't need a borderline magic addict. Okay, maybe she wasn't a magic addict; Doria is perfectly capable of being wrong.

But Andy had been out of the field for years and years, so after all my talk about how we can practically read each other's mind, I feel like an idiot for having to report that when Ahira said, "Okay. Let's say a quick goodbye and get out of here," it came as a complete surprise to me.

And not a pleasant one, either.

CHAPTER FOUR

*In Which I Think Unwise Thoughts
and Say Some Farewells*

The course of true love never did run smooth.

—WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

Nothing is more annoying than somebody who has a keen eye for the obvious.

—WALTER SLOVOTSKY

I managed to say goodbye to all my family, starting with the youngest one.

Doria Andrea takes after her father—she's a late-night kind of Slovotsky, like me and Stash, unlike Emma and Steve and her mother and sister—but when you're that age, staying up late means making it through a long dinner, and that's about all.

"Sleep well, little prosecutor," I said as I tucked her in, in a private joke that only the originals among us would have gotten, and nobody but me found even mildly funny.

D.A. wrapped her little arms tight around my neck as I leaned over. "Come back soon, Daddy. Please."

"Will do," I said, gently prying myself away. I rested my hand on her head for a moment, on the soft baby-hair that was getting more golden each day, like her mother's. "G'night, Sweetheart."

Janie was waiting for me out in the hall, leaning against the wall. She started to say something, but cut off when I put a finger to my lips. I shut the door gently and followed her over to the landing.

"Trouble is, Daddy dearest," she said, ignoring my grimace, "you're getting *too* tricky in your old age."

"Oh?" I asked, trying to sound casual. *I hate* it when she calls me "Daddy dearest."

"You've managed to teach my boyfriend not to push you around—to *not* try to push you around. But it looks to me like you gave up a cheap little dry run that would have been good for the lot of you. Doesn't sound like a good trade to me." She shrugged. "If my opinion counts for anything."

Since that had been bothering the hell out of me anyway, I found it as hard to disagree with her as it would have been to admit that it was wrong, so I didn't do either.

"It counts, kid," I said, hugging her for only a moment.

She smiled. Why is it that my daughters' smiles brighten the whole world?

"Be good," I said.

* * *

Kirah was sitting in the overstuffed armchair, a lamp at her left elbow, her sewing set aside as she worked on some knitting or tatting or whatever; I don't know the difference and I don't much care.

"You're going," she said, her voice flat, as though to say, *I won't ask you not to go*.

"So it seems." I smiled. "Hey, not to worry. I know how to duck."

She forced a smile. Either that, or her real smile and her forced smile had started to look the same to me. I should have been able to tell, after all these years. I really should.

"That's good," she said.

It was getting chilly out, and it was already chilly in. I shrugged out of my finery and padded over to the closet, dressing quickly in undershorts, black leather trousers, blousy black cotton shirt, and—lest I look like Johnny Cash—a long brown cloak, fastened loosely at the breastbone by a blackened brass clasp. I took a rose from the vase on our nightstand, sniffed at it once, and stuck it in the clasp, examining myself in the dressing mirror.

I'm not entirely sure I liked the sharp-eyed fellow who looked back at me, although he was good-looking enough.

Pretty darned handsome, in fact, the features regular, and there was kind of a pleasant Eastern cast to his eyes. Nice firm jawline, and clever mouth under the Fu Manchu-style mustache. He was well into his forties, but there were only hints of lines at the edges of his eyes, although the touches of gray at the temple were pretty nice—too bad that the gray was as lopsided as the smile.

It was clear from that far-too-easy smile that he spent too much time being entirely too pleased with himself, but it wasn't clear to me that there was enough character in his face for that to be at all reasonable.

It was entirely possible that he was thinking about how he was going out on the road with a particularly attractive old friend of his, and how—what with her son having cleverly been talked out of joining him—he might arrange to get his ashes properly hauled.

It was also possible that he was thinking about how wrong it was to be thinking about that in front of his wife. I doubt it, though. Like I say, I'm not entirely sure I liked the guy.

"What are you thinking?" she asked, as though we were a normal husband and wife, the kind who could ask each other that kind of question and expect an honest answer.

Kirah, I thought, *what happened to us?* "Well," I said, putting on my reassuring smile, "I'm thinking I'm practically naked." Close enough.

I went to the dresser and put on my weapons: throwing knives properly stowed, pistols in their holsters, master belt holding both shortsword and my long, pointed dagger. I know that a bowie is a better weapon, but I like the dagger better. Tradition, and all that.

Besides, I'm used to it.

I rolled up my hunting vest and stuck it under an arm. The Therranji garrottes were in two of the pockets.

She put down her knitting or tatting or whatever it was and walked to the chifforobe in the corner.

"Here," she said, handing me a full leather rucksack. "Clothes, some dried beef, a few candies, everything you need." She smiled up at me. "Almost."

I stuffed the vest inside, then slung it over a shoulder. "Thanks." I kissed the tips of my fingers and touched the air in front of her.

She leaned toward my hand and swallowed once, twice, hard. "You'll be back soon?"

Of course, I should have said. *Don't worry*. "Do you want me to?"

"Yes." She nodded. "Oh, yes. I do."

"Then why not—good."

She waited expectantly, her face upturned. No matter how many times it went wrong, I always thought that if I moved slowly enough, gently enough, she would be okay. This time it would be okay.

Asshole.

"It's okay, *Kirah*," I said, putting my arms around her. For a moment, just a moment, I thought it would be okay, now that she could let me touch her again.

But she shook her head once, emphatically, and then again, violently, and then she set her hands on my

chest and pushed me away. "No."

I walked out of the room, ignoring the whimper behind me.

Dammit, it's not my fault.

* * *

There was a farewell committee waiting for us down in the stables: Doria, Aeia, Durine, Kethol, and Pirojil. Bren Adahan had been left to keep the village wardens company.

The riding horses had already been saddled, and the two-horse team hitched to the wagon.

I settled for just checking my cinch straps and finding a carrot for the dappled mare that Tennetty had picked out for me before hitching the horse to the back of the flatbed wagon. I was going to drive the flatbed, but I wanted a riding horse, too. You never know when you're going to need to get away quickly, or across country. Flatbeds and fields don't get along.

Ahira was already on the back of his small gray mare, and as I walked through the wide doors, Tennetty swung up to the saddle of a nervous black gelding with a white blaze across his face, and kicked him into a clomp past the lanterns and out into the dark of the courtyard.

Andrea folded a blanket neatly across, twice, and set it down on the flatbed's seat before climbing on. "Let's go," she said, patting the seat next to her.

Doria, still in her purple evening dress, looked at me, pursed her lips and shrugged. "Take care of yourself, Walter," she said. Her fingers kneaded my shoulders for just a moment, and then she kissed me gently on the lips. "Watch out, eh?"

"For who?" I shot her a prizewinning smile she didn't return.

"All of you," she said. "Particularly Andrea."

* * *

I didn't know how things were going to break with Aeia—hell, I didn't know how I wanted them to break—until I heard myself saying, "Walk me to the gate—the rest of them will catch up in a moment."

I caught the dwarf's eye; I spread the fingers of one hand wide for a moment. *Give me five minutes, okay?*

He repeated the gesture and nodded. *Not six*, that meant.

Aeia and I walked out of the stables and into the dark. I could almost feel hostile eyes on my back, and wondered what window Bren Adahan was looking down from. Torches ringing the keep crackled in the still air, sending clouds of dark smoke into the dark sky. Above, a gazillion stars stared back at us, hanging intently on our every motion, every word. Or maybe not.

She was still wearing the Melawei-inspired outfit she had worn to dinner; I mentally worked at the complicated knot at her left hip.

"You're scared about this," Aeia said.

"Always am." And that was true enough. "Wake up scared in the morning, go to bed scared at night."

She laughed, a warm, coppery sound like a carefully bowed cello. "You couldn't have persuaded me of that when I was a little girl. My Uncle Walter scared? Nothing could scare my Uncle Walter, any more than . . ." she grasped at the air, looking for the right analogy, ". . . it could scare my father."

I chuckled. "Well, half right. Karl was too dumb to be scared."

She took my hand and we walked in silence, holding hands like a couple of schoolkids. "Just a couple of days?"

I shrugged. "Probably. Could be a few more. Or things could really heat up and we might be gone for awhile. You never know." It was like in the old raiding days, when a team would head out on the road, looking for trouble, usually finding it in the form of a slaver caravan. Slavers have to move the property around, particularly new property. People have a tendency to form relationships with other people, even if they own them. Bad for their business.

I never really liked those days, back when I was seconding Karl. Yes, there was a certain something to them; the parts that Karl didn't participate in were often kind of nice. See, not all of the folks we freed over the years were men. Some of them, quite a few, were women, and some of those were more than a little attractive. It's amazing how grateful a woman can be when you've just freed her, and often spectacular how she'll show her gratitude. You could ask my wife about that.

Besides, the money was good.

But . . .

"Bren's asked me to go with him over to Little Pittsburgh," she said. "What do you think I should do?"

"Little Pittsburgh's an interesting place," I said. "A bit dirty and sooty, but interesting."

"That wasn't what I meant."

"I know." Her hand was warm in mine. "You meant that we're going to have to make a decision sometime," I said. "Bren won't wait forever. Kirah won't not-see forever. We're going to have to decide what we are."

She nodded. "You can add that I won't wait forever. But I wasn't asking for forever, I wasn't asking about eventually. I was asking for now. What are we to be now, Walter Slovotsky?"

I rubbed my thumb against the softness of her hands. "Friends, at least."

She stiffened and let go of my hand, and touched herself above the waist at the right side. The air between us chilled, and I remembered Aeia holding a rifle straight, cheek welded to stock, squeezing the trigger gently, ignoring the red wetness spreading across the right side of her waist.

"Comrades-in-arms," she said, her voice holding a trace of that Cullinane coldness. "At least."

"Of course." I gestured an apology. "Always," I said.

The coldness broke into a smile. "Better." She put her hands on my face and kissed me hard.

* * *

As we rode through the gate, Andy started to say something but caught herself. Just as well.

CHAPTER FIVE

*In Which I Ride at Night,
and Rediscover What
a Pain in the Ass It Is*

I will not give sleep to my eyes, or slumber to my eyelids.

—PROVERBS 132:4

Riding down a country road in the dark was interesting at first. Ahead, the road curved and bent, twisting gently through fields and past villages, as the horses clopped through the dark, the rhythm of their hooves always in awkward syncopation; someday, I'm going to get a string of horses with matching strides.

It was dark, but not cloudy; the stars above shone their pale light over the landscape, turning it all delicate shades from the palest of whites to a rich, velvety black. The night was rich with sounds, from the distant hoot of an owl and the skritch of insects to the quiet *whisshhh* of wind through the trees. Night near a forest always smells vaguely of mint to me.

But it all palls quickly.

Ahead, the road did just what roads do: it went straight for awhile, then it bent, then it went straight again. The stars above shone their pale white light over the landscape, robbing it of all color except a hint of sickly blue, turning the night into something seen on an old black-and-white TV set.

And all the while, the horses just clopped on down the road, every once in a while relieving themselves, filling the air with the scents of manure and horse piss.

Rather have a Buick, thank you much.

Actually, just for the entertainment value, I would have settled for Ahira's eyes. Dwarves can see deeper into the infrared than humans can, and not only does that give them two colors the rest of us don't have, it's a huge benefit in the dark. (It's also why their warrens are usually lit by glowsteels rather than heat sources—a torch puts out *alot* of IR.)

We kept quiet, generally. It really would have been perfectly reasonable to talk as we rode, except that I had a vision of somebody lying in ambush chuckling over how easy we were making it as we rode under a tree. Without the distraction of conversation, either Ahira or I might be able to pick up a stray sound, if there was some trouble ahead.

Now, if I'd really thought that there was going to be trouble ahead, we wouldn't have been out here; I would have been safely in my bed at the castle instead of sitting on the hard seat of a flatbed, each rut in the road bashing the back of the seat against my kidneys.

* * *

By the time we arrived in Velen, my eyes were aching from lack of sleep, the sun was hanging mockingly over the horizon, and there were buzzards in the air to the southwest.

CHAPTER SIX

In Which We Encounter Some Wolves

There are no compacts between lions and men, and wolves and sheep have no concord.

—HOMER

How come you can never find a dragon when you need one?

—WALTER SLOVOTSKY

By the time we got to the buzzards, it was well onto midmorning. The buzzards had settled down both onto the carcass and onto the cornfield surrounding it.

Heedless of the damage she was doing to the calf-high corn rows, Tennyty rode hard at the birds, scattering them into flight.

I guess they didn't know about her; they took her seriously enough to beat their wings lazily into the air, but half a dozen took up residence in a neighboring oak, squawking out complaints and verbal abuse. Middle Lands buzzards are smaller than I'd always thought Other Side buzzards are (I've never actually seen an Other Side buzzard, so I'm not sure)—about the size of a big crow, huge ugly wattles hanging under wickedly curved beaks. Hideous things.

Bones aching, I set the brake and climbed down from the flatbed.

What we had here was the typical local setup: a dirt road ran diagonally across a vaguely rectangular piece of land, vanishing into the dark of the forest on either side. The woods could be only a strip of a few dozen yards, left mainly as a windbreak, or they could be much deeper.

The road was edged with a low stone retaining wall that raised it about two feet above flat ground level. I'd seen better-maintained retaining walls; this one was a bit fallen down. But that wasn't my problem. It was the baron's problem, and his tax collectors'—they were supposed to be sure that the farmer was maintaining his well and roads.

The house, such as it was, was a half-timber, wattle-and-daub shack next to the road. A hedged privy, a

dubious chicken coop, and the ubiquitous stone well were the only other structures. There was some movement over in the crofter's shack, and that would have to be attended to, but I wanted to take a look at the cow first.

Or what was left of it. The wolves had done a good job, and the buzzards had been working hard to finish it. They—the wolves; buzzards don't eat take-out food—had dragged it about thirty feet through the field, doing even more damage to the young corn than Tenny had.

The cow was a stinking, bloody mess, half-covered with flies.

I was kind of relieved. Back when I was majoring in meat science, I had to slaughter a lot of cows, and the part I hated most was the killing, and dealing with the fresh-dead. You have this pneumatic stunner—looks like a bull-barrel shotgun, sort of, connected by hose to a compressor—and you put it up against the cow's forehead and pull the trigger. The air pressure sends out the hammer—basically, just a piston—which gives the cow a sharp rap on the skull, hard enough to knock it unconscious at the least, break bones more often. At which point you hoist it, cut it, and let it bleed out.

Messy work, but within just a few minutes, you don't have something that looks like a cow anymore; you've got parts. Sides of beef, viscera, tongue. Skin flayed off, waiting to be tanned.

We had even less than that here. The wolves had eaten about half the cow. Actually, they had eaten or carried off the rear half of the cow, legs and all, leaving the front half more mutilated than eaten.

It didn't make sense. It was too neat—in too many places, the flesh had been bit through cleanly. Possible for a wolf, I guess, although he would have had to be trying hard to be neat. And why would that be? Who would teach a wolf to play with his food?

But *it was* wolves—their prints were all over the soft ground. The pack had headed off to the northeast, into the woods.

Ahira and Andrea had left their horses hitched to the wagon; they joined Tenny over the bloody mess, the three of them waving clouds of flies away.

The dwarf's brow furrowed. "It looks like the rear half of this thing is gone, bitten clean away."

Andy raised an eyebrow. "You mean, like what Ellegon would do?"

Ahira didn't answer.

There was more movement inside the shack. Tenny stalked over and pounded on the door with the hilt of her shotgun.

"Out. Everybody *out*. Now. We need to talk to you," she said. You can always trust Tenny to know just the right way to put everything.

I would have sworn that the ramshackle building wouldn't have held more than a couple of people, but in a few minutes a family of seven stood nervously on the dirt, the mother holding a baby in her arms, the youngest daughter—cute despite the dirt; they can do cute real well at that age—holding a struggling chicken tightly.

Tenny ducked inside. I wished that she would talk things over before she did them; these sorts of

things can be death traps.

But she came out laughing—not just giggling, but laughing *hard*, one hand holding her stomach. I thought she was going to drop the shotgun. "Yeah," she managed to wheeze out, in between gales of laughter, "they've got a . . . cow in there. And a goat, and I think there's some, some chickens in the cellar."

Ahira and Andrea were over with the family, trying to calm them down. I sort of got the impression that having a bunch of strangers with guns around wasn't either normal or comfortable for them.

On the other hand, when she turns on her smile, Andrea can charm bark off a tree.

"Greetings, all," she said. "We're just here to look into your wolf problem. The baron sent us."

"Old or new?" the woman asked, suspicious of us, if not of the notion of the nobility looking into predators.

"New," she said. "Baron Cullinane. We work for him. Tenny, Daherrin, Worelt, and Lotana," she said, indicating us in turn.

I'd had a moment of nervousness. Andrea's always had an unfortunate tendency to honesty, and four of us have gotten fairly famous through the Eren regions. That can be handy, but more often it's a problem: more than a few idiots would like to see what holding onto the former Empress of Holtun-Bieme would get them. (Dead is what it would get them, I hope. But maybe they don't know that. Or maybe they don't care what I hope.) And lots of folks would like to find out if they're better with a shortsword than One-Eyed Tenny or faster with a knife than Walter Slovo. (Yes, there are both; but you'll understand that I'd prefer not to demonstrate that.)

Andy's instincts were right on the money: she had picked out false names for the three of us, but not for Tenny. Tenny was fairly famous in her own right—women warriors weren't common, particularly one-eyed ones—and giving her a false name might be a clue that the rest of us were traveling under false colors.

The man ducked his head. "Begging your pardon, but—"

His wife shook her head, quickly. "No."

"I saw them," he insisted.

"How many?"

"Half a dozen, perhaps more. Wolves, yes, but . . ."

"But what?"

"There was something else," he said.

Andy's gentle smile broadened. I think she was trying to look reassuring, but she came off as amused. "And what might that be?"

He gripped at the air in front of him. "It looks like a wolf, just like a wolf, but it isn't." The words came fast, as though stumbling out. "I saw; I know. It isn't. It is larger, it moves strange, it isn't a wolf, it just

looked like one."

I gave it a try. "What do you mean, it wasn't a wolf, but just looked like one?"

His fingers twitched in frustration. "It didn't*move* right. It bends in the wrong parts."

"A wolf that bends in the wrong places," Tennyty said. "Doesn't sound like a major problem to me." Tennyty dismissed them with a gesture; they filed back into the hut, although we could feel their eyes on us.

"It was a day and a half ago," Ahira said, *sotto voce*. "Wolves can cover a lot of territory in a day and a half. If they want to."

I wish I'd taken that zoology class. What was the dynamic of pack wolves? Did they have a territory, or—

Andrea knelt next to a pile of turds, one hand in her wizard's bag.

"Hang on a moment," I said, irritated. "I don't—"

"If you can come up with a better way to find them than with a location spell, Walter," she said, "then let's get to it."

"I'm a fairly good tracker," I admitted. Traditionally, it's the job of the nobility to protect the peasants, whether it's from invading raiders or wandering wolves. We weren't the local nobility, not really, but we were sitting in for him.

"Not good enough." Tennyty shook her head. "In a few days, if they're holed up and not on the move, you should be able to find them. In the meantime, not only do they fatten themselves on the local cattle, but we have to sleep during the heat of the day and hunt through the night."

"On the other hand, Andrea's supposed to keep her use of magic to a minimum. It's not healthy—"

"—for you to be talking about me in the third person," Andy said, her smile wide, but not particularly pleasant.

Ahira held up a hand. "We are all tired. But let's think it through." He ticked it off on blunt fingers. "We've got no problem with having wolves around, as long as they know enough to stay away from people. These don't." He added a finger. "They aren't going after cattle because other game is scarce: it isn't. They have a taste for beef, and aren't frightened enough of humans. So they have to go. It's cool in the woods—we'll duck off the road into the woods and pitch the sleeping tarp, everybody gets some rest, and then a hot meal, and then we hunt late in the afternoon."

He frowned. "With the location spell."

* * *

No point in putting it off any longer. The horses were saddled, the guns loaded and lashed into place. My bow was only half-strung, slung over my chest, two dozen widebladed hunting arrows stuck into the quiver on my back. (Yes, stuck—you don't want the arrows falling out if you take a fall.) A flask of Eareven healing draught was strapped to my left calf—my scabbard kept banging into it.

My hand was sweaty where it gripped the boar spear. It's the best hand-to-hand hunting weapon ever invented: six feet of shaft, grip points wound with leather and brass, topped by a long, fist-wide blade. About two feet back of the blade was the crosspiece. The classic crosspiece is just that: a piece of brass intended to hold whatever you've just stabbed at arm's length. Some genius—no, not one of us; we don't have the patent on genius—had modified it into kind of a U-shaped staple, points sharp, but unbarbed. The result looked like a trident with a glandular condition.

Tennetty held four of the horses. They stood prancing, waiting, while Andy, in a ring of torches, crouched over the wolf shit. There was something in her expression that took me way back.

Once, a long time ago, I saw a little corgi who had just been hit by a car, about half a block from the vet's. My brother Steve and I were walking home from school and just came in at the end of it. Dr. MacDonald, a comically rotund little man, came running, a black bag like a real doctor's in his hand. He knelt over the little dog.

I don't remember much about the dog itself—I looked away.

But I do remember the look in Dr. Mac's face as he loaded the syringe: not only a kind of sedate compassion, but a raging unhurried competence. I misread it, and I grabbed for Steve's arm. "He's going to be able to save it."

Steve shook his head. "No. He's going to make the dog stop hurting."

There was that same something in Andrea's face as she silently knelt on the dust, oddments of bone and beak and feather spread out in front of her in the shape of a run-over bird.

With medical precision, she cleaned the ball of her left thumb, then pricked it with the razor point of a knife she had borrowed from Tennetty, letting one, two, three fat drops of blood well up, then fall into the dirt and the wolf turds.

The fire flared higher as she spoke, first in a quiet mumble, the volume growing steadily as her voice became clearer, uttering words that could only be heard but never remembered, smooth sibilants that vanished on the ear and in the mind. The torches flickered higher as she screamed out the vanishing syllables.

For a moment, just a moment, I thought that nothing would happen. There's a part of me that doesn't really believe in magic.

But then a feather twitched, and a piece of bone began to vibrate, and the twitching feather was joined by a white, ghostly one, as was the bone, and then another and another. Bits of feather and bone, both real and pale simulacrums, assembled themselves into bird, and flapped into the air.

Ahira and Tennetty were already on their horses, the butts of their spears resting in their stirrups.

Andrea rose, her face pale and sweaty in the firelight. "Quickly, now," she said, her voice a husky hiss. "The bird will try to keep itself halfway between me and the wolf. Let us hurry."

We cantered off toward the setting sun.

* * *

Just to show you what an asshole a kid from New Jersey can be, I used to think that riding a cantering

horse was sort of like driving a fast car. Yes, I thought, you have to worry about bumping into stuff, but physically demanding, nah. Except on the horse.

Well, a lot I knew.

We clopped down roads, cut across fields—yes, careless of the damage to crops, but conscious of the damage a pack of wolves can do to the local livestock—avoiding cutting through the woods.

Ahead, the bird fluttered, barely visible, constantly slowing, but always flying just a little too fast, just a little too far for us to ease up on the horses. Riding a fast-moving horse is hard.

Yes, my mare would jump over a drainage ditch, but I had to hang on to her back as she leaped the ditch, and landing was every bit as hard on me as it would have been if I was doing the jumping. Not to mention the way the saddle of the usually-cantering and sometimes-galloping horse kept threatening to slam the base of my spine into the base of my skull.

I was about to call a halt, using as my excuse that I didn't think the horses could take it, when the bird stopped at the edge of a field, perched itself neatly on a gnarled limb, then dissolved into a shower of feathers and bones.

I looked over at Andrea.

She nodded; the spell had dissolved because we were close, not because it had run out of magic.

The woods blocked out the setting sun, loomed dark and menacing.

Ahira was already on the ground, his boar spear in his hand. He planted it solidly in the ground, then picked up his crossbow, quickly cocking it and slipping in a bolt.

"Tennetty, keep your spear ready, but get your rifles and bow out. Andrea, shotgun on the half-cock—"

I slipped from my saddle and started to string my bow.

Ahira shook his head. "Nope; Walter, you work your way around and drive them toward us." He tossed me a pair of grenades.

I chuckled bravely as I stowed the grenades in my vest. Well, it was supposed to be a brave chuckle, but it sounded forced to me; I just hope the others weren't quite as perceptive.

"And what if they decide to run toward me instead of you?"

He chuckled back. "Then I'd suggest you climb a tree. Quickly."

* * *

Skulking through the woods is partly art, but mainly craft.

It doesn't matter who or what you are: if you try to walk on the floor of a forest—twigs, dry leaves, and God-knows-what-else underfoot—you will make noise. The trick is to stick to hard-packed dirt, to flat rock and green grass. This can get a bit complicated when you're also being damn sure to stay within dashing range of a tree.

I circled around downwind of where the wolf pack should have been, making more noise than I would have liked, but not enough to carry very far. The idea was to spook them after all, and drive them in the direction of my friends.

Nice thing to do to your friends, eh?

Well, it was Ahira's idea, not mine. And it shouldn't be a problem—that's what the guns and the bow were for. Not that that was my problem, not now. My problem was keeping myself alive and unbit while I located the pack.

Hmm. If I were running a wolf pack, I'd have posted scouts some distance away from the body of the group. It would be an interesting mathematical problem—the farther away the circle of watchers, the more warning they could give, but the more of them you'd need. Probably susceptible to some sort of minimax solution, or game theory analysis, but I don't guess that wolves do either.

The other way, of course, would be—either instead of or in addition to posting scouts—to have some roaming watchmen making regular tours.

I don't know whether it was a hidden watchman or a roamer I'd missed that jumped me. With barely a rustling of leaves and twigs, two hundred pounds of coarse fur and awful stink lunged out of the dark brush for me, teeth unerringly aimed at my leg.

—Which wasn't there. Emma Slovotsky's baby boy doesn't wait around to get bitten by a wolf.

I danced out of his way and kicked him as he passed—it didn't hurt him, but it made his lunge carry him past me.

By the time he had spun around, I was already up the nearest tree, chinning myself on a thick branch, my stomach left somewhere behind me on the ground.

As I clambered the rest of the way to the branch, shouts and shots echoed off in the distance, but they seemed less important than the way the wolf scabbled at the bark of the tree as he tried to get at me.

He howled once, then went silent—he didn't snarl, didn't growl. The silence was more frightening than snarling would have been. The way he crouched down in preparation for a leap was even worse.

I know I'm supposed to be completely cool and calm at all times, but it's only in the job description—it has nothing to do with reality. My fingers trembled as I pulled a grenade out of my vest, and tried to strike the fuse on the patch of roughness on its side. From the shots and shouts off in the distance, it sounded like the other part of the fight had already taken off, but it still made sense to scare any remaining wolves in their direction.

Meanwhile, my new friend was eyeing me silently, in between leaps up the side of the tree that brought his awful yellow teeth within inches of my ankles. I thought about trying to pull myself up so I could stand on the branch instead of sitting on it, and decided that I could too easily lose my balance trying. I thought about kicking at his face, but I only thought about it.

It took three strikes until the grenade's fuse sputtered into life, and I pitched it hard in what I hoped was the direction of the pack, and then turned to deal with the lone wolf.

I wish I could report that I did something clever or heroic, but all I did was pull one of my brace of

pistols, and cock it. The next time he gathered himself for a leap it gave me a stable enough target to aim at, and I gently squeezed the trigger. Shooting down is supposed to be hard, but that's only when you're shooting out and down—you tend to compensate for the distance to the target instead of the horizontal component of the distance.

But with wolfie ten feet directly below me, I just laid my iron sights low on his chest and pulled the trigger, rewarded by a bang, a cloud of foul smoke, and a gout of flesh and gore from the base of his neck.

He took a half dozen wobbly steps back, then fell over, watching me with glassy eyes as I clambered down.

It wasn't anything personal, not anymore. Wolfie was just protecting his pack, the way I was protecting mine, and I'd happened to be equipped with weapons he wasn't genetically prepared to deal with. I'd say I was sorry about that, but I really wasn't.

What I was sorry about was that we were on opposite sides. He reminded me of an old friend as he growled at my approach, yellow teeth bared for one last try, wanting a last taste of an enemy's blood in his mouth.

I slipped one of my throwing knives into my hand and flung it hard, burying the point in his throat, slicing through the jugular. Blood wet his chest and darkened the ground.

He died quickly.

I know that the grenade had gone off sometime during all that, and I know I'm supposed to be able to pay attention to everything that's going on, but I honestly don't remember when it happened. Look: I'm no hero, but it wasn't cowardice that kept me there with the dead wolf for a long moment.

I guess what it was, was that I felt like shit.

I felt like giving the dead body a pat, but that wouldn't have done any good, so I ran off into the forest.

* * *

Thick brush clawed at me in the dimming light. My sense of direction is unerring, so I knew that I was just feet away from where the strip of forest broke on cleared land, but for the life of me I couldn't see it.

I broke through into soft dirt and a battlefield lit by the red and orange light of a setting sun.

It was still too light out for stars, but the faerie lights were already out in force. Under their pulsations, wolf bodies and parts of wolf bodies lay scattered across the ground, most with arrows protruding from their immobile sides, others chewed by leaden teeth. One had fought his way through the rain of lead and steel to reach Ahira; it lay on the ground, still struggling at the end of his boar spear.

Only one stood, squared off against Andy and Tenny.

Ahira freed the boar spear with a wrench that sent the wolf into a final spasm, and turned to face the last wolf.

Except that it wasn't a wolf.

It *looked* like a wolf, all right, albeit an overlarge, gray one. I would have assumed it was just the alpha male—until it moved. It didn't bend at the joints, the way any animal did—it flowed, liquidly, legs snaking instead of bending as it moved.

Tennetty fired a pistol into its side, but either she missed or it didn't do anything important: whatever it was just shuddered and braced itself for a leap, no sound escaping through its bared teeth.

Andy brought up her shotgun, but she's never been much of a gunner: the blast dug up a spray of dirt to one side.

The wolf-thing lunged for her.

That was when Ahira, grunting with the effort, drove his boar spear down into its chest, shoving the tripartite head of the spear not only through the wolf-thing, but a full two feet into the soft dirt, pinning it to the ground like a bug on display.

Its legs squirmed like snakes, and ripples shook its body from nose to tail, until its bright eyes went dull and glassy, then dark, as the spasms subsided.

Ahira gave one last shove to the boar spear and then released it.

I had been running toward them across the soft ground, staggering more than once as I almost fell flat on my face, although God alone knew what I could do. Now I let myself ease into a slow walk. You don't have to run when the enemy's dead.

Tennetty let her swordpoint drop and wiped it on her leggings before putting it away in her scabbard. She walked over to where another boar spear protruded from the body of a dead wolf, set her booted foot against the wolf's side, and wrenched the spear loose. She leaned on the spear like a farmer leaning on his hoe.

"Shit, Walter," she called out. "You missed all the fun."

Things had gotten closer than they should have. The wolves should have just run away, and been picked off with bow and guns, not charged en masse. Ahira and his boar spear had been intended to be a sort of free safety, to pick off any problems that the guns and bow missed.

Ahira staggered away a pace or two. He squatted on the soft ground, then sat down hard, breathing heavy.

I stood over him. "A bit close, eh?" I offered him a hand, but he shook his head.

"Too close," he said. "They were working as a team; it was like that thing was directing them." He gestured at the wolf-thing lying on the ground, his spear still stuck through it.

Andrea smiled as she wiped her brow. "Now I remember why I've always let the rest of you do field work." She gestured toward the wolf-thing. "What *is* that?"

Ahira shook his head. "There's been talk of strange things coming out of Faerie; looks like we've just killed one of them." His mouth pursed into a line, then relaxed. It didn't matter what it was, now that it was dead.

I was going to say something, no doubt something clever, but Andy's eyes widened and her mouth opened.

"Ohmigod."

The wolf-thing rose, its formerly dull eyes now glowing, its body flowing around the boar spear like water. It shook itself, like a dog, sending the boar spear tumbling end over end into the air. The spear left behind no mark in its dark fur.

Oh, shit.

It took a growling step toward Ahira, flattening itself for a leap.

Tennetty danced toward it with her own boar spear, but she overcommitted herself: a grizzled paw, moving bonelessly, slapped the spear out of the way and out of her hands. She was clawing for her sword when the thing leaped on her.

Ahira was too far away, and he was between Andy and the ground where the wolf-thing was savaging Tennetty; it was up to me.

The right thing to do, the only sensible thing for me to do, would have been to stand back and put a throwing knife in the right place. The only trouble with that plan was that the two of them were rolling around so fast that there was no way of doing that—I'd be as likely to put the knife into Tennetty as into it. Still, there was that flask of dragonbane extract in my vest; I could drip some down the blade, hoping that this was one of the creatures with the kind of magical metabolism that dragonbane screwed up.

In any case, the silliest thing to do would be to leap on its back and try to plant a knife in just the right spot, but only an idiot would try it, and I'm not an idiot. Karl was an idiot—that's the sort of thing he would have done.

Me, I'm too smart.

My reflexes, on the other hand, were stupid: before I quite knew what I was doing, I had pulled one of my Therranji garrottes from my vest and had leaped for its back.

Tennetty's arm, through deliberation or accident, was jammed in its teeth. It was the only time I had ever heard Tennetty scream. The creature had flattened its chest and torso, cupping Tennetty's waist, threatening to flow over and engulf her.

I flung one arm around its neck and clung to its back like a rider on a runaway horse, but it was like clinging to hard jello: there was no hard muscle, no bone against which to gain purchase. Somehow or other—damned if I know how—I was able to lock my ankles together beneath it as I tried to slip the garrotte around its neck, but Tennetty's arm was in the way.

"*Let go,*" I shouted. "*FortheloveofGod, leggo.*"

Somehow, I managed to get the wire around the neck and to work the handle through the loop.

I jerked hard; the garrotte disappeared into the dense fur. Now it was supposed to writhe uselessly, trying to remove the garrotte from its neck, while it died, this time for keeps. But the wolf-thing didn't stop—if anything its struggles intensified, as it rolled over, slamming all of us hard into the ground.

Things got a bit vague there for a moment, but I tried to hang on as, with a hard shake, it dislodged Tenny. The neck turned impossibly far around for me as we rolled around the ground together.

I think I remember slipping a throwing knife into my free hand, and then into the thing's side, but I don't think that would quite have been possible.

Somewhere in all that it managed to dislodge my dagger, but I managed to cling to its back . . .

. . . until a double-bending flip that a creature with a real spine wouldn't have been able to pull off flung me out and down, hard.

Some gifts won't ever leave me: I hit the soft ground with a proper slap-and-roll, my left arm numb from the shock. I staggered to my feet—

"It's mine," Andrea Andropolous Cullinane said, her quiet voice piercing through the shouts and growls.

She had dropped her smoking rifle. Now she shrugged out of her cloak, dropping it negligently to one side, ignoring the chill air as she faced the wolf-thing, the sun over her shoulder framing her in all the colors of fire. Ahira was at her side, his axe now in his hands, but he moved away at her gesture.

She faced off against the wolf-thing.

"Be gone; you will not harm me or mine," she said. "I tell you once." She tossed her head, clearing the hair from her eyes. Her tongue snaked out and touched her full lips once, twice, three times.

The wolf-thing took a hesitant, flowing step toward her.

Her smile was thin as she raised a hand, strong, slim fingers stroking the air in front of her. "Be gone, now and forever. I tell you twice."

A low thrumming filled the air as she thrust her arms out in front of her, fingers spread, but cupped forward.

The light of the setting sun started to take liquid form, threads of gleaming honey rolling across her fingers, splashing on the ground all about her. At the touch of the liquid light, sticks and bits of stray straw flashed into flame, and the earth itself began to smolder.

The heat flashing on my face was hotter than a forge.

"Move back, move back," the dwarf said.

His face red and sweaty, Ahira scooped up Tenny in one arm and seized my waist, dragging me backwards, although I really didn't need any encouragement. Still, I couldn't turn my back.

Andrea took a smooth step forward, toward the wolf-thing, one foot swinging out and planting itself firmly in the dirt, her hips swaying, grinding with an intensity that was almost sexual. Or maybe not almost; I don't know much about magic.

She let the strands of light play through her fingers as it crouched for a leap.

"Be gone, I tell you a third and last time."

She lowered her voice and the stream of light began to darken, and at first I thought that the spell wasn't working, but no: the thrumming grew louder and higher, the volume and pitch and violence of the sound growing, until it screamed like a Jimi Hendrix guitar riff.

The sound pressed the thing back.

Andy spread her fingers wide, and gathered up gleaming strands of golden dusk. Deft fingers, inhumanly powerful and delicate, wove the strands into a stream of braided ruby light that flowed from her fingers, splashing hard against the wolf-thing. Where the stream touched the wolf-thing, it burned, spattering flaming gobbets of flesh off into the air.

I tripped Ahira and forced him and Tenny down.

Andrea screamed harsh syllables that could never be remembered, as the sound grew louder, pressing down on the world, the light so bright I had to cover my eyes.

Just in time. Even with my lids squeezed painfully tight, the flash dazzled me, and heat washed over me in a wave.

Worst thing in the world is to be blind during a fight—I forced my eyes open.

Sweat streaming down her face, Andy stood on a mound of dirt that poked above one of two irregular puddles of lava. A cloud of darkness hovered above the other, already dissipating.

"Be gone," Andrea said, quietly. "It's done."

"For here and now," the cloud said, its voice deep, but airy. "But you have ruined my fun. Perhaps I shall ruin yours some time."

She muttered something, then looked up, expectantly. Nothing. "Who are you?" she said.

The voice laughed. It wasn't a nice laugh. "Not all your rules work on me, though some do. I'll not give you a handle with which to hold me, or turn me. Call me, oh, Boioardo, though that never was and is not now my name."

She muttered another spell, and started to raise her hand, fingers crooked awkwardly.

"Oh, let me have a few more moments," Boioardo said. "Perhaps you'll appreciate it, should we meet in a Place with different rules."

Faerie? I thought. "No, Andy. End it now."

Tenny was starting to come around; I gathered her up in my arms, ready to run. I'm better at running than the dwarf is—although if Andy couldn't hold the thing, we were all cooked.

"Ah. So clever, Walter Slovo of Secaucus. Will you be so clever in the Place Where Trees Scream, or the Place Where Only That Which You Have Loved Can Help You?"

"Of course." I forced a smile; bravado is always a cheap thrill. "I'll be even cleverer; it's part of my

charm."

Perhaps it wasn't going to be a cheap thrill—the darkness started to move toward me.

"No. Be gone," Andrea said, straightening her fingers. She muttered another word, and wind blew the darkness away, into the light of the setting sun.

It was gone. We stood alone in the dusk, wisps of smoke rising from the field. Ahira was bent over Tenny, dealing with her wounds; Andrea stood on the mound of dirt rising above the darkening pool of lava, her face reddened, her whole body beaded with sweat.

Smoothly she turned, balanced like a dancer. "I think, dear friends, I'll take an attaboy on that one." She leaped lightly across the puddle of lava, took three steps toward us, and fainted dead away.

CHAPTER SEVEN

In Which Ellegon Shows Up and Points Out an Obligation

I was gratified to be able to answer promptly, and I did. I said I didn't know.

—MARK TWAIN

I'd always liked Robert Thompson's idea of avoiding compromise, of letting the person with the strong convictions have his own way . . . and then I realized that encouraged people to have strong convictions when they don't have enough data.

—WALTER SLOVOTSKY

There was a bright golden haze on the meadow. The corn was as high as an elephant's eye—granted, it would have had to have been a small elephant, and maybe the critter would have had to squat a bit. And—no shit, I was there—it looked like it was climbing clear up to the sky.

"Fuck you, morning," I murmured, *sotto voce*. I hate mornings. Never cared for *Oklahoma* much, either.

Well, we needed to keep somebody on watch. Tenny had been banged up, and she had been reluctant to waste more healing draughts on herself than necessary—that stuff is expensive. Certainly worth more than my night's sleep. Andy was drained, and, besides, she's never had the kind of alertness to her surroundings that the dwarf and I have.

By the process of elimination, that left the dwarf and me, and, as usual, left me pissed off. (I shouldn't complain; for once it didn't leave me in deep shit.) Ahira and I had split the night, and while I think I'd gotten the better of the deal, I'd not gotten much the better of it.

We were camped on the edge of the woods, a few telltales protecting us from somebody or something

sneaking around behind us, a single watchman—me—protecting our front. Field work is an exercise in applied paranoia.

Time to sit, and watch, and think, as the dawn brightened into morning.

A lot to think about in the night. Too much.

Whatever was happening on the edge of Faerie was no longer just somebody else's problem. It had struck close to home. It's not that I don't care if magical monsters mess with people elsewhere, but it's a big world, and I'm only one person. But my wife and kids were in Barony Cullinane. Boioardo, whatever he/it was, had mucked about in Barony Cullinane. That made it personal.

Still, it wouldn't hurt to spend some time around the barony instead of rushing off into trouble. Let the castle settle down, keep our ears open for a bit of news; let Tennyet heal on her own instead of using up expensive and rare healing draughts. Let me spend some more time with bow, sword, and pistol. I'd rather sit than run, run than fight, but I'd rather fight than die, thank you very much.

Maybe there was some way out of it. Sometimes, if you leave a problem alone long enough, somebody else solves it for you—Reagan diddled and twiddled his thumbs over the Osirak reactor outside of Baghdad until the Israelis took it out for him.

I would have been perfectly happy if the equivalent happened this time. Magic and humans don't tend to get along, I think; it's one of the reasons that we developed in other ways on the Other Side, and why the mundane tended to drive out the magical in the Eren regions. There was an age of dragons, when, if you believe the tales, clouds of them darkened the skies.

I didn't see what Stash and Emma's baby boy could do to halt the return of that sort of thing, even if I did want to put myself in the middle of it. Like trying to stop an oil spill by sticking your finger in a four-foot hole in the pipeline.

Sometimes, if you leave a problem alone long enough, somebody else solves it for you.

Like Kirah?

You've been really fucking clever in leaving that alone, Walter, I thought.

What should I do? Drop her, in favor of Aeia? Right; that'd be guaranteed to be good for Kirah's mental health. Try to force the issue? I wasn't about to lay my hands on a woman who shuddered when I touched her, and if somebody doesn't want to talk about something, there's no way to make her.

I sighed. I didn't see any good way out of it.

Maybe, just maybe, if I left her alone, if I kept the pressure off, if I didn't make it a matter of public record and public discussion, she'd work things out herself.

It was, at least, something to hope for.

Sometimes you have to settle for that.

* * *

Far off in the blue sky, a distant speck stopped moving erratically, and started down toward us.

Ellegon? I thought, trying to shout with my mind.

If it was him, he was too far off. Karl and particularly Jason have always had an unusually tight bond with the dragon, and could mindtalk with him at fair distances, but he and I have never been that close. Not possible, really—Ellegon knew Jason before Jason was born.

If it wasn't Ellegon, then it was trouble. There was that flask of rendered dragonbane in my vest; I got it out and pried the top off.

"*Okay, everybody, we've got something inbound,*" I said, getting to my feet. "Battle stations, people."

Fight-or-flight is always a fun decision to make. When it's just me, I tend to vote with my feet—he who fights and runs away lives to run away another day and all that. But I couldn't outrun something that flies, not without a lot more than a bikini-wide strip of woods to hide my privates in.

I dipped three arrows in dragonbane and laid them gently on the rock in front of me. I could fire them quickly, and then flee even more quickly, if necessary.

The speck grew.

The sleeping bodies, all of them, had broken into a flurry of motion—Ahira shrugging into his clothes and armor; Andrea reaching for a rifle; Tenney, her left arm bound up in a sling, bringing a pistol to the half-cock and tucking it in the front of her belt.

A familiar voice sounded in my head. **Walter, I would take it as a personal favor if you'd be kind enough to avoid killing me.**

At this distance, I could make out the familiar shape: large, saurian, huge, leathery wings beating the air.

I could practically hear the twang of my anus unclenching.

"And it's good to see you, too, Ellegon," I muttered, knowing that a whisper was as good as a shout at this distance.

Always a pleasure to be near the center of the known universe.

Eh?

The center of the universe—that spot just behind your forehead. Or just south of your belt buckle. You keep changing your, er, mind.

Just wait until you hit puberty.

In another century or two I'll be just like you. Sure. Once every dozen years or so. If I can even find a female dragon.

I muzzled a comment about "did the earth move for you, too"—

Just as well.

—as I unstrung my bow and set it aside. Accidents can happen—a quick flaming in the campfire burned the dragonbane from the arrowheads, without costing me the arrows. Good arrows are expensive.

I looked up; the sky was clear.

Where are you?

Behind you, on final approach—passengers don't like my hard landings.

I rubbed at my tailbone. *So I recall.*

Chickenshit.

A dark shadow passed overhead; leathery wings snapped in the breeze as Ellegon braked in for a landing, then slammed down hard enough on the road fifty yards away that I could feel the ground shake.

Ellegon: more tons than I care to count of gray-green dragon, the size of a Greyhound bus studying hard to become a Boeing 737; long tail at one end, alligator head at other, with the usual vague wisp of steam or smoke issuing from between the dagger teeth.

The huge, saurian head eyed me with cold, heavy-lidded eyes. I guess Ellegon hadn't liked the 737 thought-slash-comment.

Good guess. The head turned away. A brief gout of fire issued from the cavernous mouth, red tongues of flame licking the dirt road.

The dragon lumbered forward a step and slumped to the ground on the warmed spot—I couldn't tell whether in fatigue or to make it easier for his passenger to climb down from the rigging on his back.

It's purely out of consideration. As we all know, I am the most considerate of dragons. The fact that I've spent most of the past three days with my aching wings pounding the air has nothing at all to do with it.

The passenger, of course, was Jason Cullinane. Some things are eminently predictable. He waved genially as he walked across the field toward us.

"Good morning," I said.

We could have used you yesterday, I didn't say. He'd work it out by himself. Eventually.

He hitched at his swordbelt, and at the shoulder holster that held a gun butt barely visible under his short jacket. "I thought, maybe . . ."

Ahira shook his head. "Don't 'think maybe,' next time. Think for sure."

I couldn't have put that better myself. I gestured at the log where I'd been sitting. "In the meantime, have a cuppa."

* * *

Back when we were both college students, a friend invited me up to her dorm room one Thursday to sit in on her weekly electronic conversation on one of the electronic information services—I can't remember

for the life of me whether it was CompuSpend or the Source, or whatever. We sat in front of her Osborne—cute little machine—typing at the bunch of other folks, people from all over the country who were sitting typing at us. We occasionally wondered if they were sitting there naked . . . too.

The thing I remember most about it—well, the thing I remember second-most; it was a pretty good evening—is that the best, the most interesting parts of the six- or ten-handed electronic talk were the ones sent privately, below the surface of the public conversation, from one user to another.

Having Ellegon in on a meeting is kind of like that, even if the meeting is taking place while you're breaking camp.

Ahira tucked a folded tarpaulin carefully into his rucksack, tied the rucksack shut, then pitched it over to me; I tossed it into the flatbed wagon.

Tennetty took a tighter grip on the reins of the harnessed horses, who were prancing, snorting, nervously pissing, and otherwise indicating that they weren't happy. Horses tend to be nervous around Ellegon, probably for the same reason that a hamburger would tend to be nervous around me. Which is why Andy had already taken the saddle horses down the road.

Jason was sitting on the ground, his back against the base of a tree, his knees up; he set his cup of tea gently down on the soft moss. "We do have to look into what's coming out of Faerie. Ehvenor, eh?"

The boy has a keen eye for the obvious.

You're being too harsh, Ellegon said, his mental voice taking on that extra clarity, that particular brassy timbre that told me he was talking to me only. *Although he does have his father's subtlety, such as it is.*

The dwarf pitched me another bag of gear, then picked up a gnarled stick and took a last nervous stir at the ashes of the campfire. "Somebody has to." He pursed his lips for a moment. "I don't like it. Magic." He shuddered.

I chuckled. "You complaining about magic?" If it wasn't for magic, Ahira would still have been crippled James Michael Finnegan.

"Sure," he said. "And back on the Other Side, I would have complained about nuclear weapons, antibiotics, automobiles, and all other mixed blessings, too."

He looked over at Andrea. "How close do you have to be to find out what's going on?"

She gestured at a spot on the log she was sitting on. "Put somebody or something who knows right there, and I don't have to be any closer than this."

Ahira raised an eyebrow. "Some sort of mind spell?"

"No, I'd ask him." She smiled.

"Very funny. Seriously, how far away from whatever is happening would you have to be to figure out what it is?"

She shrugged. "That would depend on what *is* going on. I might be able to read it anywhere from, say,

three days ride to, maybe," she said with a squint, as she held her thumb and forefinger together right in front of her eyes, "this far from it."

"No way to do it from here? No matter what it is?"

She snorted. "Sure there is, if what's going on is broadly focussed *and* powerful *and* highly kinetic *and* unsubtle *and* unshielded, plus a couple more adjectives that wouldn't mean anything to you. But if it was, you'd have half the wizards throughout the Eren regions already alerted to it, and there would be . . . manifestations of that. So it isn't. So, if I'm going to find out what's going on, I've got to go see. The closer we get, the less I have to push myself in order to find it."

Ahira nodded. "I'll think it over." He looked over at me.

I knew what he was asking, but it was the wrong question. He was asking *when* instead of *whether*.

I shook my head. "No need to rush off without thinking. If we give it a couple of days, not only will we have time to pack intelligently, but we might be in better shape to hit the road."

"You sound too persuasive." Tenny took a sip of her tea, and spat it out into the fire. "Gone cold on me." Her lips twitched. "You're not eager to go," she said.

"I'm not convinced we should go," I said. I hadn't liked the way Boioardo had looked at me, but I wasn't in any rush to go haring off after him. I've never seen the point in galloping toward my appointment in Samarra. (Well, that's not quite true. I used to date a girl named Samarra Johnson, who was well worth a gallop or two, but I digress.)

Tenny scratched at herself, grimacing at the way her bruised body protested any movement. "I'll take the flatbed and the horses back, if the rest of you want to go by air."

Fair enough. I may as well eat the cubs, then?

"Cubs?"

I forget. Not only can't you hear with your mind, your ears are handicapped, too. The wolf cubs. A gout of flame pointed out a direction. *Thataway.*

* * *

I sighed. There *would* have to be wolf cubs, wouldn't there? Hell of a note. You can't even save some innocent peasants from a ravening pack of wolves without having to clean up after, and feeling guilty as all hell about it.

There were two of them, and they were cute as anything, hungry to the point of starvation, and smelly as a pail of shit.

The small burrow under the rock wasn't much of a den, but it had probably been the best thing that mother wolf could dig in a short while. The pack was moving, under the influence or control of Boioardo, and long-term dens would have to wait.

The dwarf wasn't going to let me off the hook. "Well, you could always leave them to starve to death and just feel bad about it later."

Jason looked over at him. "That's the stupidest idea I've ever heard."

Andy crouched down and reached out to stroke one. It nipped at her, then nuzzled at her hand, probably trying to nurse. "Or you could slit their throats."

Tennetty knelt down beside the rock. "I'll do it. Not fair to leave them to starve." She drew her bowie and reached for the nearest of the cubs.

Jason grabbed her wrist. "What's your rush?"

"They're hungry." She shrugged her hand away. "They're no enemy of mine; I don't need to see them suffer."

He held up a hand. "Just put it away for a minute. Let's think this out."

I already had. Damn, damn, damn.

Sometimes, coming from the background I do is a burden, and it looked like Jason had inherited some of it from Karl. In a primitive society, people don't tend to be suckers for cute animals; interspecies empathy is a luxury, and people who are scratching for existence can't afford it. You can't, say, raise all the puppies that your bitch breeds, and you don't have the expertise to spay her. So you have to either drown in litters of pups, or drown most pups.

Look—I've *had* to be hardhearted at times; there's situations where it's necessary to say that something's just natural, that there's nothing you can do about it. Cute baby animals die all the time out in the woods, and in a lot of cases it's just part of nature. And I've run into a lot worse than that.

But this wasn't part of nature. Boioardo had brought the mother of the cubs down out of the hills, and we had killed the pack, and that left the orphans with us. With me.

Ellegon's bulk loomed off in the distance, through the trees. *It would be awfully convenient if we had to take to our heels now.*

It would also be convenient if we had a proper canine milk source back at Castle Cullinane.

"Jason," I asked, "any chance there's a nursing bitch in the kennels?"

"No." He shook his head. "Not mine. Bren insisted on showing me the inventory, and that didn't mention it. On the other hand," he went on, "there's got to be a village warden somewhere around with one. You ever know a warden not to keep dogs?"

"There's the cows," Ahira said. "Cow milk might be worth a try."

Tennetty spat. "Silly idea. Just make it quick; that's the best you can do."

Jason shook his head. "I don't think my father would have, do you?" A thin smile played across his lips for just a moment. He reached into the den and scooped up one of the cubs. It nipped and wriggled as he handed it to me. It wasn't interested in sitting still.

He grabbed the other one and, ignoring its yipping and wriggling, headed down the path toward Ellegon. "Anybody who wants to come with me had better move it; we're heading back to the castle, on the

double."

I looked down at the pup in my hands. Its fur was harder, denser than I would have expected a puppy's to be, and its eyes were glassy with hunger and thirst.

Shit, shit, shit. "Let's roll it."

"Okay." Ahira shrugged his pack onto his shoulders. "Let's give the boy a hand."

"I thought you wanted to leave them to starve to death and worry about it later."

"No, you didn't."

* * *

By the time we got back to Castle Cullinane, Aeia, Bren, and their entourage had left for Little Pittsburgh.

CHAPTER EIGHT

*In Which, Surprisingly,
Neither My Wife Nor I
Are Urinated Upon*

To sleep, perchance to dream.

—WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

Bill, your mother swims after troop ships.

—WALTER SLOVOTSKY

The complex problems sometimes have simple, easy solutions—it's the simple problems that drive you crazy.

Like feeding the wolf cubs. The complex one was *What the hell do you feed them?*

The way I'd figured it, there was a huge chance that we wouldn't be able to find the cubs enough to eat, and that we'd have to put them out of their misery. I wasn't looking forward to that, mind, but it would have made things simpler.

But it turned out that what to feed adopted wolf cubs was already a solved problem, and so was taking a shot at domesticating them. It had been done before, in the old days, and the methods had been passed down by the dogkeepers. Some of the literate ones—and, in the old days, dogkeeping was a respectable profession, often taken up by petty nobility—had kept notes on the subject.

It was Fred (don't blame me; that's his name, okay? It's a variant of Fredelen, a common Holtish name) the dogkeeper's firm belief that the Nyphien sheepdog was a mixture of the blood of wolf and the large Holtish dog called *akalifer*, the oversized canine I always think of as a hairy mastiff.

Still, there were differences. According to Fred, a dog bitch would have done for the first few tendays, but after that, the pups would have savaged the poor thing's teats. Takes a mother wolf to keep baby wolves in line.

The standard baby wolf food was goat milk and whey, with the addition of one part bull blood for every ten of milk, and some herbs that Fred wouldn't identify.

. . . and more attention than a newborn human baby gets. If you want them coexisting with humans, you'd better have them smelling them constantly.

The next ten days were not fun.

* * *

The nightmare is always the same:

We're trying to make our escape from Hell, billions of us pushing our way through the damp curtains that hang down from infinity, obscuring the endless surface.

Everybody I've ever loved is there, along with faces familiar and strange.

Behind us, sometimes visible down the endless rows of curtains, the screaming pack of demons pursues. I don't want to look at them, and I don't have to, not anymore. We're almost out, almost safe.

But almost is never good enough.

The exit is up ahead, clearly marked with glowing green letters. And some are pushing their way through, thankfully. I think I see my wife and kids go through, and out.

I hope so.

The demons are approaching too quickly, and they're going to catch some of us. And then I see him: Karl Cullinane, Jason's father, standing tall, face beaming, his hands, chest, and beard streaked with blood and gore.

"We're going to have to hold them back," Karl says. "Who's with me?"

He smiles, as though he's been waiting his whole life for this, the fucking idiot.

"I'm with you," somebody says, and he waves whoever it is into his place next to Clint Hill and Audie Murphy.

"It's your turn," Karl says, turning to me. He's covered with blood, some sort of yellow-green ichor, and wolf shit.

He tosses his head to clear the blood from his eyes. "Your turn, Walter."

* * *

"Your turn, Walter," Jason said. He shook me again.

I woke up slowly, half in the here and now, half in the nightmare, still watching Karl's face superimposed over his son's.

Didn't like that at all—somebody in my line of work is supposed to wake up quickly, and before being touched at all. I don't care if my hindbrain thought me safe in bed next to my wife; the door was open, and an armed man had gotten in and next to me.

Not good, Walter.

Fast asleep, Kirah lay on the far side of the bed, curled under her blankets into a fetal position, her feet poised to push me away.

A dirty, smelly woolen shirt and pants lay on the floor next to me. Clothes to feed wolves in. Shudder. I levered myself out of bed, and shrugged into my wolf-feeding clothes—they were still vaguely moist with wolf drool—and a few oddments of weaponry before following Jason out into the hall.

My mouth had the metallic taste it gets when I don't get enough sleep. For some reason, I hadn't gotten enough sleep in the tenday we'd been back. Funny about that.

I stopped at the top of the stairs to look out the window.

Ellegon lay on the cold stones in the courtyard below, sleeping, his massive legs tucked underneath his body, his huge head resting on the cold stone, like a cat. Cute as a bus.

Too bad. I could have used the company. Being up and alone at night isn't any fun.

Jason handed me one of his two lanterns. The castle tradition, probably going back to the siege, was to keep too few wall lanterns burning in the middle of the fucking night, and everybody had to carry his own light sources with him.

"How are they doing?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Nora's been hiding under the stove; Nick's been eating enough for three of them." He raised a hand in farewell. "And I've got to get some sleep," he said, padding down the carpet toward his room, not bothering to throw a glance over his shoulder.

* * *

I made my way down into the inner ward, and the shack we were using as a wolf-kennel.

"Back-back-*back*, you vicious beasts," I said, as I unlocked the wire-mesh door and hung the lantern on the hook.

Obediently, the two pups bounded out of their hiding places, Nora almost making it through the door before she bounced off my foot and ran, yipping, back into the shed; Nick snuffled around my feet silently as he wagged his tail.

The locked cabinet held a fresh jug of Fred's foul-smelling wolf-baby food mixture; I took down a clean

wooden bowl, and poured some for Nora. Nick hadn't gotten the idea of lapping out of a bowl as quickly as his sister; by the time I got some into one of the feeding bottles and a rag half-stuffed into the mouth of it, he was whimpering.

Another week or so and he'd be able to eat out of a bowl.

Or I'd wring his thickening neck.

I plopped myself down on a pile of straw—stupidly but harmlessly (this time) trusting Jason to have cleaned out the place before he left. The little monsters could have—and certainly would have—dirtied it up, if they'd gotten around to it.

Nick couldn't keep himself still; I had the usual trouble getting the pup tucked under one arm and getting the bottle to his mouth.

He ate greedily, like he hadn't been fed in minutes.

Basically, as Fred had explained it, the way you have a fair chance with wolf cubs or wild dogs is to catch them young enough—which he thought we did—and to spend all your time rubbing against them.

Make them members of your family, he'd said. Imprint them, he might have meant.

We'd see how it went over the long nights.

I understood why Fred didn't want to have to do it—the smell of the pups scared Fred's dogs shitless. I was beginning to think that a spray bottle of wolf urine would be a wonderful invention for marking a territory as offlimits to domestic dogs.

I'll tell you, this would have been the perfect time for young Baron Cullinane to exercise a bit of baronial authority and tell one of the scullery girls she had a new job, as nurse to a pair of cubs.

But the Cullinanes are a stubborn breed—this was additional work, not expected, and Jason wasn't going to dump it on the castle staff, not if it wasn't absolutely necessary. No, that was for those of us who had taken on the responsibility: him, Ahira, his mother, and me.

Look: I like dogs, I like playing with dogs, I like hanging out with dogs for a few minutes now and then. Throwing a stick and having a dog fetch it is one hell of a lot of fun, the first couple of dozen times you do it.

But I didn't like spending six hours out of every day endlessly feeding and petting a couple of puppies, mucking out their kennel, and missing sleep.

Shit.

I had until dawn; Ahira would take over then. Hours of misery ahead.

Still, they were kind of cute.

I leaned back against the wall. Nora, always the less affectionate, retreated back into the shadows when she finished eating, while Nick kept sucking and licking at the bottle and the rag until he whimpered a bit, and fell asleep on my lap.

A long shift lay ahead, with nothing much to do but reflect on how the universe sucked.

Where had I gone wrong with Kirah? Was it something in how I touched her that had ruined sex for her? I don't mean to brag, but I've had relatively few complaints over the years. It isn't always unmeasurably wonderful or anything, but I'd always thought that I had more than a vague idea about what-goes-where.

No, I was being silly.

I rubbed at Nick's head, and he stirred for just a moment, then fell back asleep.

It's amazing how the same life can look good during the day and like a black cesspit in the middle of the night.

During the day, it was more important that I was living and working with friends who I cared for, and who cared for me; that the work we did was important to more than ourselves; that I had two beautiful, healthy daughters, both of whom were fond of me; that I was in good health and managed to keep up good spirits . . .

. . . and, at night, all I could think about was that my wife wouldn't let me touch her.

I guess I fell asleep, but I came awake suddenly. Nick, awake in my lap, had stiffened into immobility.

The drill is always the same: you get yourself armed and ready, and then you decide whether or not you're going to have to use it. I dumped the pup to one side and had my dagger out of its sheath—

"Walter?" It was Kirah's voice.

"Yeah." I slid the knife back in its sheath. "Just me," I said, bending to give the puzzled puppy a pat.

Balancing a serving tray on the palm of her one hand, she let herself in and knelt in front of Nick, who decided that she was okay, and demonstrated by wagging his stubby tail vigorously, then nipping gently at her face when she picked him up with her free hand.

"Hi there. What are you doing up?"

"Feeding you." She handed me the tray: half a loaf of U'len's garlic bread, in slices thick as my thumb; a huge mound—easily a pound—of cold, rare, roast beef, sliced thin enough for carpaccio, accompanied by a white clay mortar (as in " . . . and pestle") of freshly ground mustard and horseradish sauce; a wedge of blue-veined goat cheese surrounded by apple slices (try it!); a mottled brown pot of steaming herb tea, with two mugs.

My wife knows how to scrounge in a kitchen.

"I couldn't sleep alone." She smiled, aware of the irony. "I missed you, I guess."

"What time is it?" I asked, spreading a huge dollop of mustard and horseradish sauce on one slice of the bread, then heaping a restrained half of the beef on top of it before setting the tray up on the table. I'd leave some for her. At least until I finished my sandwich.

"Half past first hour." She set Nick down, and he immediately started chasing his tail.

"Pull up a seat," I said. I'd come on at midnight. "I've only been on for a bit more than an hour." Enough time to get seriously depressed, that was all.

I bit into the sandwich. The horseradish brought tears to my eyes, but it was worth it. There's something to be said for cold roast beef, thinly sliced, seasoned with just a little bit of salt, some cracked pepper, and mustard and horseradish sauce, served on coarse brown bread with little bits of garlic scattered through it . . . but I'd much rather eat it than say it.

Kirah seated herself just out of my reach, then leaned back, tugging at the hem of the light cotton robe she wore over blousy pants and slippers.

Nick went hunting for Nora, who just huddled deeper into her improvised nest in the far corner of the shack. Kirah started to get up, but desisted at my head-shake.

"Leave her be," I said, from around another mouthful. "Won't do any good to go chasing after her; she'll come out in her own time. Or not."

When something that can't be helped is bothering you, one cure is to think of something else that can't be helped that bothers you.

So I wished for a good Other Side reference book. Common sense and old records can only go so far. I remember something about most wolves deferring to alpha males, and that the way a human successfully deals with them is by persuading them that he's sort of a super-alpha male, but how did you do that? Growl and nip at them? Slap them on the snout? Pin them down with one arm and make them behave? Or was gentle firmness the way to go?

Common sense doesn't make it; all animals—homo sap definitely included—have their ways, and you violate them only at your peril. Doesn't matter how much you reason, or threaten—you can't get a cow to walk down stairs, a cat to point out game, or a horse to fetch.

I did remember from an ag ecology class that wolves mainly live off rodent pests, and that farmers who hunt them aren't doing themselves any favor. Back when I was working for King Maherralen in Endell, I'd stopped the dwarf wolf-hunt cold. (Okay, okay: I strongly recommended to the King that he stop it, which he did.) There were much better things for the king's people to do, no matter how much bad blood there was between dwarves and wolves.

Would it be possible to return these guys to the wild? Damned if I knew.

Nick came over and started nuzzling and nipping at my hand. I tried to pet him into quietness, but it didn't work—he just kept at me. Sharp little teeth. "No. No biting."

Kirah giggled. "That's exactly the way you used to say it to Jane."

I laughed back. "I probably did." I gestured at the tray with my free hand, offering to make her a sandwich.

She shook her head. "No. I made it for you.—What do you think this Boioardo of yours was?" she asked.

I shrugged. "Something from Faerie. Something dangerous."

She pulled Nick over to her; he settled down in her lap and went promptly to sleep.

I raised an eyebrow.

"You just have to know how to talk to them," she said. She tossed her head to clear the hair from her eyes.

I spread a blob of goat cheese over a slice of apple and bit into it. It's one of those combinations that seem ridiculous until you try them, like prosciutto and melon, or raw oysters and hot sausage—the sweetness of the apple softened the bite of the ripe cheese, and the crunch of the apple complemented the gooeyness of the cheese.

I made another one, and offered it to Kirah, who surprised me by accepting it.

"I was talking to Andrea about it, about him," Kirah said, licking at her thumb for the last of the cheese.

"Nick?"

"No. The fairy."

Sometimes, I know just what to say to a woman: "Oh? She have any ideas?"

"No." Her look said that one of us was an insensitive idiot who would probably need both guesses to figure out which. "Ido."

"Well? What do you think?" Gee, maybe I could have sounded a bit more stilted, a little more condescending, if I'd tried. I don't know. When a relationship goes sour, there's nothing right to say.

"Hmm. You talked about how he moved sort of like a wolf, but sort of not, like he wasn't bending in quite the right ways, at the right places."

She had been listening closely. I nodded. "Yeah."

"Well, it reminded me of something. I was just watching Dorann this afternoon, and she was down on all fours playing with Betalyn—Fona's daughter? They were playing horse."

I smiled. "Who was on top?"

For once I'd said something that wasn't wrong: Kirah smiled too. "Betalyn—Dorann wanted to be the horse. But she wasn't bending in the same places that a real horse would. And when she reared back, she didn't toss her head the way a real horse would—she was playing at it."

Analogy is tricky. It can lead you to a useful truth, or right past it, and onto a landmine. "So, you think Boioardo is a baby fairy, out playing at being a wolf?"

"What do you think of the idea? Is it possible?"

I don't know why my wife cared so much about what I think, but she was watching me like everything hung on my next words. "Maybe. You could easily be right." Which she could have, although that's not

why I said it.

Her shoulders eased; I hadn't noticed how tightly hunched together they were; I miss a lot.

"I'm not sure what good that does," she said. "But I thought . . ."

"It's worth sharing." But who knows about Faerie? What would that mean? Were all these rumors of magical outpourings from Faerie just the equivalent of a vicious kindergarten class out on recess? "I don't know if it does any good, mind," I said with a smile, "but it's worth sharing."

There were two obvious places to find out—Pandathaway and Ehvenor. Ehvenor, because Ehvenor was the only Eren-region outpost of Faerie. Pandathaway, because if there was any movement out from Faerie, no matter how subtle, the Wizards Guild would surely be looking into it, sooner or later.

I didn't like either choice, particularly Pandathaway. There was still a price on my head in Pandathaway—with a bonus if it was delivered in small slices.

That left Ehvenor. I never much liked Ehvenor. It's an outpost of Faerie, and the rules of the Eren region don't entirely hold there. It's not too bad out near the edge of the city—I've been there, and come out with nothing worse than a nervous tic that went away after a while. But they say that the further in you go, the more the fluctuating, positional rules of Faerie apply, and the less the solid ones of the rest of the universe do.

There was a solution that worked for a lot of problems: let somebody else handle it.

That looked like the best one to me. I'm not bad at what I do, but I'm not a magician, I don't like magic, and I've found it far healthier to stay out of the way of magic, no matter what the source.

"It scares you, doesn't it?"

I don't mind my wife thinking I'm not an idiot. "*You bet* it does," I said. "Anyone can get a reputation for being invincible. It's easy: to start, you go into harm's way and survive. Repeat, and you've got a reputation; do it a few more times, and you're a legend. But reputation doesn't make you invulnerable the next time. It doesn't matter how good you are, either; there's always a chance you're going to get unlucky. If you keep rolling the dice, eventually you're going to roll snake eyes too many times in a row."

"Like Karl did."

I nodded. "Like Karl did, like Jason Parker did, like Chak did, like . . . like we all will, eventually. Maybe."

We had been ignoring Nora too long; she came out from her hiding place and started chewing on my shoe.

"This is how the whole problem started, you know," I said, playfully—very gently—kicking at her. She responded by seizing the toe of my shoe between her teeth and shaking it back and forth, like a dog with a rat.

"Oh?"

"Slavery." I reached forward and took the pup by the scruff of the neck and held her firmly for a

moment. "When you fight with another tribe—doesn't matter who starts it—and you win, what do you do with the survivors? Kill them to the last man, the way Chak's people would? Let them go, nursing a grudge—"

"Which they may have a right to."

"Sure. But it doesn't matter." I shrugged. "Right or wrong, if you just let them go, you're buying trouble. So, do you kill them—do you kill them all? Or do you take them in?"

And if you do, can you take them in as citizens or tribesmen, or whatever you want to call them? Of course not—even assuming you're willing to play that game, it takes two.

Slavery wasn't the only choice, of course; there were all sorts of ways short of that—colonization springs to mind. Karl had coopted Holtun, after Bieme had won the war. The difference was a matter of permanence and scale; he had taken the Holts in with the promise of earning co-equal status in the Empire, eventually.

"So, you're saying that the slavers who burned my village and took me when I was just a girl were just a bunch of nice people. Misunderstood. Did I ever tell you about the time that six of them, that *six* of them—"

"Shh." I started to reach for her, but stopped myself. "Come *on*, Kirah." I shook my head. "Not talking about what it became; I'm talking about how it started." I patted the pup. "Maybe out of the best of intentions, eh?" Maybe, in the long run, it would have been kinder to let Tennyet simply put them out of their misery.

That wasn't enough for Kirah. Her lips pursed into a thin line, and then she turned away. Damn her, she was always turning away from me.

"Kirah," I said, "I don't ever forgive anybody for ever hurting you. Deliberately or not." I wanted to reach out and take her in my arms and tell her that I'd make everything all right, but that's the kind of lie you can't tell a woman who screams if you hold her.

For a moment, I didn't know how it was going to break. Anything could have happened, from her taking a swing at me to her coming into my arms.

But she just picked Nick up, letting his lower legs dangle. "Sure," she said, coldly, dismissing me. "Go away, Walter." There was a tremble in her voice, but I was listening carefully for it. "I'll handle things here. You need some sleep."

* * *

The perversity of my sleep patterns tends toward the maximum—I couldn't get back to sleep.

CHAPTER NINE

*In Which We Leave
on a Trip*

I am always at a loss to know how much to believe of my own stories.

—WASHINGTON IRVING

Slovotsky's Law Number Nineteen: When telling a story, effect trumps truth.

—WALTER SLOVOTSKY

Stash used to swear that it really happened, but lying runs in the Slovotsky family. Me, I don't believe it.

Story goes like this:

Once, when I was real young—three or so—Stash put me on a kitchen counter, and held out his hands.

"Jump, Walter, jump," he said. "Don't worry; I'll catch you."

"No, you won't," I said. "You'll let me fall."

"Jump, Walter, jump. Really—I'll catch you. Honest."

We went back and forth for awhile, him holding his huge hands out for me, me scared, knowing that this was some sort of test.

I jumped. And he stepped back and I fell on the floor, hard.

I lay there crying. "But you *said* you'd catch me."

"That will teach you not to trust anybody," he said.

I've thought about it, over the years. I've thought a lot about it. Doing it would have been cruel, and my father would have cut his hands off before being cruel to me. But pretending that he had done it, maybe that's different. What he was telling me was true: guaranteed, if you live long enough, and trust people even casually, somebody you've trusted will let you down.

They're only human; everybody's fallible, including me. Particularly me.

Is it better to learn that through a childhood calamity that maybe never really happened or to risk learning it when it really matters?

Don't tell me that lies are always cruel.

* * *

Jason found me down in the fencing studio, a large room at the east end of the barracks annex. A light and airy place: one wall consisted mainly of shutters open to the daylight, the other wall was regularly whitewashed.

I'd taken out a practice saber and a straw dummy and—after a good stretch; you need those more and more as the years go by—I was practicing some lunges, working my thigh muscles so hard they practically screamed.

As a friend of a friend used to say, "After forty, it's patch, patch, patch." The maintenance costs on the physical plant keep going up, but the infrastructure keeps wearing down. My right knee had developed what was looking like a long-term ache, although it only got real bad when I overdid things. Still, not good. I thought about ice, and I thought about heat, and I thought a lot about traveling over to Little Pittsburgh to see the Spider, and find out if he could put some whammy on my cartilage.

"Mind if I join you?" Jason asked. He was dressed in a white cotton tunic with matching pantaloons bloused into the tops of his boots: good workout clothes.

"Why? Am I falling apart?" I gestured at the rack of practice weapons. "Sure. Pick a toy."

"Thanks." He selected a pair of mock Therranji fighting sticks and gave a few practice swats at my favorite sparring partner: a wooden pillar, covered with hemp matting that ran floor to ceiling. He blocked an imaginary blow, parried another, then hammered out a quick tattoo against the covered wood. *Thwocka-thwok-thwok-thwok-thwok.*

"Want some free advice, worth what you pay for it?" I asked, taking up an on-guard stance opposite him.

He nodded. "Sure." He moved one stick back defensively, and thrust the other one out tentatively.

"Don't try to be able to do everything. Balance yourself between overspecialization and not being able to learn anything." I moved in and gently parried an experimental thrust, beat his stick hard aside, then withdrew.

"Nice," he said. He tried a complex maneuver that I didn't quite follow, which probably foreshadowed an attack against my sword arm; I parried easily and moved to the side, letting his lunge take him by me, blocking his attempted slash with his left stick.

"Thankee much, young Cullinane." I faked a slash at his right wrist, then turned the movement into a thrust that would have skewered him through the chest except for two things: one, we were using practice weapons; two, Jason blocked—too nicely by half!—with his left stick.

It had taken me too long to figure out what he was doing—he wasn't trying real Therranji stick play. He was fighting two-swords style, using his left stick as though it was a dagger, his right like a saber. Close in, the dagger is a killing weapon—if you go corps-a-corps against a two-swords man, you'd best not already have something interesting to do with your free hand. At normal fighting distance, it's a decidedly annoying additional blocking device and threat, particularly the ones with the pronged hilt that can trap your blade.

The classic one-sword solution to the two-sword problem is straightforward, in both senses. You maneuver your opponent into taking a square stance—all attack and little defense—while you're in a three-quarters or side stance, very effective on defense. Block hard on the long sword, then attack the long-sword arm, hit it hard, withdraw enough to be sure that he's lost the weapon—that's not the point to get eager—then skewer him.

Forget fencing targets, forget one-cut finishes. All those pretty lunges in an attempt to get through to the

body aren't worth half as much as a good, deep cut down the forearm, a slice through muscle and tendon that leaves a weapon dropping from a bloody hand.

I was thinking about too much theory, I guess; Jason worked his way through my defense and gently bounced what I was thinking of as his blocking stick off my head.

"Damn." I backed off, rubbing at the sore spot. It hurt.

He smiled. "Another point?"

"Nah."

He set the fighting sticks back in the rack, then turned to face me. "You don't think much of the idea of sniffing around Ehvenor, do you?"

"No, I don't." I shook my head. "I don't like messing around with magic."

He nodded. "I understand that. I agree. But a messenger just arrived. Seems there's other things going on near Ehvenor, too—there's been a 'Warrior lives' killing in Fenevar."

Complete with note. In English, apparently.

I hadn't heard from the dragon for hours.

"Mikyn?"

He shrugged. "Possibly not. It's our only lead."

Now, that was something reasonable. I mean, handling an outpouring of the magical was out of my league, but following a clue toward a lost friend was something I could handle.

"One party or two?" he asked.

Two parties was the obvious solution. One to look into Faerie, one to chase after Mikyn. One party to contain me, one not. But, still, what would we do when we caught him? Arrest him? For what?

Mikyn, you're under arrest for suspicion of being crazy because we haven't heard from you for too long.

Nah. On the other hand, if he had gone over the edge . . . well, it needed somebody relatively senior and trustworthy. There was a shortage of those. "I dunno. Let me talk it over with Ahira."

Jason nodded. "Sure. Let's go."

"Now?"

"Is there some problem with now?"

* * *

The dwarf was in the darkened smithy, again, his finished mail shirt hanging from a frame on the wall. Light from the coals reflected from his eyes, making them all red and demonic. He had a piece of work

going in the forge. It looked like the start of something: a piece of thumb-thick bar stock about the length of my forearm, with another, shorter piece welded perpendicularly onto it, about a quarter of the distance from one end.

"What's that going to be?" I asked.

He smiled as he slipped the joint back into the forge, and worked the bellows, hard. Heat washed against my face in a solid wave, while rivulets of sweat worked their way through the hair and the scars on his naked chest. He had been at it for some time; the thick hot air in the smithy was filled with the not-unpleasant reek of fresh sweat.

"Don't you remember those newfangled nightsticks the police were starting to wear, back on the Other Side? I figured I'd give one a try." He tapped the hammer gently against the end. "The handle's supposed to spin—I've got Kayren whittling a collar for this. I'll slip it over, then flare out the end just a trifle."

"I remember them," I said, "but those were made of wood."

Ahira smiled. "I figure I can handle the extra weight." He was silent for a long moment. "You're trying to decide whether or not it's one party or two."

Jason looked disgusted. "Oh, come *on*."

"Hey, kid," I said, "you have a friend for more than twenty years, and spend most—"

"Too much, anyway," the dwarf put in.

"—of your waking life with him, and he'll read your mind, too."

Trouble was, Ahira was only close, this time. I was more thinking about keeping the hell out of the Faerie matter than I was about who would be looking into it.

The dwarf shrugged. "It's pretty obvious. The Faerie matter is more important, but the likelihood that it's something we can affect, one way or the other, is small. On the other hand, Mikyn is one of ours, and so is the Warrior myth we created. We have to look into that." He was silent for a moment. "One party," Ahira said. "Mainly to check out Ehvenor; that takes priority over looking for Mikyn."

"That seems awfully clear to you," I said. I can't always read his mind—Ahira's smarter than I am. But sometimes I can divert him.

"Andrea's necessary for Ehvenor," he said, ignoring the objection, "and I'm not going to let her wander around without us."

"Is that an issue?"

He pursed his lips for a moment. "Yes. She's going, she says, and Tenny's going with her. Tenny is dangerous without proper supervision—so that means at least one more of us."

Jason cocked his head to one side. "How about two parties? We've got more people available. Durine, Kethol, and Piro, for a start."

"We could let you take Kethol and company and go haring after Mikyn," Ahira said, as though

considering it.

"Well, yes."

"Bad idea," the dwarf said. "I want them around, keeping an eye on the family." That's how Ahira referred to my wife and daughters: *the* family, as though none other mattered. I understand that. "If Daherrin was here, we could get some help from his team, but he's not. We don't have enough for two parties." He smiled at Jason. "The lesson begins: pick the party."

Jason made a fist, and stuck out his thumb. "Me."

"Who's going to take care of the pups?" I asked. "I thought you were going to take responsibility for them."

Jason smiled weakly. "I guess I have to add the job to the scullery maids' roster—and Jane says she'll take a turn."

I grinned back at him. "Handy to have a bit of rank, eh?"

"*Tried* to handle it without delegating it to them. Okay?" Not waiting for a smartass answer, Jason added the index finger. "Second is Mother—you're right that we have to have a wizard in on this, if we're going to look into the Faerie matter." He was missing the point: Andrea was already insisting on checking out Ehvenor. The only question was who would go with her, not whether or not she would go. "Then there's you two." He rubbed at the side of his nose with his middle finger. "You don't like the idea of trying to do two things at once, do you?"

I snorted. "I sometimes have enough trouble doing one thing at once." I cocked my head to one side. "Don't you have any misgivings about taking your mother along on this?"

She had handled herself well in Velen, and I'd been watching her closely since. She looked fine, not much different at all, although maybe there was a bit more of a rosy glow to her cheeks than usual. But going out in harm's way wasn't something Andrea had been doing, not since the very beginning. And if it required magic?

Again, it was all academic—Andrea was going, and that was that—but Ahira and I were teaching Jason; "academic" doesn't mean "irrelevant."

"No," Jason said. "I don't." Jason's expression wasn't one of unconcern; it was a cold and distant look, the expression of a chessmaster who knows the value of his pieces, and will push them around the board into the right place, no matter whose face the piece wears.

"It's necessary," he said. He added his little finger. "Tennetty." He held out his hand, fingers spread. "Five of us. Small enough not to draw unnecessary attention, small enough to hide with a little cover, large enough to handle some trouble. Ellegon to drop us off and pick us up. Just outside of Ehvenor, I'd think."

"No," Ahira said. "If there's something really sticky going on there, we don't want to drop right in on it. Better to work our way up to it, and sniff around as we go. The locals may have done some of the looking into things for us."

Better, yes. Best was to keep the hell out of it. I didn't say as much, but I guess my face showed it.

Ahira turned to Jason. "Give us a minute, will you?"

"But—"

"Now will be fine," he said, gesturing to the door of the smithy. "You can get my saddle from the stable. I want to put a few more equipment rings on it."

He stood in the doorway, watching the boy walk away, then turned back to me.

"Give it up, Walter," Ahira said. "You don't have to go, nobody's going to hold an axe to your throat. But you know you're going, just as well as I do." His chuckle was hollow in his barrel chest. "Three reasons; take your pick. First," he said, "because while this whole thing about creatures coming out of Faerie was distant, as of about ten days ago it became local, it became personal. Your wife and kids live in this country, in this barony, and you're no more going to leave that kind of menace uninvestigated than I am."

He looked up at me. "Second reason: Jason, Andy, Tenny, and I are going. You're not going to let us go into this alone," he said, as though daring me to dispute it.

"Noble guy, aren't I?" I smiled.

He didn't take the bait, not directly. "One last reason," he said, not looking me in the eye. "Your wife won't let you touch her, and if you can get away for awhile, you won't have to deal with that. You can put off handling that for as long as we're on the road." He turned back to the forge.

I wanted to be angry, to be furious with him for mentioning it. If he'd said it in the presence of anybody else, I know I would have been.

But he was right. On all three counts.

Damn, damn, damn.

Jason walked through the doorway, a saddle slung over his shoulder. "Where do you want this?" he asked.

"Just dump it on the floor," Ahira said. "You'd best go pack. We leave in the morning."

* * *

As we walked away, Jason's brow furrowed. "What was that all about?"

"What?"

He gestured clumsily. "Ahira. It was like he was . . . I don't know. Not there. Angry, maybe. Was it something I said?"

"Nah. It's not you. Game face," I said.

"Eh?"

"Never mind."

He frowned.

I thought about explaining that even when you look at the football game as a job, as a way to pay for school, you get yourself psyched up for it, and that when you trot out on the field, your heart pumping hard, the ground springy beneath your feet, ready to, say, grab a quarterback and slam him down so hard that his descendants will still ache, there's a kind of glare you wear, whether or not you intend to. And then I thought about how he probably didn't have the background to appreciate it, and how I didn't feel like explaining football to a This Sider.

And then I thought about how if I kept saying "Never mind" to the kid every time he asked a question, he was going to slip a knife into me someday, so I just smiled.

"Honest," I said. "It's not important."

* * *

I'd said goodbye to the kids, and to the pups, so I went over the list one more time. Weapons, clothes, food, money, miscellaneous. Miscellaneous was, as always, the largest category. I was packed for running, if necessary—the most important stuff was in either my belt pouch or my small rucksack.

Grab and run, if I had to. When the shit comes down, you grab your friends, and—if time—your essentials. Leave the rest be.

There was a gout of fire below in the courtyard.

They're waiting for you. So am I.

So wait a bit longer.

My big rucksack was packed solid; I took it to the window and tossed it down to Ahira's waiting hands. *Thunk,*

I turned back to Kirah. "Like the old days, eh, old girl?" I asked, smiling.

She didn't smile back. "I don't want you to go."

Walter Slovotsky's advice to wives whose husbands are packing for a trip: be nice. Let problems lie.

Look—trivial problems can wait, or you can solve them yourself while your spouse is gone. That's why we call them trivial, eh? They're not important. You can't solve anything serious between the time he takes his rucksack down out of the closet and when he heads out the door. That's not the time to try.

All it can do is screw up his mind while he's gone. So leave it be. This wasn't a time to be discussing that; it wasn't the time for either of us to be discussing anything.

The obvious thing, the right thing for me to do was to ignore what she'd just said.

"Right," I said. "And you don't want me to stay, either. You can't stand to have me touch you, remember?"

"Please. Don't blame me for that." She faced me in the doorway. "It's not my fault, Walter. I try, but every time you touch me, it's like . . ." she raised her hand in apology, as a shudder shook her frame. "I'm

sorry."

Walter Slovotsky's advice to husbands leaving on a trip is ever the same . . .

I gripped her arms tightly, ignoring her struggles. "It's not my fault, either, Kirah. I didn't do that to you, and I won't be blamed for it. I won't—" I started, then stopped, and let her go. She gripped herself across the middle and turned away. Her shoulders shook as she fell to her knees.

"No." I won't live my life in penance for harm others have done to you, I didn't quite say.

It's neither of your fault, if you want my opinion, Ellegon said, his voice pitched only for me.

Thanks. I think I needed that.

All part of the service. Should we get going, or do you want to have a few more tender moments with your wife?

I kissed the tips of my fingers and held them out toward her back. "Goodbye, Kirah."

Ah, parting is such sweet sorrow . . .

* * *

The sun had shattered the chill of the earliest morning, but clouds were moving in, and the sky to the east was slate gray and threatening. Time to get going—flying through rain is no fun at all.

Jason and Andrea had already climbed up and fastened themselves into their seats on the rigging we'd lashed to Ellegon's broad back, while Ahira was under the dragon's belly, giving the knots a last check. I'm as safety-conscious as anybody else, but riding Ellegon isn't like riding a horse—he'll let you know if things start to give.

Alternately, if I do have it in for you, a few strands of rope aren't going to make a difference. The dragon snorted, startling the honor guard of soldiers who had gathered to bid us good journeying.

Doria was taking her duties as Steward seriously—she had a list of things to do sticking out of her blouse pocket.

"Going to have this place in good shape by the time we're back, eh?" I asked, with a knowing smirk.

She smiled and shrugged. "I lost my old profession when I defied the Mother; I'd better find something else I can do." She knew better. If nothing else, there was always a job open at the Home school, teaching English, civics, and pretty much anything else; besides, Lou Riccetti would be glad to have her around.

"Home ec majors," I sniffed. I gave Doria a quick squeeze goodbye, then climbed up and belted myself into the saddle behind Tenny.

She turned in her seat and gave me a quick glare. "You took long enough."

"Leave it be." Andrea frowned her into silence.

"Everything okay?" Ahira asked, as he levered himself into his seat and belted himself in, too firmly;

dwarves dislike flying almost as much as they do traveling by boat.

Jason felt at the butt of his revolver, from where it projected under his jacket. "All set."

Tennetty folded her arms in front of her chest and leaned back against the pile of gear lashed between the two of us. "Fine."

Andrea gestured in impatience. "Let's go."

"Ducky," I said. "Let's get the fuck out of here."

Hang on . . .

PART TWO

ROADWORK

CHAPTER TEN

*In Which We Reach Fenevar,
and the Trail Heats Up*

'Tis the men, not the houses, that make the city.

—THOMAS FULLER

Health hint for the traveler: Don't throw rocks at guys with guns.

—WALTER SLOVOTSKY

I've always taken the ideas from where I could get them. Hey—I'm not as inventive as Lou; I do the best I can.

I got the "Warrior lives" notes from my big brother, Steve. It was one of the few Vietnam stories he ever told me. (When he wasn't drinking, that is. Two beers and he'd start with the stories, and wouldn't stop with either the stories or the drinking until he was totally wasted.)

It wasn't something he'd done—he had spent most of his time in Vietnam as a door gunner on a sort-of-unarmed helicopter, what they called a slick—but it was a habit that some of the ground soldiers had: they would leave the ace of spades, the death card, on dead enemies. The way he explained it, it supposedly started when somebody had a short deck of cards on him, and thought it kind of funny. Eventually, a lot of the outfits had their own cards printed up, with the name of their unit on them.

"Now, let me understand this," I had said. "They'd expect Charley—"

"You weren't there," he had said, softly. "Call them the Vietcong, or the NVA, or the enemy."

"—they'd expect the enemy to run across dead bodies of their own people, and get spooked because they had *aplaying card* on their heads?"

He'd shrugged. "I didn't say it made sense. I said that's what they did. But it did make sense. It made the whole thing more personal. There was a way to make it even more personal," he had said. "But we didn't do that most of the time."

"I thought you flew all the time," I said. If he was going to reproach me . . .

"Just flew *most* of the time," he had said. And then he wouldn't say any more.

* * *

The ideal place to have Ellegon take us would have been as far away from Ehvenor as we could get, if you asked me; the right thing to do would then be to make tracks in the opposite direction from Ehvenor.

That, however, wasn't the plan. The plan was to be dropped off down the coast from Ehvenor; Fenevar seemed about right. It would have been convenient to be dropped off behind some outcropping near the rocky shore of Fenevar. The only trouble was, there wasn't a rocky shore.

The land near Fenevar was flat and at water level, more swampy than lakeshore. There wasn't much forest or other cover; as was true of much of the arable land around the Cirric, farmers had long cleared and planted well up to the edge of the freshwater sea, and beyond, growing tame wild rice in the shallow, swampy water.

The dragon had to leave us back up the road, in the rolling foothills, a good half-day's walk down to the city.

As we had learned back in the old raiding days, the danger when Ellegon touches down is directly related to two things: how isolated the area appears, and how long he is on the ground. We did the best that we could with both.

How's it look? I asked, as Ellegon banked hard in a tight circle.

The wind beat hard against my face, pulling tears from my eyes. I could barely make out the hill below in the gray predawn light, but Ellegon's eyes were better than mine; he had spotted the road that bisected it neatly, cutting through the dense wood.

Nobody around, as far as I can tell. Coming in.

Air rushed by as the dim ground rushed up. Ellegon, his wings pounding the air hard, slammed down on the dirt road.

Their safety straps already off, Jason and Ahira slid to the ground below, while Tenny and I pulled straps loose and tossed packs and rucksacks down. I lowered Andy down to Ahira's waiting arms, then slid down a loose strap to the ground.

Ellegon took a few steps down the road, then leaped into the air, climbing in a tight spiral before flapping

off into the sky.

I'll start checking rendezvous points in a couple tendays. Until we meet again, be well, he said.

White light flared as Ahira pulled a glowsteel from his pouch. He already had his huge rucksack on his back. "Let's go, folks. We've got a full day's march to Fenevar."

Tennetty, shrugging into her own rucksack, nodded. "And nothing more than sour beer to look forward to at the end of the trip."

While a modified direct approach—distract, grab, and go—is one way of getting something specific, it's a lousy way to try to find any information.

There's any number of strategies to use when you're snooping around for intelligence—and I can always use some more intelligence.

One of the best is also one of the simplest. Any town along a trade route—and, for obvious reasons, we've always tended to work around trade routes—has at least one travelers' inn. If it's a sizable town, usually more. Travelers—no matter what they trade in—almost always like to talk. Not always honestly, mind. Then again, who am I to complain about a bit of dishonesty?

* * *

All we got out of the first two inns we tried was a mild buzz.

The talk in the Cerulean Creek Inn, the third inn of the evening, flowed like the sour beer; it tended to slop over on the floor and turn it into mud.

The general practice along that part of the coast is to sell ale by what they call a pitcher, although it's barely half the size of a common water pitcher. Some drink right out of the pitcher; others use a mug. I poured Tennetty another mug full, then tilted mine back, barely wetting my mouth.

She took a long pull. "Well?" she asked.

"Well, what?"

"What brilliant things have you found?"

I had debated bringing Tennetty along this evening. There were plenty of problems: women warriors were rare in the Eren regions, and she was relatively well known. She was moderately famous as Karl Cullinane's one-eyed bodyguard, her temper was never fully under her control, and she scared me.

On the other hand: her glass eye was in place, visible and entirely convincing under a fringe of hair, and nobody would have mistaken me for Karl, either in truth or in legend.

She was the obvious choice for this, despite the minuses—she could be counted on to keep her mouth shut, unlike Jason; she wouldn't look out of place in the drinking room of an inn, unlike Andrea; she wouldn't draw the wrong sort of attention, unlike Ahira.

Maybe I would have been better bringing Ahira along. He wouldn't have stood out: over in the far corner, a dwarf and his human companion sat, sharing a loaf of almost black bread and a bowl of thick stew of unlikely ancestry. By the cut of his leather tunic, I decided the dwarf was from Benerell—the

Benerell style has always been for clothes that barely fit. The human could have been of any origin, although you'll find more of that wheaty blond color in Osgrad than elsewhere.

Changes happen, even while you don't look for them. Or maybe particularly when you don't look for them.

I hadn't answered Tennyty. I turned to her, raising my voice ever-so-slightly.

"I don't know, either," I said. "That . . ."—the line called for a long pause—"thing we saw this morning was one of the strangest things that has ever reached Tybel's eyes, and that's a fact."

The broad-faced fellow down the bench from me pricked up his ears.

I picked up our empty pitcher and turned it over, empty. I'd buy more in a moment, unless somebody took the hint.

"Yeah," Tennyty said, not helping much.

I don't know about her, sometimes. This was the third time we'd tried this routine, and her side of it was no more polished than the first.

I'm afraid I glared at her.

"That it was," she added, chastened, trying a bit more. "Really, strange."

It was all I could do not to raise my eyes toward the ceiling and implore the help of the gods, or of heaven.

"Very strange."

"Begging your pardon, traveler," the fellow whose attention I had caught said, "but did you talk of seeing something strange?" He half-rose, courteously gesturing with his own, full pitcher.

Several times, I thought. And pretty darned clumsily.

"I guess I might have," I said, beckoning him over. I guess if a fish is hungry enough, he'll bite a hook with a plastic bug on it.

He splashed some ale into each of our mugs, then politely sipped at his pitcher.

"Lots of strange things been seen of late," he said. "More and more over the past few years. Travelers report many things, although tales do grow in the telling."

I nodded. "That they do. But this was something that didn't grow. It was a wolf that wasn't a wolf."

We were gathering an audience, or at least some company; the drinking room of a tavern isn't the place for those who prefer solitude. The dwarf and human pair wandered over as I launched into a seriously edited version of our encounter with Boioardo and the wolf pack: I cut out the fight, had him eating a deer instead of a cow, and placed it outside of Alfani rather than back in Bieme. I've always been a stickler for details, just never for accurate ones.

The obvious way to find out something is to go around and ask questions, but that invariably raises the question of who you are and what you're after. Given that there is a price on my head—the Pandathaway Slavers Guild is no more fond of me than I am of them—I'd rather not answer honestly, most places I go.

So the obvious way was out. Another way is to talk about something interesting, something related to what you're interested in, and let everybody else impress you with what they know about it.

A little bald man, a trader in gems and gold who had given his name as Enric (and who must have been a lot tougher than he looked, given his admitted profession and lack of a bodyguard) ordered a round for the table. "It's coming from one of the Places of the other ones, perhaps, they say. Or from," he made a sign with his thumb, "*there*."

"Places of the other ones?" I tried to look puzzled. "There? You mean—"

"I mean just as I say, traveler. It's an old belief that it is dangerous to mention either by name. My grandfather, long dead though he is, used to talk of them as only *them*, and while I thought that strange, he did live to sixty years."

Another man spat. "Faw. Just a superstition."

"Maybe it was, and maybe it wasn't. Maybe they know when their names are spoke, and maybe they don't. What with strange things happening, with something or other having wiped out that little village up near Erevale, I'm not one to take chances." He turned to me. "What do you think, Tybel?"

I shook my head. "I've never been one to take chances, either." Without a damn good reason. Wiped out a village? I hadn't heard about that.

"A wise man," he said. "And with the Warrior about, turning visible only to kill? I used to own a servant, had her for ten years—Venda, her name is. Stout as a stoat, and loyal as a good dog. But with the Warrior about—and there are many who say it's Karl Cullinane—murdering honest men who own such, I'll tell you that I sold her, for quick coin and without apology."

Tennetty frowned. "One moment. The way I've heard it is that Karl Cullinane and his people will leave alone all but slavers, and Guild slavers in particular."

Enric shook his head. "That's the way it used to be, for sure. For years and years. I've met some of the Home raiders and traders—I even camped for an evening with a bunch of his men one night, in Kuarolin, up along the edge of the Katharhd? Tough-looking bunch, but I felt perfectly safe among them, and they were welcome in most towns—nobody thought they'd be hunting for any but slavers, and slavers are none too popular anyway.

"But there's been word of it changing. There was a hostler murdered in Wehnest, for nothing more than having a bought servant."

"Not just off in Wehnest, either." A burly man slapped his fist down on the table, causing mugs and pitchers to dance. "Just outside our own Fenevar, not forty days ago, Arnet and his brother were murdered in their beds, and one of those notes left behind. Englits all over it, they say." He shuddered. "Dangerous language, I hear—they say that you don't have to be a wizard to write spells in it."

"That's nonsense. Pfah." Another spat. In Fenevar, you can tell the locals by their habit of spitting as punctuation.

"You have to be one of their wizards to do it, to make their gunpowder."

I listened with more than half an ear for the next hour, buying just a bit more than my share of the rounds. That's the key to being inconspicuous. You don't have to be average—you just have to seem like you're typical.

I guess I drank too much. But I do remember hearing a fragment of a phrase from Reil the baker, one I didn't want to inquire into too closely.

"—and that's what Alezyn said. You know, the new farrier, the one who was through about five tendays ago?"

Bingo. Alezyn was Mikyn's father's name. It was possible, of course, that there was a real farrier going by the name of Alezyn, but I don't believe in coincidences—somebody with that name near a killing.

It all made sense. Many smiths—most, easily—and a lot of hostlers did some shoeing on the side, but like anything else, shoeing horses is something you get a lot better at if you do it regularly. On the other hand, outside of the largest cities, there simply wasn't enough work for a full-time farrier, and it was a respectable and likely profession for a smith or horseman to take up, if he had a bit of money for tools, and the taste for the road.

Didn't take much in the way of tools, either. A small anvil and maybe a portable forge if you were extravagant, although you could build a firepit for that kind of work. Hammers, tongs, various trimming knives and clippers, plus some bar stock, and you were in business. You could put all of it on the back of a packhorse, if you were pressed, although you'd probably want a wagon.

Home raiding teams usually carried at least one traveling farrier's rig with them. It always was a good idea for a raiding team to send scouts out, and one of the best covers we had used, back during the raiding years, was that of a farrier.

Mikyn had separated from the rest of the team, taking the traveling farrier rig with him.

We were getting warm, perhaps. Possibly we could wrap up the Mikyn matter quickly, before investigating Faerie. Not a bad idea, all things considered. We had a double objective, after all, if we could manage it: sniff around Ehvenor to see if we could find out what was happening with Faerie, and see if we could track down Mikyn.

Which was more important? Okay, Ehvenor. Fine.

Which was more urgent, though? That was another thing.

Maybe a better question was: which could we handle better?

And why ask questions when there was beer to be drunk. Er, drank?

Enric refilled my mug. "You're decidedly good company, Tybel," he said. "It's been a pleasure meeting you."

"That's because I listen well."

Somehow or other, Tennyet got me back to our rooms.

* * *

I don't remember dreaming that night, although I do remember getting up once to puke into the thundermug next to my bed. (If I hadn't, the smell would have reminded me.)

In the morning, I had the godfather of all hangovers.

Anything for the cause, eh?

CHAPTER ELEVEN

In Which I Have a Hangover

It is only the first bottle that is expensive.

—FRENCH PROVERB

Mrmf. Gack. Urpffff.

—WALTER SLOVOTSKY

Trying to get something decided over a hangover is no fun at all. Trying to do anything over a hangover is no fun at all.

I couldn't see it, not with my eyes closed, but there was a thumb-sized flask of Eareven healing draughts at my elbow as I lay stretched out on the settee in our common room. Tennyet had placed the filigreed brass flask there when she and Ahira had hauled me out of my room and set me up on the settee. A damp cloth lay across my eyes, easing the dry burning of my eyeballs to mere agony.

Sadistic bitch. She knew that I wouldn't take it, not for something like this. Healing draughts are for emergencies.

"You okay, Walter?" the dwarf asked.

"Peachy keen." Each word hurt. There were little men with big knives carving on the inside of my temples, and demons with spiked shoes and flamethrowers walking up and down every tendon in my body. Never mind what was going on in my stomach. I don't like to think about what was going on in my stomach.

At least the settee was overstuffed and would have been comfortable if even softness didn't hurt. The luxury was not unexpected—we had taken a large suite of rooms at the Krellen Inn. When you're paying with real Pandathaway gold—even if you get back a lot of local coins as your change—you can usually get a spot of luxury.

I would have settled for a jot of comfort.

Ahira bit into a red, round apple; the crunching sound hurt my forehead.

My mouth tasted of sour vomit. Every time I turned to look at something I could feel my neck bones squawk, and the grit behind my eyes grated as I lay there.

There was a cure, but I couldn't use it. Wouldn't use it.

I forced myself up to one elbow and fumbled for the stone mug of too-hot Holtish herb tea that Andrea had brewed up for me; it was supposed to be good for both headaches and menstrual cramps. I had to remove the damp cloth from my eyes to find it. This is one time that I can swear that one out of two isn't good.

I eyed the flask of healing draughts. It would be wrong to take it just to cure the hangover. It's not just that healing draughts are expensive—although they are—it's worse: they're rare, hard to get hold of. We're supposed to save that stuff for serious hurts, for emergencies.

Granted, I once downed a half bottle when I was fleeing from a town—I've shown my heels to so many that I don't recall just which one now—but I had sprained my ankle, and while that's usually a minor injury, it would have gotten me killed then, and by my definition, an injury isn't minor if it gets you killed.

In all the times I've been banged up, and there are a lot of those, I've never used the stuff promiscuously—I've always preferred saving promiscuity for other contexts.

The wind was blowing hard from the west, in through the window; the fresh air helped just a little. Jason had been dispatched for food, and had returned with a basket of fruit, a dozen sticks of roasted pork, peppers, and onions from the market down the street, and a pail of ale from the eating room below.

The smell of food made me gag. The aroma of roast pork and a hangover don't mix.

Well, the tea was a loser. Maybe the ale would be better. I accepted Jason's offer of a battered pewter tankard, and sipped at the flat brew, hoping it would clear the painful fog behind my throbbing eyes.

It didn't. I've never had much luck with the hair of the dog as a hangover remedy.

Healing draughts are expensive, and hard to come by. Hangovers hurt. Balance the two in the scales, and the supply of healing draughts was still meager, and hangovers still hurt like hell.

Put it in proportion: I could lie here in pain for the rest of the day. In a day, tops, I'd be back to normal, and if we were going to leave Fenevar, we'd need at least a day to get horses and provisions, never mind about which direction.

The trouble, of course, was that Mikyn could have gone anywhere, in about three directions. On the other hand, while things in Ehvenor weren't likely to stay in one place, the city itself was considerate enough to stay in one place, and maybe that solved the problem for us.

How to travel was easy: we'd go by land. Fenevar isn't a major shipping center—the shoreline is too swampy and shallow.

"At least we don't have to travel by water," Ahira said, repressing a shudder.

Andy patted his knee. "Just as well, eh?"

Dwarves don't like water any deeper than what they wash in—and the traditional dwarvish washhouse is a small room, concave to a drain in the center, ringed with chest-high (to them) washbasins. Ahira was the only one I've ever known to use a bathtub.

It's obvious why, when you think of it—a human with a lungful of air is lighter than water. Swimming, for us, is just a matter of working with natural forces, sometimes bobbing up and down to rhythmically clear mouth and nose from the water in time with breathing. Dwarves, on the other hand, are denser than we are. Their bones aren't only thicker, with the correspondingly larger joints that confer a greater mechanical advantage, they're made of a slightly different, more compact calcium matrix than ours. Their muscle fibers are smaller and much more numerous, and they carry a smaller fat-to-muscle ratio—that's one of the reasons they're so fond of ale: starch and alcohol are good sources of quick calories.

Drop a dwarf in water, and he'll sink like a stone.

I trotted out Lou Riccetti's old joke: "How do you make a dwarf float?" I tried to grin, but the effort hurt.

Ahira smiled dutifully, while Andy answered. "Two scoops of ice cream, one dwarf, and fill with Coke."

Yup; because that's the only way. I guess you have to be an Other Sider to find it funny.

Jason wasn't having any of the humor. "I don't like any of it, but we've got to find him."

Tennetty sneered. "Wanting doesn't make it so. He left tendays ago. He could be anywhere."

Andy shook her head. "Not if he's maintaining a cover as a roving farrier."

"We need to find him."

Jason was right. It was one thing to kill slavers. Nobody shed tears for them. Fear them, sure; deal with them—well, what else was there to do with a conquered neighbor?

But express sympathy? Identify with them? Consider Home raiders a common threat?

Nah.

The trouble with creating a legend is that people will believe it. Ahira and I, and later Jason, had gone to some trouble to keep Karl's legend alive in the stories about the Warrior, and Karl was the archetype of a Home raider. By murdering the locals and leaving the note, Mikyn was fucking with the legend. I'm not sure whether I was more surprised or annoyed. Both, I guess—Mikyn had been raised in Home, and he should have *known* better.

I sipped some more of the hot tea and lay back. Just reach out, take the small brass bottle in my trembling hand, then break the wax seal with my thumb, and tilt it back . . .

No.

Ahira had been thinking. "Any chance you can put a location spell on him?" he asked Andrea.

She shrugged. "Perhaps." She shrugged. "Certainly. I've gotten very good at location spells."

I was going to ask how, but I caught myself. Back when she thought Karl was alive, she had labored long and hard to locate him. You do it a lot, you get good at it.

"I will need something of his," she said, "preferably some hair or nails, or something he's interacted with intimately."

"They say the note was written in blood."

"His?" Ahira was skeptical.

"Not likely, but it's a start." Andrea stood up. "There's a hedge wizard in town. As I understand it, he's a confidant of Lord Ulven. I think it's time for a bit of professional courtesy." She wasn't wearing wizard's robes, of course, but equally of course she could quickly demonstrate what she was, if necessary.

"Hold on, please." Ahira held up a hand. "You haven't done this for awhile."

"Magic?"

A frown twisted its way across his face. "No. The rest of it." He pursed his lips for a moment, then bit another chunk of meat off his skewer. "If you're going to brace a local, we'd best be able to get out of town quickly. That means horses."

Tennetty nodded. "Me. You part with gold too easy. Looks suspicious."

"Fine."

"Hmm . . ." she cocked her head. "One each, and two spares?"

"Three, if you can. We also should try to learn as much as we can about the local situation—there's a dwarf smith; I should go and see if he wants some word from the Old Country. Jason, it's you and me for that one."

Jason scowled. "Why me?"

"Because you speak dwarvish, and with a thick Heverel accent. Tall Ones who can speak the language, accent or no, are rare enough that you'll charm him. If he happens to be from Heverel, all the better." He turned to Andrea. "Which leaves you and Walter for the wizard. You need somebody to watch your back." He nodded at me. "You'd best leave now."

"Now?" I asked.

"Now," he said.

"Well," I said, each word a painful effort, "a bodyguard has to move around."

"True enough. Better drink that stuff," he said.

My hands trembled as I examined the wax seal perfunctorily, then broke it, tossing the cap aside. I

brought the flask to my cracked lips, each movement hurting.

A spasm of nausea washed over me, but I fought it down successfully. The too-sweet liquid washed the vomit and sand from my mouth, replacing it with a warm glow, like good brandy. In between painful beats, my headache disappeared, various aches and pains sparking away, disappearing.

But I really hate magic. Honest. I just hate hangovers more.

"That feels better," I said, my voice deepening and strengthening as I tossed the damp cloth aside and swung off the couch and to my feet.

No pain, not even any morning aches. The air was just chilly enough to be bracing, and filled with the enticing smell of roasted pork, peppers, and onions. I was twenty again—strong, arrogant, and horny, ready to deal with anything the universe cared to offer up . . . starting with a stick of roast peppers, pork, and onions that Jason had left on the serving platter.

As I bit hungrily into the cold meat, Ahira caught my smile and returned it.

In divvying up the jobs, he was still looking after me, the way it had always been. He could easily have assigned himself as Andrea's bodyguard, even if that meant she would have to wait until he got back from the smith.

Tennetty scowled. "What are the two of you so proud of yourselves about?"

Ahira shrugged. "Private joke."

CHAPTER TWELVE

*In Which I'm Too Smart
for My Own Damn Good*

A hasty judgment is the first step toward recantation.

—PUBLILIUS SYRUS

Figure it outfast—and so what if you're wrong? You might get lucky and implement the wrong one so that it works.

—WALTER SLOVOTSKY

The sign read—

REWNOR
Magician, Wizard, Mage, and Seer

—in typical convoluted Erendra lettering, although runes and symbols were scattered across its surface.

Andrea stopped five steps before the doorway, and reached into the bag at her waist.

I started to reach for her wrist, but stopped myself. "Hang on a second," I said.

She turned, her face creased in irritation. "What is it?"

"Look," I said, "I'm no expert on magic—"

"That's for sure."

"—but I do know that it's a risk for you. You've overdone in the past. Doria thinks you've been hooked on it."

She dismissed it with a frown and a wave. "You don't, or you wouldn't have let me come along."

I had been thinking about that, and I'd been thinking about how convenient it had been for me to think Doria wrong, and decide that Andy was safe to travel, because if I didn't, I don't know what we would have done for a wizard.

She tossed her head, sending her long black hair flying as she struck a pose, one hand on hip. That's who Aeia got that habit from, I guess. "I don't intend to spend the rest of my life living that down. I had a problem. I pushed myself too far, and made it worse by not taking care of myself. I've got it under control now."

I guess I didn't keep my skepticism off my face—not surprisingly, because I wasn't trying to.

Also unsurprisingly, that didn't calm her down. "Dammit, Walter, you know you need a wizard in on this, at least the Ehvenor and Faerie part."

I had to admit that was true. "Sure, but—"

"But nothing," she said. "Just navigating around the middle city takes magic. By some perspectives, it doesn't have a diameter."

"Eh?"

"I mean," she said, "looked at one way, there's a fleck of Faerie in the middle of the city, and the rules of Faerie are . . ." she grasped for a word ". . . indeterminate, by your standards. Not entirely determinate, by mine. When you get close natural laws break down.

"Well, no, they don't exactly *break* down; they kind of get neurotic. They don't apply in the same way, and there's a whole new set that you're not equipped to learn. You'll have to trust me there and then, and you have to trust me here and now."

An old friend of mine used to explain that what most women want from the men in their lives is loving leadership. I guess he hadn't met Andrea. Or Tenny. Or Aeia. Or Kirah, for that matter. Or probably Janie.

Argh. Slovic's Law number whatever: a generalization that doesn't apply to anybody means you're

missing something. Doria, maybe? Dorann, please?

"For now," Andrea went on, "you'll have to trust my judgment about when magic is necessary. Understood?"

She didn't wait for me to answer; she dipped two fingers into her bag, and pulled out a handful of dust and tossed it into the air, accompanying it by a pair of muttered syllables. Stubborn old habits die hard—I tried, once more, to make sense of what she was saying, to remember the words, but I couldn't.

Dust motes turned to a million points of light, and then dimmed to redness, and then further until all they left behind was a dazzle in my eyes.

She stopped. Her eyes closed, her lips moved slowly, silently for a full minute.

That's a long time to stand and wait.

Passersby stared at her out of the corner of their eyes, and then hurried on. Most normals—present company certainly included—tend to want to be away from a working wizard, preferably as far away as possible.

Finally, her eyes opened. "Okay; he's waiting for us. Let's go in."

"Hmmm . . . can I ask what that was for?"

"The first was just checking for . . . a certain class of trap. As to the second . . ." She smiled. "It's an old wizard's trick. You know how a spell is a collection of syllables, each in its right order? Well, if the spell is built right, there's often stopping points, short of the whole thing. You go almost to the end of the spell, and then leave the last few syllables—sometimes even one—unsaid. Sort of like building a car, then putting the key in the ignition—but not turning it. Then when you need it, out come the last few syllables." She gestured with her fingers. "And *vroom*. Lightning shoots from your fingertips, or whatever."

"I've never had lightning shoot from my whatever; it just felt like it once." I was trying to keep things light and friendly, but I didn't like her tone. There was a shadowy undercurrent in her voice, something dark and deadly. I took her arm. "Excuse me, old friend, but you've missed the point—we're not here to fight with the local wizard."

She raised her eyes to heaven and rolled them. "I know that. Silly. I didn't want to walk into Rewnor's shop with an almost-built spell hanging over his head, and mine. Not a friendly thing to do. I was busy," she said, and her lips split in a remarkably sexy smile, "eating my words, eh?" She patted my shoulder. "You handle the sneaking around; leave the magic to me." She pushed through the curtains; I followed.

* * *

Some day, if I'm lucky, I'm going to walk into a magician's shop or workroom that's lit like a library, clean as McDonald's, and sterile-smelling as a hospital.

I wasn't lucky today.

Rewnor's workshop smelled like a gym locker, redolent of old dirt, unwashed sweat, and variously related fungi eating away at toes and crotches.

Ugh.

No, the standard history of me is right, but I'm not a witling; I decided in junior high that football was to be a way of paying for college without slashing a four-year hemorrhage in Stash and Emma's savings. What I did in the fall was a job, and that's all. The stink of unwashed sweat holds no whiff of nostalgia for me. I spent too many hours in gym lockers, back on the Other Side, and don't miss the stench at all.

What light there was came from a pair of sputtering candles set into reflective holders high on the wall. Not even a glowsteel. What light there was revealed a smallish room lined by workbenches, an open door at the far end leading to immediate darkness.

The day was heating up outside, but the air was dank and chilly in here.

Shaking her head, Andrea walked to a workbench, picked up a fist-sized copper bowl, and took a sniff. "Myrrym, hemp, and cinnamon? *Really?* I am unimpressed." She turned to me. "I've always been unfond of love potions, but if you're going to do them, it's perhaps best *to do* them. A simple increase of libido is hardly the same thing, don't you agree?"

There was no answer.

"Oh, *please*," Andrea said to the empty air, with a sniff. "I know you're here just as well as you know that I am, and for the same reason. Trying to hide your fire is useless, you know; you're being *very* silly, and that's starting to irritate my bodyguard. I wouldn't want to irritate him, and I suspect you don't, either."

A bronzed god of a man strode out through the doorway, into the room. He stood a head taller than me, and I'm not a short man, and his wide shoulders threatened to split the seams of his wizard's robe.

"I was doing nothing of the sort," he said. "I was busy with a preparation in my back room." His voice was a baritone rumble, almost smooth enough to be singing. He clasped his hands in front of him and bowed his head slightly. "I am known as Rewnor; you are welcome in my humble shop."

Andrea returned the salute. "Call me Lotana, although that is not now and never has been my name."

He raised a protesting hand and tried to smile ingratiatingly. "Please, please, dear lady. Name spells are beyond such as me, and I'd know better, in any case." He squinted, as though looking at something hovering over her right shoulder. "I can't tell quite what it is, but it's about one syllable away from eating me, eh?"

"Or something." Her smile seemed genuine. "I thought I'd hidden it well."

"I thought you said you'd swallowed all your spells," I whispered, not particularly afraid of Rewnor hearing.

She crooked a smile. "You'd have been telling the truth, if he'd put a truth spell on you, wouldn't you?"

"I don't see the need." Rewnor spread his hands broadly. "I've recognized you as my better, good Lotana, but that doesn't make me blind. You're here for some purpose, and I doubt it's for love philtres of guaranteed harmlessness and questionable efficacy. Can I be of help?"

"Possibly," she said, idly picking up a tool from the table, a fairly serious violation of wizard etiquette, as I understood it. It looked more like a dentist's probe than anything else, except for a dim glow at the

point. She tested the point against the ball of her thumb. "There've been rumors of things coming out of Faerie. I'd wondered what you've heard."

Rewnor looked down at her, and over at me, his face studiously blank, as though he was forcing himself not to take offense at the cavalier way she was handling his tools. "Things have been happening, Mistress Lotana, and that's the truth. As to what, you'd have to ask the likes of better than I."

"There was a murder here, a few tendays ago. A note was left behind. We would like to arrange to see it."

"How did you know I had it here?" He frowned. "*You are* good."

Well, actually, we hadn't known it was here. We were going to ask his help getting access to it.

Andrea started to say something, but I stopped her. "You know that Lotana is better than you are. You perhaps don't want to know how much, or all that is involved."

I made a mystical sign. It didn't mean anything, not on This Side, although Sister Berthe of Toulouse—the nun we used to call "Sister Birtha de Blues"—would have been proud at how easily I did it.

Rewnor raised a hand. "Ah. I see."

Andrea glared at me, irritated at how I was interfering, but I spread my hands in apology. "I'm sorry, Lotana, but there was no avoiding it. Rewnor was always going to see that there are great forces involved. Friend Rewnor is safest just giving us the note and staying out of all this."

"Well . . ." A ghost of a smile kissed her lips, and I wouldn't have minded joining it. "If you think so. I would have preferred to enlist his help, despite the danger, but . . ."

We were out of there, the paper in hand, within two minutes.

* * *

The note was written in the blocky printing that Andrea used to teach at her school in Home, for both English and Erendra.

The Warrior Lives

—it said, in big brown Erendra letters, now flaking. And below, in English, just:

Don't try to find me. Please. I'm getting closer.

"No, dammit, there's nothing I can do with it. He just dashed it off, and while he used blood, it isn't *this*

blood. I can't use things he's only casually interacted with for a location spell, or I'd be able to track anybody, anywhere, just by sorting through a few quadrillion oxygen molecules to find one that the quarry breathed."

Andrea was not happy.

Neither was I, as I stood next to the window, trying to fan the fumes outside. Andrea's attempt to see if the note could be used to trace Mikyn had involved some odorous compounds, and I didn't need for any of the inn's servitors to smell the sulfur and hellfire of a magician's preparations.

Below, the horses were saddled, and the others waited. We didn't absolutely have to get out of town right now, but in whatever direction he was traveling, Mikyn was heading away from us as time went by, and we wouldn't be able to catch him by standing still.

Wait for word of another Warrior killing? That was possible, of course, but dangerous. Why would some travelers—ones with suspiciously too much money in their kip—be hanging around Fenevar? A good question—so best to be sure it wasn't asked. Much better to move along the coast in either direction, and see if a farrier named Alezyn had been through, and when.

We took the back stairs down to the alley, and to the horses.

Tennetty had brought a fairly broad selection, from a dull, listless gray gelding pony for Ahira—who never liked a horse to have a lot of spirit or speed; I think he would have preferred a lame one, really—to a prancing pinto mare for herself.

I checked the cinch strap, then swung to the broad back of my chestnut gelding, his torn right ear suggesting that he'd lost out to a stallion at some point before he'd lost out to the gelder's knives and irons. He wanted to move faster than I was interested in, but, thankfully, Tennetty had equipped him with a vicious twisted-wire bit, and we quickly agreed that we'd proceed at my pace, not his.

"So?" Jason asked, coming abreast of the dwarf as we started off in a slow walk, down the main street toward the coastal road through the swamp, maybe a mile ahead. "Where are we going?"

Ahira shrugged. "Tromodec is about two days that way, Brae three the other way. What we have to decide—what I have to decide—is if we let the search for Mikyn trump looking into the Ehvenor matter." Ahira was, by common consent, including mine, in charge strategically—and that's in part because he didn't make decisions arbitrarily. "Anybody got any advice?"

"Brae," Andrea said. "It's one step closer to Ehvenor." At that moment a cloud passed in front of the sun, so that a shadow quite literally fell across her face. There was something in her expression, something I couldn't quite name. Obsession, perhaps? Compulsion, maybe? I dunno.

"Tromodec," I said. "A couple days probably won't make much difference, we can catch up with Mikyn quickly. Tromodec is closer; it means knowing something sooner. By at least a day." And we'd be two days farther away from Ehvenor and Faerie. We could probably find out all that was known about the things coming out of Faerie anywhere along the coast, and I had little preference for examining the buzz-saw close up.

Besides, if Ehvenor was all that important, there were likely other folks than us, other wizards than Andy looking into it. Let them get in the way of the axe for once.

"Brae," she said. "The matter of Ehvenor is more important. Didn't you hear the rumors of a village that had been wiped out?"

"I never believe rumors. I've started too many myself. Tromodec."

"*Brae*," she said, her petulance only partly an act. There was more than insistence in her manner; perhaps a touch of fear?

"Tromodec." I smiled my most charming smile, no doubt dazzling her from scalp to crotch. "Wanna wrestle over it?"

"Later, maybe." She returned the smile like she meant it, earning both of us a glare from Jason.

I wasn't any too pleased with him, either; it had occurred to me more than once that if it wasn't for his presence, I'd likely be bunking with Andy instead of Ahira. I could have stood consoling the widow a couple of times.

Ahira turned to Jason. "Baron?"

Jason's chuckle sounded forced. "Oh, you mean me?" He was irritated with me; no doubt he'd side with his mother. "I favor Tromodec," he said.

Well, you could have knocked me over with a quarterstaff—I wouldn't have thought to duck. I should have thought it through, though—Jason was more interested in the search for Mikyn than the investigation of Ehvenor, which put us on the same side.

"If it works right," he went on, "we're closer to Mikyn; if it's wrong, we've only lost four days instead of six, the way it would be if we wrongly go to Brae."

Tennetty snorted. "I've got a better way. Just figure out which way is more likely to get us into trouble, and pick that one. It's what always happens, anyways."

"By which you mean Brae," I said.

"Sure. One step closer to Ehvenor; one foot further in the grave. I say Brae."

Ahira tugged on his reins, hard; his pony wanted to canter, and he didn't want that. "We have two for Tromodec, two for Brae. Which means that if this was a vote, I'd cast the deciding one, and get to decide. Since this isn't a democracy, and it's my call anyway, I get to decide."

Jason started to open his mouth, then stopped himself.

Ahira sighed. "I remember him, too, Jason. I remember how mad Karl and I were when we saw how his father had beaten him." He lowered his head for a moment, perhaps to bid farewell to an abused little boy, but when he raised it, his game face was back on—cold and merciless.

There was a time when Ahira could have gone up against anything with a smile on his face and a joke on his lips, but that time had passed.

"On one hand, we have the fact that Mikyn's moving around," he said. "Tromodec is the right move if we want to chase him down. Ehvenor and Faerie will stay where they are. On the other hand, the matter of

Ehvenor and Faerie is more important than the problem of a rogue Home warrior, no matter who he is." His axe was bound across his saddle with quick-release ties that would let it go from both the saddle and sheath with one quick tug. He rested his free hand on it, as though asking it for help.

"If we knew for sure that we could find him quickly," Ahira said, "I might think differently, but, as it is, I say Brae. Ehvenor's more important; we head for Ehvenor."

* * *

When I was a kid, I always thought of a swamp as of necessity something like the Florida Everglades or the Maevisish bogs—brush lightly covering a few spots of damp land and water, but mainly immense patches of quicksand that would suck you down forever if you stepped in the wrong place.

It's just as well that there's no guaranteed penalty for being wrong; I'd have paid it too many times over, in my life. Which probably would have been shorter, a lot shorter. I'd rather be lucky than right—there was a time I got involved in a small political mess in Sciforth, and definitely picked the wrong side. The good guys would have, as it turned out, stuck my head on a pole, while the bad guys and I split a pot of gold.

The swamp road twisted across the cluttered ground, seeking the ridge line, probably built up where there was no ridge. To the right and left, the ground fell, through tangles of vines and creepers, to an impenetrable morass of cypress and willow, the mess punctuated by infrequent stretches of open water and a rare sodden meadow.

The odd jay—there is no other kind—would occasionally perch in an overhead tree, to crap on us, taunt us, or both, and every so often I would hear the sound of slithering on dead leaves, but while the swamp should have been teeming with life, most of the life had learned to avoid humans, and wasn't going to make an exception for a quartet of them just because they were accompanied by a dwarf.

There were a few exceptions. At one point, the road twisted in hairpin turns down the side of a coastal ridge, and the last of the turns revealed a small lake, half a mile across, rimmed by rushes and cattails. A small doe had been drinking at the edge of the water; at our approach, she lifted her head, eyes wide as saucers, and vanished off into the brush with swooping bounds, startling a covey of swans from concealment and into flight.

Tennetty, always alert for game—or at least a chance to kill something—brought her loaded crossbow up, but didn't take the shot. My guess is that she didn't have a clear shot, and a crossbow has little stopping power—if you don't nail a deer through the spine, heart, or (much more likely) lungs, you've got a long chase ahead of you.

"So much for a good dinner tonight," she said.

* * *

We camped that night by the side of a straight section of road, hanging hammocks between paired trees rather than trusting the ground. Snakes and all.

Even I couldn't have crept through the brush silently, and the road stretched out straight a quarter mile in either direction, so we lit a cookfire and relaxed, knowing that we'd see anybody coming up on us in plenty of time.

Jason took first watch, while Ahira sat up with him, the boy nervously stirring at the fire, the dwarf rewinding the leather and wire wrapping of his axe-hilt. Me, I couldn't sleep, not yet, so I improvised a

pad of blankets in front of my saddle, and sat with them, stropping my dagger. It's hard to have too much of an edge on a knife.

Tennetty's eyes were sleepy as she joined the three of us, a brown blanket wrapped around her shoulders.

I looked up at her. "You look tired."

She nodded as she dropped a folded blanket to the ground next to me and seated herself tailor-fashion on it, huddling in her sleeping blanket.

"I feel tired," she said. "Just too wound up, I guess." She stared off into the dark like she was expecting something to leap out of it, then shook her head. "Happens, sometimes."

I scooted over a bit, to let her use my saddle as a back rest. She gave a quick Tennetty-smile—lips together, their ends barely curling up—and leaned against it, and against me. I could feel the warmth of her body through the blanket, which told me that it had been far too long since I'd been with a woman.

Still, I guess those are the times that I most like out on the trail—the end of the day, when there's nothing to do but sit and talk until sleep drives you to your bed, whatever it is.

Tennetty's arms were folded under her blanket. Knowing Tennetty, each hand would be resting on the butt of a loaded pistol. I don't mean to be condescending; it felt reassuring. One thing I could always count on is that Tennetty would be ready for sudden violence. Too ready, maybe, but ready.

The dwarf was rewinding the leather in some sort of intricate weave that I couldn't quite follow, his thick fingers moving with their familiar delicacy, while his eyes and mind were elsewhere. On the ground in front of him was a fresh spool of bronze thread—combined with the leather, it would give a good, solid grip, be the handle or hands wet or dry. (Whenever it all hit the fan, my hands were always wet, as soon as I noticed them.)

Picking up the theme, Jason had his revolver and cleaning kit out, the cartridges, bottles, cleaning cloths, and other paraphernalia neatly lined up on the blanket in front of him, steel and brass flickering in the firelight.

He cleaned and oiled the pistol in just a few moments—doesn't take much if you haven't fired it—then wiped it down with an oily rag before reloading it and slipping it back into his holster, thonging it into place.

"Other one in your bag?" I asked.

"Eh?" He looked over at me. "Other—oh: the other revolver." His smile was a trifle too easy. "I doubt it. I left it with your daughter."

"Jane, I trust, and not Dorann?"

He decided to take that as a joke, which it was. "Just in case," he said.

Tennetty, her eyes still sleepy, nodded in approval.

I stropped my dagger some more. Nehera, the master smith, had made it from a single piece of iron,

lightly sprinkled with just enough charcoal, then heated and folded over, hammered on hundreds of thousands of times, making it strong despite the thinness of the blade. It would bend rather than break, but it could still hold enough of an edge to cut through muscle and cartilage. The surface was covered with the marking of the process: dark striations, like a fingerprint. I could have recognized the pattern among a hundred similar knives.

I tested the edge of the blade against my thumbnail; even with a light touch, it bit hard into the nail, which was more than good enough, so I wiped it down with oil and slid it back into its sheath.

When I looked up, Jason was eyeing me, perhaps a bit skeptically. I tried to decide whether he was thinking that I was acting out some nervousness, or just unable to keep my hands still, but I've never been much good at mind reading, so I slipped one of my throwing knives out of its sheath and started to work on that. I don't *have* to keep my hands busy, mind; I just like to. Can quit any time I want.

Jason caught Tenny's eye and smiled tolerantly.

Ahira had caught the byplay. "You make the common assumption, Jason Cullinane," he said. "You assume that the objects we live and work with are just that: objects, and no more."

The boy shrugged. "Useful objects," he said, "but sure." He patted at his holster. "I mean, this is more useful than six flintlock pistols, but it's a thing, and that's all."

"No. It's never just a thing. Not if you listen," Ahira said, with a sigh. "I spent a lot of time making this battle-axe," he said, taking another turn of bronze wire around the handle. "Only part of my smithing came with the territory—I had a lot to learn. It took me three tries to get just the *right* steel, and I had an expert steelmaker helping me. It took me more than a tenday to hammer that blob of metal into shape, working carbon and brightsand into the edge just deep enough. I had picked up ten pieces of ash and oak in my travels, and it took me even longer to whittle them down to thin laths, then glue them together so that they would hold, never splitting."

He rubbed the flat of his hand against the dark metal. "You work on or with something, some thing, long enough, and there's part of you in it. Not just for now, not just while you live, or even while you and it exist together, but for forever."

His eyes grew vague and dreamy. "There was a door, one night. It led to a room in which three children lay sleeping, two of them as dear to me as children could ever be. There had been assassins about that night, and while we thought them all dead, we could have been wrong. So your father and I sat in front of the door that night, perhaps just in case we were wrong, perhaps because we wouldn't have been able to sleep."

Tenny leaned her head against my shoulder, her eye shut but her expression that of a little girl listening to a favorite bedtime story. I put my arm around her; she started, just a trifle, then relaxed. If I didn't know better, I'd swear she made a vague rumble, almost like a purr.

Ahira stroked the axe head yet again, then ran his rough fingers affectionately through Jason's hair. "And all night long, this axe whispered to me, *Don't worry. Nobody will ever get past us to hurt them.* "

* * *

I don't understand it, not really, but for the first night in longer than I care to think about, my sleep was deep, dark, warm, and dreamless.

* * *

Breakfast the next morning, as sunlight began to break through the brush, was bread, cold sausage, and cheese for the humans, accompanied by a clay bottle of resinous local wine; it was oats, carrots, and apples for the horses, washed down with stream water for all.

I bit into another hunk of sausage, and swallowed. Spitting it out would have been uncouth, and probably slightly less nutritious than swallowing. Look, I like garlic—I like it a lot; I swear to God—but I don't think of it as a breakfast spice.

A cookfire probably would have helped the taste, but we needed to be on our way.

I really wanted something hot, though. A mug of tea would have warmed my hands and middle quite nicely. I thought about having a nip from the flask of brandy in my pack—that would have done it too—but decided against it.

Ahira, Andy, and Jason broke camp; I helped Tenny with the horses.

"I've ridden on worse," I said, just to make conversation.

She smiled. "Not too bad," she said. "I checked them over as carefully as possible—Ahira's pony is slightly spavined, but he's the worst of them. Not really bad. Mostly freshly shod, all saddle-broken. I'd like to see how they handle gunfire," she said, with a sigh, as though she knew how they would, which she did.

They would run like hell, that's what they would do.

For a horse to hold still when there's lightning cracking somewhere just above and behind his head isn't something that comes naturally, or in one afternoon. The way you shoot from any but the best-trained horse's back is to dismount, tie the horse to something that won't move, walk away, and then do it.

Either that, or be sure that

a) your first shot hits, and

b) you have a great need to be somewhere else quickly right after, and you don't much care where.

"The hostler must have had a large stock," I said. Supply and demand works even if you've never heard the term.

"Yeah. More than he needed." She nodded. "He bought a big string from an upcountry rancher, about eight, nine ten-days ago; expecting a trader a few tendays back."

I know, I know, it's obvious—but nobody else had seen it, either. It's one thing to play armchair quarterback; it's another to be out there, calling the plays yourself.

"Andy?"

She swallowed a mouthful of bread before she answered. "Yes?"

"In order to locate Mikyn, you need either something of him, or something he's interacted with intimately, right?"

She didn't get it either, which is understandable. If you haven't ever made something from cold iron and fire, you won't understand how very much trouble it is, how every hammer stroke puts something of you in it, even if all you're making is something as humble as, say, the barbeque fork I'd made in ninth-grade metal shop, the pail hooks we used to churn out by the dozens during my summer at Sturbridge . . .

. . . or a horseshoe.

Jason was quicker—he had already approached his horse, and lifted its front hoof. "Nope—this one could stand a reshoeing, in fact."

"Try another one," I said, reaching for my own horse's left front leg. Tenny, one hand flat against the side of its neck, kept it calm while I lifted the leg.

Nope. You can often tell a farrier by his style, and dwarf-trained smiths had a distinctive one, a lot cleaner than that of whoever had shod this horse.

Two down, and no go.

Ahira checked his pony, and then Andy's nervous black mare.

"I think we're on to something. Eight nails," he said. "Nice dwarvish style." Ahira's broad face was smiling so hard I thought it might split. "Walter, you may take one 'nicely done' out of petty cash." He turned to Andy. "How long? And do you need me to get it off the horse?"

She shook her head. "Not if you two will hold it still. And ten minutes, if that."

* * *

It barely took five, although it left her face sweaty, and ashen. Like mine.

Her quivering finger pointed back the way we had come. Toward Fenevar. Toward Tromodec. Away from Ehvenor.

Ahira shook his head. "Damn it," he said, as he looked up at me. "We've got a rogue on our hands, but the reasoning still holds. Ehvenor is more important. We leave Mikyn for after Ehvenor; we head toward Brae."

Shit. Magic scares me.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

*In Which We Are
Welcomed to Brae*

Joint undertakings stand a better chance when they benefit both sides.

—EURIPIDES

Hey. The ruby was just sitting there. Okay?

—WALTER SLOVOTSKY

Throughout most of my childhood, Slash's best friend was Mike Wocziewsky, a local cop. He had been either a detective or maybe just a plainclothes investigator, but he'd been caught in a wrong bed, and rather than taking a hearing on Conduct Unbecoming, he'd gone back to a blue uniform, and the streets.

I liked Big Mike. He was built like a big blue barrel, smoked cigars that looked and smelled like dog turds, and never stopped telling stories. He gave me my first jackknife, an official Scout knife. No, they weren't the best the money could buy, but there was something wonderful about having the real equipment. I loved that knife.

And the stories Big Mike used to tell.

"There are these five scuzzballs hanging around on the corner, and I know for sure that they are the same scumbuckets that had hit old man Kaplan's liquor store the week before and left him bashed up pretty bad.

"Now, you gotta understand: *Idon't* like old man Kaplan. The cheap bastard doesn't believe in a policeman's discount—well, didn't. These days I have trouble getting him to take my money. You should see the case I got for Christmas, Stash . . .

"—But never mind, even though I wouldn't give a shit if he'd fallen down the stairs at home, when he's on my street he's one of my people, and I don't like having one of the people on my block lying in a hospital bed with one tube running up his nose and another out of his shlong, understand?

"Back to the douchebags on the corner. I don't have anything to pull them in on, and besides, I'm a bluesuit now, not a shield, and so it's none of my business. Bluesuits don't investigate. Except, well, I don't let dogfuckers shit on my people, not on my block. So I go up to one of the cuntfaces, and pull him away.

" 'Pretend like you don't want to talk to me,' I say, kind of low, but just not quite low enough. He's not slow, and he gets the idea real quick, and shouts out something as he sort of swings at me. But I've got about a hundred pounds on him, and he knows better than to really slug me—I mean, if he does that, he knows I'll put in so much stick time that his *descendants* will hurt.

"But while he's swinging on me, I grab his arms, and shove him up against a wall, real gentle, just hard enough to distract him while I slip the hundred I'd palmed into his pants pocket.

"Now, the other dingleballs are watching all of this, and one of them sees it, which saves me some trouble. I just let him go.

"I didn't know how far it would go, and I didn't much care, but a couple of days later I visit the dickhead in the hospital, and he's in even worse shape than Kaplan, and very willing to talk. Lay a hand on him? Nah. I just offered to give him another payoff. For some reason, he didn't want that.

"Hundred bucks a lot of money? Sure is. To a cop. I got paid back. I bet old man Kaplan thought it was the best hundred he ever spent."

* * *

I'd been expecting to hit town in midafternoon, but we must have been making better time than I'd thought.

It was noon when Brae came on us suddenly, or vice versa, depending on how you look at it. The way I see it, the center of the universe is a couple of centimeters behind the middle of my eyebrows. The center of the universe just moves around a bit.

In any case, we rounded a bend, and there it was, a collection of one-, two-, and three-storied wattle-and-daub buildings and twisty little streets sprawled across the coastal hills, running from the crest of a ridge all the way down to the Cirric.

Not much of a city.

"Reminds me of an old joke," I said. "Waiter comes over to the table. Says, 'How did you find your steak?' 'I just looked under the parsley, and there it was.' "

Andy laughed dutifully, as did Ahira. Neither of the other two did. I guess you have to be raised speaking English in order to get the jokes—and Tenney wasn't. And you've probably got to have a sense of humor, unlike Jason Cullinane.

At first, Brae stank of fish. Not surprisingly; the waters in that region are rich with fish, and dried alewife—ugly fish—is a major export. Despite the smell, my mouth watered at the thought of fresh spotted trout over an open fire, seasoned only with salt, peppers, oil, and maybe a squeeze from a small, sweet, Netanal lemon.

Ahead, straddling the road, stood a guard station at the entrance to town—antique construction, but freshly manned.

"Strange," Ahira said. He was handling the horse better than I'd expected, although I knew he would have preferred his pony. I had another use in mind for the pony.

I nodded. Along the Cirric, most danger to the locals comes from the sea, not the land. The domains tend to be on good terms with each other, generally saving their hostility for pirates and islanders.

"Okay, everybody," Ahira said. "Let's take things nice and easy; I don't see any need for a problem. Nice slow walk toward the guard station. Walter, you're on."

This is why we get along well—Ahira knows when to let me be, and when not to. Actually, I'd been working up another cover story, but Ahira pointed out that we had met some of the travelers in Fenevar, and could easily be exposed as somebody with something to hide if we changed our story. Not that that would necessarily be horrible; a lot of folks who travel through the Eren regions aren't quite what they seem, and anybody who automatically believes what a traveler says is too trusting by more than half.

I turned in the saddle and gave everybody the once-over. The rifles were lashed in a bundle with the bows, and the pistols were safely stowed away. Andy was dressed in her wizard's robes, but had, as she put it, "dimmed her flame" to that of a minor wizard, much less powerful in appearance than in reality. I'd

have to take her word for it.

She looked too good, dammit, and the smile on her face, while not too eager, was just a notch off.

Tennetty, a blue cotton shift over glossy leather riding breeches, was her maid, and if a maid carried a largish dagger, that wasn't particularly surprising.

Nor was a three-person bodyguard for a wizard, even one of them a dwarf.

We looked the part, I supposed. Except for Jason. There was a bulge under his tunic, which was okay; lots of people carried an extra knife or purse against their body, but the butt of his revolver peeked out. Which wasn't okay—while slaver rifles and pistols were becoming increasingly commonplace as time went by, I didn't want to have to explain what we were doing with something that was so clearly the product of Home.

"Lace up your tunic a bit," I said. "And when you put the holster back on, shift it around so that the butt isn't visible, eh?" If everything hit the fan, I'd be more than happy for Jason's revolver, but I'd be less than happy if that's what made everything hit the fan.

We couldn't stand a search, but a search isn't a common custom when passing into an Eren town.

Last but not least . . . "Andy?"

She closed her eyes for a long moment. "Two local magicians. Not particularly bright flames; not terribly powerful or accomplished. Or they're doing the same thing that I am." She smiled. "Only better."

I would have shivered, but it was too warm out.

* * *

The guards at the station had been stamped out of the same mold: medium-sized, stocky men, with walrus-style mustaches and sharp chins, large hands that held on to the stocks of their spears either for support or out of readiness. Me, if I had to stand guard, I'd want a spear, too—gives you something to lean on.

About three-quarters of a wagon wheel had been stuck up on the side of the guardhouse, for reasons that escaped me for the moment.

"Names and purpose in Brae?" one asked.

"Tybel, Gellin, Taren," I said, indicated me, Ahira, and Jason. "Bodyguard to Lotana, wizard. Duanna," I said, indicating Tennetty, "wizard's maid."

Now, I won't swear that it's true, but I've always thought of bodyguards as nontalkative types, and bet most people do. A few clipped words might save us a lot of fast talking. "Passing through, or passing by—your choice; no trouble wanted. May stay one night, two, three, or none. Planning on trading further down the coast. We don't discuss what, where, or who."

They would figure out that further down the coast meant Ehvenor, but it wouldn't be in character for me to discuss it.

The two guards shrugged at each other. "By command of Lord Daeran, be welcome in Brae," one said

formally, with a slight bow.

"The town is laid out like this," the other said, indicating the broken wagon wheel. "Town square here." He tapped the hub with the point of his spear. "Lord's residence here; if you're looking to buy fish in quantity, you negotiate that with the Valet." He did say "Valet," honest—it was the same word as for the fellow who lays out your clothes and cleans your room for you.

"You'll find inns along High Street," he went on, tapping a spoke. "Fish markets along the docks." He tapped against some of the broken spokes. "Ride through Main Street," another tap, "and through the center of town and by the Posts of Punishment on your way."

Andrea cocked her head to one side. "Wouldn't it be quicker to take the Street of the Eel up the hill to the Old Avenue?"

He looked at her suspiciously. "I hadn't realized you'd been in Brae before, Mistress Lotana."

She gave him a chilly smile. "I haven't."

She made a brushing gesture with her fingers, something halfway between a gesture of dismissal and the sort of finger movement a wizard often makes when throwing a spell. I didn't like it, but there wasn't much I could do about it, or even a good reason to argue about it. Andrea was, after all, good with location spells, and it couldn't hurt for one of our party to know her way around Brae.

It could, however, hurt for one of our party to shoot off her mouth, and I resolved to discuss that with her later.

The soldier decided to drop the matter. "By the Lord's direction, everyone is to pass the Posts of Punishment," he said. "Any other needs?"

I would have asked about the Posts of Punishment, but with Andy already having shot her mouth off, more curiosity didn't seem called for.

I jerked my thumb at the pony, trying to keep things casual. "Could use a good smith. Useless, there, threw a shoe this morning."

Shoeing a horse takes some tools and effort—removing a shoe takes a lot less.

A look passed between the guards, and one walked to the rear of our group, examining the gray pony's foot closely for a moment, then nodding.

The fact that I was ready for all of this didn't mean that I liked any of it, although as the guard let the hoof drop, the chill in the air warmed up. I wasn't born yesterday—I had pulled both front shoes the day before, to be sure that the hoof would be properly dirtied, and the sharp edges worn a bit.

"Smith? Not a farrier?"

I spread my hands. "That would be fine, too." I shrugged, calmly, casually, but not too casually. A bodyguard with no connections to Mikyn wouldn't be upset at the question, but would think it a bit strange. "I wouldn't have thought Brae large enough to need a full-time farrier."

That must have passed muster, because he nodded and said, "You'll find Deneral the smith on the Street

of the Dry Creek," he said, returning to his tour-guide persona, "at the base of the hill. He does fair shoeing, so they say. Again, welcome to Brae."

* * *

We rode past the wattle-and-daub houses of merchants and town-bound tradesmen, toward the center of town.

"Posts of Punishment?" Jason asked.

I shrugged. "Common along the coast."

There's an Other Side variant of it called crucifixion—basically, you tie somebody up on a stick, don't let them have food or water, and let them die of thirst and exposure.

I frowned. Maybe I haven't seen enough death and suffering, but I really didn't need the local lord ordering me exposed to some more.

Ahead, the street narrowed; we shifted from riding two-two-one abreast to a single line, with me, as chief bodyguard, first, Ahira last.

Across the square were six posts, each about the size and shape of a telephone pole, each topped with a vaguely cigar-shaped iron cage barely large enough to contain a person. What amounted to a siege tower stood nearby, rolled just out of reach of the first cage.

That one, and three others, were occupied by motionless forms, all rags and bones, slumped up against the metal.

From that distance, I couldn't tell if any of the four were alive, but then I saw an arm move.

Tennetty grunted. I thought she had a stronger stomach than any of the rest.

Ahira hissed at her to shut up. So did I. I wasn't too worried; being nauseated by the sight of this wasn't particularly a break in character.

"Fine," she said, her voice low. "But I know one of them. I recognize her from Home. She's an engineer, name of Kenda. And the one in the far cage. That's Bast."

Ohmigod. I remembered Bast as a skinny little boy.

Jason's horse took a prancing step as he walked it up to my side. "What do we do?"

"Nothing quickly," I said. "Nothing at all, until Ahira and I say so. If we say so. Understood?"

His face was white, but he nodded.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

In Which I Go for a Stroll

There are usually aleph-null ways to do something right, but aleph-one ways to do it wrong.

—LOU RICCETTI

Lou always makes things complicated. What he means is that if you choose how to do it at random, you will screw it up. What he's leaving out is that if you're careful about how you do it, you'll probably screw it up. Still, "probably" is better than "will."

—WALTER SLOVOTSKY

I've always tried to both keep and avoid a sense of proportion. Ever since the freshman philosophy class that James Michael and Karl and I were in together.

There's lots of ways to teach ethics. Professor Alperson tried a complicated one.

"Okay," he said. "Classical ethical problem, with a twist. You're in a specific city on a specific date and time, and you're walking along the railroad tracks. You hear the whistle of an oncoming train.

"Now, ahead of you, you see two people stuck to the tracks; each is wedged in by the foot. One is an old man, who you know to be a good and saintly type; the other is a young boy, who you know to be the worst brat in all of . . . well, never mind. You only have time to save one. What do you do, and does it matter what you do?"

We batted that one back and forth for awhile. I, of course, challenged the parameters he had laid down—never take a problem at face value—but he held firm. No, there was no way either was going to free himself, the train was not going to stop, and I knew that for sure, and we'd discuss epistemology some other time.

James Michael tried to take the long look, but rejected it. "In a hundred years, they'll both be dead, so it doesn't matter? Is that what you're getting at?"

Alperson shrugged. "Maybe. Maybe I'm not getting at anything."

Karl took it seriously. "You save one. Either one. You save the old man because he is good and virtuous and because virtue should be respected, or you save the boy because no matter how much of a brat he is, he still deserves to grow up, but you do save one of the two."

Alperson smiled. "What if I were to tell you that the date is August 6, 1945, and that the city is Hiroshima, and that in two minutes, the bomb the *Enola Gay* is about to drop will kill all three of you? Would that make any difference?"

Karl shook his head. "Of course not."

Alperson's smile grew larger. "Good. I don't know if I agree, but good. You've taken a position. Now support it."

* * *

It took us the rest of the day to put it all together, but the locals were still talking about it, and evincing curiosity didn't make us seem, well, curious.

There had been a murder just outside of the city of Brae, but well within the domain of Lord Daeran.

There had also been a contract team of engineers from Home here, laying out a glassmaking plant. Canning—well, jarring—of fish in glazed clay pots was one of the ways of putting down a larger-than-usable catch. While overcooked and oversalted lake alewife fillets in a sealed pot of brine was not my idea of a good time, there were folks inland for whom that was a great if expensive treat, and a very good supplement to a diet that consisted largely of bread and onion, with too little protein.

Real glass canning, though, would have been an improvement—safer, faster, cheaper. Good glassmaking was something that Lou Riccetti wanted, and the Cirric shore was the right place to put such a plant. So he had sent out an engineer team to negotiate and reconnoiter, led by Bast, one of his senior engineers. Bast was a good fellow, who I still, deep within my heart of hearts, thought of as a skinny boy who drew more than his share of guard duty.

A new idea of Lou's, contracting out labor.

Not a great one, as it turned out.

* * *

Farm slaves were increasingly rare these days, horses and oxen increasingly common. Of the circle of farms surrounding Brae, owing fealty to Lord Daeran, only a handful had even a single slave; most were worked by large families and their horses and oxen.

Except for one, a small plot worked by an old man named Heneren, his childless wife, and a superannuated slave, name of Wen'red. They had been visited by a traveling farrier, who was traveling through the arc of farms, reshoeing as he went.

He had swiftly murdered Heneren and his wife, announced to Wen'red that he was now free, and left the old slave alone as he headed off toward the city.

Wen'red had waited a day before he had started in toward the city, on foot. It took him several days—he hadn't been off the farm in thirty years, and got lost. But he knew his duty to his late owner, and reported the murders to a city armsman . . .

. . . the day after Bast had been seen helping the farrier book passage away from Brae.

The afternoon of the morning that Mikyn had sailed way.

Two days before an armsman returned to town, bringing word of the state of Mikyn's victims.

It was only natural that Bast and company would offer help and shelter to a Home raider, even one in a farrier's disguise that they would have pierced easily.

It was equally natural for Lord Daeran to try Bast and company for conspiracy in the murder of Brae subjects, and to stake them out in the hot sun and cool night, providing them only water, and only enough to keep them alive until they would die of starvation and exposure.

Nice folks, eh?

* * *

"Just about midnight," Ahira said. "Guard will be changing any time."

My time. No matter how much intelligence you have, you can always use good intelligence, if you catch my drift.

We had taken conspicuously rich rooms that were even more conspicuously secure. They were on the third floor of the inn, with but a single door entrance, and two balconies, neither of which would be easily accessible from below, and only barely from above—the overhanging roof would prevent somebody from simply dropping down from roof to balcony.

There was nothing that would prevent me from rappelling down the side of the building into the edge of the square below, except the possibility of some passersby seeing what was going on.

But local light-discipline was lax, and two of the lamps on the street were out, the residents not yet braced by armsmen demanding they be lit.

More than enough shadow for the likes of me.

Walk out the front door? Sure, I could have done that—but it's always better to have the option of being officially somewhere else when there's skulduggery going on.

That's me, Walter Slovtosky: skuldugger.

I sat tailor-fashion on the floor, Andrea behind me, fingers kneading at my shoulders hard, just this side of bruising. I might turn down a massage from a pretty woman, but only rarely from somebody who is good at it, and never from a pretty woman who is good at it.

Jason scowled. I had a blindfold over my eyes, but I could hear him scowl.

"I should go too," he said.

Tennetty snorted. "Like you could get him out of trouble?"

His voice was too quiet. "Yes," he said. "Like I could get him out of trouble."

He was right—he had saved my life last time out—but it was irrelevant. We weren't configured for violence or flight, and I didn't see any way to change that, not tonight. If we had been more cold-blooded, we would have left the engineers in the hot sun for another day before I went reconnoitering—giving the rest of the group time to get beyond town, ready to run if things went sour.

But no. They had been up there for days and days, slowly burning to death and starving in the hot sun, and while I didn't see any possible way I could get them out tonight, the sooner we knew what we were up against, the sooner we could get them out.

If we could get them out.

Look—truth is that the importance of something doesn't have a lot of effect on whether or not it's doable. I've had too many lessons on that already; I hoped this wasn't going to be another one.

Time for a quick sneak around, to find out whether rescue for the engineers consisted of a breakout, or a merciful death.

Or nothing at all. If you can't do it, you can't do it.

"Time," I said, rising to my feet. I opened my eyes, and could see through the blindfold that the lamps were still on in the room. "Lights out."

I heard several puffs of air, and then: "Lights are out."

The best way to see in darkness is to be born a dwarf—not only do they see better with less light, they can see three colors down into the infrared, and can find their way at a dead run through territory and conditions where you and I wouldn't have a prayer.

The best way wasn't open to me. The second best way to see well in darkness is, first, to have the heredity that gives you decent night vision; second, to eat your carrots, whether you like them or not—I don't; and third, to give your eyes enough time in darkness before you venture out into it.

Black is one of my favorite colors, particularly at night. The trouble is, it's the classic color of a thief. Similarly, it would have been nice to rub some black greasepaint over my face and hands, but that would have labeled me as someone skulking about.

Ahira gripped my shoulder for a moment. "Don't get too close, and don't get into trouble." He was always trying to keep me out of trouble, and it was only through the obvious necessity of it that he had agreed to my night walk.

"Trouble? Me?" I smiled. "How could anybody who looks this good get into trouble?"

He didn't chuckle, although his grim frown lightened a shade or two. "True enough. Don't try to get too close—you're much too high class to be concerned about the fine details of the Posts of Punishments. Just make a quick survey of the situation, then get back here."

"Sure."

What the well-dressed thief was wearing this year: black cotton breeches of a nice thick weave, neatly bloused in plain leather boots that were somewhat better made than they looked; a dark tan shirt, jauntily slashed to the waist, all that covered by a brown cloak whose collar would work as a hood, if need be. A particularly short shortsword, suspended from the swordbelt with cloth linkages, instead of metal—no clanking when I walk, thank you. A fine leather sap tucked into the belt—a footpad's weapon, but something a bodyguard might carry. Two braces of throwing knives hidden here and there, and a largish pouch slung pertly over the right shoulder, containing some money, a couple of flasks of healing draughts, and a few oddments. Gloves of the softest pigskin, which gripped the short woven leather rope quite nicely as I tied it into a rappelling rig, then passed one end of the long climbing rope through.

The street was quiet. With Ahira holding one end, I threw the other end over the edge, and stepped out into the night.

* * *

There's basically two ways around a city—you can stick to the main roads, or try to keep in alleys and back streets. I passed down several alleys before I found what I was looking for: a tavern across the street, its open door belching sailing songs into the night, and on this side of the street a raised walkway.

I pulled some dirt out, then stripped off my shoes, socks, gloves, cloak, belt, sword, and shirt, wrapped everything else tightly in the cloak, and stuffed the bundle under the walkway, patting dirt back into place over it.

Ahira was right. Somebody who looked the way I had wouldn't have any business skulking about the center of town, past the Posts of Punishment, alone or in company.

Shirtless, I straightened and slung the bag over my shoulder and strutted across the street toward the tavern.

First, a bit of beer. No, first, *alot* of beer.

The street was cold under my feet as I walked across the street, and through the broad door, into noise and light and singing.

"Hey," I said. "Is there nobody who will drink with a sailor?"

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

*In Which an
Old Acquaintance
Is Briefly Renewed*

He is the best sailor who can steer within fewest points of the wind, and exact a motive power out of the greatest obstacles.

—HENRY DAVID THOREAU

It's always seemed to me that sailors spend most of their time making up funny names for things.

—WALTER SLOVOTSKY

The first time I went sailing, I don't think it went terribly well. Some people have no sense of humor . . .

I had a summer job at a Y camp in Michigan—just driving a truck, actually, although that was more fun than it sounded. What I got to do was haul campers out on expeditions—canoeing down a river in Canada, hiking through the forest in the Upper Peninsula, survival camping in a national reserve, like that—and haul them back. All in the back of slightly modified trucks. Grossly illegal—all the laws specified school buses—but as long as there weren't any accidents, nobody was going to bother the Y.

There were two neat things about the job. One was the scenery; that part of the world is pretty. The other one appealed to my laziness: when there weren't campers to be driven around, I didn't have anything that I had to do.

So I hung around the camp. Ran five miles a day to keep my wind up; rebuilt a few forest paths and such, but mainly just goofed off around and read—Stash and Emma would send me a CARE package each week with five packs of M&Ms, ten new paperbacks, a couple pairs of socks, and a totally useless dozen condoms. (I didn't find any need for condoms in an all-boys' camp.)

One day, one of the campers—a sixth grader, I think—asked if I was willing to come out and skipper an E-scow for him and a few of his friends. It was a single-masted racing shell with twin daggerboards, fast and lovely as it skimmed across the lake, but if you didn't handle it just right, it could capsize in a breath of wind. Seems that while all five of them were very experienced sailors, the camp rules required an adult in charge, and I was considered one, being all of nineteen at the time.

It was strange. Mickey, the kid who was really in charge, would address me very formally—"Skipper, I think we should stand by to come about," and then I'd say, "Stand by to come about," and they'd framish the glimrod and farble the kezenpfauffer, or whatever needed to be done, and wait for me to respond to Mickey's nod with a "come about."

The only part they didn't like was when I told them stuff like, "All right, let's hoist up the landlubbers and batten down the hatches."

No sense of humor.

Particularly when I said, "Stand by to capsize."

* * *

"The thing is," my new friend said, his thick arm thrown across my shoulder, "is that the *Watersprite* may *look* like the slowest scow on the face of the Cirric . . ." actually, he said "Shirrick," but you get the idea ". . . and it may *smell* like the least-bailed excuse for a floating cesspool ever to dishonor the sewer-water in which it floats, and it may be*captained* by the stupidest man ever to risk falling overboard and poisoning the fish below, but, once you get used to her and her ways, she's even worse. Havanudda beer."

He was a broad, thick man, with a rippling sailor's beard that spilled down both cheeks, across his neck and down his chest. Beneath the beard, his face was sweaty and dirty in the light of the sputtering candles that dripped wax onto the filthy surface of the rough-hewn table. Absently, he crushed a beetle with his thumb, then drained some more beer, one hand on my knee.

I think he was about to launch into another long, drunken monologue—drunks do that, a lot—so I interposed another suggestion.

"So," I said, weaving in time with him, "you think I should not think about thinking about signing on." My slur was worse than his, but not much.

"Welen, my pet . . ." he waved a finger. He was trying to point, probably. "I think you'd be crazy to entertain the thought of considering contemplating the idea of thinking about signing on."

"Aw, it can't be as bad as all that, now can it?"

"Can't it now? I see right through you, Welen, and don't you think I don't. I know what you're up to."

I forced a warm smile. "Oh, you do, do you?" I didn't look toward the door, but with a bit of luck I could make it out into the night with a kick, a leap, and a dash.

"Don't you think I don't—been too long with dirt instead of a deck under your feet, eh? It shows, man, it shows. A man's got to eat—and drink, eh?—and a sailor's got to sail. I don't doubt that, Welen-pretty, but you can do better than the *Watersprite*, is all I say, except to add that you can't do worse."

He rose, wobbly as a newborn colt. "No time like the present—just let me finish this, and we're off. Hey, Tonen, Rufol—I'm off. Are you with me, or against me? Swear to the Fish, I do, you'll not find your way back alone. I think you are drunk, the two of you, the both of you are drunk."

"Drunk, us? No, just reefed a bit too tight," another sailor said, as he and yet another lurched to their feet, and we all lurched out into the night.

We staggered down the street, down the hill, toward the center of town, belting out a very pretty harmony on a sailing song usually used to time the pulling of a rope.

I took the baritone lead; I'd spent a fair amount of time impersonating—no, *being*—a sailor; it was one way to move along the coast and among the Shattered Islands without drawing any attention, and ships are always in need of crews.

The light-negligence that I'd seen higher up the hill wasn't echoed in the center of town. The poles were ringed by a dozen lanterns, and a ten-man squad of soldiers stood guard from nearby. If I had to, I would have bet there was another troop in the dark of the lord's house, across the way, and certainly plenty more within call at the barracks. Coastal cities had always been subject to pirate raids, and local lords knew to keep troops handy.

"—so haul them hard, sailors,
Pull them down and away,
You'll work hard for your money,
No drinking today.
So haul them hard, sailors—"

One of the troop broke away and stalked across the darkened ground toward us.

"Be still, the lot of you," he said, smiling, "M'lord sleeps with his windows open, and if you wake him you'll not be finding him amused."

My new friend threw his arm companionably about the soldier's shoulders. "He doesn't like singing? What kind of lord is this?"

The poor soldier gagged at the smell of his breath. I didn't blame him. The sailor released him, then staggered toward the nearest of the posts, dragging me by the arm.

"Come look at what we have here. Eh, but *whatdo* we have here? Skinny little birds on their perches. Hello, skinny little bird? Would you like to come down from there and perch on my face?"

From the cage, Bast's skeletal face looked listlessly down, his eyes dull. There was no sign of recognition; I doubt he could even have focused properly. I wouldn't have wanted to bet he could take another day. Kenda looked even worse, and the two in the cages beyond were unmoving, perhaps already dead.

The cages were secured by locks, not apparently welded shut. No, not welded shut at all—as Kenda shifted position slightly, the door squeaked against its catch. Not good, but not as bad as it could have been—it was possible that they had been welded in there. There isn't a This Side lock I can't open, given the right tools and a few minutes. I had the right tools in my pack—the few minutes would be a problem.

Never mind that for now. Just get information.

One guard sat in the door at the base of the siege tower, a tall, thick column probably concealing a circular staircase—it was thicker than would have been needed for just a ladder, and it would be much easier to manhandle bound prisoners up a staircase than a ladder.

"Heyheyhey," the guard said. "No talking to the condemned, eh? Be off and on your way."

We staggered off into the night, belching out another chorus.

Dockside, my thick-fingered friend let the other two on first. "I want to have a little, oh, talk with our new friend, eh?" he said.

The other two laughed as they reeled off down the docks toward the narrow gangplank. They knew about his predilections.

I'd worked them out a while back, but I wasn't ready for it when he clumsily threw his arms around my neck and said, "Was that good enough, Walter Slovotsky?"

He didn't sound drunk at all.

* * *

His smile was crooked. "Did we find out enough, I asked you," he said quietly, then raised his voice. "*What's the matter with you? I jus' wanna be friends, don' you wanna be friends?*"

"You should ask how I know you," he went on, lowering his voice. "You don't remember me, but we met once before. Years ago."

He fingered his neck, at the base of the black beard that ran down his chin and neck and into his chest. Perhaps it was the flickering lamplight, or maybe I did see, almost hidden beneath the mat of beard, white scars that an iron collar would have left behind.

Clumsy fingers groped where his collar would have been. Had been.

"Push me away now, Walter Slovotsky," he whispered. "A quick curse, too, if you please."

"I do it with women, damn you—keep your hands off my cock, or I'll geld you," I shouted, as I shoved him, hard. "I swear I'll cut your balls off and stuff them up your nose."

"Aw, *let's be friends.*" And, again, *sotto voce*: "We sail in the morning. I'm not a brave man, or I'd stay

and help you and your friends." He backhanded me across the face, hard enough to sting, no more. "That for your shyness." And, again, quietly: "If you're leaving by water, the two fastest ships in port are the *Butter* and the *Delenia*, but careful of both captains. They do much business here." He raised his hands in defeat.

"I know when I've been told no," he said, staggering away into the dark, gesturing a farewell with a casual wave.

I didn't even know his name.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

In Which a Hearty Breakfast Is Eaten

In skating over thin ice, our safety is in our speed.

—RALPH WALDO EMERSON

Audacity is a virtue that should always be practiced with caution.

—WALTER SLOVOTSKY

The others were all up waiting for me. Ahira hauled me up into the window so fast it felt like flying.

"How did it go?" he asked. "Did you find out what we need?"

"Maybe." I nodded. "I'll need to think about it."

"See," he said with a relaxed smile. I liked that smile. I hadn't seen it for awhile, not since Bieme. "You didn't have to get all that close, eh?"

I shrugged. "I guess I should have listened to you."

* * *

"Sometimes things are real simple," I explained to three others, as we gathered around breakfast in the central room the next morning. "I know the easy way to get them out."

Down in the town center, our friends were spending another day starving and frying in the hot sun. Tenny was off running an errand.

Here, sunlight splashed in through the breeze-stirred curtains, onto the four-person dining table and the silver trays heavily laden with rashers of bacon, chicken pies, and little ceramic ramekins holding coddled

eggs, among other things. Breakfast is traditionally the biggest meal of the day in Brae, which is fine by me.

Ahira cocked his head to one side. "Sure." Using a pair of silver tongs to protect himself from the heat, he took the lid off a baking pot, and sniffed. "Some sort of stew, I think." He slopped some onto his plate, and mopped at it with half of a golden fist-sized roll. "Hmmm . . . not bad. Kid, maybe."

I reached for a roll—it was still warm from the oven—then tore it in half and dipped one end into a crock of raspberry preserves. It was delightfully sweet, with maybe just a touch too much tartness, and the seeds crunched between my teeth.

Andrea wasn't having any of it—she and her son were only picking at their food.

Ahira crunched into a thick rasher of bacon, then washed it down with a swallow of deeply purple wine. "So tell me how we do it the easy way," he said, a suspicious twitch to his grin.

"You and Jason take over the siege tower, climb up, and run a cable through all four cages," I said. I dipped the other hunk of bread into a cup of golden butter, and bit into that. Hmm . . . it was hard to decide which way was better—I downed both halves of the roll in two bites. "We splice one end to the other, tying them together. Meanwhile, I wrap det cord around the base of each pole, and light the fuse.

"Just before it all blows, Ellegon swoops down out of the sky, and grabs the whole mess just as the explosives cut the poles free."

Jason frowned in disgust. Andy shook her head, tolerantly.

"I think I see some problems with that," Ahira said, dryly.

"Only a few," I said. "One, we don't have a cable. Two, last time we talked about it, Lou figured he's about five years away from being able to produce det cord or any other good plastique equivalent, so that part doesn't work—the closest thing we have is a handful of grenades, and they won't do it.

"Three, there's no rendezvous set up with Ellegon for another eighteen days, so we can't count on him for this.

"Four, there's too many soldiers out there, and they'd cut us down before we got anywhere."

There was a pyramid of three tiny roasted chickens on one of the serving plates; I took the top one and tore off the drumstick. It came off too easily—either the bird had been overcooked, or I was more pumped up than I was trying to affect. Not that it matters: the skin of the drumstick was crisp and garlicky; the meat was rich and firm.

Tennetty burst through the doors, shut them behind her, and gave a quick nod as she took her seat at the table and tore into a loaf of bread. "Passage for eight on the *Delenia*," she said, from around a huge mouthful. "We leave at noon, tomorrow."

"Boarding?"

"Any time in the morning, from first light on. One problem, though—she's riding too low for her dock space, and they're moving her out to a mooring today so they can finish loading her. Long Dock needs work—it's been silting up underneath, and Lord Daeran had a problem with his last set of silkies

workers."

"Launches?"

She nodded. "Her own. Two. Each can carry eight, including crew. Both will be tied up at Long Dock from sundown on."

Andrea had caught on. "We've done this one before," she said. "One day after arriving on This Side."

Once we were safely on the ship, we would have a common interest with the captain in getting the hell out of here, just as we had done, long ago, with Avair Ganness and the *Ganness' Pride*.

"Almost makes me feel nostalgic." Her smile brightened the whole room as she reached for a chicken breast and tore into it with strong white teeth. "How about the other part?"

"All a replay." I shrugged. "Ahira and I did that one, too, the time we ended up having to put your husband on the throne." I shook my head. "This time, though, it's a solo."

It would have to be me, and me alone. I'm not a hero or anything, but Ahira wouldn't be able to get in. It was totally not Andy's sort of thing; Jason was just too young to pull it all off. Tennyty could do the threatening part of it—and well—but not the rest of it. I sat back, trying to think of a way I could make this work with a fortyish woman wizard, a reliable dwarf, a still-green kid, or a one-eyed psychopath in the lead role, but couldn't.

"Uh, excuse me? Last time you did this?" Tennyty cocked her head to one side. "As I recall, last time you went face-to-face with royalty was the time you got Baron Furnael killed, no?"

"Close enough." I nodded. "Hey, I'll have to do it better this time."

Jason looked from Ahira to me, and back to Ahira, and then back to me. "You love this, don't you?"

"Truth to tell, Jason-me-boy, I do. Consider it a personality defect." It also scared me shitless, but not out of an appetite. I reached for another piece of chicken.

One does have to keep a sense of proportion about such things.

* * *

While our friends baked in the hot sun, we spent the day preparing, and resting, and eating.

I had to get up too early for breakfast the next morning. It was important to be at the residence early.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

*In Which I Have
a Pleasant Chat
with Lord Daeran*

The same man cannot be skilled in everything; each has his special excellence.

—EURIPIDES

There's a balance you have to learn, between being able to do a little of everything, and therefore nothing at all real well, and becoming overspecialized and completely useless outside your specialization. Learning that balance is, I've always believed, part of becoming an adult. I figure I'm about twenty years overdue to learn it.

—WALTER SLOVOTSKY

Old family story—and it's one of the few that my mother used to tell, so it could be true. Nah. But . . .

It seems that when my parents were trying to have me, there was some trouble conceiving. The doctors didn't know much about infertility then, and were trying whole bunches of things, some of which made sense, others of which were just patent nostrums. Schedules, diets, temperature taking, boxer shorts—the whole bit.

Finally, according to Mom, the doctor said, "Look. Stop trying so hard. It may just be a matter of relaxation. So take it easy, don't worry about schedules, don't worry about time of the month. Just do it whenever you feel like, okay?"

"That's why," Emma would say, her mouth quirked into a smile that caused Stash to blush just a bit, "we can never, ever go back to Howard Johnson's."

* * *

The way to a man's heart is through his stomach—or his ribcage, if you're playing for keeps; the way into a lord's residence is through the kitchen.

It only stands to reason—the formal front door is for formal visitors, and is well-guarded by people wanting to know the reason for somebody entering. There was a lot of traffic, mind; Lord Daeran wasn't just idle royalty, but like most of the rulers of the small domains along the Cirric, the equivalent of the village warden, as well—his time was spent in negotiating rates for dock space and bargaining over the cost of potted fish.

On the other hand, given the local refrigeration problems—there isn't any—there are constantly people arriving with food deliveries. Particularly in early morning, before the sun is fully up, before even those who are up and working are really awake.

Well, give them credit—this isn't the way an attacking army would work its way in.

The trick was to look like I knew where I was going, and to be sure that I didn't end up in a closet.

Fairly straightforward, actually—the kitchens occupied the alley side of the residence, and there was only one open door, through which I could hear the clanging of pots and shouting of cooks. (Why all cooks shout is a mystery to me.)

I was through the outer kitchens and into the cooking room itself before anybody braced me. It was a burly woman, who vaguely reminded me of U'len, although this one had an even meaner expression on

her face, if that could be believed. She had been stirring a huge stockpot filled with bones and carrots and onions, but she stopped to look up and glare at me.

"Sweetmeats for Lord Daeran," I said, bowing deeply, holding out a small wooden box and a piece of parchment to her.

She didn't take either. "What am I supposed to do with these?"

"Lady, I've ridden all of a day and a night to bring this from Fenevar and Lord Ulven." I spread my hands. "The box is to be properly presented to Lord Daeran; the parchment is to be imprinted with the mark of Lord Daeran's Valet, attesting to my having delivered it in good order." I gestured at the parchment. "Good lady, I am sure that you can mark it for him, if you would be so—"

She eyed the broken wax seal that my carelessly spread fingers didn't quite obscure. "And what am I supposed to do about this?"

I smiled innocently. "Which?"

"This seal. It appears to be broken. Will I find some sweetmeats missing inside?"

"Please, please, good lady—do I look like the sort who would steal a sweetmeat from the likes of Lord Daeran?"

She nodded. "Yes, you do. Now, do I look like the kind of fool who would sign for something I knew to be short?" She shooed me away. "Now, now, Lord Daeran is normally a patient man, but be along with you," she said, brushing me toward the inward door. "Find somebody else to sign for it. Our lord has little patience."

"Oh, please." Please don't throw me in that briar patch.

"Be along with you."

One down.

* * *

I made my way up the service stairway, cold stone rough beneath my naked feet. Bare feet are quieter than shoes.

The next part was going to be easy. We knew where the lord's room would be—when you've got an appearance balcony outside, it's not hard to guess.

Security might be tightened up shortly, but it would be a while. Word of what he was doing to the engineers would get back to Home, but it would take tendays; Daeran would want to tighten things up soon, but he wouldn't want to put everybody on full war footing *too* early, for fear that his troops would lose their edge.

Alternately, he might assume that Lou Riccetti would think of contract engineers as labor to be hired out, but nobody to fight a war over.

In the last, he was right. Too much land and too many countries and domains lay between Home and Brae over which to fight a war.

In any case, Lord Daeran's quarters were going to be on the second floor, and there weren't going to be any guards in front of his door, although he would probably sleep with the door locked.

I stopped at the beaded curtain across the entryway to the second floor, listening at the beaded curtain that hung over the doorway. Listening for the sound of feet padding down the hall, anything.

Nothing. Cautiously, slowly, gingerly, I pushed a strand of beads out of the way. There was no reason at all for there to be a guard standing in front of the door. So, there would be no guard standing in front of the door.

All I had to do was convince the guard standing in front of the door.

* * *

I eased the strand back and stood there too long, thinking. Not good, but harmless this time.

The obvious thing to do was to pull out the pistol and point it at him, because everybody knows that when somebody points a gun at you, you just do whatever they say, right?

Well, no.

A Grateful Dead fan once got backstage by buying a pizza and walking past all of the security stations loudly proclaiming, "Pizza for Jerry Garcia. Pizza for Jerry Garcia." It worked just fine, and, so I hear, the band was kind of nice about it, and let him hang out backstage for the rest of the show. And they ate the pizza, too.

On the other hand, some would-be presidential gatecrasher once tried just that with Jerry Ford—"Pizza for President Ford. Pizza for President Ford" and he didn't even get to the Secret Service. He was arrested at the first police checkpoint and spent the rest of the weekend in jail while the lab checked out the pizza to be sure the pepperoni wouldn't explode or something.

All of which goes to show that impertinence can work for you or against you.

The box held my finery—I had been intending to change in Lord Daeran's room before waking him, figuring that the plain muslin tunic and leggings of the lower classes might not intimidate him.

I dressed quickly.

The very best guards are the most literal-minded. If they have specific orders to cover a situation, they obey them; they show no initiative at all.

On the other hand, rulers, particularly harsh rulers, tend to want to have things both ways. They punish any violation of orders, but they also hand out punishments for violating unwritten, unvoiced orders—regardless of what the literal orders were, regardless of any conflict between the written and un-. Keeping quiet around a sleeping lord would be an unwritten, but enforced order.

I walked right through the beaded curtain, gesturing as imperiously as possible to the guard.

"Don't you have ears, man?" I asked, loudly. "Didn't you hear me call you?" I asked, slapping my hand hard against my thigh as I walked toward him. "Look at this mess," I said, gesturing back toward the hall. "Have you ever seen anything so—"

Either they don't hire terribly bright men as guards in Brae, or he wasn't a morning person. He hadn't decided what to do when I hit him hard in the throat with one hand—no windup; I'm good at that—and then slammed the box into the corner of his jaw—a blow to the chin gives a nice shock to the brain stem—before his panic circuits cut in. By then, it was too late. His eyes rolled up, his knees buckled, and he collapsed.

I didn't quite catch him before his head bounced on the floor—ouch!—but I quickly hauled him through the darkened doorway and into Lord Daeran's room. I've gotten pretty good at tying people up—the basic trick is to start by wiring the thumbs together, tight.

The room was large, light and airy, plaster walls newly whitewashed, the expanse broken by an occasional painting. A black-and-white striped Nevelenian rug covered the floor. Thick, too; I sank to my ankles. Lord Daeran lay snoring on the broad bed. Alone. Good.

The broad windows to the balcony were secured by a bar. I carefully lifted the bar and set it down on the floor, then pulled the windows open with one hand while drawing my dagger with the other.

Lord Daeran's bed was a huge canopied four-poster, silk ropes secured to each post. Hmmm . . . it was obviously for him, but which way? I smiled. Nah. I'd never get away with it.

It only took me a minute to set myself up.

Well, no point in wasting time—I turned him over, stuffed a wadded end of blanket in his mouth, and set the point of my dagger under his nose as he came very, very quickly awake.

* * *

"One loud word, Lord Daeran," I whispered, visibly trembling, "one shouted syllable, one raised voice, and I'll discuss this with your successor." I moved the point of the knife from his nose to his throat, and kept up a nice, vibrato quaver. I do a good tremble. "Understood?"

My voice cracked a bit around the edges, which I think scared him more than anything else. I wouldn't want a nervous man holding a knife to my neck, either.

Under other circumstances, I suspect Lord Daeran would have cut a better figure, but sleep had splayed his long goatee and bristly mustache, and fear had his eyes wide.

He didn't really want to nod—not with the knife ready to cut his nose off—but managed to move his head up and down a fraction of an inch.

I pulled the end of the blanket out of his mouth, and replaced it with the neck of a metal flask. I thumbed the flask open.

"Have a drink," I said, raising the flask to his lips and the point of the knife to his right eye.

It was pretty foul stuff, but he choked it down.

"Swallow good, now," I said, still obviously scared shitless.

I let out a sigh as I moved away from the bed. I set the flask down on the table, took a small glass vial out of my pouch. The cork came out with a loud *pop*.

"That's all over." I raised a hand as I relaxed into a chair, a man whose work was done. "Just keep your hands away from your mouth for a few moments, and we don't have to worry about you purging yourself. As an alternative, if you want to find out how much your successor loves you, just let out a yell. I'll dump the antidote out on the rug or shatter the vial against the wall. By nightfall you'll have died a particularly horrible death."

I tapped the point of my knife against the glass, and he winced. It was starting to get to him.

I smiled. "Careful. Don't get any on the bed." I didn't turn my head decently aside as he vomited onto the floor, a quick stream of green foulness. "Stage one. Even if you get to a bottle of healing draughts now, it won't do you any good. This mixture is special—the Matriarch of the Healing Hand could probably cure you, or perhaps the Spidersect Senior Tarantula, or whatever they call him. I don't think your locals can manage it."

Wiping his mouth on the back of his sleeve, he was able to summon up more composure than I would have had in his situation. "I take it there's an alternative." He tried to smooth his beard and hair into place.

"Yeah," I said. "You can get my friends out of your cages, down to Long Dock, and all of us away from here. You've changed your mind—they're going to be banished, not slowly executed."

I had been hoping for some quietly blustering threats, but he just nodded. "Who are you?"

I bowed. "Walter Slovotsky, at your service." His eyes widened marginally; he had recognized the name. "Or the other way around, eh?"

"So," he said. "I free your friends, and then I get the antidote? Enough to counteract the poison?"

"Sure." I nodded. "It doesn't take much—this is easily three times as much as is needed. To cure you, that is. You will still hurt some. Probably spend half your next tenday squatting over a thundermug—but it'll be loose stools; at least you won't be shitting out your whole insides."

He looked at me out of narrowed eyes. "I'm not sure I believe you."

* * *

I had been counting on selling him on the story.

It only stood to reason—I had taken a huge risk in sneaking myself in, and for what? Just to feed him a mixture of water, iodine, pepper oil, ipecac root, and some slightly raunchy mayonnaise we had pilfered from yesterday's breakfast and let sit out in the sun?

Of course not.

The bigger the bluff, the better chance it has of working, and this was about as big as I could arrange on short notice.

Hmm . . . we could always fall back on Plan B. The only trouble was, I had been counting on this one, and I didn't have a Plan B. I mean, I had the general outlines, but none of the nuances, and the nuances are always the best part. It ought to start with a thrown knife in his throat, to stifle his screams, and I could take it from there. The window? Not for me, but yes—strip the guard's tunic off, and throw him out the window. He would be the assassin, killed while trying to escape.

There was a desk next to the window; I could probably hide under it while everything went to hell, and maybe slip out during the confusion.

I'd gotten out of worse, but not often, and one of these days I wouldn't. When you're playing table stakes, you can't always push everything you have into the pot, and I had, and the son of a bitch was going to—

* * *

A universe was born in a cloud of gas, grew to a majestic spectrum of stars, and then aged and died to cold iron stars in the moment between when he said, "I'm not sure I believe you" and "You'll have to take the rest of the poison to persuade me that the antidote works."

Slowly, he picked up the flask and held it out to me. "I want to see some of it pour into your mouth."

I swallowed the horrible, thick stuff—God, we had done too good a job on it.

"See?" I said, as my gorge rose. I hate ipecac root. Waves of nausea dropped me to my knees as my stomach purged itself, but I held the flask out, threatening to throw it, as he retrieved a dagger from somewhere next to his bed.

I wiped my mouth on his sheets, then carefully, deliberately swallowed a third of the antidote, such as it was. It burned its way down. Just what I needed on a nauseous stomach: a shot of Riccetti's Best corn whiskey.

He hesitated for a long moment, then dropped the point of the dagger. "I guess I'd best get dressed," he said. He was already planning to betray me, of course. I hoped I was one step ahead of him.

* * *

Two soldiers lowered Bast to the dirt of the town square, laying him next to where Kenda was already recovering—a dose of healing draughts was not going to do Mardik or Veren any good. There's nothing you can do for the dead.

It was a good time to think about that, and to think about Bast and Kenda, about Tenny, Jason, Ahira, Andrea, and myself, for that matter. A horrible way to die.

I looked Daeran in the eye. It would be a mistake to move my free hand toward a knife. I had to remember that I had the antidote to the "poison" that still had his stomach a bit queasy, and that was weapon enough.

The fact that something isn't true has nothing at all to do with your not remembering it.

Daeran kept staring at my right hand, the hand that held the flask, measuring his chances of securing it in one leap, and deciding that he didn't like the odds. I kept my eye on the hefty soldier behind me who kept trying to circle around me so that he could move in and grab my arms. Eventually, he might try it. Or maybe not. I'd have to be ready to toss the antidote aside, and tell Lord Daeran that there was more on the boat already, but I wasn't at all sanguine about that working.

People would have gathered in the square, but squads had been detailed to close off the base of the streets.

Kenda was able to sit up by herself, and raised the bottle to Bast's cracked, bloody lips.

He swallowed once, convulsively, and the all-too-familiar miracle happened: pink washed most of the ashen color from his face, and the black hollows that were his eyes filled out. He was still half-starved—there was only so much that a healing draught can do. It would be days before he could walk by himself, and weeks before he could fight. If he could fight—self-defense was part of an engineer's training, but I don't remember Bast as being terribly good at it.

"No more than ten soldiers," I said to Lord Daeran. "One each to carry my friends, eight more to make you feel secure."

The fullback behind me took a step forward, his foot scuffing the gravel. I was supposed to turn around and look at him, while the free safety to my left dived in and grabbed the flask. Granted, the flask didn't contain anything important. Just my life, and my friends' lives. That made it easy for me to forget that the liquid was only a gill of corn whiskey.

I raised the flask above my head, ready to dash it to the ground. "Tell them, Daeran."

He motioned them to desist. "Corporal Kino, pick out ten men. Two to carry Walter Slovo'sky's friends." He included the two football players, of course.

* * *

Under a sky filled with puffy, peaceful clouds, a cool wind blew off the Cirric, blowing the smell of my own fear away.

Tennetty and Jason were waiting at the end of the dock. Jason's pistol was at his side, his finger near but off the trigger. Tennetty had her sword out in one hand, a flintlock in her other hand, and another brace of pistols in her belt.

Maybe three hundred feet off the end of the dock, the *Delenia* floated, secured at bow and stern by anchor and mooring. She was getting ready to leave. Her mainsail and mizzen were up, their booms swung out by the wind, sheets hanging loose as they flapped and cracked in the stiff breeze. The jib had been raised, but was bound to the foremast. Setting it would take only a few moments. Raise anchor, drop the mooring, haul in on the sheets, and the ketch would be off. It was rigged for several additional sails—they're called staysails on the Other Side; This Side the term is "leach sails"—but that would just add a little speed.

Andrea and Ahira stood on the high rear deck, talking with the captain. I don't know exactly what they were saying, but I hope they were being persuasive.

I don't think the sailors in the two launches were any too pleased. A Cirric sailor has to be able to fight as well as run, but the *Delenia* was a fast ketch, and they were undoubtedly much more practiced at running than fighting.

"The flask, if you please," Daeran said, holding out his hand, "and then you may load yourself and your friends in the boats and go."

I laughed. "Really? Do I look that stupid?" I held the flask out over the water. "We'll all go out to the ship, and then send the flask back in one of the launches."

"How do I know you won't simply kill me once we're aboard?"

Jason spoke up. "You have the word of a Cullinane."

There are parts of the Eren regions where that would have settled it all.

Brae wasn't one of them, apparently. "No," Daeran finally said. "I don't trust any of you. You will go out in one launch, and six of my men and I will bring the prisoners along in the other. We will get on board, and then make our exchanges, and then each of us will go our separate ways."

I thought about it for a moment, and then shrugged. "Sure."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

*In Which I Make a Trade
and We Seek to Bid Farewell
to the Friendly Natives of Brae*

Crescit amor nummi quantum ipsa pecunia crescit. (The love of money grows as the money itself grows.)

—JUVENAL

So I said to myself, a two-way split can be profitable, but a one-way split might even be more than twice as good.

—WALTER SLOVOTSKY

Logistics, formal or in-, has never been something that I've found terribly interesting. It's always been somebody else's department. Riccetti, now . . . hell, Lou would have worked out the problems just as a matter of practice. Logistics was why we put Little Pittsburgh in Holtun, rather than Home—Home is out of the way, and too near elven lands for the comfort of many, myself included.

That's Lou. Me, I had been vaguely wondering how they had managed to load the ship, but I hadn't really thought much about it until the launch pulled around the far side of it, revealing the floating dock.

Well, actually, it was more of a small, thin barge, stabilized at either end by floating barrels lashed to the water line, which presumably didn't let it dip or rock much. A wooden frame hung over the railing of the boat, basically locking the barge into place at the waterline. Clearly, the goods had been placed on it back on dockside, and then the whole thing poled out to the *Delenia*, the frame tied into place. That way, the barge could be emptied into the cargo net and the net lifted up by the winch with some reasonable amount of security for both crew and cargo.

Above, two crewmen were finishing securing the cargo crane, the cargo netting already having been neatly folded over the rail and lashed into place. They were late with that. You can't actually use the crane unless you've got the sail booms either stowed or, more commonly, lashed to the other side of the

ship—they both swing through the same space, as the long-arm crane's boom has to be long enough to swing through a huge arc to provide the mechanical advantage that will allow one or two seamen to move a ton of cargo from dock to deck.

During my time at sea, working my way from port to port, I always used to like running the winch and crane. It's hard work, which I grant is atypical for me, but there's something special about being able to handle such massive forces, even by indirection.

Then again, maybe not.

I thought for a moment that it was all going to break loose as Tennyetny leaped lightly from the launch to the floating dock, then helped me up, the flask still clasped carefully in my hand, as though everything depended on it.

Which it did.

Daeran and his soldiers followed us onto the floating barge, two of them carefully lowering Bast and Kenda to the ground. Above, the captain, his hands on the rail, leaned over.

I disliked him at first sight—from the neatly trimmed beard, framing the lips that were parted in an exhibition of straight, white teeth, down to the v-shaped torso of an acrobat or bodybuilder, all the way to tree-trunk legs. All nicely bronzed, rather than browned.

Pretty men bother me.

"Greetings," he said, his voice deceptively calm. Or maybe not. Maybe maybe he was just an idiot who hadn't figured out how easily, how quickly everything could go to hell. "I am Erol Lyneian, captain of the *Delenia*."

I nodded. "Walter Slovotsky. Captain of my own soul."

"Oh, shit," Tennyetny muttered. "I thought you were going to react like this."

"What?"

"You don't like competition, Slovotsky," she said. "Pay attention."

"I see," he went on, "that we have a problem. Why don't all of you come up and discuss it?"

It was just as well that Tennyetny had cautioned me—it had been my intention to make the final exchange aboard ship, but something in his voice made me want to change my mind.

It was still the right move. "Very well," I said.

Ahira was waiting for me at the top of the ladder. "I think," he said, "that we may have a problem." His voice had taken on that level, overly calm tone he only used when things were just about to break. "*Delenia* and Erol Lyneian have been trading here for too long, and they're on good terms."

"How good?"

"Good enough that Erol Lyneian isn't even scared."

That was bad. Part of the plan involved the captain being sufficiently frightened of the local lord that he would want out of there, and quickly, not trusting Lord Daeran to believe that his involvement with us was innocent. It's sort of like Big Mike's routine with the stoolie, except Lord Daeran played more for keeps than any bunch of New Jersey street hoods.

Andy's eyes were glazed over, almost completely. If I'd had the genes for it, I suspect I'd have seen nascent spells hovering over her. But if everything went off, she would be like a flamethrower operator in combat—everybody's favorite target. She might have time to get a muttered, unrememberable syllable out, but she might not.

What we needed was something that would be worth more to Erol Lyneian than the ability to trade in Brae. A lot more. He only had a crew of five—it doesn't take many to run a well-designed ketch, and the more labor you have, the narrower the profits—and things didn't look like an even match, even with them on our side.

On the other hand, if everything hit the fan, he would know there was no guarantee he would make it out alive.

I smiled at him, as though to say, *You can count on being the first to go*, and he smiled back and made a gracious gesture, as though to say, *After you, my dear Alphonse*.

Okay. I know: there were twelve of them against five of us, and I've faced worse odds than twelve to five.

On the other hand, Daeran's soldiers looked like they knew what they were doing, both singly—which was bad enough—and worse, collectively. As though to underline that, three of Daeran's bruisers leaned their heads together and started divvying up targets.

Bad, bad, bad. We could probably take on the six, but it would be close, and if the seamen came in on the other side . . .

I did a quick sum of the party's possessions, including coin, gem, potions, and everything, and decided that wasn't going to do it, even if we threw in my charm. A sea trader has to be something of an adventurous type, but his ship comes first, unless—and maybe not even if—you've got enough to buy him another ship.

Lord Daeran had decided that wasn't going to do it, either. He held out his hand. "The antidote, please," he said, smiling, his men gathered around him in a semicircle. "Then we'll all leave," he said, lying, thinking that I would have to decide to believe him.

That's how a Mexican standoff ends. With somebody making a fatal error.

"What would you trade for passage on your ship, Erol Lyneian?" I asked.

"Oh," he said, idly, "you've already paid for passage." He didn't expect me to believe him, and I didn't.

Well, we'd been saving this for years. It was even a secret that anybody but the Engineer knew how to make it, although all of us Other Siders did.

"I will tell you how to make gunpowder," I said. "Not the magical slaver imitation. Real gunpowder,

black powder. It's very cheap to make. I'd tell you right now, except that they would know how, too."

Ahira's jaw dropped, and Jason's eyes grew wide. I wasn't looking at Andy and Tenny, but I don't imagine I would have seen them beaming approval.

Look. It wasn't the best idea in the world. Maybe it wasn't even a good idea. The best I can say for it is that I'd just given Lord Daeran and Erol Lyneian a huge conflict of interest. One of them as the source of real gunpowder would mean an immense shower of wealth; two would mean just another competitive business. As the sole non-Home possessor of the secret, Erol Lyneian would be a happy ship owner sailing from port to port, selling cheaply made gunpowder at high prices; if it could be bought competitively, it was just another commodity.

If I'd had a day or more to think it over, I can't imagine anything else I could have said that would have made Erol Lyneian want to side with us, rather than with Lord Daeran. I've thought about it since, and I still can't come up with an alternative.

There was only one trouble in this admittedly brilliant piece of improvisation: I could see by the look in Erol Lyneian's eye that he didn't believe me.

* * *

I only realized that Lord Daeran did believe when he lunged for me, wrestling the flask from my hand as he shoved me up against the rail.

In retrospect, of course, it only stands to reason. I'd spent some time persuading Lord Daeran of my sincerity, and it had worked—he went for the flask of supposed antidote, after all. He was disposed to believe me; I could have sold him the Brooklyn Bridge, even though he wouldn't have had the slightest idea what a Brooklyn is. Erol Lyneian, on the other hand, had just met me, and had yet to discover what a charming and reliable fellow I am.

Things went to hell quickly.

One reason that wizards need good bodyguards is that in a fight, a wizard is everybody's first target; having Andy free and operating would have ended things in our favor quickly.

Two soldiers jumped at her; out of the corner of my eye I saw Andy collapse from a blow to the head, and Tenny hack down at the soldier who then tried to pin her against the deck, but I was busy with my own fight.

This would, in the old days, have been a great time for Karl to be there.

Once, when a trap we set for slavers went suddenly sour, he ended up inside a circle of four swordsmen—and good ones, too—armed with nothing more than an improvised quarterstaff. In about four seconds, it was all over—he had hit them hard, and fast, and they were down.

But Karl was dead and gone, and all we had was me.

I did the best I could—I flung a throwing knife into Lord Daeran's belly, and lashed out with my foot at the nearest of the soldiers, sending him crashing into one of his fellows.

That gave me enough time to get my sword free.

I batted a knife out of the way and slipped my blade in between a soldier's ribs. His bubbling scream cut off as he twisted spasmodically away, my blade jamming in his ribs, taking my sword with him. Ten years before, even five years before, I would have moved fast enough to extricate the blade, to twist it loose, before it was caught, but I was getting old and slow.

We would have had no chance at all if it hadn't been for Jason's revolver and for Ahira. The dwarf somehow got hold of a huge boarding pole, and flailed it around like a quarterstaff, hitting one of Lord Daeran's men so hard that he actually broke through the railing and slammed down hard on the floating dock below.

Jason's revolver spat flame and smoke at one of the soldiers, echoed by a gout of blood and gore from his thigh. Screaming, the soldier fell heavily, across Bast.

Bast's arms moved spasmodically, clumsy hands flailing away at the soldier's face. He was doing the best he could, but he wasn't going to be any help.

I ducked under a butt-stroke from a spear and lunged for the owner of it, drawing one of my Therranji garrottes as I did. I faked at him with my left hand, then neatly looped the garrotte over his head with my right, drawing it tight with a jerk that should have taken his head half off.

Face already purpling, he staggered away, fingers clawing uselessly at his throat. It would take a bolt cutter to save him now, and I wasn't about to go digging in my kit for ours.

But there were so many of them; even without Erol Lyneian and his sailors taking part, there were just too many of them for us to take at such close range. I should have thought it out better. I should have insisted that Jason stand back, out of range, before everything hit the fan, but that sort of thing had always been Karl's department, and Karl was dead.

One soldier reached Jason, pulling his revolver down, his body shuddering at the shot that ripped through his belly and out his back, but before Jason could free the weapon two others were on him.

Tennetty had just fired one of her flintlocks, although I didn't see what, if anything, she hit. Moving even faster than I'd have thought she could, she was on the back of one of the soldiers wrestling with Jason, her shiny bowie rising then falling, then rising and falling again, now redly wet.

Jason managed to free himself and fire off two more quick shots, but his revolver clicked empty.

The revolver.

It fired cartridges, filled with the smokeless powder that Lou Riccetti and his top assistants had spent years perfecting; for now, it was one of two, one of only two repeating pistols, the most advanced weaponry in the world.

Jason was Karl Cullinane's son, and Karl Cullinane would have done his damndest to make sure that a weapon that advanced didn't fall into foreign hands. Jason Cullinane tossed the pistol over his shoulder, over the railing.

A priceless piece of blued steel tumbled end-over-end through the air, arcing outward.

I think that was when I heard Tennetty scream, as a sword pinned her by the shoulder to a mast, her knife falling from her useless fingers. I know that was when Jason went down under a rush of bodies. It

was too late for him to get his sword free—

Something caught me upside the head, shaking the whole universe for a moment. I staggered, tried to recover as I drew my belt knife and stabbed backwards, rewarded by a scream.

"Walter, we—" I didn't get to hear what Ahira was trying to say. The largest of the soldiers hit him with a flying tackle, neatly knocking the dwarf, his arms spread wide in helplessness, backwards through the hole in the railing, like a cue ball smacking into the eight, and the eight into the pocket.

Except that the pocket here was deep water.

Very deep water.

"No."

No, it was going to be okay. Ahira was tough. When he hit the floating dock, his superior musculature and thicker bones would protect him. But he had been hit hard, and at a sharp angle, and it arced him out past—

I can still hear his scream of terror, a high wailing cry. I can still see him falling backwards, out of control, his fingers reaching for the floating dock, missing it by inches. I can still see the splash he made, and see his wide eyes, and the panic written on his face as the water closed over it.

Dwarves don't float.

Dwarves can't swim.

Dwarves sink like a stone.

"No," I shouted. Asshole. You'd think that a man would learn, well before he's my age, that wanting something not to be so has never, ever changed it, that it doesn't matter what you want, what you desire, what you need, but what you do.

Reflexively, foolishly, idiotically, uselessly, I reached out a hand, but it was useless. The water was eight, ten feet below the rail, and Ahira had already vanished from sight.

Something hit me alongside my right ear, I think.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

*In Which a Friend
Has a Few Final Words
with Lord Daeran*

Pride, envy, avarice—these are the sparks have set on fire the hearts of all men.

—DANTE ALIGHIERI

I can think of two things I've been waiting my whole life to say. A friend of mine recently stole one of them.

—WALTER SLOVOTSKY

My karate teacher, Mr. Imaoka, gave me the best lesson on fighting that I've ever had.

"The most important lesson in karate is running," he said, as the lot of us reluctantly strapped our sneakers on. "The first thing you do in a fight," he said, "is to turn and run away.

"Run for at least a mile, preferably two or three. If he's still chasing you, he's probably out of breath by then. If it's still worth fighting about," he said with a smile, "you turn around and beat him up."

When next I could follow what was going on, Lord Daeran was looming over me, looking none the worse for wear, his hair and goatee now neatly combed, his face glowing with health and vigor.

He had gotten to our healing draughts, it appeared.

I would have rather had a hangover, thank you much. There was a constant stabbing pain under my left shoulder blade, where I was sure that I had been stabbed. I had to breathe shallowly, broken ribs grating at even the slightest movement.

Not that I could have moved a lot. Lord Daeran had saved me that trouble by tying me to the rail near the stern, between Tenny and Jason, my hands behind me. Andy, Kenda, and Bast lay tied on their sides on the hot deck, a soldier looming over each of them, although I don't know why.

Tenny and Jason were cut in dozens of places, and while they hadn't bled out, neither of them was in any shape to fight: Jason was battered badly, and while the fingers of Tenny's right hand were feeling around for the knots, her whole left arm hung limp—the sword she'd taken in the shoulder must have gotten to a nerve center.

Not good.

Over her gag, Andy's eyes were wild, even the heavily bruised right one, swollen almost closed.

Ahira was dead.

Our gear had been spread out across the deck, clothes scattered haphazardly, weapons and other stuff carefully laid out for Daeran's examination. Stooping over our gear, he fingered an unmarked gunmetal flask. I wouldn't mind if he drank that—it was a liniment for saddle sores, and the main ingredient was wood alcohol.

"First matters first, Walter Slovotsky," Daeran said. "The antidote. You have more of it, I'm sure."

Well, yes, we did—the more of it was in another flask, just out of his reach. I like an occasional nip to cut the dust of the trail.

I didn't answer, and I was very careful not to look either at the flask of Riccetti's Best or away from it.

He didn't get angry. He just stalked over to me and carefully hit me across the face twice, first time with his palm, then with the back of his hand.

Not torture. Not yet. This was just to let me know that he was serious.

In my mind's eye, I could see Ahira taking the bastard in his broad hands, fingers crushing the life out of him.

But Ahira was overboard, in thirty feet of water.

Dead.

Only one chance, although not much of one. Things hung in a balance here, perhaps too delicate a balance. With the damage we had done to his party, Daeran and Erol Lyneian were at rough parity on the ship, and Daeran would know better than to endanger that by sending for more troops right now, threatening to cut Erol Lyneian out totally.

The two of them would come to terms before they could afford to torture the secret out of me; they would have to set up a cozy little arrangement that would have landed them with an antitrust suit on the Other Side.

I could think of only one card to play. We had managed to keep the secret of black powder for close to twenty years now, through the time that Pandathaway wizards had invented their expensive substitute, through Riccetti's re-creation of the smokeless powder for cartridge weapons, through all of it.

But it was now, or never. I voted for now. "Saltpeter—the crystals you find under old piles of manure."

"No," Bast shouted. "Don't tell him. In the name of the Engineer, shut your mouth. Don't—"

"Saltpeter," I said. I wasn't going to be stopped. "Fifteen parts by weight. Powdered charcoal—willow works best—three parts. Sulfur—two parts."

"That's the antidote?"

"No, no, no," I said. "That's *gunpowder*. Black powder. Manufacture is tricky, but those are the ingredients. Saltpeter, charcoal, sulfur. Fifteen, three, two."

A stray smile crossed Erol Lyneian's lips. "I think that Lord Daeran is more interested in the antidote to the poison right now. You managed to spill all but a drop."

I tried to shrug, regretting the effort instantly. "There wasn't any poison," I said, spitting out each word through a red cloud of pain. "All a bluff. The idiot went for it."

Think, dammit, think. I was just going through the motions. All I had done was my usual part of it: try to buy some time for Ahira to figure us a way out of this mess, to pry up some loose edge of the trap we found ourselves in for him to work on, but Ahira was gone.

Dead.

I'd have to do his job. Or somebody would.

No. There was another solution. We could all die.

Daeran took a step toward me, but stopped at Erol Lyneian's gesture. "You're lying."

"Then have some more out of that flask," I said, pointing with my chin. That hurt, too. "It's just corn whiskey, but enjoy. It'll taste the same. Enjoy. Compliments of the Engineer."

Below his angry eyes, Bast's lips were pulled back in a snarl. If he could have worked his way loose, he would have gone for me, not for them. The secret of gunpowder was the great treasure of the Engineer, and I had just given it away.

Well, my life and the lives of my friends were the great treasure of *me*, and I was hoping that I had just bought a better chance of survival for all of us. Neither of them would trust me, and Erol Lyneian now knew too much, as did all of his men.

But he wouldn't have to face that intellectually, not yet. Lord Daeran had three functioning soldiers aboard the *Delenia*, all of them with naked weapons, and Erol Lyneian had only his five crewmen, none of them visibly armed, all of them on deck. Erol Lyneian and his men could win a fight, probably, but only an extended one. He couldn't count on taking out all of Daeran's people before reinforcements arrived.

Daeran forced the mouth of the corn whiskey flask between my lips.

I took a large mouthful before he wrested it away. Last drink for the condemned man, and all that.

"Too eager, you are," he said. "I think you may be bluffing again. We'll wait and see what the effect is."

It wasn't going to work. I didn't have enough leverage to play Erol Lyneian off against Daeran. All I was doing was buying time. For what?

Maybe Tennyet could work her way free.

She clearly didn't understand the situation; she was smiling. Crazy, idiot bitch. Didn't she know how badly she had been cut, didn't she know that we were all dead, that I was just buying us some time for a miracle, and that it wouldn't come?

Jason started smiling, too. Imbecile.

Look, I don't mind people being heroic, but this was ridiculous.

Ahira was dead, we all were as good as dead, and the fucking idiot was grinning—

It was then that I felt the blunt fingers behind me, working on my knots.

* * *

Daeran saw something in my eyes, I guess. His brow furrowed, and he took a step forward.

I spat blood on the deck. Blood always makes a good distraction.

"Healing draughts," I said. "No more until I get them, for me and my friends."

"We'll see about it, after the details," Daeran said.

"Now," I said. "Or I bite my tongue off and you never know what the secret procedure is."

The secret procedure wasn't much—grind each ingredient separately, toss in a barrel, then wet it down with water (good), urine (better) or wine (best), then stir, stir, stir, until your arm feels like it's going to fall off. Then stir some more. Push the mixture, now vaguely dough-like, through a wire mesh to mix it more—it's called corning. Repeat, dry *very* carefully, and there you have it. It's dangerous—kids, don't try this at home—but it's not complicated.

"You're bluffing. Again," Daeran said.

"Try me," I said, bluffing.

He didn't quite sigh. "Not this time, I think. This time, I'll let you win." He took a step toward me.

Behind me, the fingers went away. Ahira, somehow clinging to the side of the ship, probably standing on top of the molding surrounding a porthole or something, had ducked down.

"No, them first." I nodded at the others. They needed it worse than I did, Tenny and Jason in particular, and I needed my hands free.

Daeran had decided to control his temper. There would be enough time shortly to punish me for my insolence, and just because he'd fed them healing draughts, it didn't mean he couldn't kill them later.

"Very well." He moved over to where Tenny was bound, and brought the bottle of healing draughts to her lips.

The fingers behind me returned, and finished their work, then pressed a knife hilt into my hands, but the hilt was withdrawn. The fingers put leather thongs into my hands and closed my fingers around the thongs, giving my hand a final quick pat before the blunt fingers went away.

Thanks a fucking lot, Ahira.

It was him. There was no question of it. I knew the touch of that hand, and I don't look a gift horse in the mouth, not when it's the only ride out of town. My best friend was alive, and operating independently, and—

Of course. Sometimes I'm such an idiot—he wasn't teasing me. He had just given me the inventory of our weapons, and assigned me the one he thought suited our situation best, trusting me to read his mind.

We had leather thongs—the ones that had bound my wrists, no doubt—and we had a knife.

Okay; that was a start.

The knife would go to Tenny, and Ahira would try to work his way around, clinging to the side of the ship, trying to stay out of sight. No. He wouldn't. If he fell again, he might not be able to make his way up out of the water. He would stay right where he was, perched on top of the rudder or whatever. He would free me, Tenny and Jason, and then expect me to start things off.

How the hell had he gotten out of the water? I had seen him hit the water, and seen him sink like a stone.

Later, Walter, later.

And what had taken him so long?

Andrea, Jason, and Tennyet had been treated with the healing draughts; it was my turn.

Lord Daeran knelt in front of me. "Your healing draughts. Then you will talk. I promise you, you will talk." He brought the warm lip of the bottle to my mouth, banging it hard against my teeth.

I didn't care. The too-sweet taste of the healing draughts washed the blood from my mouth, my aches and pains becoming distant and vague.

No time to enjoy that now. I tied a loop in one end of the leather thong, and slipped the other end through it.

Lord Daeran's eyes went wide as I whipped the loop over his head and drew it tight around his neck.

* * *

"*Now*," I said, probably redundantly.

No time to finish him off—I kicked him aside then went low, toward our gear. Tennyet, the knife held in her outstretched hand, went high above me, bowling herself into a soldier who was reacting just a little too slow. I think she gutted him; his scream rang in my ears.

No time to think, either; I would have to do it all right, and by instinct.

I slid a sword hilt-first toward Jason, then tackled the soldier above Andy hard enough to have satisfied even Coach Fusco. Sonofabitch always thought I took it too easy on quarterbacks. Fuck him.

And to hell with the soldier, too—my rush carried him back to where the rail caught him across the kidneys. His arms flew apart as the tetanic shock hit him hard.

We were still overmatched, and even with Ahira back in action we wouldn't have had a chance unless . . . first, I'd have to get Andy free, and she would have to . . .

Of course. Trust your friends. I could see the boom out of the corner of my eye, and hear Ahira laughing about it in the corner of my mind.

"Tennyet, Jason—*down*," I shouted. The dark shadow swept toward me; I ducked under it and went for Andy as the boom, propelled by impossibly strong dwarf muscles, swept hard across the deck, bowling over soldiers, the sailors reflexively ducking.

I scooped up a knife and reached Andy's side. A slice and a twist and she was free, fingers already clawing at her gag; a leg-sweep knocked down the soldier who had been lunging at her.

Her arms spread wide, she rose to her feet, uttering just one syllable.

Daylight reddened and dimmed, and the sky went dark above us.

Time slowed. I'd been hearing my heart thumping hard and fast, but now with each beat was a slow double moan.

Gwa-thunnnnnnk.

Long pause.

Gwa-thunnnnnnk.

I could still think, I could still see, but I couldn't even fall fast. We were all stuck in the same clear molasses: Tenny, her knife rising, unable to see the saber inches from her back, about to skewer her; Ahira, one hand clamped on a bloody mess that had been the face of a soldier, his other arm squeezing another's chest further than bones could give; Jason, in full lunge through the belly of the largest of the soldiers, his face grim as he saw another blade descending toward him.

We were all trapped in the red time. Except for Andy.

Leaning hard, like she was walking against a strong but steady wind, she walked smoothly across the deck, pushing up on the saber menacing Tenny as she passed.

She reached her son's side, and brushed the attacking blade aside, then set one finger on either side of the soldier's head, muttering a word I could not have remembered even if I'd heard it.

Sparks leisurely leapt from finger to finger, strengthening as they did. Her mouth was moving, but I couldn't make out what she was saying. The sparks became a flow, and the flow became lightning, jagged forks piercing the soldier's head until a cloud of smoke gathered about his forehead and ears.

Slowly, gracefully, she turned toward me and smiled. It wasn't a friendly smile.

Over to you, she mouthed.

As the light blued again, and time returned to normal, Ahira had retrieved his axe from our pile.

There were only two soldiers left alive on deck. Tenny had snaked her arm around the throat of one, and Jason, his sword shining in the light, had squared off against the other.

All that left was Lord Daeran, lying on the deck, loosening the garrotte that I clearly hadn't quite tightened enough.

Hey, I was in a hurry.

Ahira raised his axe.

"What . . . *are* you?" the lord asked.

If it had been me, I would have been tempted to make a speech, about how Mikyn was one of ours, and if he needed stopping, we would stop him, and no locals need apply, and about how putting friends and associates of ours to death for unwittingly helping Mikyn was just plain wrong, and wasn't going to be tolerated.

But Ahira didn't make premature speeches.

The axe fell, and then he spoke.

"Justice, you son of a bitch," he said.

I guess, back in the old days, James Michael and I saw the same movies.

* * *

Soldiers at the dock were loading themselves into boats, and two of the small boats were already on their way toward us.

"Captain," I said, "do you want to try to explain it all right now, or shall we get out of here?"

Erol Lyneian smiled as he gestured his crew into motion. "We still have an agreement, Walter Slovotsky. The *Delenia* is to take you safely to where you wish to go; you are to give me the secret of making engineer gunpowder."

He wouldn't apologize for his having made a virtue of necessity earlier, for siding with the late Lord Daeran. Business, after all, was business.

Bast pushed himself forward, staggering, probably both from the rolling of the ship. "No. Don't tell them anything, don't let the secret out, don't—"

Tennetty caught his arm, twisted it up and around behind his back with an economical motion. "Not now. Later, if at all." She pushed him away, then drew her sword again and took up an *en garde* position next to me.

I nodded to Erol Lyneian. "We have a deal. Let's just move this ship, asshole."

CHAPTER TWENTY

*Immediately After Which
I Strike My Forehead,
Quite Briskly, with My Open Palm*

It ain't what a man don't know that makes him a fool, but what he does know that ain't so.

—JOSH BILLINGS

Sometimes, it's good to be wrong.

—WALTER SLOVOTSKY

There is a thing a friend of mine once labeled the "rhinoceros in the corner." Maybe she was just repeating it, but I always associate it with Peggy.

"The rhinoceros in the corner is the idea that hangs over a conversation," she said, "but that you don't talk about. You find them all over the place, in a lot of situations."

"Like, say, the first time you go to dinner with a girl?" I smiled. It was, of course, the first time we'd gone out to dinner.

"Woman."

"Woman." Fine.

"You talk about school," she said, "and about majors, and jobs, and movies, and politics—anything. But what you're both thinking about is whether or not you're going to bed together."

"Oh?"

"I mean, like, you're thinking about that, and she's thinking about that, but you don't talk about it."

"You mean like we're not?"

"Well . . ." She smiled and sipped at her beer. "Yeah."

* * *

Ahira didn't want to tell me how he had survived, not unless I asked; and I wasn't going to ask him. Just pure stubbornness on both of our parts, but it's a pattern we'd fallen into over all the years. Eventually, one of us would give in, but you wouldn't want to bet the farm on which.

Ahira and I stood in the spray on the foredeck, near the bow. He sat on the step next to the anchor, one arm hooked over a safety line as he honed the edge of his battle-axe; I leaned against the rail, doing nothing much.

Ahira whisked his stone smoothly against the edge of his axe. *Fsssst. Fsssst. Fsssst. Fsssst.*

"You're going to get that sharp enough to shave with, if you keep at it," I said.

He shrugged. "No such thing as too sharp an axe." Yes, a too-thin edge could chip in a fight, but that wouldn't make much practical difference, not with Ahira's strength behind it.

At least Ahira was talking to me, even if the stubborn bastard wouldn't volunteer the information I wanted him to. I was *persona non grata* with Bast and Kenda, and Jason wasn't sure, yet, whether I had brilliantly bought us more time—thereby cleverly saving the day—or if I had cravenly sold out everything that Home stood for, and for no purpose. I would have given him an argument, but I'm not sure which side I'd have taken, so I had given it a pass. Andy was asleep in her bunk, Tenny watching over her, Bast, and Kenda.

"Feels faster now than it was before we tacked," he said.

"I know," I said. "But it just feels that way."

Running with the wind is fast, but despite the name it's stuffy and no fun. The faster the sailboat, the less pleasant it is—the more efficient the boat is at using the wind, the less breeze you have. You carry your

effluvium with you. It feels like you're not moving, like the rest of the universe is moving around you. Slowly, and stuffily.

I much prefer sailing close-hauled, close to the wind, the rush of air in my face, occasional jets of spray refreshing me.

Magic and madness were loose somewhere out in the night, and we were sailing off into it all.

We talked, and kept watch on the night. Not the worst thing to do. The night was clear, the sky bright diamonds displayed proudly on the blackest velvet. To port, beyond where the starlight capered across the gentle swells, dark land loomed threateningly below the starry sky, the blackness broken only occasionally by the flickering of lanterns or fireplaces in some window ashore.

Off to starboard the roiling surface of the water, dark and glossy, shimmered and shattered the starlight.

A sailor only sees the surface of the sea, always is left to wonder what may wait below the surface. There's a lot you never know.

I guess I'd never know what the right thing to do about Kirah was. But maybe I didn't have to decide on the right thing, not in terms of effects. Maybe what I ought to do was accept the principle that if I wanted things to work out for me and Kirah, just maybe running around the Eren regions wasn't the way to cure it, that maybe the reason things had gone okay during the years in Endell is that I'd been there.

Or maybe not. Maybe what both Kirah and I needed was a long time away from each other.

I could still remember her, though, her hair floating in the breeze, her body soft and warm. Too long ago.

There comes a time when you just make a decision, when you stop fooling around pretending that what you're doing is weighing and balancing and considering and trying to decide, and you just decide. Fine.

I'd decide. Enough trying, enough whining and wondering and whereforeing. When I got home, I'd make things work between Kirah and me. Period. Never mind how, never mind why. I'd just do it.

"What are you thinking about?" Ahira asked. *Fsssst. Fsssst.*

"Just thinking that it's getting cold out here."

Straight ahead, perhaps only a few hundred yards, perhaps more than a few miles, a trio of faerie lights slowly circled each other as they pulsed gently through the progression of blues and greens. The tempo picked up, and the lights orbited faster around their invisible center, becoming all red and orange, the pace increasing still further as they circled each other faster and faster, tighter and tighter, until the circle could not hold. First one, then the other two shattered into a shower of fiery sparks that blued as they fell toward the dark waters below.

"Magic and madness are loose out in the night," I said.

"True enough."

"And we're sailing toward it."

"There is that." *Fsssst. Fsssst. Fsssst.* He raised his head. "Where would you rather be?"

"Here's fine, I guess." Some of the best times are when you just sit and talk and think.

Erol Lyneian was very much a neat freak: the anchor cable, of that strange Therranji construction that left a brass-and-iron cable as flexible as rope, had been carefully flemished against the deck, not simply coiled in a heap.

Ahead of us, starlight danced on the water; the water rushed against the fast-moving boat. Above us in the dark, the jib strained to catch every whisper of wind, looming above us like a large vague ghost.

One of the crewmen worked his way forward. Vertum Barr, his name was: a short, bony man well into his fifties, naturally so thin that you could see his ribs despite the small potbelly, dark and wrinkled like a dried mushroom—the sort of sailor you find working all over the Cirric, from boat to boat. He would never own more than he could carry in his seabag, but as long as he could work he would always have a bunk under which he could stow his bag.

"Carrying a bit of weather helm as the wind picks up, eh?" I asked.

His face split in a gap-toothed grin. "How did you know that?"

"Please. I do have an eye for the obvious: she's heeling a bit. Whoever is back at the tiller keeps having to bear away. Costing us speed."

"Hmmm . . . and what would you be doing about it, were it yours to do?"

I shrugged. "Is this a test? Your center of effort's too far back. Me, I'd just crank the traveler leeward—flatten out the mainsail. Or maybe I'd heave to and reef the mainsail some. But I'm a lazy man. A captain who prides himself on every breath of speed is either going to fly one of those loose-footed sails you're rigged for, or more likely going to put on a bigger jib."

"He is, is he?"

"And somebody who has gone to the trouble of having the mainmast rigged with twin forestays isn't going to want to heave to and switch sails the easy way—it'll take at least four men to do the job, and I'll bet you'd like a couple of assistants to help with that huge mother of a jib."

"I wouldn't bet against you, truth to tell." He smiled. "I could use some help, at that."

"Sure; we'd be happy to."

Ahira nodded. "I can finish this later." He stowed his axe in its sheath and then bound it to a rack of belaying pins. "What are you getting us into now?"

"Just a bit of work." I still wanted to ask him how he had survived, and he wanted to tell me, but the two of us have always allowed ourselves to be stubborn over things that don't matter.

His smile was bright in the dark. "That I can handle."

We surprised them. Ahira and I managed to haul the huge bag with the balloon jib—we would have called it a genoa jib on the Other Side—all by ourselves, even though Ahira grunted with the effort as he hauled the sailbag up the hatch. It must have weighed four hundred pounds, but Ahira can carry weights

like that.

Me, I just steadied the thing. I'm only human, after all.

The rigging was a bit different than I was used to, and they had folded and packed the sail according to their own idiosyncratic system; I wouldn't have wanted to try to rig the sail myself, but Vertum Barr and Tretan Verr knew their jobs, and it wasn't all that long before we had the balloon jib up on the leeward forestay, and the smaller jib down, folded, bagged, and stowed.

We returned to our spot on the deck, the huge jib ballooning in the wind above us, luffing just a bit as the crew worked to get the trim right.

"I don't know what you see in this," Ahira said. Not criticism. Just observation.

"Guess you have to be born with a taste for it." I smiled. "I had a bit of experience on the Other Side." Just a bit. "It's relaxing."

"Hmm."

"You've got something on your mind," I said.

He nodded. "That's a fact. I've been wondering if you're getting too slow, Walter," Ahira said, considering the edge of his axe, as he resumed his sharpening. "You all do seem to slow down, as the years go by."

"And not you?" I asked, maybe too harshly. "You missed a step today." If Ahira hadn't been bowled over the side, we might have won on the first round, instead of lucking into another shot at the game.

I shuddered. The locals have ways of getting people to talk, and I'm none too fond of even the *idea* of red-hot poker being shoved up my ass. We all have our peccadilloes, and that's one of mine.

He shook his head. "No. Not me. I'm not aging like you are, not as fast." He stared at me out of sad eyes. "If I was losing it, bit by bit, I'd admit it. To myself."

I leaned back against the railing and closed my eyes. Possibly I was getting too old for this. I'd been saying that for ten years, and maybe it was coming true.

Damn silly time to be growing old. Magic was loose in the world and we were sailing toward Ehvenor, toward God-knew-what. The situation called for not only the wisdom that's supposed to come with age, but the reflexes of youth. We needed a cross between Alvin York, Natty Bumppo, George Patton, and Shadowjack, and all we had was me.

"Maybe," I said. "And maybe we just were unlucky this time. I don't think we did too badly. Getting out of Brae with all of us alive is about ten strokes under par, as far as I'm concerned. That was too close."

"No," he said, firmly. "Just par."

We sat silent for a long time.

"Don't be angry," he said. "It had to be said."

"Maybe it did, and maybe it didn't."

"Would ignoring it make things any better?" A broad hand gripped my shoulder. "I seem to remember somebody telling me, one rainy Friday night years and years ago, that I wasn't going to drive my wheelchair out of the dorm and into the rain, because I couldn't afford to risk getting a cold, not in my state. I remember him saying something about that it was fucking unfair, but the universe was fucking unfair, and we weren't going to pretend otherwise."

I shrugged. "Well, you couldn't."

It was hard to remember Ahira as crippled James Michael Finnegan, largely because I'd never really thought of James Michael as a cripple—his mind had always been sharp, sharper than mine. The body, sure, that was bent, but after you've known somebody for awhile, you learn to stop worrying yourself over it; it doesn't rub off.

"I also remember," he said, his voice low, "that you canceled a date to put together a poker game that night."

"Hey, I needed the money." I smiled. "Besides, I didn't really cancel it, we just pushed it back a week."

Bethany had been good about it; she had acted as James Michael's hands at the poker game, and had been amused at the way that the other players paid more attention to her cleavage than to their cards. Nice lady. Next weekend we had a nice steak dinner, complete with a bottle of Silver Oak cabernet, paid for with my winnings.

"Now it's my turn," he said. "You've got to start taking it easy." He chuckled to take the sting out of it, the laugh a deep rumble in his barrel of a chest. "You can't afford to get your neck broke, eh?"

"Hey, I wouldn't do that. Deprive all the women of my charm? But leave it for later. Not now. I'm still okay."

He had finished with his axe; carefully, gently, he wrapped it in an oilcloth.

"Maybe so," he said, "probably. But you will slow down too much, some day. We can push it back a bit, but there's going to come a time when you're not going to be able to go out and do things yourself." He bit at his thumb. "Next generation's coming along—Jason's getting sharper. We're going to have to be sure that he's got the right kind of people to back him."

"Until what?"

The dwarf shrugged. "Until things change. However they change. Until the revolution that Lou is building takes off on its own; until the gathering of Holtish and Biemish nobles becomes a true parliament, until Arta Myrdhyn takes a hand and screws up whatever the hell we think we're doing."

Starlight danced on the water, and a brief spray more chilled than refreshed me.

"In the meantime," he said, "you've got to do two things."

I knew what the first was going to be. "Practice, practice, practice."

"Yup. Starting in the morning. You and me . . . well, I can read your mind almost as well as you can read

mine. Tennetty tends to bunt too much, and Jason can't coordinate with anybody."

I shrugged. "I keep thinking of him as his father. Karl would have ducked back and blown six of them away before getting into the fight, and then he could have taken out the rest."

Ahira looked me over, slowly, the way he always did when I said something stupid. "That's the second thing. Don't buy into the legend, or you might start to believe you're just as legendary." He looked out over the water. "You've got to remember you're tricky Walter Slovotsky, and stop trying to be Karl. Swaggering through the town square on a recon was a Karl sort of thing."

Well, I didn't say, I actually didn't do it Karl's sort of way. I did it my way.

But Ahira was off on his you're-getting-too-old-for-this kick, and I didn't want to complicate the issue.

Besides, he was right. I've always been best at sneaking and indirection, not taking on half a dozen swordsmen. I should have thought out a way around it, not confronted Lord Daeran in some sort of Mexican standoff.

"I'll try," I said.

"Good," he said, rising. "We start practicing in the morning. In the meantime, get some sleep. I'll keep an eye on things tonight; I can catch up on sleep tomorrow."

Screw it. "Okay," I said. "O-fucking-kay. I give."

"Eh?"

"I give in. You win. If you won't tell me, I'll break down and ask."

He smiled as he ticked his thumbnail against the anchor. "Ask what?"

"How it happens that you're alive."

He smiled, again. "You mean because dwarves can't float, can't swim, right?"

"Yes. That's exactly what I mean. Are you going to tell me, or let me die of curiosity?"

He shrugged and hefted the anchor chain. "I think I'll ask Erol Lyneian for a piece of this, as a good-luck charm.—Anybody ever tell you that dwarves can't *climb* ?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

*In Which I Face Off
with a Fanatic,
and Spend Time with
an Old Friend*

There are truths which are not for all men, nor for all time.

—VOLTAIRE

I changed my mind, okay?

—WALTER SLOVOTSKY

Old friends are good to have around. There's a story or two about that, but they'll have to wait, just a bit.

* * *

We stopped to trade at Artiven, bobbing safely at anchor offshore, while the launch took Erol Lyneian and some trade goods ashore—a few bundles of Sciforth ironwood, a couple of hogsheads of horrible-smelling Fenevarian glue, and, surprisingly, fifty-or-so pounds of Home wootz.

Maybe that shouldn't have been so surprising—Artiven was known for its knives and swords, and it would have been hard to think of a better start than the high-grade weapon steel that Home produced.

We could have gone right past, I guess, except for two things. For one, crew provisions were low. There hadn't been quite enough time to load them in Brae. Taking to your heels usually interferes with something important; this was above par. Two: Ahira wanted Bast and Kenda off the ship, and away from us.

Erol Lyneian had been pushing me for more of the details of powdermaking, and I'd been supplying them.

Bast wasn't happy. We hadn't had quite enough healing draughts to bring him and Kenda up to full health; the aftermath of his ordeal had left him frail, at least for the time being. Rest, food, and time would do everything else. Although he couldn't rest.

He caught up with me as I was getting a lesson in rigging and ketch sailing from Vertum Barr—I'm no dilettante, but I like learning new skills and polishing ones I already have—while Tenny and Jason were working out on the rear deck.

It was good to play sailor again, wearing nothing but a pair of blousy pantaloons and a headband—well, and a knife strapped to my right calf, concealed by the pant leg—worrying about nothing more important than how to get a bit more speed out of the shape of a sail, whether the bilge hold needed pumping again, or how to fly a complex set of sails.

The *Delenia*'s gear was unusual, even by the idiosyncratic nonstandards of Cirric sailing: she used a lot of lacquered, layered wood rather than iron (okay) and brass (better); jibsheet fairleads anchored, instead of track-and-slider; reefing claws that looked like bear paws. Strange stuff, but not bad.

Tenny had stripped down to a thin cotton shirt and shorts, and Jason down to just a pair of ragged Home jeans. They circled each other, hands reaching out for a grip on forearms or waist.

"Now," Vertum Barr said, chewing on a piece of jerky as he talked, "you hear a lot about how the mizzens don't add much to the speed of a ketch, and there's some truth to that. But when you're

close-tacking, the faster you can come about, the better off you are, and that's why we pay particular attention to the trim of the mizzen." He frowned at the horizon, his forehead creased leather. "Probably fly the mizzen trysail, if things look shaky."

Far off, probably a storm was brewing. All kinds of storms.

Tennetty let Jason grab her by waist and arm, and as he tried for a solid throw, she kicked her heel against his calf, knocking one leg out from beneath him, the two of them falling hard to the deck, Tennetty on top, her fingers stopping inches from his eyes.

She slapped the deck and rose. "Again."

"So why a ketch?" I asked.

He smiled. "*Delenia* used to be a fishing boat—and a fisherman has to be nimble more than fast. If it were up to me, I'd have her remasted and rerigged as a sloop, but Erol Lyneian likes the way she handles as is, and she's his ship, not mine, eh?"

This time, as Tennetty and Jason closed, their arms and feet moved so fast that I couldn't quite make out what they were doing, but when they parted, he was still on his feet, and Tennetty was lying at his feet, slammed hard onto the deck.

If it were up to me, the ship would lie at anchor here while the storm passed us by, but none of the crew seemed to think it looked threatening enough. You can pick up a lot of knowledge by working the coast, from boat to boat, but there's things that only years of experience teach you. "Now, if we have to run before the storm, we may be able to run quicker, without endangering ourselves, if we have a bit of cloth back here. Yes?"

I nodded. "That would seem to be so."

I'd heard Bast walk up behind me, but I hadn't done anything about it. Let him make the first move. Of course, if the first move was slipping a knife in between my third and fourth ribs, I'd probably regret it. I'm kind of funny that way.

Vertum Barr touched a bent finger to his brow and walked off.

"Walter Slovotsky," Bast said, as I turned. "We have to talk."

"We can talk. If you want to argue about taking passage to Sciforth, talk it over with the dwarf, not with me."

Ahira was ashore, finding a ship for Bast and Kenda, a) which I didn't want to argue about, and b) with which I agreed.

"Not about that," he said. "About something more important."

I remembered Bast as a gangling kid, with an Adam's apple that used to bob nervously up and down his skinny neck, never really concealed by the soft, downy beard that couldn't grow long enough to cover it, or to conceal his soft face. He could never look me in the eyes in the old days, always looking away.

Now, his black beard was trimmed back, like an overgrown hedge; his skin was pulled taut at the bridge

of his nose and above his cheekbones; and his unblinking eyes never left mine. He was dressed only in a blousy pair of sailor's pantaloons with thick rolled hems at his ankles—they were much too large for him—and carrying only a waterskin over his shoulder.

I knew what he was going to say before he said it. It's a minority opinion, but Lou's disciples have always seemed to me to tend toward the fanatical.

"We have to silence everyone aboard this ship," he said, his voice stubbornly level and reasonable, his eyes obstinately refusing to glow with fanatical fire. He dropped the waterskin over the rail, letting the coiled leather thong pay out from his hand until it splashed in the water below. He hauled it up and tied the skin to the rail, letting it cool in the breeze.

Evaporative cooling, and all that. I bet he even knew the name of it.

"Just because they overheard the secret of powdermaking?" I finally asked.

"Yes."

As Hassan ibn-al-Sabbah would have said, *Death to all fanatics!*

I shook my head. "The secret would have to get out sometime. May as well be now. If the choice is the secret getting out now or me cold-bloodedly murdering the *Delenia*'s captain and crew, then it definitely gets out now." I reached down into my pouch and pulled out a stick of jerky, tore it in half, and politely offered him his choice of halves. I wouldn't have returned the courtesy, mind—if he had done it, both halves could have been poisoned.

He thought about it for a moment, debating the propriety of eating with the greatest traitor that he'd ever known, then decided that it wouldn't stay his hand, if necessary. He bit into the jerky.

"No," I went on, "our edge is always going to be progress, not secrets. If the process for making slaver powder was cheaper, the secret of black powder wouldn't be worth anything. It could have been cheaper to make; hell, maybe it could be made that way; I don't know enough magic." I chewed some more jerky. Too salty. "No, our edge is going to be in staying ahead of the game, not in controlling who plays what pieces. For now, staying ahead means smokeless powder weapons replacing black powder. More bang for the volume, less smoke, slower burning."

His look was too controlled to be a glare, but just barely. I wasn't supposed to know the advantage of slow-burning powders in long barrels.

Tennetty and Jason walked up, both sweaty from their workout. Well, Jason had that sweaty-but-satisfied look that the younger folks get; Tennetty's breathing was still fast, and a vein in her neck pulsed in a rapid beat. She looked more drained than anything else.

"We're thinking about going ashore for awhile," he said. "Stretch our legs a bit, maybe ask around some." His face was too much a mirror to his thoughts; I could tell he was too eager.

"Tennetty?" I cocked my head to one side. "He's leaving something out."

"He told you."

"I doubt that."

"Well, maybe he could have been more specific." A smile worked its way across her face. "One of the crew came back with some rumors about things streaming out of Ehvenor. We thought we'd see what the local gossip is."

I turned back to Jason, not asking why he hadn't come clean with me. He still had a lot to learn—I don't insist on doing all the fun things myself. Besides, looking into rumors wasn't all that much fun. "You asking permission?"

He thought about that. He thought about the fact that he didn't like me much, and then he thought about the fact that he was perfectly capable of making errors, too.

So he said, "Advice, at least," his face going studiously blank. He had worked out that he didn't have to take advice.

Tennetty kept her smile small. Good; the kid didn't need to see her beaming approval. Might swell his head fast enough to burst the skin.

"You ask the dwarf?"

He shook his head. "Him next, and Kenda." He looked over at Bast. "Would you like to come along?"

Bast shook his head. "No."

Delicately put. Bast reminded me of an Other Side friend I used to have. Brian would always turn down an invitation to go out to dinner with a guttural monosyllable, implicitly trusting to his friends not to take offense. Not a good bet, not altogether. Eventually we stopped calling, most of us.

Jason was waiting with simulated patience, and the day wasn't getting any shorter. Artiven was a relatively safe town, but there was no sense in pushing it, either way.

"Sure," I said. "Go on in, but don't try too hard to nose around. Spend a bit of money, eat some local food, keep your eyes and ears open, and your mouth chewing."

Jason and Tennetty walked away. Bast was still scowling at me.

Black powder wasn't as much of a secret as he thought. Andy had been around when Lou and I mixed up the very first batch, and helped stir, all the while chanting, "Bubble, bubble, toil and trouble." She knew the formula, and Ahira did, and I'm sure Doria knew what went into black powder, too, although I wouldn't have given odds that she knew the proportions.

Not that those mattered—you can get quite a distance from the classical mix and still get real gunpowder. The main secret is in knowing what to play around with, and going ahead and doing it.

So, the simple argument went like this: Bast, don't worry about the secret getting out, because there's a bunch of us who have known it for years.

With Bast eager to slice the throat of everybody who had heard the secret, it was probably not a good idea to give him more targets; better to reason with him. "Did you know?"

He shook his head. "I had . . . hints, but I deliberately didn't follow them up. I didn't need to know how

to make powder, and I didn't want to know. Master Ranella does, and there are . . . arrangements if she and the Engineer were both to die. But no, I didn't know how." He unfastened the water-skin from the rail and took a polite swig before offering it to me.

I thought about the waterbag, and I thought about the drinking to show that I trusted him, but then I decided that it was too big a risk, even though I knew there was no point in Bast poisoning me. Maybe he didn't know that.

We'd had enough to do with poisons recently, albeit fake ones.

"I don't think so, Bast," I said, handing him the waterbag back.

"You ask me to trust you, but you won't trust me?" he asked.

I nodded. "Well, yeah."

It was, after all, a fair statement of the situation.

* * *

The door to Andy's cabin stood half open. Inside, the slatted blinds over the porthole cast bands of light and dark onto her bunk, striping its rumpled brown blankets. Dressed in a pair of shorts and a halter against the heat of the day, she was sitting tailor-fashion on her bunk amid scattered items: a silver knife, its handle the dull white of new bone; a spool of impossibly fine thread; a small lenticular crystal clutched in a clay claw; a foot-long feather that pulsed through a rainbow of colors as she idly stroked at it.

You know: the usual.

She didn't notice me at first; she was concentrating on the thick, leather-bound volume. I glanced at the pages, and found that not only couldn't I read them, but that the letters blurred and swam in front of my eyes.

More magic. I shivered. I don't like magic.

I stood in the doorway, silently. I'm good at that. I once crouched silently on a tree branch for more than a day, motionless while the sun rose and fell and rose again, although my thighs and lower back still ache at the thought of it, even now, years later.

"Close the door and pull up a seat," she said, not looking up. "I won't bite."

"Oh, darn."

She raised her head into the bands of light and shadow, and the light caught her eyes and mouth as she smiled for a moment. Just for that moment, all the years fell away, and we were kids again, back in our twenties. She looked too young for all the years, maybe, or maybe it was just that the years had finally settled well on her. I never believed the common Other Side nonsense about how a woman was necessarily the most beautiful at twenty or so, and over the hill by thirty.

But it was only a moment; she moved her head back, one band of shadow turning her smile into a dark and distant smirk, another masking her eyes. "What's everybody up to?"

I sat down on the bed, the spell book between us. "Jason and Tennyet have gone into town, just to look

around. Ahira's over in the docks, buying passage for Bast and Kenda. We should have the two of them out of our hair by tonight. What are you up to?" Translation: How much have you been using magic, and how much is it affecting you?

Her mouth quirked in the shadows. "Trying spells that are beyond me, without success." I guess my alarm showed in my face.

She waved her hand, as though to wave my concern away. It didn't work. "No, not dangerous ones—this is subtle magic. Information magic, not power magic," she said. She touched a fingernail to a fuzzy line on the page. "This one, for example: I could, say, accent the second syllable of the instigator, reverse the suffixes for any of the hegemonies, lisp my way through the dominatives, and all that would happen to the power is that it would randomize, and that wouldn't do much. It might raise the temperature in the room a few degrees, but that's about all."

"What's it for? The spell, I mean."

"Mapmaking," she said. "Directional magic. We'll need it in Ehvenor. We're getting close to Ehvenor. Tomorrow night?"

I nodded. "Morning after, at worst."

Or at best. This time I didn't shiver. Reflexively, I reached toward the knife—I'm comfortable with an edged weapon in my hands—but pulled my hand back. Messing with wizards' equipment isn't a good idea.

"Sometimes a knife is just a knife," she said. "Go ahead; you won't hurt anything."

I hefted it in my palm, the silver blade cool against my skin, the bone handle too warm, as though she had been holding it tightly, too long.

She looked up at me, her eyes probing from the slatted shadow. Bars of light and dark cut diagonally across her face, striping it.

"I worry about you sometimes," she said. There was an extra note in her voice, something high-pitched, perhaps. It bothered me.

"Me, too," I said. "I'm getting too old for this." I ran my thumb along the edge of the knife. I'd seen sharper.

The edge of her mouth touched the light as she smiled. "Too old for what?"

"This running around, getting ourselves in and out of trouble."

"You still seem good enough at it," she said, leaning back, considering.

I shrugged. "The trouble with this line of work is no matter how good you are at it, eventually you get unlucky. It's like . . ."

That was the trouble. It wasn't like anything else. "Okay, try it this way. Karl and I used to spar, back in the old days. Now, back at our peak, he had the edge on me in strength, and I had a bit more speed, but his reflexes were just a touch better than mine. He couldn't move as fast, but he could react faster, he

could get started moving just a hair before I did."

She nodded, her face impassive.

"So, given that he was better at hand-to-hand than I am, he should have won all the time. But he didn't win all of the time—just *most* of the time. Big difference. We were operating close to the limits of human reflexes, and sometimes you have to, say, commit yourself to a block before your opponent strikes—if you wait for him to make his move first, there won't be time for nerve impulses to travel to the brain and make the return trip before he connects, yes?"

"So?" she said. "What's your point?"

"My point, such as it is, is that we live in a world of both skill and chance. If you put yourself into a situation where there's a random factor operating, no matter how carefully you've scoped it out, no matter how good you are, sometimes you're committed to a path, sometimes you've already entered into a course of action that'll smash you flat."

"Or blow you into hamburger," she said, her voice low but unnaturally even. She wasn't talking about me. "Turn his body into garbage," she said, her fingers digging into my arm, "and spread it across a filthy beach, gulls swooping down and pecking at threads of muscle and patches of skin, flecks and fragments of bone, and one eyeball, miraculously intact, lying on the sand, staring blindly at the sharp beaks, at—"

"Andy—"

"I can see him before," she said, the words coming faster and faster, "I can see him and I can feel it, except when the fire flares in my mind, except when the power plays through my fingers. I can see him smiling, not because he isn't scared, because he was never afraid to be scared, but because he knows that that will frighten them just a little more. I can see him lighting the fuse," she said, spitting out the words in a rapid-fire tattoo, "I can see him batting them away with his good hand while the fuse burns down, and laughing at them, smiling at them, maybe because they don't know enough to run, maybe because since he can't run he won't let them run, because he's decided that this is the end and they're all going with him." She looked up at me. "But sometimes he isn't wearing his face, because sometimes it's Jason's, and sometimes it's Ahira's, and it's been Piell's, and my God, Walter, sometimes he's wearing your face, sometimes he looks like you, sometimes it's you, Walter . . ."

"Shh . . ." I laid a finger against her lips. "Easy, Andy. Slow down."

With a visible effort, she stopped herself from talking.

Trembling fingers reached for my face, her touches tentative, light, like the brush of a cobweb.

"Sometimes it's yours," she said. "Sometimes he wears your face." Her breath was fast and ragged, and her voice was thick and liquid. "It's all getting so complicated," she said, "the closer we get to Ehvenor."

She touched my forehead with two widespread fingers and breathed out a spell, like she was blowing a bubble in the air.

Bright lights flared behind my eyes, in my mind, and I could see distant fires, to the horizon, and beyond. They burned too brightly; reds and oranges that intense, that vivid would have burned my eyes out of my head.

Off in the distance, beyond the horizon, the rolling waters of the Cirric roiled at the edge of Faerie, bubbling in places, freezing in others, while below the surface, immense dark shapes waited for release.

Somewhere far away but closer, a purple vein of magic had been cut open; strange things and strangeness bled out into the cold air, taking on a solidity that was nonetheless substantial for all its wrongness: a vision of a dagger-toothed, batwinged creature became real and flapped off into the night; a vague, insubstantial hulking shape took on precision and substance as it shambled across the ground, scratching at its hairy sides.

Off beyond, beyond distance, barely visible yet crystalline in its clarity, a landmass stood waiting, bright lights pulsing across the twisting shoreline in a gavotte somehow familiar in pattern but unpredictable.

"Faerie," she said. "Imagine yourself with all the problems and sorrows a human could have. You could lay it all before the Faerie, and they could send you home healed and well, or broken and misshapen, better than you ever were, or worse than you ever feared you could be."

Chances?

She laughed as she spread her hands in front of me, her fingers moving as though she was shuffling a deck of cards. "Imagine an infinite deck of cards, Walter. Each card has a number on it, from one to infinity. There is one one, two twos, three threes, four fours, and so on." She mimed fanning the deck. "Pick a card, at random, Walter, from one to infinity, and I will pick one, too, and what are the chances that my number is larger than yours?"

50–50, looked at one way; 100%, looked at another; zero, yet another.

"All are true," she said, dismissing the deck.

The inner vision turned away from the water, toward the land. We were used to thinking of powerful magical objects as few and far between, but I could see the flare of half a dozen charmed amulets or rings within the confines of Artiven itself. And not just the fire of an enchanted stone or piece of glass. Hiding, wrapped in long-rotted leather, an iron glove lay, its fingers thick worms of segmented steel, each finger tipped with a jagged blade like a shark's tooth, waiting while it lay beneath the sands at the shoreline, pushed down beneath the rotted piling of an old dock.

"Deathglove," she said. "It kills happily, it kills well, but it kills a bit of you every time you use it. Buried a long time ago, by somebody wise enough not to keep it. There would be those who would give everything they have for this."

Then how could it have lain there so long? I didn't voice the question, but she answered it anyway.

"Can't you see? It's hidden, it's hidden."

Not now it wasn't. But I don't need a deathglove, thank you very much.

"No, Walter, you idiot, not the deathglove, the rest of the picture, the summoning. It takes more power and control to find it, to see all of it. If I can just look deeper . . ."

The light started to clarify further, to brighten, but—

"No." I could feel the sharp clarity of the shapes cutting at my mind, sawing away at my sanity. I pushed

her hand out of the way, and the light died behind my eyes. I wasn't meant to work magic, or to work with magic.

And neither was she, not at this level. Not like this.

"Stop it," I said. "Let it drop."

Her eyes had gone wide and unblinking, her jaw slack. A fat, red drop of blood hung at the swell of her lower lip as her lips moved rapidly, almost in silence, her breathing growing faster and more ragged.

"No."

I shook her once, gently, then again, hard, but she didn't stop. I tried to shake her even harder, but I couldn't. I don't mean that I wasn't willing to shake her hard. I tried, but it was like trying to push her first through water, then molasses, then through a wall—there was a limit to how hard I could shake her, how hard her magic would let me hold her.

"*Stop it.*"

I tried to slap her, but my hand slowed as it approached her face, turning what had been intended to be a sharp hit into a gentle cupping of her cheek. Whatever was moving her was protecting her on the level of physical attack.

"Andrea."

I couldn't hit her, and nothing I could say was going to do any good, so I pulled her close, my mouth over hers.

Her eyes were wide and her mouth was wet and warm, salty with the taste of blood, perhaps mine, perhaps hers. Her arms snaked around my chest, astonishingly strong fingers locking tightly behind my back as she pushed herself hard against me, her tongue warm and wet in my mouth.

Old reflexes died hard while long-time inhibitions died easily: I swept the spell book and her gear off the bed and onto the floor, not caring about the damage.

Her eyes, now more insistent than mad, locked on mine as we fell to the bunk, fingers struggling clumsily with clothing.

The part of me that's always analytical mused that I used to be a lot more expert at this, but I told it to shut up, and for once it listened.

* * *

She lay in my arms for a long time, her head resting on my left shoulder, her breathing so slow I thought she was asleep, which is why I didn't move my arm from underneath her, even though she was pressing against my biceps in just the right place to put the arm to sleep.

To tell the truth, the first time hadn't been all that good; we were both in too much of a hurry, or at least I was. The second time was better. Twenty years before, there had been a third time, but no matter how long it had been for me since I'd last been with a woman—and it had been *far* too long—I was years older, and was slowing down.

Well, I had seen this coming, and now it had happened, and the world hadn't ended.

What I hadn't considered enough was that Doria was probably right, that Andy was overdoing the magic, and it not only was taking a toll on her, but was threatening to send her right over the edge, almost as though it was a personal force. I'd have to try to keep her away from magic, but I didn't have the vaguest idea as to how to do that. This worked once, but I didn't think that keeping it up twenty-four hours a day was a really live possibility.

I mean, assuming I was, er, up to it, how would I phrase the suggestion?

I smiled to myself, but it wasn't funny. Andy was pushing herself too hard, and I didn't see a prayer of stopping it. Maybe, just maybe, she could control it better. Maybe there was some other way.

I hate maybes.

I had thought she was asleep, but then she stretched and yawned, lifted her face to mine, and smiled as she stretched, one toe coming up and playing with the sheath still strapped to my right calf. I don't normally feel the need to be armed during sex, honest, but I hadn't spent a lot of time thinking this out.

Unsurprisingly, all the tension had gone out of her body. Even if you do it wrong, that still tends to happen, and while I hadn't been keeping score, I hadn't noticed a lot of mistakes on either of our parts, just the normal sort of first-time clumsiness. What did surprise me was that a lot of tension I hadn't known I'd had, had gone out of me. In my shoulders and right arm, particularly. (I suspect the tautness had gone out of my left arm, but it was numb, and I wasn't going to know about that for awhile.)

"What am I supposed to say?" she asked, her voice blurred with sleepiness. "Thanks, I needed that?"

It would have been uncouth to observe that she obviously *had* needed that, even softened by an explanation to the effect that for an adult used to an active sex life, there were better things than having it cut off, as I could have explained from my own recent history.

Or I could have explained that I needed it too. No, not just the release; as much as I'd wanted that, I am more than skin and meat wrapped around a collection of gonads and hormones. What I had needed, what I had needed badly, was the touch of a woman who didn't shudder when I laid a hand on her.

But—

"Sure," I said. "That'll be fine."

* * *

Let me tell you two of the nice things about having old friends around:

You can do something that is at the very best morally ambiguous, and then, when questioned about it, you can try to shrug it off with a stupid one-liner, and all that will happen is that your old friend will stiffen for a moment, then relax in your arms and lay her head on your chest, and then she'll say with an affectionate laugh in her voice, "Walter, you are *such* an asshole." And then, quickly: "We'd better get dressed before my son gets back."

And, later, you can be standing next to a railing as a ship is blown through the night, watching the faerie lights dancing manically along the horizon, their reflections in the water shattered and dispersed long before they've ever reached you, and another old friend will walk up and rest a slim hand on your

shoulder, lean her head against your arm, and say nothing, nothing at all.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

*In Which We Meet
Three Slavers Snarling,
Two Wizards Waiting,
One Cleric Considering,
but Skip the Partridge
in the Pear Tree*

*Whoever loves, if he do not propose
The right true end of love, he's one that goes
To sea for nothing but to make him sick.*

—JOHN DONNE

Peer pressure is a pain in the ass.

—WALTER SLOVOTSKY

The sun had just set, casting fading bands and threads of gold and crimson on sky and water, as the lights of Ehvenor drew over the horizon and started to peek out between the islands.

The cold gray waters around Ehvenor were scattered with rocky, wave-spattered islands. Some thrust stony fingers through the surface and into the sky, and made me think of underwater spires threatening to gut the ship. Others, their backs covered in moss and brush, rose only a few feet out of the water. Their dark bulks loomed dangerously beneath the waves, threatened the *Delenia*'s bulk with grounding.

Mostly, they just got in the way.

Life's a lot like that.

Erol Lyneian pointed the *Delenia*'s bow high, toward what looked like a dangerously narrow passage between two islands, but he looked like he knew what he was doing, and I hoped he knew what he was doing.

"There's a landing on the other side of that. That's the closest I'm willing to go to Ehvenor these days."

There was a light behind Andrea's eyes—and no, that's not a figure of speech—as she laid a hand on Erol Lyneian's shoulder and said, "No. There is another. Further down, past the channel. Sail to that one." Her voice was a thick contralto, almost singing.

I looked to Ahira, and he looked back at me, but neither of us was going to say anything further.

Erol Lyneian started to protest, but she silenced him with a gesture. "Sail to that one."

* * *

The landing was a shelf cut into the side of the cliff, and three flights of steps carved up the side, zigzagging to the top above.

Delenia strained gently at her anchor as the onshore breeze tried to blow her up against the rocks, her sails flapping loosely in the wind. We unloaded our gear quickly, Jason and Tenny descending first, Ahira and me throwing packs and parcels down to them and the four rowers in the launch.

I was the last one down. I turned to Erol Lyneian to thank him, but he hadn't gotten us out of Brae out of any goodness of his heart, but in return for a secret worth as much as a hull full of gold, perhaps. And worth nothing if I simply spread it around, telling everyone I encountered what gunpowder consisted of, how to make it.

Of course, it wouldn't be worth anything to me, either, but it never had been, not in the sense that Erol Lyneian thought of it. Which is why he hadn't thought of the possibility that I might spread the secret further—why would I give away something that I had so carefully husbanded all these years?

I smiled.

"Fare well, Erol Lyneian," I said, as I lowered myself over the side.

Only a few minutes later we and our gear were safely ensconced on the lower landing, watching the sailors row the launch all too quickly back to the *Delenia*.

Ahira looked at the lights brightening the sky overhead, obscured by the cliff, and then he looked at me.

"Walter," he said, "you're on."

* * *

Most of the time, the precautions you take are wasted, but you have to take them anyway.

A college friend of mine—she was a senior when I was a freshman—got married right after graduation. She wanted to get started on making babies, only to find after much effort and expense that she had a fertility problem, and that all the years and money she'd spent on contraception had been wasted. I don't want to count the number of times I've entered a room through a window, or perhaps an unexpected door, or poked my head in and out for a quick peek before going in. I can't begin to add up how often I've armed myself for the day or night without ever having to even touch a hand to a knifehilt or pistol butt. I won't try to remember the number of times I've loaded a pistol and hung it on the wall without having to fire it.

Still, you do it the right way, each and every time.

I crept up the steps slowly, carefully, hands feeling for any give as I slowly put my weight on each progressive step, eyes sweeping the steps ahead for a sign of anything out of the ordinary, happy that these were stone, and not wood. There's a thousand ways to gimmick a wooden staircase; a laid stone one is trickier, and carved stone is the toughest to rig, but it's not impossible.

The obvious place for a trap was at the top, where some idiot would poke his head and torso over the ledge, leaving himself an open target, so I paused at the last landing and gently straightened.

The plateau was overgrown by a thick vine that lay flat on the ground; it had long choked any grasses dead, so there was neither any obstruction nor concealment.

Still, in the dark, you wouldn't expect anyone to be looking for a forehead and a pair of eyes. You wouldn't expect there to be somebody right there, his eyes inches from mine.

Which is okay, because there wasn't.

What there *was* was a man, squatting easily, just out of reach, looking down at me, two men standing behind him. He was broad of shoulder and dark of hair and beard, and his thin lips barely split in a smile that held only a trace of cynicism, perhaps, or possibly just a hint of contempt.

The hilt of a saber hung near his left hip, canted forward, but his hands were clasped in front of him.

"Greetings," he said. Moving with exaggerated slowness, he unclenched his hands and gestured beyond, to the campfire, where three more shapes in dark robes huddled around a simmering pot. "They've been waiting for you, for all of you." He extended a muscular hand to help me up, but backed slowly away, palms up, when I didn't take it.

I looked beyond the three rough men toward the fire, toward the three hooded shapes there, watching us, not moving.

Six of them, five of us. I didn't particularly like the odds; the three robed ones sitting about the fire might as well have been wearing signs proclaiming themselves magic-user types.

The dark-bearded man spoke again. "Ta havath," he said with a smile. "We mean you no harm, not here and now." It was a genuine smile, but I didn't like it. "Even though I am called Wolkennen, and am a full brother of the Slavers Guild, as are my guild brothers here," he said.

Sometimes, everyone is lucky that I'm me, and not Karl—me included. Karl would have launched himself at Wolkennen, and damned be the consequences, figuring one down was a good start. Me, I just beckoned to the others to hurry the hell up the stairs, and straightened, slipping the hilt of a throwing knife to the palm of my hand.

I mean, I believed him, but I wasn't sure I believed that I believed him, if you understand what I mean.

Andy was at my side, one hand touching my arm to urge caution, a soft spell on her lips.

"Be easy, Walter," she said, walking up the steps and stalking across the mat of vines toward the campfire, and the three sitting around it. One of the slavers took half a step toward her, stopped by a glare from Wolkennen.

"No," he said. "Leave them be." The three slavers backed off, away from us, away from the fire, toward the far end of the plateau where a pair of low tents stood pitched.

I walked the last few steps up the plateau. Down the slope, Ehvenor lay, waiting. Or maybe it didn't lie, and perhaps it didn't wait. Maybe it was doing more than lying.

Down the slope and below, Ehvenor flickered brightly in the night.

The last time I had been near Ehvenor, it looked pretty much like a normal city, except for the area around the Faerie . . . well, embassy, I always thought of it.

I'd say that part of it was unchanged, except that it had never *been* unchanged: that was the trouble with it.

It was a tall, dome-capped tower, rising perhaps four stories, seemingly woven of sunrise and haze, always best looked at out of the corner of the eye. When you'd look at it directly, it would seem to shift, to change, to melt from one shape to another, but always so subtly that you never could tell just what had happened, always knowing that something was different from what had been, but never able to tell whether the change had come on quickly or slowly.

It was still there in the center of the city, but now it was surrounded by three similar buildings, no, it was a hundred buildings; silly, of course it had always been—a thousand buildings, spread across—no, tightly packed through—miles upon miles of crooked—no, curved—no, straight streets.

I could have looked away, but it's a bad habit to look away from things that bother you; you have to get used to it. So I looked, my jaw clenched so tight I'm surprised I didn't break any teeth.

Okay; fine. The outer parts of the city were still streets of cobblestone and mud, still buildings of wood and stone, but the center of the city, a mass of great brightness and indeterminate size, was something that my mind couldn't quite grasp, no matter how hard I tried.

Big fucking deal. Nothing to be scared about. I'd never been able to do integral calculus, either; not understanding something didn't have to scare me.

So why was I shivering? I would have guessed that it was cold on the plateau, but I don't like the looks of that kind of intellectual dishonesty on anybody, present company included.

Okay; it scared me. Big, fat, hairy deal. I'd been scared before.

Off toward the edges of the light, dark shapes shifted into and out of solidity, some evaporating in the flickering whiteness, others shuffling off into the darkness.

I turned back to the others.

Trouble was brewing, at least from one quarter. Andy had quietly joined the three robed ones sitting by the fire, but Tenny and Jason had dropped their gear and squared off opposite the slavers. No weapons had been drawn, but maybe it was only a matter of time. Jason had already thumbed away the thong holding one of his borrowed flintlocks in place.

Silly boy. I thumbed away the thongs of *all* of my flintlocks. I was willing to take Wolkennen's word for his harmlessness—until it all started.

Ahira stepped in front of Jason. "Let's not start anything we can't stop, friends," he said, mainly to Jason and Tenny, but maybe a bit to me, as well.

Something moved in the vines underfoot, and I started, stopping my hand at the butt of a flintlock.

"You know," I said, "this reminds me of a story I once heard about. Seems there were these two groups of combatants squared off against each other, trying to make peace. Only trouble was, one member of

one party spotted a snake, and drew his sword to cut its head off. That's when it all broke loose. Not because anybody wanted it to, but because everybody thought it already was breaking loose."

Ahira nodded. "So we'll all stand very easy. Tenny, you and I will just sit ourselves over there," he said, indicating a spot about halfway between the fire and the tents. "Jason and Walter, you join Andrea."

I didn't know whether to be flattered that he trusted me enough to back Andy on whatever was going on, or whether to be discouraged that he didn't trust me to either hold my fire or put it in the right place, so I decided to skip being flattered or discouraged and hurried over with Jason to where Andy was standing by the fire.

Well, I had long taken the position that if what was going on with Ehvenor was all that important, there would be magical types looking into it; I didn't know whether to be glad or disappointed to be proven right.

One of the three robed ones stood, throwing back the hood, and letting the dark robe fall to his feet. Beneath the robe he wore tunic and leggings, both of a light yellow. My prejudices are always to think of wizards as small, wizened men and women—the more powerful, the smaller and more shriveled—but that's really silly, when you think of it. Somebody who can take on a better appearance may well choose to appear young and strong; somebody with enough power to make that appearance real may well choose to be young and strong, and by no means are all wizards human.

He was tall and just barely slender rather than skinny, his black beard trimmed neatly, the movements of his hands graceful as he beckoned to Andy.

"Join us, good wizard," he said, clasping his hands in front of him and bowing. "We have been waiting."

Andy said nothing, and the silence hung in the air for a long time while the city flickered and the fire crackled. In the crackling flames, a burning log broke in two, sending a shower of sparks into the air and off into the night.

Andrea raised a hand and breathed a spell, and the wizard stretched further until he was impossibly thin for a human, the tops of his ears losing their roundness, as his hair and beard became finer, softer, like a baby's hair.

"Well done, oh, well, done," the elf said, his words almost a song. "You have unmasked me, I do depose."

She tossed her head. "I don't need false congratulations. I couldn't have overcome your seeming if you hadn't let me."

"True." His look wasn't quite condescending; neither was the way he clasped his hands at his waist and bowed. The look was penetrating, the kind of stare that made me think he could look through not only my clothes and flesh, but maybe even my self.

"I am Vair ip Melhrood, long resident in glorious Pandathaway, for these past two hundred years of the Wizards Guild. I am known as Vair the Uncertain." His lips crooked into a smile. "At least, I think that's how I am known."

"You wear your age well," she said.

"Thank you."

The second rose, throwing robes aside in one rough motion. He came about waist-high on the first: a dwarf. My first thought was that he wasn't a wizard—dwarf wizards are rare—but when he seated himself tailor-fashion on the air, I decided otherwise. It takes a powerful wizard to use a levitation spell at all, and even more so to simply use it for the casual purpose of bringing his eyes to the same level as Andrea's—it could have been just showing off, but he was a dwarf, and dwarves don't tend to show off. No, he was a wizard, but he hadn't bothered with a seeming.

Dwarves don't mind how they look; there's no accounting for taste.

This one looked pretty ugly, even for a dwarf. He was only a little shorter than Ahira, but probably didn't weigh more than half as much. His skin hung off him in deep folds. The peeling skin didn't look particularly healthy, but I guess he didn't care about the heartbreak of psoriasis.

Where Ahira's big nose and massive jaw make Ahira look pleasantly homely, this dwarf's face was covered with deep wrinkles that made him look like shrunk leather.

"Nareen," he said, his voice a quiet rasp. "Nareen the Patient, Nareen the Glassmaker. I ask that you sit with us."

"I will hear you," Andrea said, "shortly." She turned to the third, who rose as the others had, pushing her hood back. Even though her hair was pulled back in a tight bun, she would have been lovely, except that her right eye stared unmovingly ahead, dead and unseeing.

She parted her brown robes to reveal pristinely white robes beneath. Despite the contradiction of the eye, I knew what that meant.

Shit.

"I have no name, nor am I called by one," she said, her voice a rich contralto. "But I am of the Healing Hand."

Double shit.

Shit: I don't like the Hand; it's personal. They took Doria away from us for years, and never really gave her back; she had to break free, and was only barely able to. We had run into each other one time, her mind more melded than anything else into their collective conscious. I know that's part of how they relate to the Power they call the Healing Hand, and that's what enables them to act as a conduit for its blessings and providings, but I don't have to like it, and I don't like it.

Double shit: it seems that as Hand clerics develop more power, they give up more of their identities; the higher-ranking ones are known by their titles, having forsaken their own names. According to somebody who ought to know, the Matriarch herself no longer has any of her own personality, but is merely a reflection of the whole Hand consciousness, and that spooks me. I had a run-in with the Matriarch years before; she didn't find my rather charming self-centeredness, well, charming, and for some reason I'm uncomfortable being in the presence of someone of power who strongly disapproves of me. Always have been, ever since back in high school when I had a run-in with the principal about the awkward incident involving a hydrogen-filled basketball and a bunsen burner.

Call me picky.

Andrea gestured at where the slavers were camped out. "And these are?"

"They are with me," Vair said. "I required bodyguards. In Pandathaway, the slavers and my own guild have a . . . standing arrangement." He cocked his head to one side. "You seem surprised to see us; did you think you'd be the only ones interested in such an event?"

Nareen spoke up. "I have been waiting here for most of a year," he said, "living off roots and leaves, watching the changes below, waiting to learn more." He gestured toward the flickering city. "When I arrived, it was still only in the center. Fewer of the—"

"There," Vair said, pointing. "Another one."

I followed the pointing finger, but didn't see anything.

Neither did Andy. "Another what?"

Vair shrugged. "Who knows? Something released from the shadows, to shamble off into the night. Dark and hulking it was, at the edge of visibility, now off in the darkness."

Nareen's eyes were following something I couldn't see for a long while, but then he shrugged. "It could be anything. A fairy taking a shape, a shape taking identity, a myth taking reality." His eyes sought and caught Andrea's. "I've seen two dragons spurt forth and fly away, a dozen deodands stagger off into the night, and scores of large, hairy things, like humans but uglier even than humans." He watched the city flickering for the longest time. "There. A glimpse, a flicker, a taste of the Place Where The Trees Scream."

The Hand woman stroked the air in front of her. "Possibly. I know I saw a flash of meadow earlier, somewhere outside of Aershtyn."

I was going to ask how she was sure where the meadow was, but I didn't. Magic, after all.

She shook her head. "No, Walter Slovotsky, it was not that. The meadow was ringed by tiny firs, the sort that grow only high on the slopes of Aershtyn."

"What's going on down there?" Trust Jason to ask the obvious question.

Vair shrugged, again. "It could be any of a number of things. It's possible that this is but the first tentative feeler in a long time, an attempt to see if the powers of magic and the will of the gods still balance the faerie and the fey.

"Or it's possible that an immature one of them has been . . . Mmm. I don't think I have the words." He looked at me, then spoke a few low syllables, while distant fingers touched my mind. It was only then that I realized that he had been talking in English, not Erendra. "It is possible that an immature one of *them* is loose, creating magical creatures and spinning them off into the solid regions like a child blowing soap bubbles off into the breeze." He smiled, sadly. "Or it could be that I have been quite deliberately misled, and that this is just another part of the duel between the two long-mad ones."

Nareen smiled. "Don't ask an elf for answers; they always have too many."

"How about you?"

The dwarf shrugged. "I don't pretend to have any. Oh, anyone can see the obvious, that magic and the magical spurt out from Ehvenor like molten glass from a holed crucible, solidifying in the coolth of hard reality. But the cause? I'll not talk on causes, or you'll think me to be Vair the Uncertain."

Vair folded his arms in front of him, then brought up one hand and felt at his chin. "I don't know. It is unknown, and perhaps unknowable. Of a certainty, I can see no way of knowing without getting close enough, without getting to the Hall. Perhaps there is a breach between Faerie and reality; perhaps some of the Good Folk simply toy with Ehvenor; perhaps it is the end of the world."

The Hand cleric laid a hand on Vair's arm. "The unknown can be investigated. A breach can be healed, perhaps; the Good Folk may be persuaded to cease their play, if it is just play; the unknowable and the end of all that is can be met with serenity. It is the not knowing that is the problem, almost as much as the knowing too much."

Knowing too much can be a problem?

She gave me a look. Okay. It can fuck up your sense of proportion to all hell. I'd worked that one out years ago, even before Professor Alperson's class. Too much of a sense of proportion is a disability. See, the answer to the railroad problem is that it doesn't matter what you know or what you think you know—Karl was right. The answer is that you don't, for the lack of willingness to make a hard decision, let two people die when you can save one, even if it's only for a moment.

One side of Andy's lip curled up into a skeptical half-smile. "What are the chances of this being the end of the world?"

Nareen scowled. "There is no chance of that. Vair exaggerates. It may be important, but it is not of that importance. The feel is wrong. Lives hang in the balance, yes; but not the reality of reality, not the existence of existence."

Big fucking relief.

The Hand cleric chose her words slowly, with special care. "It is necessary that someone go down into the city, to the Hall. What you call the Faerie Embassy."

"And you think you've found your suckers, eh?" I asked.

Vair's thin lips twisted in derision. "Sucker, no. Someone who is . . . unusually expert at finding her way about, beyond her abilities in more traditional areas of expertise. Someone who was called, perhaps." He gave Andrea another one of his penetrating looks. "Though I cannot see who could call you against your will."

I turned to Andrea. "I don't like the sound of it."

"You don't have to." She dismissed me with a wave as she turned back to the Three. "Your problem isn't a lack of power, is it? It's a lack of knowledge. Vair alone has enough power to . . . cut a magical flow, given the right tools. You've made the tools, Nareen, but you can't heal over the cut, stitch space and time back together. The Hand has the power to cauterize the cut, if there should be need, but not if none of you can see through the indeterminacy."

Her lips were tight as she nodded once, tightly. "The three of you need someone who has been

preoccupied with location and direction spells, someone who has skill in that area beyond what she should, someone who can plot her way through with some hope of getting out, and report to you what is happening in there, the shape of reality inside."

Nareen sighed. "That is almost the case," he said, sadly, his hand reaching down to a pouch at his waist and pulling a small leather bag from his purse. With exquisite delicacy, his large blunt fingers worked the knot open and slipped a glass eye onto the palm of his hand. "This is the second Eye I have made here."

"I have the first." The Hand cleric reached up and touched her dead, staring eye with a fingernail. *Tick. Tick.* "What one Eye sees, the other Eye sees. So. There are three of us: *Me*, to see. Nareen, to make the tools. Vair to use them. You are the fourth: one to place the Eye."

I held up a hand. "Now wait a fucking minute. Why can't you do this yourselves? Why Andy? Why us?"
Whyme ?

"Why not us?" Vair nodded, conceding the validity of the question, if not the accusation. "Not me, because I would soon be lost within Ehvenor; my abilities are in a different area. Not she of the Hand or Nareen, because I need her sight with me, and I need the tools he will make ready." Vair the Uncertain looked uncertainly at me. "Andrea, because she can expand her powers to navigate through indeterminacy. Jason, because he will go in willy-nilly, as his father would have. Ahira, because there is danger in Ehvenor, and his strength may well be required; Tenny, because where strength may not be enough, viciousness may serve; you, because where strength and viciousness may be insufficient, sneakiness, pragmatism, and pigheadedness may suffice."

I cocked my head to one side. "And all we have to do is get this Eye to the Faerie Embassy, or outpost, or whatever it is, and then get out?"

"All that is needed," Nareen said, slowly, sadly, "is that it be brought all the way in."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

*In Which We Foolishly
Don't Take Our Time
to Think This All Over*

Though boys throw stones at frogs in sport, the frogs do not die in sport, but in earnest.

—PLUTARCH

Sense of proportion, pfui.

—WALTER SLOVOTSKY

A friend of mine once explained why she did her breast self-exam only once a month. You'd think, given the Other Side importance of spotting a lump early—there are only a few really solid cures for the wasting disease on the Other Side, and all of them work better if you catch it when it's young—she'd spend a few minutes every morning checking. And, hell, if she didn't want to do it for herself, I could think of a few dozen men, myself included, who would be happy to do it for her.

But she explained that those sorts of changes happen so slowly that if you feel for them all the time, you'll get used to the growth of the small lump, and it'll become part of the background—you'll miss the changes, until much later than you would if they surprise you.

Sometimes important changes happen right in front of your eyes and you can't see them.

* * *

I didn't like it. Any of it.

"What I don't see," I said, "is why her. Why us?"

"Because we're here?" Ahira shrugged unnecessarily hard as he settled the straps of his rucksack over his mail overshirt. He had put the strap buckles in their outermost holes; it now barely kept the rucksack on his back.

"Bullshit," I said.

"There have been things Andrea let drop. I think she's been pulled here, maybe. Think about it."

I remembered the time in her new workshop, and the momentary look of obsession, compulsion that had crossed her face. And then there was the time outside of Fenevar, when the idea of heading away from Ehvenor had scared her.

Ahira slipped a piece of rope under the straps of his rucksack, put a single knot in it, then tied a bow that held the two front straps together.

"By whom?"

He shrugged. "I don't know." He shook his head. "I could be wrong. It doesn't make sense—she's stubborn, and if somebody's trying to bend her will, she wouldn't go along without a fight. Who is there who might try to influence her that she wouldn't resist?" He threw up his hands. "So forget it. Not all my ideas are winners."

I couldn't think of anybody, either. "So why aren't we turning around and running away?"

His mouth twisted into a frown. "Because it doesn't much matter what anybody or anything else wants. The same principle still applies, only more so: strange things have been coming out of Faerie, and that's started to affect us and the people we care about." He looked at the three around the campfire for a moment. "And because Andrea is going in, no matter what you and I want her to do, and you'd no more let her go in alone than I would."

Well, one of us had to say it, and it was his turn.

"Turn around," I said. When he did, I gave a good, hard tug on the rucksack. Solid. Neither elegant nor

comfortable, but wearing it this way meant that his rucksack would stay on his back, yet he'd be able to release it with one quick tug if need be. "It'll do."

"Good." He bit his thumbnail, and considered the ragged edge. "How many individuals or things have you run into that you don't understand?"

"Well . . ." I couldn't help smiling. "Everybody except me and thee, and sometimes I'm not sure about thee."

His frown was sour. "Magical individuals or things."

I shrugged. "Including Deighton? A lot." I started to tick them off on my fingers. "The Wizards Guild, for starts. Does that count as one, or as one per wizard? The Matriarch. The Bright Riders. Boioardo. Those guys in the black robes we ran into outside of Endell a couple of years ago. Thelleren, although maybe I'm just being suspicious by reflex. I've never been sure about Henrad, and . . ." I shook my head. "No. She's stubborn, like the rest of us. I don't know of anybody who could make her do anything, not really."

"Nobody alive," he said.

* * *

I didn't envy Wolkennen his job; he was trying to make a case he wanted to lose.

"I still believe," he said, "that you should take the three of us with you. We're pretty good when it comes to blades."

Tennetty didn't quite sneer. "I'm sure you are." She pumped her bowie in its sheath a few times, hard. "Want to—"

"No," Jason said. "Not here and now," he said. "You'd kill him, but he might damage you in the doing of it, and we only have a few sips of healing draughts left."

"I don't understand why you're turning down help." Andrea shook her head in frustration. "We could run into trouble in there." This wasn't her part of the business, and she didn't like the way things were shaping up. But, bless her, she was willing to hear me out.

"It's a matter of practice and trust," I said. "I can trust Tennetty to watch my back when that's her job, and that'll leave me free to worry about what's in front." I looked down the slope. "I don't trust Wolkennen, and I don't know how good he is. I don't need to worry about my back."

Ahira slapped his hands together. "Enough. Case closed. Let's get ready. Tennetty, you've got the Eye?"

"True enough." She displayed Nareen's Eye on her palm. Turning away, Tennetty removed her eyepatch, and brought her palm to her face. When she turned back, the Eye glared from the socket. A good place to keep it, although as she blinked, the blank back side of it rolled forward, and it stared out blackly into the night.

She worked her shoulders under her leather tunic. "Simple job: just bring this—" she tapped at the Eye "—to the Faerie Embassy, or outpost, or whateverthefuck it is." She dropped her hand and looked over at me, looking cross-eyed for the moment. She patted at her various and sundry weapons, then shouldered her pack. "I'm ready to go. Is there any reason why we're standing around?"

Yeah, there was. Maybe the horse would learn how to sing.

"No," Andy said. "Best done quickly."

"Okay, everyone," Ahira said. "Let's do it."

"Wait a moment." Jason turned to Wolkennen. "We know what you are," he said. "You trade in people's flesh. Here and now is not the time and place to settle with you for that, but there will be another time, another place—"

Wolkennen sneered. "Who are you to say what time and place there will be?"

Jason smiled. "Hey, Wolkennen, haven't you heard? The Warrior lives." He turned back to the rest of us. "Now it's time to go."

Tennetty and I took rear guard as we walked away. "I don't like it," she said. "They could cut across the top and swing down the east side, then ambush us ahead. Two in front of us, one in back. Nail us with arrows before we could get at them."

I shook my head. "Nah." Then who would they get to go into Ehvenor?

But I kept my eyes open anyway, and Tennetty and I both had our swords drawn.

* * *

Stone steps down the other side of the plateau dumped us down on a narrow road that twisted down the side of the hills toward the city, alternately revealing and hiding it as we walked on.

I couldn't figure it, not at first. The city was pulsating, and flickering, streets shifting position and constitution. At one moment, one would be a narrow lane, surrounded by low windowless buildings in the night, and without warning or apparent rearrangement, it was suddenly a broad avenue crisscrossed by walkways in the day, and I couldn't spot the moment where one had become the other.

But, then, as we got closer, the pace of change slowed. Streets stayed themselves longer, the changes coming farther apart, but nonetheless both sudden and unseen. I know: it's not possible for something to change instantly, right in front of your eyes, and for you to not see that it's happened.

Understand why I don't like magic?

The trouble is, of course, that my mind wanted to spot the changes, to catch the flicker or shuffling or shift or transformation, and it wasn't equipped to. Looking for it was like, say, trying to spot bands of color in the infrared: something else I wasn't equipped for.

I guess I was paying too much attention to the way the city was peeking out around the next curve when the pack jumped us. It's something you've always got to watch out for around Ehvenor; there's too much magic around there, and hanging around magic drives some humans crazy. I guess it must make them want to leave each other alone, because if it didn't, they would quickly kill each other off. I dunno; not my department.

What was my department, what I did see, and barely shouted a warning about, was the three dark shapes that dropped out of the trees, one claw-fingered hand gripping Tennetty's shoulder, dragging her down.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

*In Which We Learn
a Possible Origin
of a Previously
Familiar Term*

Nonviolence is not a garment to be put on and off at will. Its seat is in the heart, and it must be an inseparable part of our very being.

—MOHANDAS K. GANDHI

Just once, I'd like to have an enemy against whom nonviolence would be a workable alternative—workable in the sense of me not ending up dancing on the end of a spear, or cut into tiny, bite-sized pieces.

—WALTER SLOVOTSKY

I shouted a warning to the others as I cut down at its broad, hairy back, only hacking once before I had to bring up the sword to skewer the one charging me, its hands outstretched.

The standard drill on that is straightforward: you parry his weapons, thrust, then withdraw with a twist—turning a narrow wound that might not slow him down into a broad one that will definitely sting him a bit—as you pull out your sword and get it ready to parry or cut something else. What you *don't* want is for him to be able to pull either a distraction, where one opponent monopolizes your attention while another one gets to you, or a sacrifice, where he forces you to spend too much time killing him, setting you up for the next one.

Either way, it's parry, thrust, and out-with-a-twist-*fast*.

Trouble was, this thing wasn't only larger and stronger than a human, it was also faster—it rushed up my sword, burying the hilt in its hair-matted belly, and seized me in a bearhug as it lifted me up and off the ground. Or, not quite a bearhug—while it pinned my right arm to my side, I managed to get my left hand free, and smash a bottom-fist down on its leathery face once, then again, and again.

Wrong, wrong, wrong—that had less effect than the sword did. It was like slugging a leather-covered rock.

The two massive arms squeezed the breath out of me, and kept squeezing so hard that the hilt of my sword was pressed hard against my gut. Warm blood—its warm blood—was running down my belly and leg, but *I* was the one losing strength; it seemed unaffected by the sword that had run it through.

Darkness started to close in, but I was able to get my free arm over and around its hairy arm, and liberate one of my flintlocks from my holster on my left thigh. I cocked the hammer as I brought the pistol up to its head, and then closed my eyes as I set the barrel against its snout.

I pulled the trigger. Fire and wetness splashed my face; with a liquid gurgle, it slumped to the ground, releasing me as it did.

My next breath tasted of sulfur and fire blood and foul sweat and my own fear: it tasted wonderful. I drew another pistol and cocked it, but the others had already dealt with the other two creatures.

Tennetty's, the one I had wounded, lay dying on the ground, its chest heaving slowly up and down, bleeding from a dozen wounds, some light, some cuts to white bone; the third had been split almost from collarbone to waist, spilling dark blood and yellowy viscera onto the cold dirt with callous indifference.

Ahira stood over the last one, panting heavily, his axe and mail slick with blood, glossy in the starlight. "Everybody okay?"

"Jason and I are fine." Andrea was behind him, Jason beyond her, his sword in one hand, a flintlock in another. The two Cullinanes were unmarked, as far as I could see.

"I'll live," I said.

"Unh." Tennetty was on all fours on the dirt. She knelt back for a moment, then slowly, painfully, got to her feet. "Been worse." Her hair was a bird's nest, and she had scraped her face badly just above the right cheekbone, but she looked not much the worse for wear.

The three things lay on the ground in front of us.

Take a human, blow it up to one and a half times its size, stretch its face and then cover it all with a thick mat of stinking fur, and that's what you have. Something big and too strong, if not overly bright—if the three of those things had been a bit faster, or a bit smarter, all of us would have been dead.

Ahira knelt over a severed arm and poked at the hand with the hilt of his axe. "Partially retractable claws, and the thumb's just barely opposable. It may be intelligent."

I felt at my side. It hurt like hell, but maybe that was all. I breathed deeply, and didn't feel the broken edges of ribs grate against each other, so maybe I was okay, too.

That's where age and experience had saved our asses. Most of the precautions you take are wasted ones; ninety-nine plus percent of the time that you post a guard, nobody's going to even bother him; the rear guard of the party is usually a waste. Young people learn that too quickly, and not only do their minds tend to wander—so does mine—they also tend not to be able to pay attention to what's going on.

You live through this sort of thing for a while, and your chances of surviving the next time go up.

Nothing to it, really. Nothing but effort and patience and concentration and luck. Nothing to worry about.

I wiped my trembling hands on my thighs.

"What the fuckare you?" Tennetty asked the dying creature.

The last of them rolled its head slowly toward her, its eyes wide with pain, certainly, or anger perhaps.

"Urrkk," it said, slowly, painfully reaching out claw-tipped fingers toward her.

And then it shuddered and died.

"Time's wasting," Ahira said. "Let's go."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

*In Which We Enter
Ehvenor and I Get Lost*

Nothing endures but change.

—HERACLITUS

When you get to my age, you like a little stability. At least in the fucking ground under your feet.

—WALTER SLOVOTSKY

The mountain road bled off onto flat land at the shoreline, as we walked on while the morning fog crept in and the city insisted on changing in front of us. The road narrowed, became little more than shoulder-width, surrounded on each side by dense brush; we had to walk single file.

We walked for what felt like hours and hours; Ehvenor drew slowly closer. Dawn threatened to break over the horizon, while a light fog blew in off the Cirric, chilling me thoroughly to the bone.

Tennetty and I had switched off with Ahira and Jason, taking the lead behind Andy while they watched our backtrail. So far, so good.

The only trouble was Andrea: she was too calm, her steps too light and easy as we stopped at a fork in the road. I shook my head. That fork hadn't been there before; the road had twisted at that spot, but it hadn't forked.

It did now.

She smiled, and muttered a few quick syllables under her breath. "Right fork," she said, then relaxed.

Her eyes met mine for a moment. "It's okay to talk now; there shouldn't be any decisions for the next half mile."

"It would be nice if it didn't change for awhile."

"Don't count on it."

I tried to smile confidently. "How are you holding up?"

She shrugged. "I'm okay. I can handle this."

"Fine," I said. "But we can turn around any time you want."

Her eyes had stopped blinking. I didn't know what that means, I still don't know what that means, but her eyes had stopped blinking.

"I don't think so," she said. Then she corrected herself. "No, we don't turn around here. We keep going."

"We just lost the fork behind us." Ahira's voice was too calm.

I turned to see the road twisting behind us, vanishing off in the fog well beyond where the fork was. Had been. Should have been. Whatever.

"Good," I said. "I never liked it anyway."

Ahead, the fog thickened.

"Hey, Ahira? What say you and Tennyty switch?" Infrared can pierce fog a bit deeper than visible light, and dwarves can see farther into the infrared than humans can.

They did, and as we walked on, the fog thickened further, until I could barely see six feet in front of me.

"Let's close up, people," Tennyty said, beckoning Jason in tighter. "One for all and all for one, eh?"

I would have been tempted to protest, but Ahira nodded. "Makes sense. Andrea?"

She shook her head. "I can't think. The fog is too thick, on the ground, in my eyes, in my mind." Her shoulders hunched, as though waiting to receive a blow, then slackened as she breathed a spell, her fingertips working in front of her, drawing invisible letters in the air.

The fog drew in further, until I could barely see my feet, and Ahira off in front of me.

My heart started thumping.

Look—I'm not normally claustrophobic. A dwarf friend of mine (not Ahira; he doesn't like spelunking) and I once waited out a cave-in for three full days until rescue reached us. I didn't have any trouble; I taught him how to play Ghost in dwarvish. But there's something reassuring about the solidity of cave walls. Nobody can reach claw-tipped fingers out of a cave wall and pluck your heart out; the closeness of a dwarf passage doesn't hide pitfalls and tripwires, or strange creatures waiting to leap out of nowhere and . . .

Easy, Walter.

Andy was guiding us toward Ehvenor by magic; Ahira was looking into the fog, at least a little way farther than I could, protecting us from sudden attack. Tenny, Jason, and I were useless, and a third of that really bothered the hell out of me.

"Just a little farther," Andrea said, off in the mist, just a shape, nothing more.

The fog rolled up to my knees, and then to my belly, and it was all I could do to see my hand in front of my face.

"Here," Andy said, "take a sharp right, and step forward. No, not the rest of you. Just Ahira. Okay, Walter, you're next."

I turned right and took a step forward, out of the fog, and found myself standing next to Ahira in the morning light and thick mud of a narrow Ehvenor street.

* * *

I wanted to run, I started to run, but the mud sucked at my boots. It would be like trying to run, well, through mud.

Besides, there was no reason to run. I had just been in dense fog, and now Ahira and I stood in clear light on a narrow street, surrounded by two-story wattle-and-daub buildings, up to our ankles in soft, brown mud. It could have been any street in any city, except for the way that faerie lights, bright even in the daylight, hovered motionless overhead, seemingly frozen in place.

Andy's voice was far away, but I couldn't tell in what direction. "Jason goes next," she said. "Right here. Yes, go right, right here."

And suddenly Jason, and then Tenny, and finally Andrea herself were beside us.

I forced a smile. "Nicely done. I didn't know you could teleport."

Andy smiled; then reached over and gave me a peck on the cheek. "Thank you for the compliment, but true teleportation takes power and control that's only theoretically possible. For anything mortal," she added.

If that wasn't teleportation, I'd like to know what it is.

I guess the question showed on my face, because she shrugged and answered. "It's not teleportation. Teleportation is when you go from point A to noncontiguous point B, skipping the points between. This just happened to be right next to where we were, if you knew where to look."

The air was warmer than it should have been for this time of the morning; I'd expected it to warm up some, but not this much. Cold mornings are better. Give a hot sun a while to work on the typical city street, and it'll smell like it's been paved in well-aged horseshit. Which it has, come to think of it.

"Waddling Way," Andrea said, nodding to herself, beckoning us to follow her. A twisty street, lined by two-story wattle-and-daub buildings, it curved off sharply maybe a hundred feet behind us, and less in front. The buildings were too tall and we were too close to see much over them, except for the distant glow of the Faerie dome to the north.

It was all quiet, and empty, except for the mud, and the buildings, and the faerie lights.

"Is quiet," I said. "Too quiet, kemo sabe."

Ahira chuckled. "Shut up," he said, not meaning it, as we walked after Andy. "Take it while you can get it."

Tennetty turned about slowly, like a camera panning in a full three-sixty, which I guess she was, at least in a sense. I didn't blame her for wanting to take it all in—it was so ordinary, not at all what I'd expected Ehvenor to be. Where was the flickering? The street we were standing on was as ordinary and solid as any street I'd ever seen.

I was going to be the straight man, but Jason beat me to it.

"Where's all the flickers? Why is it all so stable?" he asked.

Andrea didn't turn around. "The flickering was from indeterminacy. Ehvenor is never really sure what it is, and the uncertainty has been growing. But whatever it is, we're here, and that's determinate. We're in only one time and place."

I had my usual reaction to explanations about magic:

"Oh."

There's three theories about how to make your way down a street in hostile territory. My favorite theory is to avoid it in the first place; you very rarely can get killed in places you aren't. Second best is to split the party in two, each group staying on one side, covering the other. It limits the field of fire of anybody hiding in buildings on either side.

Another theory is that you walk square down the middle of the street; the idea is that gives you time to react before anybody or anything can reach you.

I don't much like that one, so I moved away, toward the raised wooden sidewalk that skirted the alley.

"No," Andrea said, without turning around. "Don't. You might get lost. Can't afford that."

Lost? Look—I'm not the kind who gets lost. I don't have a perfect sense of direction, but nobody's going to lose me on the streets of a city, not without a whole lot of trying.

Right, Walter, so where's the fog bank that was up to your nose?

I stayed close.

Waddling Way twisted and turned for maybe a quarter of a mile until it forked around a vest-pocket park, the left road leading up a cobbled street, the right one down into more muck.

I bent my head toward Ahira's. "Want to bet which way we go here?"

"Right here," Andy said, clopping down into the deeper muck, sinking in almost to her calves.

"It rained hard here, and recently," Ahira said, his eyes never stopping moving.

"No shit, Sherlock."

We followed her down into the muck, our boots making horrible sucking sounds every time we lifted our feet and stepped—

* * *

—up onto the hot, dry dirt of the street, under the heat of an oppressive noon sun and the whistle of music in the crowded marketplace.

"People," Ahira said. "It's good to see people."

That was the moment I expected them all to turn from their buying and selling, sprout long fangs, and leap at me, but sometimes I'm lucky enough not to get what I expect.

High overhead, a dozen wood flutes swirled and swooped and dived through the moist air, moving fast as they piped their tunes, the high-pitched whistling dopplering up and down in counterpoint to the manic melody. Not great music; they played an eight-bar theme, repeated without variation.

We had to step aside, quickly, to avoid two horses—huge things, about the size of Clydesdales, although dappled, not solid—pulling a heavily laden wagon.

We pressed tight around Andrea, like a bunch of school-kids staying with teacher. Which wasn't so bad an idea.

Okay, okay, I'm slow, but eventually I get it: Ehvenor wasn't just unsure what it was, it didn't know *when* it was. Normally, it's easy to get from mid-morning to noon, but you don't do it without skipping over late morning. Unless everything, time included, has broken loose. Hell, it was possible we'd stepped from today into yesterday.

It was a market day, and the trading was brisk under the whistling of the overhead flutes.

Over by a pyramid of reed bushel baskets, an apple-cheeked appleseller haggled endlessly with a tall, raw-boned man in a traveler's cloak and floppy hat. Beyond them, one of the hulking beasts—shit, I'll call them urks or orcs until you've got a better name for them, thank you very much—gestured clumsily that the butcher was asking too much for one of his hanging haunches of mutton. Well, *I hoped* it was mutton; it could have been shepherd.

Beyond the street, the dome of the Faerie Embassy waited, separated from us by maybe two or three cross-streets.

"This way, and try not to bump anything," Andy said, working her way through the crowd as a heavily laden wagon clomped by, pulled by two enormous horses. The trouble with a crowd is that you have to suppress combat reflexes. I don't like strangers pressing up against me—I'd rather do the pressing. That's how you work a crowd, and I'm a pretty good pickpocket, actually. Not that this was the time to see if my pickpocketry was up to snuff.

We made our way down the street, past the filled stalls where an overweight appleseller haggled endlessly with a tall man in hat and cloak, past the orc arguing with the butcher, past the shops where the candlemakers wielded their frames and dipped their wicks, where a fat old basketweaver took another turn on the base of the frame she was building.

Something about it bothered me, and I gave Ahira a quick touch on the shoulder, then slipped back to the rear of our group, and looked behind. Yes, yes, you can leave trouble behind you, but monkey curiosity is a survival factor, if you don't overdo it.

They were still at it. All of them. The orc was still haggling over the cost of meat, and the tall buyer was still arguing with the short appleseller, and the basketweaver still hadn't—

A heavily laden wagon clomped by, pulled by two enormous dappled horses, each about the size of a Clydesdale.

And the flutes were still swooping and swirling overhead through the same eight-bar theme.

I pushed my way up to Andrea's side. "Andy—"

She raised a peremptory finger as she muttered another spell. "We go this way." She elbowed her way through the crowd, between two stalls, and into the cool of the day and the—

* * *

—dark of the night near the middle of the square. Well, triangle—three streets dumped on it; the buildings at their ends wedge-shaped, triangular, like pieces of stone cake. No windows, no doors, nothing.

A pedestal holding a statue stood in the middle of the square, although I couldn't see what it was a statue of.

Ever do that experiment where you find your own blindspot? It's pretty simple. You put two dots on a piece of paper about six inches apart, close one eye, and stare at one of the dots as you move the paper closer, seeing the other one only out of your peripheral vision.

Eventually, you'll pass the dot through the blind spot of your eye, the place where the optic nerve enters. And it'll disappear, although you'll still know it's there, and if you move the paper or your eye just a little, you'd see it, but don't: stare straight ahead.

That's what the statue looked like. Like I Can't See It.

Above and beyond it, straight up one of the feeder streets, the dome of the Faerie Embassy stood, flickering in the night.

Andrea hurried us along. "Quickly, quickly," she said, moving us toward another one of the feeder streets.

Ahira held up a hand. "No. Stop. What are we doing—"

She shook her head, her eyes growing wide. "No. We can't stop. It's all breaking loose." Her lips moved, her breath went ragged.

"It's not just the city anymore. It's falling apart." She gestured at the street that apparently led toward the embassy. "The Hand was right: it's connecting with the rest of the world." She gestured at the street. "Walk down that way, true, now it'll take you to Lost Lane, but Lost Lane won't dump you out on Double Circle—go north at the first corner and it will lead you down to the pits; the east road will bring you to a spot a hundred feet under the Cirric, just off the Pandathaway coast; west will drop you in a tree

outside a village on Salket. It all," she wriggled her finger, "touches. But you won't walk down there, will you?"

Great. Andy had an n-dimensional map of the city so crowding the inside of her head that she couldn't remember that the rest of us barely knew what the hell we were doing.

"Let's get the hell out of here," I said.

"No, it's not all of Faerie. Not in the solid regions. Just a piece of it. *We go*, before he gets here." Dragging Jason by the arm, she ran off toward the street.

What did that mean? He? Who, he? I broke into a sprint after her, Ahira and Tenny at my heels. There was something behind us, something huge, but I didn't take a look at it. We reached the juncture of square and street only a few paces behind her.

"Boioardo?" I asked, craning my neck to look as we lunged into the night and—

* * *

—skidded to a stop two feet from the edge of the hot, flat roof. I stuck out an arm and stopped Ahira from bumping into Jason. A bright noon sun beat down on us, but the blue sky was covered with black bands, arcing from horizon to horizon.

"Quickly, now," she said, "over this way." We made our way down a ladder into an alley, and followed Andy down the alley and—

* * *

—into a vestpocket park, cool and green and minty against the heat of the late afternoon.

I would have said the trees were oaks, except that their bark was edged in silver, and the broad leaves chimed gently, like silver bells, as they rustled in the breeze.

Tenny's breath was coming in ragged gasps, and I could have used a breather.

Ahira looked around. "Can we take a moment here?" he asked, over the ringing of the leaves. "Or do we have to run on?"

"Oh, yes," Andy said. "We rest here for a moment," she said. "I've muddied the trail enough for us to do that, at least."

One branch of the ancient oak hung long, within grabbing-and-hanging-on-while-you-grab-your-breath range, which I did. The bark was rough beneath my hand, its silver trimming cool.

Jason reached up and flicked his fingernail against a leaf. It rang like a tuning fork.

Ahira squatted on the ground. "Well, just in case we need to know, which way do we go next?"

She closed her eyes and thought about it too long, her lips moving almost silently.

I mean, I wasn't timing it or anything, but easily a minute passed before Tenny started getting twitchy, only to subside at Jason's light touch on her arm. Jason was getting good at light touches; I would have wanted to punch her. (I wouldn't have *done* it, mind, but I would have wanted to. I get nervous around

magic.)

Finally, Andy opened her eyes. "You can't see it from here, but there are steps down to the road about fifty yards that way, past the old oak. For the next while, at least, we'll be able to make it almost all the way down the steps—but do skip the top one; it connects off the roads."

I let go of the branch and sat slumped against a tree, letting myself go limp, which took no great effort.

The rough bark was somehow reassuring against the back of my tunic. Maybe I took some comfort in its solidity. My fingers played in the long grass. Long for a park, that is—about four inches in height, dense and fine and green, like a lawn.

Tennetty tapped a finger against the glass eye. "What is going on?"

Andrea opened her mouth, closed it, opened it again. "You don't have the background to understand it."

I've never liked that sort of explanation. The trouble is, it's true, sometimes. Try explaining Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle to somebody who doesn't know that the smallest possible piece of matter isn't a dust speck, or the rudiments of atomic theory to somebody who thinks that if only you have a sharp enough knife you can divide a piece of clay endlessly in half—I've done both.

Andrea's fingers twisted clumsily. "We live under laws of nature. Magic is part of those laws. Gravity attracts matter to matter; magnetism attracts or repels; the weak magical force carries information; the strong force carries power." She waved her hand toward the dome of the Faerie Embassy. "But those are just a . . . a subset of the rules of Faerie. When we're in Faerie, or even just close to it, it's like we're a bunch of Newtonians trying to plot our way through Einsteinian space, and wondering why we can't break the speed of light no matter how much faster we run."

She gestured at the park around us, her movements jerky, like she was wired too tightly. "Ehvenor's always been part of the . . . outskirts of Faerie. The Good Folk don't like it much; it's too restricted there, too flavorless. But that's changing, and I'm starting to see too much of it." She stood, and as she stood, the tension in her body eased. "It's not just space that touches, but time. The here and the now." Her voice was low. "At the core of Faerie, at the singularity at the heart of it, all is chaos, all touches, there are all rules and none."

She shook her head, as though to clear it. "But that doesn't have to be here. The Three can anchor it all in reality, if only they know . . . where. Vair is the most powerful, but he's uncertain where to put his fire; Nareen's tools have the solidity and stolidity of his race, but little more." She reached out a finger and tapped at Tennetty's eye. "They need *her* sight."

I wouldn't have wanted to poke my finger at Tennetty's eye, even at a glass one, but Tennetty didn't react.

Andrea shrugged into her pack. "So we go."

"Why now?" There was a panicky tone in Ahira's voice.

"Because," she said, "I told you; I've seen the paths. In just a few seconds we hear his footsteps, and we . . ."

Heavy footsteps thudded on the ground; we ran down the steps—skipping the top one—and across the

cobbled street, down the alley, and—

* * *

—into the dark of a cloudy night, lit only by the dim green glow of the stinking mosses lining the gutters.

Ahira pulled a glowsteel from his pouch, and the actinic blue chased the darkness away.

It was just an alleyway, a slim street between two rows of buildings that towered in the night, vanishing up in the distance. There was no sound behind us, but Andy shook her head. "He's too close here—we have to take a short cut by diving deeper into Faerie.

"This way," she hissed, vanishing in the darkness of a doorway. We followed her, through the darkness—

* * *

—and into the hard, cold wind of the Place Where Trees Bleed.

The icy air blew unrelentingly through the scarlet leaves, each one dripping crimson at the slightest movement. The giant limbs creaked in their pain. Pools of blood gathered beneath the trees, darkening, thickening in the air.

"*Nobody move*," Andrea said. "Let me move you. The rules are more . . . general here; there's no safety in solidity, not if you don't know where to step." She stepped quickly around, moving so fast it was as though her feet hydroplaned over the damp grass, gently touching Jason once on the cheek. He disappeared with a loud *pop!*

"You have to move just right." She pulled Ahira's arm forward. He staggered forward and then disappeared, too.

Only Tenny and I were left with her, but I could hear the footsteps on the ground behind us. One chance only, and not much of one.

Andy's hand caressed my cheek. "Don't move, Walter," she whispered, her voice low. "He's behind you."

Tenny spun, her sword raised high, but the grasses turned into snakes, winding themselves about her ankles, their long fangs sinking deep into her calves.

She screamed. I don't know why it surprised me that it was a high-pitched, horrible sound, like anybody else's. But she turned it into a grunt, as she hacked down at the snakes, her blade slashing them, turning the ground around her into a mass of bleeding, writhing pieces of reptilian flesh.

The voice was the same:

"Good day, all," Boioardo said. His face was too regular, too pretty, the cleft in his chin too sharp. He was all in black and crimson, from the cowl of a scarlet cape flung carelessly over one shoulder to the black boots with enough shine for an SS officer. His tunic was of red velour, cut tight at shoulders and belted at the waist to reveal the v-shaped torso of a bodybuilder.

He proceeded to sit down on the empty air, like somebody who had forgotten that there wasn't a chair behind him. But before he could fall, a swarm of tiny winged lizards flew down from the trees, the lot of

them barely supporting a jeweled throne that they slipped behind him, just in time. Others pulled off his cape and folded it neatly over the back of the throne.

Tennetty grunted again, still slashing at the snakes.

Boioardo crossed one knee over the other and smoothed at the already-smooth black tights. "Oh, please. Don't make such a fuss." The snakes melted at his gesture, but the blood continued to run down her leg.

He blurred in front of my eyes, and when I could focus on him again, he was a slim man, about my age and height, still sitting easily on his throne. Maybe a touch older, less in shape, gray at the temples only. His jaw firm, his mustache evenly combed, an ever-so-slight hint of epicanthic folds at his eyes. He was dressed all in black, except for a brown cloak held fast by a blackened brass clasp.

Okay, okay, I'm slow: "I'm more handsome," I said.

Tennetty gave me a funny look. Funnier than usual, I mean. "Than me?" she said.

Andrea's fingers touched me at the temples, and for a moment, he flickered, becoming Tennetty, then Andy, and then back to me. He wasn't me, here, he was just mirroring me, in his own way.

Andy looked me in the eye for just a moment. She didn't need to say it: she had to get the Eye to the Faerie Embassy, and Boioardo had to be delayed enough for her to do that. She knew the path; Tennetty had the Eye. That made Andy essential, Tennetty next in importance, and me expendable.

But she couldn't. Expend me, that is. Not without my permission. That was the trouble with Andrea: she never was cold-blooded enough.

The dream was always the same. Except this time the Cullinane was asking me to do it by myself, and I didn't know if I could.

I froze, for just a half-second—

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

*In Which I Find the Place
Where Only That Which
You Have Loved
Can Help You*

Involve yourself with the world. Reach out. Touch. Taste. Live. Trust me on this one, if on nothing else.

—WALTER SLOVOTSKY

I wasn't there for a lot of the next of it, but it happened, at the same time that I was busy fighting for my life, I think.

Or maybe it didn't. I mean, *it happened* —reports for the rest of it are reliable—but there's that problem of time. We don't know much about Faerie, and probably aren't built to know much about Faerie. But we do know that time acts funny in and around Faerie, and there was no question that we *were* around Faerie. And there's no question that time was already acting strange in Ehvenor. That part is certain—when you turn a corner from afternoon and find yourself in dawn, I mean, you don't have to be Albert Einstein to figure out that time has been thoroughly fucked with.

What I can say for sure is that what happened with Jason and the dwarf happened during the next part of their lifespan, just as my fight with Boioardo happened during the next part of mine.

I guess that'll have to do.

And I can't tell you what finally made it all happen. I've been wondering ever since—was it me, or was it Andy and the Three? Both? Something else?

The trouble with this part of the story is that I don't know who the real hero is.

Well, that's not true, either. I do know.

She bought Andy and me a few seconds, and paid in full measure, without a whimper.

Damn it, Tenny. I never got to say goodbye to you.

* * *

Ahira staggered out of the screaming grasses and into the dark, onto the soft carpet, Jason right in front of him.

They found themselves in a small room, suitable for a bedroom or a study, high above the dark streets below. Lit only by a single lantern mounted high on the wall, the room was empty save for the carpet, a desk of sorts up against one wall, and a pile of blankets and an empty chamberpot off in one corner next to several canvas sacks brimming with raw vegetables and dried meat.

The desk, such as it was, was interesting. The desktop was a smooth-sided door—the knob was still attached, but it was on the far side, near the wall—elevated by stone blocks at four corners that raised it to knee-height. Books and scraps of parchment lay scattered on its surface, held down by oddments of stone and scraps of ironwork. He made out some Erendra glyphs, and some of the rest was in scratchy runes that Ahira didn't recognize, but most of the writing blurred in front of his eyes. Wizard's work.

"Somebody has been living here," Jason said.

Ahira raised a finger to his lips. He wasn't irritated by the boy's keen attention to the obvious, but by his talking. Until they had a better grip on where they were, it was best to keep mouth closed, eyes and ears open.

A heavy wooden door stood half open, leading out into the dark hall. Ahira listened for a moment, but couldn't hear anything. So far, so good.

Gesturing at Jason to keep an eye on the door, he turned to the window.

Outside, just across the street, the Faerie Embassy stood gleaming in all its unfixed glory.

Was it three or four stories tall? And were there long, rectangular windows, like glass doors leading out to a balcony, or were the only openings in the solid expanse broad slits, too narrow even to be arrow loops?

He didn't like looking at it; he couldn't tell. Better to concentrate on the here and the now. Hanging around a wizard's workshop was a bad idea, it was time to—

Jason was beckoning silently to him; the boy had already flattened himself near the single door leading to the hall.

His lips moved. *I hear something*, he mouthed.

Good boy. This time, he wasn't scared. No, that wasn't true—Ahira could smell the fear on him. Jason was bright enough to be scared, he knew he could be hurt or killed at any moment, but that was just another fact of the universe, to be dealt with appropriately.

And he knew it. He couldn't keep a smile off his face. This time Jason Cullinane wasn't running away.

His axe held easily in his hands, the dwarf leaned his head close. Familiar footsteps echoed down the hall.

Ahira lowered his axe. "Hello, Andrea," he said.

Andrea walked through the door, but it was a changed Andrea. Her black leather vest and pants had been replaced by a gleaming white robe, woven of fog and light. Her black hair was shot with silver, and her eyes were red and rimmed from either crying or lack of sleep.

Jason took a step toward her, but Ahira seized his arm. "Wait."

She raised a slim hand. "Yes, it's me. Older, perhaps a year, perhaps more, or less? Time is so . . . different here, and I've been hiding and studying in nooks in time, trying to control the madness while I've learned more. I'm older, yes; somewhat wiser, I would hope; knowingly more ignorant, certainly. But I'm still me." A tear ran down one cheek. "May I hug you? It's been *solong*," she said.

* * *

—but Tenny didn't spend any time thinking it out: she dug her finger into her eyesocket and flipped me the Eye while she launched herself at Boioardo.

The glass Eye tumbled through the air toward me.

No. "Tenny, *don't*."

But thinking or saying it didn't make any difference. Nareen's glass Eye, the one the Three needed in order to see through the veil of uncertainty into the heart of Ehvenor, floated through the air toward me. I snatched the Eye out of the air, slapped it into Andrea's hand, and started my turn, but it was too late.

Boioardo had already risen from his throne, moving so quickly that his sleeves and cape snapped through the air like the end of a whip. He batted her sword aside as though it was nothing, and had his

hands on her.

She grunted once as his fingers tore through her flesh the way a backhoe claws through ground, and then he shook what was left of her once, twice, three times, like a dog shaking a rat, and tossed her aside, bloody, broken, dead.

His arms red with her blood, splashed to the elbows; it seemed to bother him in his fastidiousness. He looked down at them, at the red blood wetting his sleeves, and then he gestured once, idly, and the blood was gone. Tenny lay on the ground, her dead eye and empty socket staring off into nothing.

You don't waste time grieving for friends, not during a fight, you don't.

"Now, Andy," I said. "Do it now. Take him. Like you did before."

She shook her head. "Not here, not on the edge of Faerie. I don't have enough power, not enough strength to do it."

Boioardo smiled. "She knows I can follow the two of you wherever in Ehvenor you try to hide."

I pulled Andrea close. God, why did you make women so warm? "Hide yourself for now," I whispered, "but get the Eye where it needs to be. Do what needs to be done."

She nodded, once, quickly, then touched soft fingers to my lips and pushed me away, hard; as she stepped away and vanished I staggered back—

* * *

Jason awkwardly hugged his mother, and Ahira let the blade of his axe drop to the carpet.

"How long?" Ahira asked.

She spread her hands as Jason released her. "I don't know. Possibly a year. Perhaps two. I used to keep count of meals and sleeping periods, but I gave that up when I found that I didn't need to eat and sleep much here. Two years?" She walked to the window. "Long enough to learn what it will be necessary to do to walk across that street. Long enough to learn most of the paths through Ehvenor, long enough to learn some truths about myself, long enough to call myself here." She shook her head as she turned back to them. "I'm sorry to be so maudlin. I know it's been only seconds for you."

Ahira smiled at that. "That answers that question."

That part of it made sense, at last. He had known Andrea Andropolous Cullinane for twenty years now, and had known her to be every bit as stubborn as it was possible for a human to be. Her will wasn't subject to anybody else's command. She decided for herself, and nobody else did. Nobody else.

So: who could call Andrea to Ehvenor? Who could bring her here? Who had been calling her here ever since Castle Cullinane? Who was it who had made her stir-crazy enough to go out on the road into God-knows-what?

Andrea.

She returned his smile. "Me. Who else?" Her eyes went vague for a moment. "She'll be along shortly, with the Eye."

"And what happens then?"

She shrugged. "I only know a little. She didn't—I mean *I* didn't have time to talk much with her, with me. After we abandoned you two, she took the Eye, and then pushed me off into a strange part of Ehvenor, and I got lost. I had to learn how to find my way back to here. She said that she was going to, that *I* was going to try to walk across the street and bring the Eye there." She looked out the window. "No matter the cost. The rest is up to the Three." Her eyes widened. "Oh, *no*. It was so good to see the two of you that I forgot what she told me—" She turned to Jason. "Quickly, hand me your knife."

* * *

—I staggered back onto an empty street in a deserted part of town. Rows of tenements lined the duly street beneath the dark sky, while cold white light shone up through the cracked ground.

I was alone, but I wasn't going to be alone long, not if Boioardo was following me. I had to hope that Boioardo was going to chase me, that I could distract him long enough to give Andy time to do her thing, to get the Eye to the Faerie Embassy, and return to pull me out of trouble and away before Boioardo killed me.

Andy was good at locating people and things; it might work, if I could buy enough time. But I'd have to avoid him for as long as poss—

There was a tap on my shoulder, and there he was. It wasn't like looking in a mirror, not really; surely such a self-satisfied smirk would never be found under my mustache?

"A fine place," he said, reaching slowly for me. The light from beneath cast his eyes into shadow, but his too-white smile almost glowed in the dark. "Shall we end it here?"

I started out in high school as a running back; I ducked under his arm and ran, broken-field style. It didn't do any good. There he was, just a half step behind me. Not running, just gliding effortlessly over the ground, his feet never touching the dirt.

He frowned. "This is too easy," he said, giving me what looked like a gentle shove. It didn't feel that way—I slid six feet on the dirty ground, the grit and dirt scraping away the clothing over my left hip, then grinding a wide swath of skin and flesh from my hip and thigh. I slammed against a wall, hard, knocking the wind out of me.

I lay sprawled on the ground, trying to force some air into my lungs. Muscles just wouldn't work right. None of them.

He loomed over me. "Get up. You must be better sport than this."

I rolled to my hands and knees, then staggered to my feet.

"Wait," I managed to croak out. "Give me . . . time . . . recover."

I wasn't sure that my right knee would support my weight, and I could feel ribs grate against each other in the mass of red agony that I used to call my chest.

His smile broadened. "I don't see the need for that." He waved his hands once, and all my aches and pains were gone. It didn't happen with the wave of comfort and ease that healing draughts always

provided; one moment I could barely grunt out words through the pain, and the next, all the aches were gone.

Even the scrape I'd taken on my left hip had healed, and the clothing over it.

Stall, Walter, stall. "Just wait a minute," I said. "This is too easy for you. Give yourself a handicap. Don't just look like me. Reduce your strength and speed to mine. Make it a fair contest." If Boioardo had a weakness, it was his arrogance—although who could call him on it? Incredibly powerful, invulnerable, able to assume any form he chose. I would rather have been in Philadelphia.

He cocked his head to one side. "Fair, no; I do not care to lose. Less unfair, certainly. That will make you better sport."

He eyed me carefully, then closed his eyes and concentrated. His form seemed to flow for a moment, then stop flowing, until he looked like me, again.

Boioardo took one step forward. "I'm only twice as strong as you, and but half again as fast." He blocked my punch and backhanded me back, lights flashing on the edge of my vision. "That ought to do."

If you practice something often enough, it becomes part of your muscle memory. Maybe the basic block-and-strike was like that.

He took a punch at me, and I had blocked it, moved in and brought my knee up quick as all hell.

The only trouble for me was that he was already blocking down, and hard.

The only trouble for him is that I'd finally slipped one of my throwing knives into my left—blocking—hand and slipped that in between his ribs. He staggered back, in pain. Not enough pain, but he'd taken on not just enough of my form, but enough of the reality of being human, to hurt.

I would have finished him off, but I'd been through that before with him when he was playing wolf. The best I could do—the best I hoped to do—was to fight him to a stalemate while the others did their thing.

And the best way to do that was to run.

I ran, down the street, and into—

* * *

—a forest of huge trees, the canopy of leaves arcing fifty feet above my head. Low brush clawed at my ankles and calves as I ran, my feet crashing through the dry leaves littering the floor. Above, tiny green lizards in the trees sang in easy counterpoint to the rhythm of my steps.

I was tripped, sent sprawling; I rolled to my feet, barely avoiding an immense projecting root, one of the huge trees at my back.

Boioardo moved his cloak aside as he faced off against me.

The only plan that occurred to me was to stall for a moment, just a moment, while I readied a knife. Maybe this one would hit something vital, knock him dead before he could regenerate himself.

"The Place Where One Speaks Only Truth," he said. "Just the outskirts of it. Shall we end it here?"

"No, I'd rather stall as long as I can," I said, truthfully, fingers clawing surreptitiously for a throwing knife. "And I'm going to try to stab you—"

Shit, shit, shit . . .

I ran up the root toward the trunk of the tree and leaped for another root, my next leap carrying me beyond the tree, toward a path. His footsteps crashed behind me as I scampered down the path through a bend, to where it intersected with another path, and leaped through—

* * *

Andrea turned to Jason. "Quickly, hand me your knife," she said.

Jason didn't move; Ahira shoved him aside, hard, snatching at his belt for the knife, flipping it easily, hilt-first, to Andrea.

She raised the knife and tossed it toward the open door, just as the other Andrea, dressed in black leather, flicked into being in the doorway.

Ahira's breath caught in his throat.

* * *

—into darkness. I tripped, and fell backward, into water and slime, then forced myself to my feet, all wet and cold. I could barely stand without bumping my head on the roof of the tunnel; I steadied myself with my hands against the side. The walls of the tunnel were warm and soft to the touch, the fleshy feel of it broken every ten feet or so by hard rings of something white and bony beneath the surface.

There was light ahead, farther along in the tunnel. I staggered along, as quickly as I could. There was a juncture up ahead, barely visible.

Footsteps thundered behind me as I reached the junction and dashed through—

* * *

—into the next passage of the tunnel.

Sometimes, even in Ehvenor, a corner is just a corner.

I ran on, my feet making awful sucking noises in the muck, and into—

* * *

Ahira's breath caught in his throat.

"No." It had to have been Andrea, but it couldn't have been Andrea. Andrea wouldn't try to kill her earlier self, but Ahira had just given whoever this was a knife.

The blade twisted through the air, barely passing over the new Andrea's shoulder, only to bury itself in an outstretched hairy arm.

Ahira smiled. By God, he*had* been right. White Andrea*was* his old friend.

White Andrea grabbed Black Andrea's arm and pulled her to one side as the thing staggered inside, all

hair and muscle and stink.

It closed with Ahira, hairy hands fastening on his throat as it lifted the dwarf bodily from the floor, ignoring the knife still stuck in its arm. The new Andrea, the younger one, raised her hand, but the one in white batted it aside.

"No. We have to go. *Now*. This is where we abandon them. We don't have much time."

Over her protests, the white Andrea pulled the other one out through the door, and slammed it behind, quite neatly trapping Jason and Ahira inside.

* * *

—smoke, clawing at my lungs, tearing at my eyes. Strong fingers grabbed at me, but I kicked out once, twice, then dived away into blindness, his coughs and chokes behind me.

I was just starting to wonder if he'd locked himself into a human form, stuck with human weaknesses, when the coughing shut off.

Fairy, you cheat. He had taken a moment to change a little, to allow himself to breathe smoke without pain, without coughing.

"Well, certainly."

I staggered forward, from the smoke—

* * *

The dwarves call themselves the Moderate People; and there is a saying among the Moderate People that condemns immoderate moderation. Balance is important, equilibrium is necessary, but only in its place. This was not the place for balance; here, moderation would have been recklessly immoderate.

The universe dwindled to Ahira's hands, each one on a wrist of the monster. That was all. There would never be more than that, and each hand would have to close, to pry the strong hands away from Ahira's throat.

His fingers clenched tighter, and tighter. But so did the choking hands. His lungs burned, needing air. Darkness crept into the edges of his mind.

There had been a time when sickness had bound him to a metal chair, but that time was gone, and it must not return. He could tolerate almost anything, but not being confined, not being held immobile.

His arms and legs thrashed, uselessly, helplessly.

I will not be held down against my will. I will never be held against my will.

There was nothing else but his fingers on the wrists, squeezing hard, harder against the creature's bone and muscle. Rage flared blue-white in Ahira's mind, giving strength to his hands, washing away thought and intelligence, as a berserker rage built, needing only one more spark to set it flaring.

Bones cracked beneath his palm, the hands eased, and Ahira dropped to the floor, while steel thumped into flesh—

—*again*, he realized.

He had been hearing the sound of a knife hacking into flesh for some time now. All the while that he had been trying to break free, Jason had been stabbing at the creature.

Ahira rose to his knees and sucked in a lungful of fetid air. Despite the unwashed reek of the creature and the smell of his own sweat and fear, the air cooling his aching lungs was as exhilarating as a cold white wine. The cold and comfort flooded his body, pushing his rage back, leaving his mind intact.

He opened his eyes to see Jason hack again at the creature's neck, as blood flowed down its chest from a dozen wounds.

It staggered back, then forward again, and reached out for Jason, too stupid to know it was dead. Ahira dived at its knee, shoulder hitting hard against fur-covered muscle and bone, tripping the creature. He fastened his hands on its head, the fingers of his right hand tangling themselves in its stiff, wiry hair, while his left hand closed on the massive bony ridge over its eyes.

Ahira twisted once, giving it everything he had, rewarded by a single loud *snap*.

That was all it took. The creature shuddered once and went limp, its dead body voiding itself with an awful flatulence. It was all Ahira could do not to vomit.

Both of them gagging, Jason helped Ahira to the window.

"What's going on?" Jason asked.

"I don't know."

The cold outside air helped to clear his nose and his mind, but it didn't provide any answers.

Andrea had abandoned them, but she had done so knowing that they could handle the creature—orc, or goblin, or whatever it was. He leaned farther out the window and breathed in the sweet, fresh air.

Below, White Andrea stood on the sidewalk, facing the Faerie Embassy, the Eye held high in the palm of her right hand, an open, leather-bound book held in her left.

Ahira called out to her, but she either didn't hear him or was ignoring him. Andrea took one step onto the narrow street, but as she did, the air around her darkened, then solidified into three dark bands that looped about her body, and slowly, inexorably contracted, forcing her down and to her knees, trying to force her back.

Her gaze dropped to the book in her hand, and her lips moved.

Ahira's hands tightened on the windowsill. His mouth was painfully dry.

Andrea was a powerful wizard, certainly, and as White Andrea she had had plenty of time to prepare for this. But too much use of power could drive her insane, and she was fighting out of her league when she took on Faerie. And she'd known that, dammit. She hadn't impressed the spell she was using into her memory, but was reading it from the open book, not trusting her ability to carry it in her own mind and remain sane.

Curling the rest of her fingers around the Eye, she raised her right index finger and gently touched the outer corner of her right eye. A single teardrop swelled there, fattening, growing until it could hold no longer and ran down her cheek, bursting into fire as it fell from her jaw and onto one of the black bands.

Where the flaming tear touched, the band dissolved, leaving behind a ragged hole.

Andrea shed another fiery teardrop, and yet another, until she was crying a shower of burning rain, dissolving the bands of darkness until all that remained of either tears or darkness was a bit of dust, a little ash and soot that slipped from her white, misty robes as she took another step forward.

* * *

—and I staggered into the glowing fog, flagstones hard under my knees, a distant roar in my ears. I got to my feet, not sure which way to run. I could more feel than see a wall to my right, but the fog was thick around me, and there could have been miles of open space in any other direction, or a waiting open pit.

God, Andy, hurry up with whatever you're doing. It would be nice to be saved in the nick of time.

Maybe I could climb the wall. If Boioardo were to climb after me, I could drop down on him. Even with twice my strength, he wasn't invulnerable. Given enough of a start, if I could gain enough height, I might be able to land hard on him, smash him to the ground, and crush him either to death or unconsciousness before he could throw off the limitations of the flesh that he had assumed.

Yeah. Sure. And maybe I'd be elected fucking Queen of the May, too.

The fog thinned in front of me to reveal a series of niches, carved into the wall, each of a different size. There may have only been ten or so; there may have been hundreds, thousands, vanishing off into the fog.

In the first one, in the niche right in front of me, was a pair of sneakers.

"Holyshit. "

They weren't just sneakers; they were *my* old sneakers, my first pair of sneakers, or at least the first pair I remembered.

Stash had always believed in buying irregulars, and had picked up a pair of some famous brand—PF Flyers, maybe?—that the manufacturer had rejected because of a sloppy seam along the uppers. The sloppy seam was still there—just a little crooked; nothing important—and so was the spot on the sole, just below the heel, where somebody, probably Inspector 7, had neatly sliced off the little brand patch when the sneakers had been rejected.

Same blue stripe along the rubber sole, same flat cotton laces, clean and white like they had been the day they were new.

They reminded me of running fastfastfast on a hot summer day, of leaping over low picket fences and scrambling through backyards not just when that damn St. Bernard was chasing me, but because I was ten and it was summer, and that's what you did when you were ten and it was summer.

In the next niche was a fountain pen, a real chubby-barrelled Shaeffer fountain pen with the white dot on the clip, and I knew that if I took it down, and took off the cap, it would write with the blackest of blue-black ink, because that was the ink that was in it the day that Mom had given it to me, the day that I had brought home my first report card that was just Bs and As. How had she known that I was finally

going to bring home a decent report? Had she had the pen waiting through most of my elementary school career?

Four As, and three Bs, the report card said; it was in the next niche, all clean and waiting.

It takes longer to tell it than it did to live it; I don't think I'd stood in front of that wall for more than a second, taking it all in.

My teddy bear was in the next niche: an ugly stuffed panda in black and dirty white, one ear half torn off, glossy brown buttons from an old overcoat for his eyes. He waited, lying patiently, the way he always had at the head of my bed.

Bears are like that.

Boioardo had spoken of the Place Where Only That Which You Have Loved Can Help You.

Now I understood. It was a capital-P Place in Ehvenor, yes, on the edge of Faerie, surely, but it was also a small-p place in my mind.

I've lived some years now, and I've touched some things more than casually. You run through enough summer days in an irregular pair of PF Flyers, and they become part of you, not just for the few days and weeks and maybe months that the shoes last, but for as long as there are hot summer days just after school's let out, and as long as there are the tight, springy steps that you can only take in a new pair of sneakers and as long as there are fences and yards and dogs that surely can't be as big with teeth that can't be as sharp in reality as in memory.

It was mine, forever.

My bear was here. No nightmares here, not with my bear waiting at the head of my bed, ready to dispel a bad dream with its familiar warmth.

It was all mine. This was *my* place.

In the next niche was a jackknife. It didn't look like much, I guess, and it was smaller than I remembered it, but the Scout crest had the same scratch on it that it had always had. *My* knife.

It was my knife, the one that Big Mike had given me, so many years ago, and it was here, in my hand, the ripples cut into its plastic sides familiar under my thumb.

Look: I know I had a fighting dagger at my waist, and I know that it gave me more reach. But that was just metal, just a tool.

This was *my* knife.

It had meant something to me, and it was here to help me. What was it that Ahira had said? Something about how it's not just the people in our lives that matter, about how we had best be careful what we make, what we use, because we invest something of ourself with everything we touch.

And I know that a nonlocking jackknife is a silly weapon in a fight, so I thumbed open the awl on the back, and held the knife hidden in my hand, just a sliver of metal showing. One punch with it, and the awl could slice hard, deep, through flesh and into Boioardo's eyes.

My knife.

Okay; bring on the demons.

Off in the distance, something roared, a sound both familiar and strange. Not the growling of a beast, but the roar of an engine. I hadn't heard the sound of an engine in more years than I cared to think about.

Boioardo walked out of the fog, an immaculate imitation of me, his cape curling swirling about his ankles.

"Nice of you to wait for me, Walter Slovotsky," my face said, in my voice. "You ruined my fun; now I'll ruin yours." He smiled. "I always knew that it would end here, here in this Place,"

He took a punch at me, but I blocked it with my left arm; it went numb and fell back at my side, but my right arm still worked, and I punched hard at him.

"Fuck you," I said.

His head moved to one side, but the slim steel edge cut his cheek open to the bone, and staggered him.

It wasn't enough. He backhanded me, lifting me up and off my feet. I fell hard to the flagstones, the knife skittering and bouncing away into the fog. I started to crawl off after it, but he blocked my way.

"You lose," Boioardo said.

The distant roar grew closer.

I knew that sound, by God, I knew that sound. Eight cylinders, generating more power than three hundred horses, hauling around tons of metal and glass, painted all black and yellow, like a bumblebee.

Ahira was right. We had best be careful of what we touch, what we make, what we use, because there is some of us in each bit of it, and we'd best be careful what we are. And in the Place Where Only That Which You Have Loved Can Help You, you'd best have gone out in the world and touched a lot, because you never know what you will need there. I forced a smile. "Wrong, Boioardo. You lose."

* * *

The rain of tears dissolved the black bands, and Andrea took another step across the street, toward the flickering of the Faerie outpost.

"She did it!" Jason sighed in relief.

"No." Ahira shook his head. "She's not there yet. Look."

The flickering below took on substance, shimmering shifting into a wall across the street, reaching down through the dirt and up to the sky.

Glassy hands reached out from the wall to push and pull at Andrea, several fixing on her robes of mist and light, others fastening tiny fingers in her hair. Small fingers twisted tightly as they became more substantial.

She turned to another page of the book, and hesitated for a moment, just a moment before she began

reading.

Lips murmuring words that could never be remembered, she tucked the book under her arm, and touched her right index finger gently to her left wrist.

A trickle of blood ran down her arm, fat red drops turning all sparkling and golden as they fell to the ground.

She cupped her left hand in front of her. The trickle of blood ran down her wrist and pooled in the palm, swelling. When the pool began to drop golden sparks, she raised her hand, and shook it once, twice, three times. A cloud of golden sparks shattered the ghostly hands into fog, and then into nothingness.

The Eye held high, the book again open in her free hand, White Andrea took another step forward.

* * *

"Wrong, Boioardo," I said. "You lose."

It doesn't cost anything extra to die with brave words on your lips, but I wasn't going to die, not here and not now. It was his own fault; he had chosen the Place. Perhaps, in his alien cruelty, he had thought that it would be amusing to finish me off here in this place, in my Place, but his arrogance had betrayed him.

This was my Place.

At first, he didn't believe me. Then his smile vanished, and his eyes widened. He looked from side to side for an avenue of escape, but there wasn't any. The wall was to one side of him, and it was coming out of the fog from the other.

Boioardo tried to cheat, he tried to change, but he was too late, and too slow. He had been faster in his changes; now it was as though he was trying to do too much at once.

Too bad for him. You don't face off against the Big Car when you've got other things on your mind.

It was among the last and absolutely the best of the standard American bigmobiles. A huge car, pulled around by a three-hundred-horsepower V8, easily enough for the job—a monster of an eight-cylindrical engine, it roared like a lion. Two-toned, black and yellow like a bumblebee, wraparound windshield, curved fenders, and a rear deck large enough to camp out on.

Tires squealing as it swerved to miss me, tons of black and yellow steel roared out of the fog and smashed into Boioardo, knocking him back up against the wall.

He tried to rise, but the Big Car shifted into reverse, tires smoking as it lunged back, then shifted into drive and lunged forward to smash him against the wall, steel squealing as the impact crumpled the grill, starred the windshield.

Boioardo had been caught in transition; he rose once more, battered and bloody, too broken to concentrate and change. His fingers bent at impossible places as he threw up his broken hands to protect himself.

"No, please."

Pity wouldn't have stayed my hand, and I had no pity. You don't go around playing with people like they were toys, not if you expect any sympathy from me. You don't rend somebody I love to shreds of bloody flesh and then ask me for compassion.

"Do it," I said.

* * *

The air in front of Andrea solidified, warped itself into a black wall that separated Andrea from the flickering of the Faerie Embassy.

She put out her right hand, the hand that held the Eye, and pushed hard on it, lips never quite stopping their motion. Light flared around her fingertips, cold, silent balls of red and whiteness that vanished as they hit the black wall.

She murmured another spell, and waves of thunder crashed, making Ahira's ears ring. But the thunder beat uselessly, harmlessly against the blackness.

She took a step backward, looking from side to side, as though deciding not whether to run, but where to run. Andrea shook her head, black hair shot with silver settling about her shoulders, eyes closed tightly.

Ahira couldn't hear her over the crash of thunder, but he didn't need to hear the words.

Ahira found that the windowsill was splintering under his grip; he forced his hands to open. Crushing the windowsill would do no good. He had been wrong again, dammit. He had thought that a wizard didn't know how far to push magic, what moment would cost sanity, when that sacrifice would be made.

It was clear that Andrea knew that her next spell would cost her more than tears and blood.

She straightened, her shoulders back, and opened the book to a new page, reading slowly, carefully, as she raised the hand that held the Eye, her index finger straightening as she touched it to her temple, as though to say, *I'll feed you with this.*

Her right hand glowed, and as she pushed it forward the black wall melted in front of her. She pitched the Eye toward the flickering of the Faerie Embassy, and then fell to her knees, her face buried in her hands. Her shoulders shook.

Far off, a distant voice spoke slowly, thoughtfully, the way elves tend to. "I see it, I think."

"Don't be so tentative," another answered. "Use this, and seal it all off."

The world exploded into brilliance, and then faded.

* * *

"Do it," I said.

The Big Car gunned its engine once more. Tires squealed on the stones, and the stink of burning rubber filled my nostrils.

It smashed into him one last time, steam from its shattered radiator vying with the fog as it ground what was left of him against the wall. It backed away, leaving Boioardo broken, bloody, dead. If I hadn't

known, I wouldn't have been able to tell what he had been.

Slowly, brokenly, the car circled around to me, one crumpled fender nudging gently up against me, as though to ask if I was okay.

The Place faded out around me.

I barely had time to lay my hand on its cold metal flank. I didn't know the Polish, and it didn't matter anyway. It would understand, no matter what the language.

"Thank you, thou good and faithful servant."

And then the mists swirled up, and around, and washed all traces of consciousness away.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

*In Which We Part
Company, and Two of Us
Head Homeward,
Well Holtun-Bieme-ward*

Every parting gives a foretaste of death . . .

—ARTHUR SCHOPENHAUER

When you say goodbye to a friend, assume that one of you is going to die before you ever get to see each other again. If you want to leave something unsaid, fine . . . but be prepared to leave it unsaid forever.

—WALTER SLOVOTSKY

I don't remember how we got there, but the next thing I remember was being back on the plateau above Ehvenor. It was like I had been going on automatic pilot. It could have been a shock reaction, I suppose; my extensive collection of bumps and bruises showed that I had taken more than a few blows to the head.

No, that wasn't the next thing I remember. Ahira and I had been talking about what happened, while I looked off into the distance. Andrea, wrapped in a woolen blanket, had been leaning up against Jason, sobbing.

There were seven of us, some sitting, some standing, the fire to our backs, looking out at the ruined hulk of a city below.

The three slavers had fled, or just plain decided to leave.

Ehvenor had stopped flickering, and the mass of creatures flickering through its changes had been unceremoniously dumped in the here and now. Bands of hairy beasts fought with each other through the narrow streets, the wise ones fleeing outward, while creatures of the night ran for the darkness of the hill, escaping the oncoming day.

Dark shapes moved outward, fleeing the solidity of the city, some shuffling along the ground, others taking to the air or diving into the Cirric. I could almost have sworn I saw a dragon take wing and flap off toward the south, but I could have been wrong.

What I wanted was a drink. No, what I wanted was a drink with Tenny. Maybe a nod and cold smile that said I'd done okay, although why I ever gave a fuck about that cold-blooded psychopath's opinion escaped me.

Damn it, Tenny.

I'd have to settle for the drink; I fumbled through my pack and brought forth the flask of Riccetti's Best. It was heavy enough, there was still some left, enough for maybe half a dozen good-sized drinks. I pulled the cork and drank deeply, letting the fiery corn whiskey burn in my throat and warm my middle before I passed the bottle to Ahira.

"Well," he said, considering, "I think we earned that." He took a swig and then offered the bottle to the Hand woman, surprising me.

She declined the offer with an upraised palm, her eyes, both real and glass, never leaving the pageant below. "Magical beasts loosed into the wild, into the earth and air and water," she said. She cocked her head to one side. "Things haven't been like this since I was a little girl."

It only occurred to me later that most magical creatures had been gone from the Eren regions for centuries.

Shouldering a small canvas bag, she turned and walked away into the darkness.

It took me almost a full minute to realize that she had just left, and wasn't coming back. Ahira passed the bottle to Jason, who passed it along to Nareen.

Vair polished a coin-sized ruby, then fit it into an open wire frame. He threw a handful of powder on the fire, and considered the smoke through the lens.

"It could be worse, perhaps," he said. "All of Faerie could have poured through, possibly. If the breach had not been sealed, if the one who cut the breach had not been stopped." He looked at me through the fire of ruby, then tucked it in his belt pouch and crossed his long arms over his chest. "It all would have failed if we had not seen the breach, with the Eye. You have done well, the lot of you." He rose. "Or so it would seem to me." Without another word, he turned and walked off into the darkness. I was sure—I *am* sure—that he disappeared while he should still have been visible in the firelight.

Andrea, leaning up against her son, still sobbed. Quietly. Jason glared furiously at all of us, as though we could do something.

Nareen chuckled gently, for that is the way the Moderate People chuckle. "There is nothing to be done, young Cullinane. There is only much to be endured." Nareen walked to the two of them and gently, slowly, pried Andrea away from her son, and took her small, delicate hands in his huge ones.

"You see," he said, as though to Jason, although he really was talking to Andrea, "those of us with the gift know a truth, that there is no pleasure quite like using it, like refining it." His broad hands stroked hers. "Most of us know that we must be careful in its use; that if we use too much of the gift, push it too far, we will have to choose between it and sanity, and who would choose sanity compared to the glory of the power rippling up and down your spine, eh?"

His words were gentle, but each struck Andy like a blow; she sobbed even louder, trying to turn away. But the dwarf wouldn't let her.

"No," he said. "You made your decision. To feed your power not with your sanity, but with your ability." His index finger moved in the air, his rough fingernail tracing a fuzzy red glow that swiftly faded. "Your ability to see this as sharp lines instead of a red blur, and all that that implies."

I thought about how, a long time ago, another friend of mine had sacrificed his ability to do magic, and how that had worked out well for him, and I hoped. Maybe it would be so for Andrea, too. Or perhaps not.

Nareen nodded his head, perhaps admiringly, perhaps with just a trace of condescension. "My compliments," he said. He lowered her to the ground; she squatted gracelessly, her face in her hands.

Nareen turned away.

"Don't leave yet." Jason held up a hand. "Wait. I—we, that is. We helped you. I'd like some help, from you." He swallowed. "There's a friend of mine, running around, doing some horrible things. I need to find him. Help me."

There was that Cullinane grimness about his face again. No matter that he loved his mother, and no matter that she sat on the ground at his feet, weeping—there was something out there that he had to do, and he was about to do it.

Nareen nodded. "Perhaps just a little."

"Okay."

Shit. That's the trouble with trying to be Hercules. You clean out the Augean stables, and then you have to go chase down Pegasus.

Ahira looked over at me, and he was smiling. "What am I going to say?" he said.

I smiled back. "Ask Jason. It'll be good practice."

Jason thought about it for a moment. "That somebody has to take Mother home, but that I'm still too young and stupid—"

"Inexperienced," the dwarf put in.

"But close enough," I added.

"—to be running around on my own." He swallowed, hard. He wasn't going to say anything about Tennyty. I don't know why that was important to him, but it was. "So," he went on, a catch in his voice, "one of you had better come with me. The one that's better at keeping out of trouble, not the one that's better at getting into it."

Ahira smiled at me. "I wonder—who could that be?"

Jason turned to me, and gave me another shot of that grim Cullinane look. I never much cared for it.

"You'll watch out for Mother?" he asked, although it really wasn't a question, but a command.

That was okay. "Sure," I said. "Andrea needs some rest. The two of us, at least, had better camp here for tonight, head up into the hills tomorrow."

It would take a week at least to get to Butterspot, the hill north of Ollerwell that was the nearest of the regular rendezvous places. We could wait there for Ellegon's next circuit through. Might be a few days, a tenday at worst. I could live off the land for longer than that.

I wouldn't get any rest worth talking about, not tonight. I'd have to leave somebody on guard, and a nonspeaking, incessantly weeping woman wasn't my idea of a great guard.

Nareen smiled reassuringly. "That can be taken care of, at least for tonight."

I guess I should have been irritated that the dwarf wizard was reading my mind, but his grin was infectious. He reached into his pouch and brought forth a small glass ball, about the size of a big marble, which he placed in the air, and set spinning with a flick of his thumb and a few muttered syllables. "Sleep easily tonight; this will scream at any danger. For us, the sooner we leave, the sooner we can book passage at Artiven."

I wondered how they were going to make their way through the dark of night, but Ahira tapped at his brow.

Darksight, remember?

Oops.

Ahira nodded. "'Twere best done quickly, eh?"

"There is that."

I clasped hands briefly with Nareen, and gave Jason a hug—which he tolerated with admirable patience—before turning back to Ahira.

"Watch your six, short one," I said. "And if you need me . . ."

He nodded, once, and gave a half-smile. *We'll be fine*, he was saying. *But if we need you, we'll send word*. His grip on my shoulder was firm.

I fed some more wood to the fire while they walked off into the night.

Below, Ehvenor stood in the dawn light, empty, no sign of life save for the gleaming building in its center.

* * *

Just as well Nareen left the marble-or-whatever-the-hell-it-was on guard. While I do recall spreading my bedroll and lying down on it, I don't remember actually settling myself in for sleep. Before I was completely flat, I was out.

And I slept like a dead man, only awakened at dawn by the *tink!* of the marble-or-whatever-the-hell-it-was bouncing off a stone.

PART THREE

NEW WORK

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

*In Which the Living Dead
Not Only Speaks,
but Eats Both Trout
and Chicken*

Travel, it seems to me, has always done more for flattening the arches, callusing the feet, and irritating the hemorrhoids than broadening the mind.

—WALTER SLOVOTSKY

I eyed the sky over Ehvenor as I broke camp.

Blue sky, puffy clouds, no dragon. Damn.

Hmm, I guess that should be "as we broke camp" except that "we" weren't doing it. I had made breakfast—jerky and oatmeal; sticks to the ribs. I had packed the rucksacks—fairly, honest; I was putting out the remnants of the fire—okay, I was biologically better equipped for that job.

Andy was waiting for me down the path. She had taken a battered leather book out of her rucksack, and opened it. The letters swam in front of my eyes; I'm not built to read magic.

They probably swam in front of hers, even forgetting, for the moment, that she had burned out her magical ability. Tears do that.

She wiped her eyes on the back of her hand and put the book away, tying the rucksack tightly shut

before she slung it over her shoulder.

"Well," I said, "day's a-wasting." I love it when I talk colorful. "Let's get going."

She set off in a slow walk. At least she wasn't crying now. Her eyes were red, and there were dark baggy circles under them. Her hair looked like a bird's nest, and her mouth was set in a permanent frown.

But at least she wasn't crying.

Big fat, hairy deal.

I scanned the skies, hoping for a pair of leathery wings. This would be a handy time for Ellegon to show up and save some wear and tear on both my bootleather and my tender tootsies. But the sky was just full of blue and clouds and birds, and you can never find a dragon when you need one.

We headed off down the path.

* * *

There's any number of things one can do with somebody who is busy withdrawing from the world. You can just be patient and let them retreat into their navel, coming out whenever they please. *If* they please.

Now, I'm not saying that's a bad plan. It's probably a good way to handle it; maybe even the best way to handle things. But it's not a Walter Slovotsky way to handle things. Sorry.

"Now," I said, babbling over the babbling of the stream, "anybody can get lost in the sense of not knowing where you are. No big deal, as long as you know how to get where you're going. Not knowing how to get where you're going is the dangerous kind of lost."

It was a nice-sized stream, maybe three yards across where we were, its broad banks providing a wide path. During rainy season, the stream probably overflowed the banks, but it wasn't rainy season.

"This is one of the easier orienteering tricks," I said. "Avoid heading across unfamiliar territory for a point-destination: a town, an oasis, whatever. Points—okay, okay: areas—are easy to miss.

"Roads and streams, on the other hand, are long skinny things. You tend to trip over them.

"So you aim for a road that you know leads to your destination, even if that means breaking right or left of whatever you're heading for. Now, I know the road from Heliven to Ollerwell—it's a long, wide one, crosses a lot of streams up in the hills, certainly including this one. So, unless there's a good reason not to, we follow this stream until we hit the road. Q.E.D."

She didn't answer.

"I know what you're saying," I said. "You're saying, 'Walter, that's all well and good,' you're saying, 'but you've walked out of Ehvenor before, and so this isn't unfamiliar territory to you.'

"You've got a good point, and that's a fact. But there's a difference between having been through this area before and knowing it well. Now, I do know the route that we took the last time I walked out of Ehvenor, but that was more than ten years ago, and I think they may even remember me in one of the towns we passed through, so perhaps we'd be just as well skipping it."

She looked at me, trying not to glare. That was an improvement. At least she was trying something.

I was tempted to try something; I've been in worse-looking company.

If you ignored the reddened eyes and the slumped shoulders, Andy was still an awfully good-looking woman, in or out of her boots and leathers.

But she still wouldn't talk.

There are things I like less than traveling with somebody who won't start a conversation, who won't answer in other than monosyllables, and who cries herself to sleep each night, honest. But most of those involve things similar to sitting up on the Posts of Punishment.

The stream bent up ahead, and I suspected there'd be some fish feeding under the fallen tree that didn't quite bridge the stream. The morning was getting old, and the food in our pack wasn't getting any more plentiful, so I shrugged out of my rucksack and beckoned to Andy to wait.

She dropped her own rucksack and squatted on the ground, silently obedient.

I would have rather she spoke up and spooked the fish.

I crept out on the log. Sure enough, just under the surface of the rippling water, in a quiet space sheltered by the tree, a trio of largish trout hovered in the shadow, either having a quiet chat about fishy life or eating something.

Not for long.

One of the gifts I got in transition to This Side is my reflexes, and while they've been more important, they've never been a lot more fun than when I lunged, scooping up one of the fish and flinging it high into the air, just like a bear with a salmon, except that I'm much prettier than any bear.

The trout thumped down on the riverbank, flopping madly. *Flibitaflibitaflibita*.

Nice-sized, the way local speckled trout often get. Maybe three, three and a half pounds.

I'd sort of hoped Andy would take over, but she just watched it, so I pulled the utility knife from my rucksack—I don't use my dagger or my throwing knives for this sort of thing—then quickly gutted the fish, rinsing off both the fish and my hands in the stream. Ick.

"Now, the *right* way to cook trout involves poaching it with vinegar and spices," I said. "Blue trout is one of the greatest meals that ever there was.

"A good second choice is to tie the trout to a green stick and then shove it head deep in nice, hot coals. On the other hand, we don't have nice, hot coals, and I'm not going to spend an hour building up that kind of cookfire."

Keeping up a steady monologue, I gathered some dry wood and built a quick cooking fire on the riverbank—if you've got some birch bark handy, which we did, and if you're willing to waste a little gunpowder, which I was, you can start a fire real quick.

I cut the fish down the back and seared the halves on the ends of a pair of green sticks, using a rough

stone to grate just a taste of wild onion onto it. It only took a few minutes; all you really have to do with freshwater fish is cook them enough to kill any parasites.

A bit of salt from the saltwell in my pack, and, *voilà*: fish on a stick. Lunch for two.

"What are you going to have?" I asked.

She didn't rise to the bait, and I wasn't irritated enough to let her go hungry, so I handed her one of the sticks and then quickly wolfed down my own.

Not bad. Not bad at all. Fresh trout, no more than fifteen minutes from the stream, is a dish fit for a king.

Or even for Walter Slovostry.

I washed my hands in the stream and then scooped some water onto the fire. "Let's go."

* * *

The first days were like that. Andy slept when told to, ate what I put in front of her.

To my surprise, she stood her turn at watch and stayed awake and alert while she did, but that was about all.

The nights were cold, and I wouldn't have minded not sleeping alone. But it didn't seem like the right time to bring up the subject, not even of sleeping. I'm a sensitive guy, eh?

So, instead, I kept up the constant monologue as we walked. I swear, I began to run out of subjects; by the third day, I'd covered damn everything I knew (well, almost everything. Some things Woman Isn't Meant to Know). About how to set up a staff in a castle. About how to keep in practice with a bow. About why you keep flintlocks loaded, and how poor old Tennyet always scared the shit out of me.

We hit the Heliven-Ollerwell road late on the second day, and left the stream and trout dinners behind.

* * *

Just as we were breaking camp the next morning and I was launching into today's monologue—a reconsideration of the Nickel Defense and its suitability for college football—Andy looked up at me and frowned.

"Walter, shut up," she said.

"Well, well, well. It lives." I hefted my rucksack to my back and we started to work our way back toward the road through the forest.

She should have snorted, but she just looked at me deadpan. "Your sympathy is underwhelming. You don't know what I had to give up."

"Better than sex, so I'm told."

The corner of her mouth may have turned up a millimeter. "Depends on with whom."

"Was that an offer?"

"No."

Sometimes no doesn't mean no, but when it's accompanied by a weak shake of the head, lips pursed just so, that's exactly what it means. Which is okay. I can take no.

On the other hand, I was heading home to my wife, to make things work. It would have been nice to have one last dalliance. On the other hand . . . I've run out of hands.

Just as well.

* * *

We walked along, not talking. I can take silence, although you'll never get that in the forest. There's almost always the far-off cry of a bird, the chittering of insects, and if nothing else, a whisper of wind through the trees. Not silent at all. Not even quiet, not really; it's only the tallest trees that are quiet.

"What now?" she asked. Or maybe said.

I hadn't taken this route before, but I had passed through Ollerwell once or twice. "Ollerwell's just a few miles ahead, just across the river, and down away. We can buy some fresh food. I don't think we'll be able to get more trout—they tend to fish it out around Ollerwell—but maybe some eel, or some of that bass you find in the lakes up this way. Not beef—I mean, they might have some, but the locals don't eat a lot of beef, and we'd smell of it for days. *We could* splurge on a chicken, if—"

"Shh." She waved it away, tiredly. "I mean, what do I do now? After we get back."

I shrugged. "Whatever you want, Andy. Except magic, so I'm told."

For the thousandth time, she took the battered leather volume out of her pack and opened it.

The letters blurred in front of my eyes, and apparently in front of hers, too.

They would have, even if she hadn't been crying.

* * *

Sometimes I call it right: a farmer at the edge of town had a fire going, and a fat capon turning over a spit, sending delicious flavors wafting off into the breeze. We could probably have made a better deal in town, but the crackling of crisp skin over the coals made me part with a Holtun-Bieme copper half-mark with Karl's face on it, which bought me a huge chunk of breast (no comments, please), and Andy an oversized thigh, each served on a fist-sized loaf of fresh brown bread hot from the oven.

I didn't wait for it to cool, and ended up burning my tongue. It was worth it.

I'd like to report that Andy wolfed hers down with hunger and gusto, but she just ate as we walked through the village, past a couple dingy rows of wattle-and-daub houses and onto the northern road.

Another couple of days and we'd be at Butterspot.

"How about you?" she asked.

At first I didn't answer. It took me a moment to realize that she'd picked up our conversation of hours ago where we had left it off. I hate it when she does that.

"Me?" I shrugged. "I think I'd better take it easy for awhile. Spend some time with the kids, and with Kirah. You?"

She sighed. "I might go back into teaching. English, basic math, the usual. Even if some of the Home youngsters do it better than I could. I don't know."

Maybe, just maybe, if I gave Kirah enough patience and attention, maybe that would do it. Life's like a fight, sometimes; there's times when you have to commit yourself, to lunge full, all stops out, not worrying about what happens if it doesn't work. See, you don't just put something of yourself in what you touch, but you put it in who you touch. After close to twenty years together, Kirah was part of me, and I wasn't going to cut that out, any more than I'd throw away my left arm.

* * *

Ellegon found us that night.

I was a bit nervous about camping on the ground close to a road broad enough to be navigable by stars and faerie lights, so we had moved well off the road, onto a wooded rise, and slung our hammocks high in a giant old oak tree while it was still light enough to see.

Actually, I'd done the slinging, and it had only been one hammock. Climbing was hard enough on Andy, but I picked her branches to make getting in easy for her. It had been some trouble, but we'd gotten her settled in and pretending to be asleep, while I climbed farther up the tree and seated myself in a crotch between two old limbs, too lazy, or maybe too tired to mess with it all. I just whipped one end of a piece of rope around the tree, and knotted it in front of my chest, so that if I leaned forward instead of back I wouldn't fall out and break my neck.

I let the day slip away. What was that old dwarven even-chant? Something about—

That was, of course, the moment that flame would have to flare loud and bright over the treetops, accompanied by the rustle of leathery wings.

Wake up, folks. Your ride's here. If you hurry, we can be in Holtun-Bieme in the morning.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

*In Which We Decide
What Those Who
Can Do, and Why*

It is better to travel hopefully than to arrive.

—ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON

Never come home unexpectedly. It's a break-even proposition, at best.

—WALTER SLOVOTSKY

Ellegon set down quietly outside the walls in the gray light just before dawn. I slid down his scaly side and landed hard on the hard ground, twisting my ankle.

"You're getting old, Walter," Andy said, as she lowered herself more gently down from the dragon's back.

Happens to the best of them, the dragon said, turning its broad head to face the two of us. *So I understand. What are you going to do now?*

"Me, I'm for bed," I said. "I don't sleep well in the air."

So I noticed.

Andy patted at her belly. "I'm going to go eat something, then probably some sleep. You?"

The dragon walked away, toward the main road, his wings curling and uncurling. *There's a sheep in the south pasture with my name on it. I'm hungry.*

It was nice of Ellegon to walk away far enough that we wouldn't be battered by dust and grit when he took off. Although, at this point, that would have been wetting a river.

In that case . . . the dragon leaped into the air, leathery wings sending dust and grit into the air to batter at my eyes and face.

"Me and my big mouth," I said.

Andy didn't answer.

The watchman at the main gate let us in through the small-door; we waved aside his offer to wake a welcoming committee. I just wanted to look in on my kids and wife, and then find an empty bed. Or, better, grab a few blankets and curl up in a corner of Kirah's and my room, and let her find me when she woke. I wouldn't slip into bed with her unexpectedly; that would set her off.

Andy touched my shoulder for a quick moment. "Look me up when you get up. I've got an idea I want to talk over with you."

I nodded, too tired to bother asking what it was.

Dawn had been threatening to break outside, but a castle is always dark until the sun is well up, and well before it's down. Not that the staff believed that. Some wisely frugal servitor or penurious asshole had put out most of the lanterns; I had to get one from the rack outside the kitchens.

I don't believe in madly tittering darkness, but the murk kind of giggled at me as I made my way up the stairs toward the bedrooms.

Dorann's room was next to Kirah's and mine. I crept in for a quick moment.

Barely illuminated by the flickering lantern, my baby daughter lay under her blankets, all curled up and tiny. It was all I could do not to sigh out loud, although I couldn't prevent a tear or two from running down my face. Dammit, but she looked like she had grown an inch since I'd been gone. You miss so much when you're on the road, whether your business is sales or steel.

I rested my hand against her warm cheek for a moment, and she stirred just a little, then reached up a pair of chubby hands and pulled my hand closer to her face, never coming close to waking. After a few minutes, I gently detached my hand.

God, little one, I never realized how much I missed you.

I shut her door gently behind me, then went to Kirah's and my room. The knob refused to turn; it was locked. Good; Kirah was still practicing ordinary security. I was willing to bet that the secret passage to the room next door was still properly blocked.

I dug in my pouch for my key. I turned the key in the lock with exquisite slowness, and gently pushed the heavy door open, hoping that the hinges wouldn't squeak and wake her.

The bed had been moved in my absence, and a full-length mirror had been set up next to the window, angled to reflect the first traces of dawn light down onto the pillows, to wake the occupants.

Very clever.

But a hint of predawn light was enough to let me make out the faces of both occupants: my wife, and that asshole Bren Adahan.

* * *

I don't know how long I stood there, not thinking. It seems long in retrospect, but it probably wasn't.

I do remember, vaguely, what I thought about, in between the moments of anger, and hate, and jealousy, and shame, and guilt.

I thought something about how I didn't believe in a double standard, really, truly I didn't, no matter how hard and fast my heart was beating, no matter how much anger flared red behind my eyes, in my mind.

I do remember realizing how it wasn't being touched that disgusted Kirah, it was being touched by *me*, that it was the feel of my hand, my body against her that she associated with her old life, with rape and slavery.

What had I ever done to deserve that? Nothing, maybe. Fine. Who the fuck says you get what you deserve?

I do remember thinking, just in passing, that I could probably pick the lock to Bren Adahan's room next door, and be waiting for him when he made his way back through the secret passage.

And I do remember thinking that standing in an open doorway, tears running down my face, wasn't going to do any damn good, so I swung the door slowly closed and wiped my face on the back of my hand. I had the key almost completely turned when I heard soft footsteps behind me.

I hadn't been listening. Bad policy.

I finished turning the key, carefully pocketed it, and slowly turned, my weight on the balls of my feet.

Janie and Aeia stood side-by-side in the gray light. Janie in a heavy black sleeping-robe, belted at the waist with a thick velvet rope. The robe was far too large for her; its hem touched the floor, and her hands barely peeked out of the sleeves. It all made her look younger, far too young to be around for this.

Aeia had thrown on a thigh-length white silk robe. Slim fingers nervously toyed at the belt at her waist. Her eyes were puffy from sleep, but just a bit wide.

I was trying to figure out who had wakened whom, and decided that Aeia had probably wakened Janie. Aeia knew—hell, everybody knew—that Janie could always handle me.

"Hi, Daddy," Janie whispered.

"Hi, sweetness," I whispered back. "What's new?"

With a sad little smile—damn, I'd never seen Janie smile sadly before; I didn't much like it—she took my arm and brought me down the hall to the top of the stairs.

"Some things have happened while you were gone," she said, "some things we all pretend we don't know about. Aeia's been worried you'd do something stupid, but I've been telling her that my Daddy will handle things in a nice, civilized manner, that nobody's going to get hurt." Her face grew somber. "Tell her I'm right, Daddy."

Look: I am more than a collection of hormones and reactions. I could be livid with rage—and I was—but I decide what Walter Slovotsky does, not my anger. I decide, and I decided that I wasn't going to blow up. Not here and now; not ever. You don't solve this kind of problem with a knife and gun, you really don't.

So I forced my fists to unclench.

"Sure, sweetness. No problem. Truth to tell, I'd decided that your mother and I were through." Well, that was probably true. Since just a few minutes ago, no matter what I had decided on the *Delenia*. Hell, we might go through the motions for awhile. But every time I saw her, I'd replay the scene of her and Bren in bed, and each time I'd try to touch her, she'd see whatever private hell she saw.

Fuck it.

Aeia smiled. "It's going to be awkward," she said. Her golden brown hair was mussed from sleep; I wanted to run my fingers through it. She slipped her hand into mine, and gripped tightly. "But everything will be fine," she said. "Trust me."

"We'll manage," I said, weary past imagining.

She nodded, once.

"In the meantime," I said, "how about somebody finding me a bed?"

Janie led me down a flight to an unoccupied room on the floor below, and gave me a peck on the cheek. "See you this afternoon. Sleep well." She turned back down the hall, almost stumbling over the hem of

her too-large robe.

Aeia came into my arms for a brief moment, her arms pulling, not pushing, her body warm and alive against mine. She rested her head against my chest, then raised her face and kissed me quickly, gently on the lips.

"Later," she said, then turned and walked away down the hall.

The room was dark, and smelled vaguely musty. The bed was lumpy, and smelled more than vaguely musty. But there's one great thing about being dog-tired: you can cry yourself to sleep in about two seconds.

* * *

The nightmare is always the same:

We're trying to make our escape from Hell, millions of us streaming down the streets of Ehvenor, running from the wolf-things that think of us only as toys and prey. Everybody I've ever loved is there, along with faces familiar and strange.

There's a street corner up ahead, a place where I somehow know that a right angle turn will bring us to safety, and I shout out directions.

It seems to be working. They flicker out as they turn, and I somehow know, as you can only know in a dream, that they've escaped, not found themselves in the Place Where Trees Scream.

But the wolf-things approach, accompanied by the shambling orcs, their fangs dripping blood.

And then I see him: Karl Cullinane, Jason's father, standing tall, face beaming, his hands, chest, and beard streaked with blood and gore.

"We're going to have to stall them," Karl says. "Who's with me?"

He smiles, as though he's been waiting his whole life for this, the fucking idiot.

"I'm with you," somebody says.

Figures push out of the crowd, some bloodied, some bent.

Tennetty's the first. Not the aging, wasted one, more used up than aged, but a younger, vigorous Tennetty, her sneer intact. "Count me in."

Andy's next to her, looking foxy in her leathers, a small leather shield strapped to her left arm, a smoking pistol in her right. She smiles at me. "You don't think I need magic to count, do you?"

Big Mike hefts his baton, tapping it lightly against his thigh. "Never need anything, eh?"

My brother Steve fixes the bayonet to the end of his empty M16. His smile is reassuring. "Sharp edges don't jam, eh, Cricket?"

Karl looks at me—they all look at me—his bloody face puzzled. "Walter? What are you waiting for?"

I was about to say something, to tell them something important, but—

* * *

I woke in a cold sweat, in the dark.

Just a dream. No big deal, I tried to persuade myself as I wiped the sweat off my forehead.

It was dark; I'd slept—or nightmared, if you want to be accurate—all through the day and well into the night.

Somebody had snuck in while I was sleeping and had not only laid out some fresh clothes, but had filled the copper washbasin, then set the lantern underneath it to keep the chill off, if not keep it warm.

I stripped down to skin and scabbards, then splashed a little on my face and chest before pulling on the trousers and slipping the shirt over my head. A full bath could wait until I had some food, but not much longer. A nice hot soak was just what the cleric ordered.

I swallowed. Okay. Now, what?

There was a knock at the door.

"Come," I said, slipping the handle of a knife into my hand. I mean, I didn't need to fight with Bren, but maybe he wouldn't know that. It *does not* take two to have a fight.

Andy walked in, a lantern in one hand, a tray of food balanced on the other. "I had one of the guards listening for any sign of movement in here," she said. "I wanted to get to you before things get . . . hectic."

I forced a smile. That was a good word for it. Hectic. I liked that. "And you wanted to talk to me," I said. I bit into a cold drumstick. "You wanted to talk to me about something else, about, say, about how now that you're no longer a wizard, you want to go into what Karl used to call the family business, and about how you need a teacher, and about how I'm not going to be completely comfortable around here for the next while, and about how maybe I ought to be the teacher, eh?"

She nodded. No smile. Just a nod. I wondered if the only place she ever was going to smile again was in my nightmares. "Good," she said, matter-of-factly.

"And what did you think I was going to say?"

"Yes. I thought you'd say yes."

"Okay: yes." I nodded. "I've got to straighten out some things, some family matters, but then we go into training, and we hit the road as soon as we can."

She looked like she had a question.

"Lesson the first: ask it. When you've got time, always ask."

She thought it over for a moment. "Why are you so eager to get back on the road?"

"You want the truth?"

"Sure." She smiled. "Why not."

I shrugged, and looked back to the sweat-soaked rumpled blankets heaped on the bed and floor. "So I can get a good night's sleep."

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The heroes in Walter's dream sequences are intended to be Walter's, not mine; there'd be some overlap, but my list wouldn't include many of his selections, and vice versa.

Each of us, after all, does get to—and has to!—pick our own.

—J.R.

The Road Home

Dedication

This one's for three of my teachers:

Robert A. Heinlein

Donald Hamilton

David Drake.

Acknowledgments

Some Acknowledgments and
a Mercifully Short Hail and Farewell:

The truth is that the beginning of anything and its end are alike touching.

—Yoshida Kenko

—which is the quote with which the book begins, quite appropriately; but it bears repeating here.

As I write this, it's been a dozen years since I sold *The Sleeping Dragon* to Sheila Gilbert, then editor of what was then the Signet SF line—the line of books that's now the Roc imprint of Penguin USA.

I'm not sure, sometimes, if that feels like yesterday, or like a million years ago.

A bit of both, I guess. Long enough, certainly.

While it's time for both me and further books in and out of the series to move on (and, yes, the Guardians stories will continue), I wanted to take this last opportunity to express my gratitude to all the good people who have worked at this company—in management, in editorial, in production, and in marketing and sales—who have helped with the books over such a long, and largely rewarding, period of time.

Thanks, folks. It's been real.

* * *

As usual, I'm indebted to the Usual Suspects—Bruce Bethke, Pat Wrede, Peg Kerr Ihinger—and even more than usually to my agent, Eleanor Wood; and I'm always grateful to my wife, Felicia Herman, and my daughters Judy and Rachel, for things that have both little and much to do with the work at hand.

PROLOGUE

The Road from Ehvenor

The truth is that the beginning of anything and its end are alike touching.

—Yoshida Kenko

A hero's work is never done, which is one of the minor reasons I don't recommend the profession.

—Walter Slovotsky

Below, in the dark, in the city with the gleaming building at its heart, the flickering had stopped. But the killing hadn't.

He was supposed to feel a sense of satisfaction, Jason Cullinane thought. But he didn't. Whatever good he and the rest had done, they had also loosed more violence upon the world.

Shit. Like there wasn't enough already.

And the cost . . . worst of all, it had cost them Tenny. But he would not cry over Tenny. Never. She was just his father's tame killer, that's all she had been, that's all she ever had been. She hadn't been his friend, not at all. It was just that she had latched onto him as the closest available substitute for Karl Cullinane.

But I'm not Karl Cullinane, he thought. I'm just Jason Cullinane, I'm just eighteen years old, and I

can't carry it all. He realized that he had been unconsciously tightening, then loosening the shoulder muscles beneath his leather tunic. Mainly tightening. He felt like a lute string, wound too tight, ready to break at the slightest pluck.

He would not allow himself to break. That would not be permitted.

He almost jumped out of his skin when the dwarf patted him on the shoulder.

"It'll be okay," Ahira said. His face, broader than any human's could possibly be, was split in a grin that spoke more of relief than reassurance, although only his expression and the way sweat had slicked his hair down betrayed the exhaustion that the dwarf must have felt.

But he looked strange. Jason still hadn't gotten used to looking down at Ahira. Ahira had shrunk over the years in Jason's mind, if not in reality. Jason had known the dwarf for all of his life, and remembered looking up to him and wondering why all the grownups made short jokes about him, jokes that Ahira took not just with good grace, but with good humor, most of the time with a broad smile on his lips, all the time—at least in Jason's memory—with at least a trace of a grin.

In Jason's mind, the dwarf would still always tower over him, the way Ahira had when Jason was a baby, the way Ahira had loomed above him when Jason had taken his first steps toward those thick, hairy arms, toward the utter safety of those broad, strong hands. His father was gone too much of the time; Ahira had always been there. That smile had always been there.

"It'll all be okay. Trust me," the dwarf said, with just that trace of a smile.

Jason's mouth twisted. "I'll try."

Jason and Ahira had done their part, and the rent in reality had been sealed, and whether it was by Jason's mother or by the Three didn't really matter. It was done.

There was only a mess to be cleaned up, or lived with.

Below, the narrow streets of Ehvenor were filled with bands of the beasts Walter Slovotsky insisted on calling orcs, some fighting with each other, some fleeing into the countryside. Some sought the shelter of the hill, but it would be next to impossible to climb its rocky sides, and the plains and forest beyond the city were much more inviting than a narrow, twisting path up the side of a hill. They should be safe for now.

"Shit," Walter Slovotsky said. "Like closing the city dump and turning all the rats loose."

Not just orcs, either. Some immense creature, its broad side a glossy black in the starlight, slipped into the dark waters of the Cirric to disappear, only a momentary wake marking its passage. Another huge thing, misshapen and dark, flapped leathery wings as it vanished behind the city.

Jason turned his back on Ehvenor.

There were seven gathered around the hissing, spitting campfire. An elf, two dwarves, and four humans, if you included the Hand woman, who had no name and little of her own identity.

Mother, huddled in her blanket next to the campfire, was still weeping. Jason sat down next to her, put his arm around her, and pulled her close to him. What could he say? She had done it. She had brought

Nareen's Eye close enough that the woman of the Hand could see and Vair the Uncertain could see the rent shut.

It had been done, but Mother had spent not just her magic but her ability to do magic, burned it away to accomplish her goal.

Jason felt at the amulet around his neck. Nareen said that it would still work, that the sort of magic Mother had used to make it was mechanical, not transubstantive, but all Jason cared about was that it still worked, that it still protected him from being magically located as long as he wore it.

Jason looked over to where the Three stood. Nareen, the dwarf glassmaker wizard, rubbing a thumb idly against the side of his face: more aged and shriveled than any other dwarf Jason had ever met.

Vair the Uncertain, the elf: tall, rangy, and distant; under short, sharp bangs his eyes focused on something far away.

A nameless woman of the Healing Hand: watching the city with one eye of flesh and one Eye of glass.

Still Mother cried. Her shoulders shook with tears as she leaned close to Jason, seeking what comfort she could from his arm and shoulder.

Walter Slovotsky's all-is-wonderful-with-a-world-clever-enough-to-contain-Walter-Slovotsky smile was intact, and never mind that it seemed forced. They could all live with forced. His hands shaking only marginally, he reached into his pack and brought out a battered metal flask, then pulled the cork and drank deeply before passing the bottle to Ahira.

"Well," Ahira said, considering, "I think we earned that." He took a drink, then held the flask out toward the Hand woman.

She declined the offer with an upraised palm, her eyes, both real and glass, never leaving the pageant below. "Magical beasts loosed into the wild, into the earth and air and water," she said. She cocked her head to one side, and Jason wasn't sure, but perhaps there was a slim smile on her lips. Or perhaps not. "Things haven't been like this since I was a little girl."

She lifted a small bag to her shoulder, turned, and walked out into the night. It was all done so smoothly and casually that it was a long moment before Jason realized that she had left them.

Something bumped against Jason's arm. He looked up to see Ahira holding out the flask. Whiskey was not what Jason needed, and neither did the weeping woman leaning against his shoulder; he took the flask and passed it along to Nareen, who took a polite sip.

Vair produced a wire frame holding a clear red stone, and held it in the long fingers of his right hand, while with his left he threw a pinch of powder on the fire, then eyed the resulting smoke through his lens.

"It could be worse, perhaps," the elf said, his voice high-pitched but quiet, like the call of a distant hunting horn. "All of Faerie could have poured through, possibly. If the breach had not been sealed, if the one who cut the breach had not been stopped." He turned for a moment to Walter Slovotsky, and it looked like he was going to say something, but then the elf just tucked the ruby in his belt pouch, and left, vanishing in the darkness.

Really vanishing.

Jason turned to Ahira. Had anybody actually touched Vair? Had he really been here? He was going to ask, but there wasn't any point, and it didn't matter, not with his mother sobbing on his shoulder.

Why didn't somebody do something?

Nareen chuckled gently, for that is the way the Moderate People chuckle. "There is nothing to be done, young Cullinane. There is only much to be endured."

Nareen walked to the two of them and gently, slowly, pried Mother away from Jason, his fingers gentle against both Jason's arm and her shoulder, and took her small, delicate hands in his huge ones.

"You see," he said to Jason, although Jason couldn't figure out why Nareen would be talking to him, "those of us with the gift know a truth, that there is no pleasure quite like using it, like refining it." The dwarf's hands stroked hers in a way Jason tried to find offensive, perhaps almost obscene, but couldn't. "Most of us know that we must be careful in its use," Nareen went on relentlessly, "that if we use too much of the gift, push it too far, we will have to choose between it and sanity, and who would choose sanity compared to the glory of the power rippling up and down your spine, eh?"

Mother tried to pull her hands away from his, but the dwarf held her tighter. Jason was going to say something, to interfere, but Ahira's broad hand was on his shoulder, and Ahira's face was grim.

"No," Nareen said. "You made your decision. To feed your power not with your sanity, but with your ability." A broad dwarven finger traced a red glow in front of her face. "Your ability to see this as sharp lines instead of a red blur, and all that implies. My compliments," he said. He eased her to the ground, and started to turn away.

But no—"Don't leave yet." Jason held up a hand. Mikyn was still running around loose, and he had to be found. "Wait. I—we, that is. We helped you. I'd like some help, from you." He swallowed. "There's a friend of mine, doing some horrible things. I need to find him. Help me." There were things he knew about Mikyn that nobody else did, that the abuse he had suffered as a boy was not just at his father's hands, but at the hands of an owner with perverted tastes. It had become, apparently, too much for him.

Ahira's gaze was frankly appraising. Was Jason insisting on this right now because of an obligation to Mikyn, or because he couldn't stand his mother's tears? He didn't have to voice the question; it might as well have been written across his forehead in big, blocky letters.

It was too bad that the answer wasn't.

I'll tell you someday, Ahira, when I know. If I ever know. That was the trouble: if he couldn't tell when he was behaving nobly or selfishly, how could he expect others to get it right?

Nareen nodded. "Perhaps just a little."

"Okay."

Ahira was smiling at Walter Slovotsky, in that way that old friends smiled at each other in assurance and with reassurance. "What am I going to say?" he said.

Slovotsky returned the smile.

Jason felt more like an outsider than usual.

"Ask, Jason," Slovotsky said. "It'll be good practice."

They were always trying to train him, and most of the time he didn't mind. This wasn't most of the time, but there was no point in arguing now. "That somebody has to take Mother home," he said, "but that I'm still too young and stupid—"

"Inexperienced," the dwarf said, interrupting.

"But close enough," Walter added.

It was what they meant anyway.

"—to be running around on my own." He swallowed, hard. "So," he went on, a catch in his voice, "one of you had better come with me. The one that's better at keeping out of trouble, not the one that's better at getting into it." Much better to be traveling with Ahira and not Slovotsky. There was going to be more than enough trouble between here and wherever Mikyn was.

"I wonder—who could that be?" Ahira's grin was almost infectious. Almost.

He turned to Slovotsky. "You'll watch out for Mother?"

"Sure," Slovotsky said. "Andrea needs some rest. The two of us, at least, had better camp here for tonight, head up into the hills tomorrow."

Jason tied his rucksack shut while Nareen made some arrangements with Walter Slovotsky.

Ahira nodded. "'Twere best done quickly, eh?"

"There is that."

Slovotsky hugged him, and for the first time Jason realized how much he would miss the big man. There was something about him that was oddly reassuring. Maybe it was his easygoing self-confidence that would have bordered on egotism if only it could have been toned down. Or maybe not.

Slovotsky turned to Ahira, his grin still intact. "Watch your six, short one," he said. "And if you need me . . ."

Nareen and Ahira leading the way, they walked off into what was left of the night.

Behind them, Ehvenor stood in the dawn light, empty, no sign of life save for the gleaming building in its center.

1

In Which I Have a Bad Dream and an

Unpleasant Chat with an Old Friend

*Sleep that knits up the ravelled sleeve of care,
The death of each day's life, sore labour's bath,
Balm of hurt minds, great nature's second course,
Chief nourisher in life's feast.*

—William Shakespeare

Will, your sister has an 800 number.

—Walter Slovotsky

The nightmare is always the same:

We're trying to make our escape from Hell, millions of us streaming down the concrete corridors, past the open cells, toward the front gate, and safety. Bodies are packed tightly, too tightly, and it's all I can do to stay on my feet without knocking anybody else down.

Everybody I've ever loved is there, along with strange faces, some of which I know should be familiar. I can pick out the beefy face of Mrs. Thompson, my second-grade teacher, and I hold out a hand toward her, hoping to pull her close, but she's swept away from me into the crowd.

Behind us, there's a screaming pack of demons. Some of them are cartoons right out of Fantasia, and some are huge misshapen wolves like Boioardo. Others are just . . . different. There's one that looks like a human, except that he's got the head of a goat and an erect penis the size of my arm, and there's another that seems to be covered in boiling oatmeal, but they're all chasing us, and they're all getting closer.

One exit is up ahead: a steel door to the courtyard outside, dangling on its hinges.

The crowd pushes through.

I can't tell who's gone through, but I can only hope . . . Please. Let it be my daughters, my friends, the people I love. Please, God.

It occurs to me that I could be making sure that they're safe, I could be going with them, and who the hell told me my place was here?

There's a hand on my shoulder. "I did, asshole. Although I'm not the only one."

I'm not at all surprised to see Karl Cullinane standing there, surrounded by the rest of the legion of the dead. What surprises me is that his hair is gray as a winter storm cloud, and that his face is lined with wrinkles. He's at least sixty.

But . . . he can't be. He wasn't much older than forty when he died, buying the rest of us time to escape.

Tennetty, her sneer as intact as her eyepatch, smiles at me out of a face that's withered and lined and just plain used up. "Who else would have, eh?"

Beyond her stands a company of old men, all dressed in white sailor's tunics. Some brandish swords, some spears, another a net and trident.

"Some work of noble note, eh?" The one who seems to be their leader takes a step forward. He's impossibly old; his face is deeply creased like ancient leather, and his hair and beard are white and fine as spun silk. But his back is straight and his high voice is clear as a glass of cold white wine. "Even fifty years ago, I could have held them by myself," he says. "But today, I will have your help, whoever you are."

Ushelp him?

I would tell him to go to hell, but, hey, what the fuck? We're already there.

Karl just clasps him on the shoulder. His voice cracks around the edges, not with fear, but with age. "We will hold the corridor," Karl says. "Who else is with me?"

Then I wake up.

* * *

Back when I was a kid, sure as anything, the moment my temperature hit 103 degrees, the nightmares would come. Fever dreams, Stash and Emma used to call them.

Not the usual kind of nightmares, either—familiar, reassuring things would turn dark and threatening, and somehow their familiarity was proof of the threat. The clock on the wall opposite my bed would stare down with a horrible, baleful glare, while I knew that just behind the open door to my closet misshapen things waited with evil intent, evidenced by the menacing way the shirts hung on their hangers, proven by the way a pair of pants lying on the floor huddled in a limp mass. I'd drift off to a light sleep without knowing it, and things would melt around me, while I'd huddle under the blankets, impossibly cold and wet with sweat, afraid to poke my head out.

A regular nightmare would go away by itself when I woke up, but not these fever dreams, not until the fever went below that critical temperature. And while just the touch of Mom's smooth, warm fingers to my forehead could dispel an ordinary nightmare, not even Slash's thick, callused hands could chase away the fever dreams.

It wasn't just that they were scary—everybody has nightmares, every now and then, but when you wake up, they're gone. What was horrible about it was that every time I'd close my eyes to sleep, the fever dreams would be there waiting for me, like some monster hiding in the dark behind a door.

* * *

I couldn't sleep; the bed was too comfortable, but the nightmares weren't. They were always the same, and I was always the same when I woke up, too sweaty to sleep, too scared to try, too tired to do anything useful.

At my movement, Aeia cuddled closer, her head pillowed on my shoulder, hair spilling like warm silk all over my neck and arm, her breath warm on my chest. The light of the candle sputtering in its pewter holder on the table next to our bed turned her face all lovely and golden. Not that it needed any help. High cheekbones, vaguely slanted eyes, rich, full lips making up the stubborn mouth that goes with being a Cullinane by birth or adoption . . . I would have pulled her closer, but I was bathed in enough sweat to mat down my chest hair, and I didn't think that cold and clammy was all that romantic.

What I really needed was to be held. I guess you never outgrow that.

Damn, damn, damn.

Back on the Other Side, I was an unusually big man, with all that implies. Not particularly clumsy, mind, but I was not overly graceful. I lost some size and bulk in the transition, and gained enough dexterity and deftness to be able to slip out of bed without waking her. Not that I had a choice, but even if I had one, I'd make the trade in half a second.

There's a lot I would have missed otherwise.

Too much.

I looked down at her for a moment.

Truth to think, if not to tell, I would have broken things off with Aeia and gone back to my wife. Or at least that was what I'd told myself. And even that was saying too much. I would have given up, or tried to give up, Aeia in my bed; I wouldn't have given her up as a friend. A lover, I can dispense with; somebody I love, no. I don't do that.

Shit, not even after they're dead.

Tennetty, Karl, Chak, all of you . . . I miss you every minute.

I slipped into a blousy pair of trousers, and noticed that I didn't have as much slack drawstring as I was used to. Hmm, my waist was starting to slip, just a little. Fifty more daily sit-ups perhaps, or maybe I could figure out some other exercise that would give me a flat stomach for another couple of years.

Getting old, Walter, I told myself, all too truthfully. It was hard to figure exactly, but I was more than forty years old, and definitely slowing down. Forty didn't seem so old, but shit, when I was a kid, I didn't think God was older than thirty. Maybe it wasn't quite yet time to give up this running around and getting in trouble, but the time was soon approaching. I'd been just a trace too slow in Fenevar, and that had endangered the others. If it wasn't for Ahira, if it wasn't for Tennetty, if it wasn't for Andy with a spell on the tip of her tongue, we would all have died horribly there.

Once more. One more time, maybe. Enough to give Andy a chance to get out and get a taste of it, then the worn-out ones of us could settle down and turn things over to the younger crowd, and those of their elders who still had it.

One more time, once to purge the nightmares, and then I'd be done.

Jason was coming along, and hell, Thomen was the Emperor. Over in Home, Petros was running things mostly just fine, and Lou would still be active for the foreseeable future—the mid-forties didn't make an engineer old—and who could tell about Ahira? Dwarves didn't age much after they reached maturity. A hundred and fifty, perhaps two hundred years, then a quick decline to a dramatic senility, and then gone. How old was he? Well, back on the Other Side, Ahira Bandylegs had been thought of as not quite middle-aged. For a dwarf, less than a hundred. Perhaps he had another century in front of him, where I'd be lucky to have another forty, fifty years.

Well, to hell with it. We all live under a death sentence—and most of us under the Prisoner's Dilemma. If worrying over it would do any good, all humanity would be immortal, instead of most of it being immoral.

Another English joke. The words for "immortal" and "immoral" in Erendra didn't sound similar. *Devorent* was a form of "to live," with the indefinite prefix; *enken* was a simple negation of *ken*. None of the locals would get it; they all tended to think in Erendra and not in English. Even Janie and the rest of the kids.

I don't know why that made me as sad as it did.

Never mind that. Once more, one more time to dispel the nightmares, and then I'd settle down. See if I could work some minor miracles with Imperial agriculture, or just ask Thomen for a ranch of my own. Surely the Empire owed me at least that much, I thought. Surely the Emperor owed me at least that much, I thought. Surely I owed myself that much, I thought.

Surely too much thinking was making me hungry, and thirsty. Even if U'len wasn't up yet, there would be something to eat in the pantry—maybe some slices off last night's joint of mutton, washed down with a glass of milk from the coldcellar.

Or a quick snort of Riccetti's Best. No. Best not to drink that if I was going to try to get more sleep. The nightmares were already bad enough.

I slipped a pair of throwing knives nevermind exactly where, then opened the door no more than was necessary in order to slip out, preventing the hall lantern from shining down on Aeia's face. That might have woken her up, and she would have wanted to talk, and while I don't sleep with anybody I won't talk with, what I wanted now was some privacy and something cold to drink.

The hall carpet was soft beneath my bare feet.

Down the hall stood what had been my room, now officially occupied only by my wife, Kirah. Unofficially, that scumbag Bren Adahan was probably creeping down the hidden passageway from his connecting room to sleep with her, although perhaps that was just a passing phase. It wasn't being touched that made Kirah crazy, that triggered memories of things she wanted to forget.

It was being touched by me, but it wasn't my damn fault.

Or maybe it was; I guess it depends on how you look at it.

It would have been so easy to lose my temper, and I could have gotten away with that. Find your wife in bed with another man, be it in Holtun-Bieme or pretty damn near anywhere else, and few will blame you for killing them both in a white heat of anger.

It would be so easy.

But who was I kidding? There are problems that can be solved by kicking open a door and chopping everybody inside into tiny little bits, but no matter how I looked at it, no matter how shitty Kirah had made me feel, this wasn't one of those. We had been together for close to twenty years, had had two daughters, and in all that time, I'd never raised my hand to Kirah. Breaking a string like that by stabbing her and her lover in their bed wasn't really on the agenda.

Neither was slapping his face repeatedly, forehand and backhand, until I'd loosened every single tooth and he looked like he had a mouthful of bloody Chiclets.

Although it did make me feel good to think about it.

Sublimate, sublimate, dance to the music . . .

I headed downstairs, and at the bottom of the stairs, started toward the kitchen and pantry, only to freeze at the sound of a voice behind me:

"Late night, again?" Doria Perlstein, her legs curled up underneath her, was sitting on an oversized, overstuffed chair at the end of the downstairs hallway, which sounds like a stranger place to hang out than it is. That end of the hallway had long—back a couple of Furnaels or twelve—been a sitting area, where the lady of the house could sit and knit or chat and take tea, all the while keeping an eye on the staff bustling in and out of the kitchen, without them being right in her lap. Doria had a stack of papers on an ancient lapdesk. All governments, even that of Barony Cullinane, live on paper, I guess, and I didn't have reason to doubt that the regent would have it any different.

"Well," I said, shrugging, "yeah."

"Not surprised. Seems to run in the family."

"Oh?"

"Your youngest wandered down a while ago. I sent her to the kitchen."

"My baby daughter's sleeping in the kitchen," I said, trying for a deadpan delivery to let the words speak for themselves.

Doria smiled. "U'len's watching over her. She rigged a nice little spot between the oven and the woodbin, protected by a bit of latticework—when the oven's low, it keeps things toasty warm. I wouldn't worry."

It's not your daughter, I didn't say, and not because Doria couldn't have children. She would no more have let Doranne sleep in unsafe proximity to a stove than I would, so I just let it drop.

Doria was dressed in a thin black robe, belted tightly around her waist, that made her normally pale skin seem wan, except that the smoothness of her complexion and the hints of highlights at the cheekbones turned it all smooth and creamy. She adjusted the cleavage at the opening of her robe for a moment, then smiled up at me.

"Not fair to tease the animals, Doria," I said, although that was just for effect. Doria and I had long since worked out that being friends worked better for us than being lovers, and what with things being new for Aeia and me, I wasn't exactly suffering.

"Pity." She tossed her head, once, flirtingly, clearing the fringe of blond hair from her eyes. Most women look better to me with long hair, but there was something about the way her short hair flipped from side to side that was particularly pretty, and kind of young, a strange contrast to her wide eyes with their golden irises, eyes that seemed to be ancient.

"You know the difference between your friends and your partners?" she asked, a slight smile on her full lips.

"Which kind of partner?"

"Ahira, Karl, Chak, Tennetty—that kind."

"Yeah: some of my friends are lovely; those kinds of partners aren't."

She shook her head. "It's the eyes. You and Ahira almost never look each other in the eye. I used to think it was that you were afraid to, but I was wrong. You're each always standing watch, and you know in your heart and your gut that you don't have to watch each other, so you unconsciously divide the universe into the part that you watch over and the part that your partner watches over, like the rest of the universe is the enemy."

"Sometimes . . ." I started to say something, but I didn't quite know what. "Sometimes the rest of the universe is the enemy, kiddo." Slovotsky's Law Number Sixteen: When the universe doesn't give a fuck, don't be mad: it's being as friendly as it ever gets.

"Sometimes it's just the job that is the enemy." She tapped a fingernail on the paper spread out on her lapdesk. "Running a barony is a fair amount of work."

"Think Jason might keep you on after he gets back?" I asked.

"Could be." She shrugged. "I've had better jobs, although not recently," she said. A smirk quirked across her lips for just a second until it could become a smile. She carefully stacked the papers, then set the lapdesk down on the table at her elbow. "Not that I've gotten a lot done tonight. I haven't been able to concentrate tonight, anyway. I was wondering when you'd show up," she said.

"I'm that predictable, eh?"

Everybody I love has at least one habit that drives me absolutely bugfuck, even though I try not to show it. With Ahira, it's his stubborn unwillingness to admit the obvious and insist that I do. With Janie, it's that she's always a step ahead of me. With Doria, it's her habit of changing the subject from light to serious.

"No," she said, sobering irritatingly. "But I've been talking to Aeia. More to the point, she came to me. Says you've been having trouble sleeping."

I shrugged. "Happens, off the road." Each of us grows our own night demons; mine bother me when I'm in a soft bed at home, even if the home wasn't technically mine, but the property of the Cullinane barons. My subconscious only deals in technicalities when it's holding them against me.

She shook her head. "That isn't going to fly." She licked her lips, once, and then pursed them for a moment. "You're eating like a horse, and I'm given to understand you're getting regular exercise," she said, quirked a smile, "both in and out of bed."

"And with enough food, exercise, and sex, all is well for the forty-year-old male, is that it?"

"Well, no. Not if he's having a midlife crisis."

I had to laugh. "Excuse me?"

"Oh, come on. Put it in Other Side terms. Take, say, an agricultural consultant to a major monarch." She stopped herself, and chuckled. "Okay, make that an agricultural consultant to, say, a state governor. He's got a wife and two kids, a stable job that pays well, and an equally stable—if perhaps a trifle dull—lifestyle. Less than a year later, he finds himself out in the world in a whole new job that involves

getting shot at, and he's dumped his wife for a younger woman, and even figured out a way to blame her for it. What would you call it?"

"Not fair. You're ignoring the specifics."

She waved it away. "There're always specifics. You think most middle-aged men in the midst of a midlife crisis—"

"You missed a 'mid' in there, maybe."

"—think they're picking up a random young bimbo as a new bed partner?"

That got me angry. "I don't want you talking about Aeia like that."

She sniffed. "I'm not talking about her, you idiot; I'm talking about *you*. You can't see it as part of a pattern. It just *has* to be something special between you and her, something precious.

"What's precious, just maybe, is that she's somebody new, somebody younger, somebody who makes you feel younger, because what it's all really about is that you feel the breath of your own mortality on your neck, and you've got to run faster, to strike out in some new direction to try to escape it."

I don't really know whether her smile was intended to be mocking, but it was infuriating. "And if the model doesn't fit perfectly, what model ever has?"

I guess Doria has more than one habit that irritates me.

2

The Apprentice Warrior

It is easy to fly into a passion—anybody can do that—but to be angry with the right person and at the right time and with the right object and in the right way—that is not easy, and it is not everyone who can do it.

—Aristotle

When it comes to throwing a fit, it's better to give than to receive—and much the best to avoid the whole thing entirely.

—Walter Slovotsky

The air in the thatch hut was cool and quiet; the killing had been over a long time. But it didn't feel that

way. It hadn't felt that way before, and it didn't now.

"Ta havath, Jason," the dwarf said. Literally, it was the verb *to maintain* in Erendra, but it meant *take it easy. Relax. Don't get excited.* "It happened a long time ago." His voice was quiet, but rasping, the sound of an old saw, still sharp.

"Too long," Jason Cullinane said, bending to feel at the rotting straw covering the floor. Soggy, more than half-rotted, it had not been changed in many tendays.

The shack was dark, and quiet, and no longer reeked of death, as though it never had. If anything, it smelled too good. The damp, musty reek of the thatch overhead, the fresh wind blowing in the open door and out through the torn greased paper that had covered the window, and the cool smells of the forest all combined with the rotting straw in a way that was disturbingly pleasant.

It should have smelled of death.

An old man and an old woman had been killed here, murdered here.

By my best friend, he thought. Mikyn . . .

Enough. Straightening, he turned to the dwarf. Ahira's easy good humor hadn't deserted him, not even here and now as he stood where morning sunlight splashed golden on the rotting straw. There was nothing of a broad smile on his face, but just a trace peeked through his black beard. It held something of reassurance in it, perhaps, and perhaps more than something of an announcement, perhaps something of a warning.

It said, I have dealt with worse than this, and this too I will deal with.

Jason envied his self-assurance.

"There's nothing more we can do here," Ahira said.

"More?"

Ahira's laugh might have been forced, or perhaps not. It was hard to tell, "Nothing, then."

They exited into the too-bright sunlight. Nareen was waiting out there, floating comfortably in the air above the three battered rucksacks. The wind kept the grasses waving gently, like the Cirric on a quiet day, but it didn't appear to affect Nareen. Little did.

His appearance was exceptional for a dwarf. While he had the large bones and even larger joints of his breed, Nareen lacked the huge bundles of muscle that generally wrapped around a dwarf's bones. His skin hung on him loosely, as though he was somehow deflated. Instead of the gentle rounding that softened the harsh bones of Ahira's face into something warm and familiar, Nareen's cheekbones and eye ridges kept his look almost skeletal. It was like having a skull looking out at you, and Jason didn't like it much at all.

"There is, I take it, no sign of your friend?"

Jason shook his head. "None." He had hoped to find some trace of Mikyn, something he had left behind, something that Nareen could use to trace him, but it had been unlikely, and it was too much to ask. But

maybe, just maybe.

He had the beginning of an idea, but it was one that scared him silly. It probably required more cleverness, or more fighting skills, than he would ever have. But it made sense, at least on one level, and it was the sort of thing that Walter Slovotsky would think of.

Purely logical: who else was looking for Mikyn? The Slavers Guild was, and they were based in Pandathaway. That might be the place to find out where Mikyn was—although it was also a place where Jason and Ahira were wanted, dead or alive. It would take much trickiness to get in and out alive. More of a Walter Slovotsky thing than a Jason Cullinane thing.

Leave it be, for the time being.

3

In Which I Hurt Myself for Good Reason, and Play with Knives

Perhaps the reward of the spirit who tries is not the goal but the exercise.

—E. V. Cooke

Well, truth to tell, my first thought after we arrived on This Side wasn't Holy shit—I'll never have to do a fucking calisthenic again. It was, however, my second thought. (I was wrong, but there you have it.)

—Walter Slovotsky

I never really wanted to be a football player, but my scholarship was a way for me to go to college without sucking Stash and Emma's savings dry. They'd put aside money for it, sure, but Other Side colleges are like the vampires that leaked out of Faerie during the Leak: how much of your money they soak up isn't a variable—they take *all* of it. That's the way the system is structured.

There are a few situations where some of that weight will be taken off you. It happened to some of us. Lou Riccetti got a thousand bucks a year off of his tuition for being a National Merit Finalist (never mind what that means; it's a long story). I never asked James Michael what sort of deal he got, although I know there was one.

Me, I got a completely free ride for being very adept at running after and seizing a fast-running man holding an inflated pig-leather bladder, and then quickly throwing him to the ground. In order to maintain that facility, I had to spend a lot of time with sweaty people of varying intelligence, all of whom were obsessed with the movement of that leather bladder, and with training for their opportunity either to move it or to prevent somebody else from moving it. I dunno, but it seemed reasonable to me. At the time.

* * *

By the time I had reached a hundred sit-ups, my abdominal muscles were screaming for mercy, so I decided to inflict only another fifty on them.

The trick is to persuade yourself that every bit of pain is helping make things better, and for all I know that can be true about a lot of things.

That which does not kill me makes me stronger, and all.

Or maybe it just hurts. I don't know.

Dressed in a pair of drawstring shorts and a loose shirt, I was stretched out on a woven grass mat in the fencing studio near the window at the juncture of floor and ceiling. The early morning sunlight had warmed the mat to merely chilled, which I could live with, and it made the wicker walls look all cozy and golden, which I could enjoy.

"Whatcha doing, Daddy?" came from the entrance to the fencing studio, in a high-pitched voice that still didn't have a full grasp of complex consonants. My baby daughter, Doria Andrea.

Well, at least that was better than the time that Janie had walked in on Kirah and me making love, and said the same thing, followed somewhat later by, "If you were having so much fun, why aren't you smiling?"

My daughters seem to catch me off guard when I'm sweaty; I was grateful this time it was only from exercise.

She was in a sort of shorts-based overall today, over a dingy white pullover sweater with the arms rolled up. I bet that even the dingy whiteness wouldn't last until lunch; my daughters always play hard, and there was a new coal-black foal in the stable that Doranne was helping the stable boy take care of, help that probably only slowed him down a medium amount. Which, too, was okay.

"Hi, Doranne," I said, sitting up to give her a hug. Attention fathers: enjoy the hugs while you can; eventually they get too old for that, or at least think they're too old. "I'm staving off eternity, one bit of agony at a time."

She frowned, but then put the frown away. When you're four, adults are always saying things that you don't understand, but if you let them know that, then they'll always say, "You'll understand when you're older."

Except me. *Inever* say that to my kids.

"I don't understand," she finally said.

"What I meant to say is that I'm exercising, trying to keep myself strong and pretty. What's up?"

She didn't get that, but she decided that it didn't bother her. Which also was okay.

"Uncle Bren said to tell you he wanted to see you," she said.

Which wasn't okay. And which also wasn't her fault. "Thanks, honey," I said. "Did he say where he'd

be?"

She shook her head. "I didn't ask. I'm sorry."

"T'sokay, kidlet," I said. "You seen Auntie Andy this morning?"

She nodded. "I helped her saddle her horse; she went for a ride."

Well, that was good. By far, the best intermediate training in riding consists of riding a lot, and I had prescribed long, hard morning rides for Andy, switching horses out at the farm, and then again at one of the nearer villages. It would be good for her seat—technical term—and I couldn't help thinking what it was doing for her thighs, then mentally slapped myself. Life was complicated enough.

My daughter shifted from foot to foot.

"What is it?"

"Dier said that if I went to the stables early enough, I could feed the new baby horse."

"Then you'd better get going," I said, giving her a quick squeeze before I let her go. "I'll go find the baron."

She left at a dead run. Kids always run, and think nothing of it.

In the corner of the room, right over the sump-drain, was a cold-shower stall. I tossed off my exercise clothes, unstrapped the scabbard from my right calf, then quickly sluiced myself off in the cold water, fed from the cistern on the roof. Rainwater's good for the hair, so I'm told, but it was cold enough to make my testicles try and crawl back up inside my body cavity.

I dried myself with a thick but napless towel.

Time to get dressed. I was breaking in a new pair of black leather trousers, so I slipped those on, and tucked in the tails of an all-too-white silk shirt before belting it tightly around my waist.

The back of the matching leather vest held one throwing knife; the other one returned to its usual spot strapped to my calf. I slipped a Therranji garrote into a hidden pocket at the inside of my vest, then belted on my weapons belt, sword on the left, its hilt properly canted forward, a single pistol on the right.

Not quite what I'd prefer to take with me to have a talk with my wife's lover, but then again, I wasn't particularly expecting violence. Frankly, I was willing to bet against it. I didn't know whether or not I could have taken Bren in a fair fight, but it would have been a stupid gamble for either of us. Having his blood on my hands was unlikely to make me popular with my soon-to-be-ex-wife, or with any of the other women around—forgetting what the Emperor would probably say about me killing his favorite Holtish baron. And there are people who wouldn't have taken kindly to him killing me, probably including Kirah.

There are, after all, an amazing number of problems in the world that can't be fixed by slitting the right throat.

I loosened my sword in its sheath and headed out into the day.

* * *

The three musketeers caught up with me in the courtyard of the main keep, just outside of the back entrance to the kitchens, right where the cooks were growing yet another patch of dragonbane. (Well, with all the strange things that had been leaching out of Faerie, I didn't have a lot of trouble seeing why the cultivation of the stuff was becoming popular again. It's poisonous to most of the magical metabolisms.)

Well, not really the three musketeers. Which is just as well. Shit, imagine actually having Athos, Porthos, and Aramis at your back in a fight. By the time they'd finished speechifying, and then elegantly drawing their swords, and then preparing to fence—each in a style designed to reveal the nature of his character—three tired, ordinary swordsmen would have been looking down at their dead, bleeding bodies, breathing through their mouths to avoid the stink in the air, and wondering why life couldn't always be this easy.

Me, I'll take Kethol, Pirojil, and Durine.

Kethol: raw-boned, red-headed, and lanky, with deep-set eyes that alternated between staring off in whatever direction he had last been looking and constantly moving, constantly searching, although for what, I'd never been able to ask.

He noticed me noticing, and let or forced an easy grin across his face.

Pirojil: broad and squat, with a huge flattened nose, massive jaw and overhanging eyeridge. The top half of his right ear was gone; it looked like it had been chewed off, which could easily have been the case. His neck was too thick, and his receding chin was only one of several chins. Pirojil was probably the ugliest man I'd ever met, but with a broad smile that made his face comfortably homely, as long as you didn't look right at it.

I didn't. But he was watching me.

And then there was Durine: the big man, almost a head taller than Kethol. Bushy beard and unsmiling mouth on a face sitting over a bull neck; a chest like a beer barrel, thick, hairy arms, and huge, blunt fingers that seemed too wide to be adept with anything subtler than a club. Not particularly well-proportioned—his legs were just an irritating amount too short for his body—not particularly clever, not particularly friendly, and not particularly even-tempered.

And looking at me in a way that was not particularly pleasant.

More than two dozen men had set out with Karl on his Last Ride. These three had survived. Part of it was luck, I'm sure, but not all of it. There was something about them, something that smelled of death, maybe, and of suffering, and of men who had seen and done things that bothered them, but that they had lived through, and they could live through whatever they had to do to you, thank you very much.

Which is why I might have chosen them as bodyguards, but I didn't particularly like them.

Kethol leaned against a whitewashed wall, still chewing on a few slivers of flesh clinging to a drumstick from either a large capon or a medium-sized turkey.

He gestured with it. "A moment of your time, Walter Slovotsky?"

I liked that. Neither my name nor my effective position really fit into their view of the world, so all three

of them called me by my full name, pronouncing my first name as though it was a title.

I dialed for an easy smile. "Of course, Kethol. What's going on?"

Durine spoke up, his voice a bass rumble, threatening a thunder that only sounded distant. "The Regent asked us to have a word with you. And perhaps one with the Baron Adahan, as well." His hands gestured clumsily, as they usually did when they weren't holding something that could stab, cut, or crush. "She says she wouldn't want any accidents to happen."

I held up both hands. "Ta havath, eh? I don't want a fight, any more than he does." Which was true, although I probably should have kept the anger out of my voice, if I wanted to be believed. Which I did.

Kethol nodded, trying to look as though he believed me. Durine's face held no expression.

Pirojil just looked skeptical. And ugly. "Things have been known to get out of hand."

"As we should know," Durine said, rubbing one huge finger against an old scar—not one I'd given him. I'd sparred with each of the three of them, but never with anything more than practice weapons, and never with any intention more serious than a good workout. Look, if I have to fight, my preference in an opponent would be a lame, one-legged, arthritic swordsman with cataracts and palsy—I don't need a fair fight, thank you very much.

Pirojil chuckled, and in a moment, Kethol joined him. Not one of the three offered to explain it to me. I hate in-jokes.

"Then you wouldn't mind the three of us keeping company with you for a short while on this fine day?" Kethol asked.

Sure. Just what I needed. Three large, murderous babysitters.

It didn't seem politic to refuse. And, besides, I was going to be doing a spot of adult babysitting myself. "Sure," I said. "You don't mind hitting the kennels first."

May as well let them in for the hard time as well as the good, although given what they'd been through from time to time, a bit of wolf dung wasn't going to be all that difficult to deal with.

* * *

I was surprised to find my daughter Janie in the kennels, but I shouldn't have been. She had been spending a lot of time with Nick and Nora, and they would always whine and whimper when she left them in their kennels.

Well, kennel is the best term, I guess, although it wasn't where the castle dogkeeper kept the dogs. The castle dogs didn't take to being kept near wolves, and if kenneled near Nick and Nora, would alternate between cowering in one corner of their cells and barking up a storm.

Which wasn't the only reason that the two of them had been moved to a newly built structure in an unused corner of the keep. There had at one point been something there; a rough inlaid-stone floor sprawled out beyond the edges of the wolf pens. Just as well. Wolves dig, and dig well.

What Doria had ordered built filled the bill nicely, even if a six-foot-high wire fence looked out of place in the castle. The wolves didn't like the feel of the wire against their paws, and it hurt to try to climb it.

Janie had been feeding them over by their Snoopy-style doghouse, but they raised their heads at our approach and bounded over to the gate, waiting, tails wagging, Nick's thumping against the fence post with a rhythmic *clinkity-clinkity-clinkity* until Janie opened the fence and let them come out and greet me.

The three musketeers didn't like all this. Hands tended to hover near hilts, and the wolves didn't like the movement. Janie—like me—was part of the pack, but not the three of them.

She caught the movement and gave Nora a loud thump on the back. "Down, down, they're okay. You just leave them alone," she said, the voice of authority.

Teenage daughters are a problem. Today she was dressed in an imitation of Andy's leather road outfit: jacket-vest tight, midriff bare to equally tight leather jeans. With the rough boots and the addition of the leather overjacket now hanging on a fence post, it wasn't a bad outfit for running through the fields and woods with a pair of wolves, but it reminded me more than I was comfortable with that she had long since ceased being a girl and was well into woman.

While the outfit wasn't an invitation to rape—there's no such thing as an invitation to rape—it was an invitation to being hit on, even when her ensemble also included a pair of very territorial wolves. Just as well I don't really care if my daughter fools around.

She gave me a quick hug and a kiss—okay, she was still my baby, after sixteen or so years, although baby fat had long since given way to long, thin limbs, and chubby cheeks to a heart-shaped face framed in straight, short, black hair.

"Hi, Daddy."

"Hi, Sweetie. And Nick, you're not my type. Go away."

Dogs, wolf or tame, are never an aid to personal dignity: Nick, always the more affectionate of the two, stuck his nose in my crotch as a demand to be petted. Or thumped, more precisely. It was like patting a fur-covered wall. His fur was as thick as steel wool, and almost as stiff. Fingers couldn't penetrate through to the flesh, and it would give even teeth a hard time. Which was the whole point of it, I suppose.

Nora took her time coming over to give me a sniff and a lick, but seemed to take a few quick pats with pleasure. It's important to remind the furry little buggers every now and then that you're the boss, because they tend to forget.

Which, as usual, is something they were working out. Nick gave a quick snarl at her, his tail erect, teeth bared. Seemed he didn't want to share me with her.

Janie glared at me, then reached over and smacked him firmly on the head. "*No.*" She jerked her head at me. "You tell him, too, Daddy."

I did, then cocked my head at her.

She sighed. How could a father be so ignorant of the obvious?

"It's okay for them to work out who the boss is in private, but not in front of you. If Nora needs to be put in place while we're around, *we* do it, not Nick." She gave him a dramatic glare. "Down, Nickie, *down*

, " and the huge creature immediately crouched, looking for all the world scared of the teenaged girl who surely didn't weigh more than half of what he did, and didn't come equipped with a tenth of the natural weaponry.

Well, I was impressed, and the three soldiers at least had the grace to appear to be. "Nicely done, child of mine."

Her dimples were still as cute as they'd been when she used to wet on my lap. "Thanks, Daddy. Something you needed to see me about?"

"I figured I'd stop by on my way to find Bren Adahan," I said.

She looked disappointed—"And you want to set the dogs on him? Not fair, Daddy, not fair at all."—but then realized that she was overdoing it, and broke into laughter.

"It's not funny."

Janie shook her head. "It had best be funny, Daddy. Otherwise it's going to be too sad. You and Mother have been together how long? And now things are going to fall apart just because you can't keep it in your pants?"

Pirojil snickered at that, which gave me somebody else to glare at.

"It's a lot more complicated than that, kiddo."

"It always is, I hear—and touchy, aren't we?" She shrugged, but then smiled to take the sting out of it. "But so what?—Bren should be down by the stables; he was talking about riding out to the farm. Said that it's the baron's job to look in on things from time to time, and that if Jason's not going to do it, he'll do it for him."

Kethol was already in a jog toward the stables, calling out for four horses. I shrugged and gave my daughter a peck on the head, before following.

"Play nice, Daddy."

Janie always gets the last word.

* * *

We caught up to Bren Adahan at the apple orchard outside the farm—the family farm was an old baronial tradition, going back at least several generations of Furnaels.

Most ruling nobility lives totally as either symbiotes or parasites—take your pick, depending on whether or not you think the ruling class does something for its keep. (I do—I just think they do it all too often.) Taxes consist of taking a portion either of the peasant farmers' money or—more often—of what they grow, and, typically, that's the only thing that the ruler lives off.

The Furnaels had always done things differently, just a bit. Much of the farmland right around the keep was owned and kept in operation by the family itself—or, to be more accurate, by family retainers, farmers who, historically, worked the baron's lands as what I can best describe as collective crofters.

Not the best deal in the world for them, mind, but it did mean there was always a default local

occupation for the odd somebody—a farm can't always use a lot more help, but it can always take on another one or two—and it left the crofters less likely to be wiped out during hard times, as the baron had a direct responsibility for their welfare. They "ate from his table" in legal theory, if rarely in practice.

The best part of the deal for the crofters, of course, was during wartime, when crofters had both the right and—more important!—the chance to seek sanctuary in the keep.

During times of peace, that didn't seem like so much, but memories of the Holtun-Bieme war were still fresh in some minds, and in some of the scars that still showed—in the newish split rail fences that stood where old stone fences should have; in wattle-and-daub houses whose beams looked too new, too unweathered; in the short green scrub that stood where tall, windbreaking patches of trees should have, and in young apple orchards where the trees were only now beginning to bear fruit.

The Holtish had rampaged through the territory, burning what they couldn't pack away. If Karl hadn't stopped them, the Biemish would have returned the favor just a few miles away, across the river in Barony Adahan . . .

Part of the tradition was for the baronial family to take a hands-on attitude with the farming, and while Bren Adahan was not, strictly speaking, a member of the family, he was helping to fill in. He took the job seriously enough to be stripped to the waist and halfway up one of the few remaining ancient apple trees, cutting grafts from the newer shoots high up.

An apple tree, at least a Biemish apple tree, was as much a work of art as of nature. Some of the least interesting apples bred true—the sour little things called, as close as I can translate it, old-maid's apples, the crisp but almost tasteless horse-apple, the pig's apple—but the better ones were hybrid, and the better hybrids came from trees with several different styles of cuttings.

Hence the grafting.

I didn't know the names of the fifty or so workers in the fields—hey, they weren't *my* peasants—but I did hear whispers involving my name, as though it was some big deal that Walter Slovotsky would be here.

Fame is a bit weird.

As the three musketeers and I approached, Bren, sweat-slick from headband to the dark stains spreading down the sides of his legs, dropped a bundle of freshly cut shoots to waiting hands below, then dropped lithely from the tree and rose easily to his feet, taking a long swig from a proffered waterbag.

"I told Doranne that I'd make an effort to see you later," he said, still sweating, but not panting. The sun was hot and the morning was going to give way to noon, but the bastard wasn't really tired, just sweaty.

I think I resented that more than I should have.

He poured some water into one hand and splashed it on his face to clear the sweat away from his eyes.

"You sent for me," I said. "I'm here."

He eyed his weapon belt, dangling from a tree a good leap away, and then looked back at me. "I would have thought you'd think yourself enough to take anything on, Walter Slovotsky," he said.

So I shook my head. "That was Karl's flaw, not mine. Me, I'd be perfectly happy using an axe to swat a fly. Long as I didn't care about whoever the fly was sitting on."

I remember something from a Steve Stills song about paranoia striking deep, and it was all I could do not to smile in the special sort of insulting way that I once practiced in front of a mirror. Bren had misread the situation; he was looking at Kethol, Pirojil, and Durine as though they were my henchmen, ready to take him on.

It would be so easy. He was half-ready to make a final stand against the four of us, and he was good enough—hell, anybody's good enough—that none of the three of them would try for a disarm if he went for his weapons. Just cut him down, fast, and discuss it later.

All I had to do was make a tiny move that let him think I was going for a sword, or a gun. Just drop the right shoulder an inch or two and glance to the left, then jump back as though startled and let Kethol and—

No.

It was all wrong. It could happen too easily—anybody can start a fight, but it's not easy to stop until somebody's lying dead on the ground—but it was all wrong. I was letting my own irritation get in the way.

It didn't matter that while Kirah shuddered at my touch, the night too often brought her groans of orgasm down the halls from where he shared her bed. It didn't matter that he had fallen into my bed and much of my life comfortably while I was away, out on the road saving the goddamn world. That was no reason to trigger a fight. It was every reason *not* to trigger a fight. I might have lost my wife to him, but in ten years, maybe less, it wouldn't rip my guts out, it wouldn't make me want to dig my nails into my palms until they bled. So I really didn't want to see him dead on the ground, his neck bent impossibly to one side, his tongue bulging and black in his mouth, the raw stink of death harsh in my nostrils.

If you keep telling yourself something, you can make it true, but, damn, it's a lousy day when you don't even want your wife's lover dead.

So I held up a hand. "Ta havath, eh? Peace. Let's take a walk, just you and me."

Bren's lips pursed. "My pleasure."

Kethol's mouth twisted into a frown. "I don't much like this."

Pirojil shook his head. "Me, neither. But we'll search the both of them, and then let them do it. Durine?"

The big man nodded. "That ought to do."

* * *

I would have felt a lot more comfortable without-clothes naked than without-weapons naked. Hell, it had been all that I could do to slip one of my throwing knives into the back of Durine's belt while he searched me, then take it back as he turned. If the others had been watching him instead of Bren and me, I never would have been able to pull it off.

We walked in silence for a while between the rows of young trees, until a rise put us out of sight and sound of the others—orchards can easily grow on ground much steeper than you'd like to plow.

He stroked his well-trimmed beard into place. Too damn pretty, and too damn prissy—that was the trouble with the young baron. Or maybe it was that he was too damn young; I was feeling awfully old of late.

"I hear that you're planning on going out again in a few tendays," he said.

I nodded. "A while. No rush." No rush except the dreams, and I wasn't going to be stampeded by my own subconscious. Andy was coming along fast—too fast, in a lot of ways—and she had the level head you expect from a woman in her thirties, but until recently, she hadn't been out on the road for many years, and never without magic to back her up.

"I assume you're going after Jason and Ahira?"

"You'd wish that on me, wouldn't you?" I snorted. "Like hell." Sure, just what I needed to do with a green partner: help chase down one of our own, somebody who had gone rogue, turned into a serial killer. I mean, this business is likely enough to get you killed when you're acting sensibly; there's no sense in rushing things.

"No," I said, "we're going to hit Home, and pick up some weaponry, and then just pull a snoop around, say, Wehnest."

Who knows what we might learn? I was sure that Lou had spies—excuse me: investigatory representatives—out, but it wouldn't hurt to supplement them. More important, it would give Andrea a taste of what it was like without sticking both our necks in a buzzsaw. If it was necessary to go after Jason and the dwarf, I'd do it myself.

Mainly, though, I wanted to get around and see things. The leakage from Faerie had been plugged—I happened to be there at the time, and even played a small part—but magic and the magical had been leaking out ever faster before that. One of the fringes of this business is that you get to get out and see things, even if too often the things are interested in killing you. It pays to be able to run real fast.

Or to be able to change the subject. "What I'm curious about is what your plans are, Baron."

He didn't answer for a moment as he pulled a small twig from his belt, stripped off the bark with swift movements, and used the point to clean under his fingernails. "That would depend, I guess, on what the ladies want." He eyed me levelly. "I wouldn't be . . . entirely averse to pretending that the last while simply didn't happen, and going back to the way things were: Aeia and me . . . intended; you with your wife, to work out your own problems."

"Really head over heels for Kirah, eh?" If he had made just one move, I would have opened him from guzzle to zorch, and never mind that I'm not exactly sure where the guzzle or zorch is; I'd have kept cutting until I found one.

"What has happened between Kirah and myself is between Kirah and myself. What my feelings are for Aeia are my own," he said, his voice strangely mild, as though he was trying to sound calmer than he was and was overcompensating. "I'm a political realist, Walter Slovotsky, and I'm also Baron Adahan. It's clear to me that a marriage between me and the Cullinane family is of rather greater benefit to the barony than marriage to Kirah would be." He raised a hand. "You're free to make decisions on more personal grounds. I have to think of my people. That aside, I intend no criticism of you, honestly, Walter Slovotsky. What has gone wrong between you and Kirah probably couldn't be helped."

No, Walter, I'm not being critical of you just because your wife screams when you touch her, you insensitive bastard.

But it wasn't my fault, and whatever my feelings were for Kirah, I wasn't going to live my life in penance for how others had treated her before I came along. Nor for the fact that the first time we made love was hours after Karl and I had freed her from slavers. She had a choice, dammit. I would have taken a no.

But the back of my mind whispered: *she didn't know that, now did she?*

He held out his hand. "I doubt that we'll ever find a permanent arrangement that suits all of us, but in the interim I suggest a temporary one, just for you and me."

"Oh?"

"Truce," he said, extending a hand. "And more than a truce. I'll cover your back—I'll go out on the road with you and Andrea." He shrugged. "I've been absent enough from my barony; Ranella runs things just fine without me. Until then, nobody will see anything that's not rubbed in his face, eh?"

But can I trust you, Bren Adahan?

"It would have to be understood that I'd be in charge on the road," I said. It's one thing to let Ahira call the shots, and another thing entirely to trust somebody who would be better off with me dead.

He nodded. "I believe the phrase is that if you ask me to jump, I inquire as to how high on the way up?"

"I like it better that when I tell you to take a shit, you squat and ask 'What color?', but you've got the idea."

"It's understood, Walter Slovotsky—I understand that command can't be divided, and that somebody has to be in charge."

Whether I meant it or not, the right thing to do was to say, "You've got a deal, Baron." It could be fixed later. He could be fixed later.

So I did the right thing.

His smile was perhaps a millimeter too wide, and I didn't like it. It said that he was thinking two moves ahead of me, which was entirely possible, given that I didn't know what my next move was. I couldn't see putting things back together with Kirah, I just couldn't, not if that meant giving up Aeia. I had come home determined to do just that, but the combination of finding Bren in Kirah's bed and finding Aeia warming not just my bed but my life had turned that resolve into dust and ashes.

Life gets too goddamn complicated.

We had started to walk back toward the others when Adahan snorted.

"Some things, Walter Slovotsky, should be a lot simpler," he said.

I smiled. I could simplify things with a quick knife move, but I'd already given that up and really didn't consider it. I wouldn't mind stabbing an unarmed man, not if that was the right thing to do, but it wasn't,

and that was that.

"I know," I said.

He reached up and cut a sprig from a tree overhead.

Cut?

His smile broadened as he slipped the knife back into his waistband. "It's too bad I won't stab an unarmed man."

I forced myself to nod and shrug. "You've got a point."

* * *

I met Andrea Cullinane down in the fencing studio just at noon, as usual.

She was dressed only in a tight cotton halter incongruously above a pair of bulky drawstring pantaloons. The tight halter plumped up her breasts, which didn't particularly need it, leaving her long midriff bare almost to her hips, where the bulky pantaloons concealed the long legs that I had reason to remember with some affection.

"Good ride this morning?"

She smiled. "Good enough. But don't think I'm too tired to move on to the next item on the agenda."

"Wouldn't think of it."

Her long black hair was pulled back tight into a ponytail, which made her ears seem to stick out a trifle, kind of pixieish.

Well, maybe it wasn't incongruous, after all; the purpose of the halter wasn't to make her look great—although it did. Jouncing up and down wasn't likely to do her breasts any good, and while it was amazing what subtle damage a good healing cleric could correct, it was also a bad idea to count on it.

There's a kind of beauty a woman gets as she moves into her late thirties and early forties, if she's lucky. It's not the same thing as the prettiness of a girl in her late teens and twenties, where youthful energy mixes with a sort of pneumatic dynamism that's all fresh and bubbly, even if a bit raw at the edges.

No, there's something else that happens for that period of time between when the baby fat disappears and when the wrinkles take over, when something I think of as balance can make her sexy as all hell. I can't remember a lot of Playboy Playmates in their forties, so I guess it doesn't show up as well on film as it does in the flesh, but Andy had been pretty when I first met her, and was getting more beautiful every year.

Which wasn't something it was a great idea for me to be thinking about the mother—adopted or otherwise—of Aeia.

I stripped off my shirt and tossed it into a corner.

Andy smiled knowingly as she reached for a pair of practice swords. She tossed one to me, flipping it end-over-end.

"Protect yourself, Walter," she said.

I had to lunge back a half step to catch the sword by the hilt, and by then she was almost on me, her lunge a classic extension from left ankle to right wrist. A sensible man would have been too busy defending himself to notice how sexy she looked that way, but I've never been accused of being sensible.

Oversexed, maybe, but not sensible.

I slapped the blade to one side with the flat of my left hand while I settled the hilt into my right, then swung at her arm with my own practice sword.

Needless to say, her arm wasn't there anymore. The full lunge forward had been followed by a classic recover that brought her out of range and back to a nice en garde position.

I tried a double-feint lunging attack, and only had to hold back a trifle to let her beat it aside.

She was picking this stuff up fast. I said as much.

"Ten years of dance class, Walter," she said, as she tried another attack. "A bit of jazz, and my ballet teacher managed to get me up on toe after less than a year—" she emphasized the last word with a very pretty disengage and lunge.

My built-in skills and almost twenty years of practice were enough to keep her attack at bay, although she did manage to back me up almost all the way across the room. I saw her eyes widen as we approached the balance beam, and could almost see the picture in her mind of me falling ass-backward. Never one to let it be said that Walter Slovotsky would let a lady down, I let my right heel bump into it, then threw up my hands as though fighting for balance.

She was still too green, although it was a close call—but with my hands that high, I was exposed for a thigh wound at the very least, and she should have gone for it. If you can get a disabler, take it; going in for the kill can wait.

But she was still new at this: instead, she took a step forward, waiting for an even better opportunity as I fought for balance or fell.

I whipped my sword down, hard, slashing against her free arm even harder, then fell into a fighting crouch as she turned to bring the hurt arm away from me, and caught her sword hand with the tip of my practice blade hard enough to make her drop her sword.

Give her credit: she didn't scream, but just grunted as the sword fell from her fingers.

I didn't drop my own blade. The lesson wasn't over. "Don't take anything for granted, Andy. Pretending to be hurt, to lose balance, to have a phony tell on an attack—it's all part of the standard repertoire." I wouldn't give her half a chance in a real fight against a real swordsman—except for the surprise factor. Which might be enough. And another few months of this, and who knows? She was talented, and dedicated, and that counts for a lot.

She raised her hands, clasping her fingers behind her neck. "Point taken, sir. I surrender."

That made me mad. "In the field, you know what that means as well as I do. You can't ever afford to

lose, or—"

"Or?" The corners of her mouth lifted, and she did something behind her neck with the ties of her halter, and it fell free as she took a step forward, her breasts hobbling free as she gently pushed my sword arm aside and came into my arms. "Or what?" she whispered, her breath warm on my neck.

I started to push her away—"Andy, this isn't a good idea," I started to say—when I felt something sharp and cold prickling at the back of my neck.

She wasn't smiling anymore. "I'm sorry, but I don't have a practice knife—I guess the real thing will have to do. Drop the sword, Walter."

Her smile was broad, but it wasn't pleasant. Think of a lion smiling at a lamb. "If this was for real, I wouldn't have given you that chance." Gentle fingers rested on my second and third rib; a less gentle one poked at the flesh between them. "I would have stuck it here, real, *real* hard," she said, her voice all honeyed and breathy.

As my swordhilt thudded on the floor, she added: "And twisted."

I tried to look mad, but the truth is that I was proud of her.

4

In Which Dinner Is Interrupted

There is a simple, guaranteed way that any woman can make herself look more beautiful to you. More effective than the most expensive of carefully applied cosmetics, more than surgery, than exercise, or hairstyle, or any combination of the above.

It's simple: she can leave you for another man.

—Walter Slovotsky

The dream is always the same:

We're trying to make our escape from Hell, millions of us streaming down the endless rows of gym lockers, past the searing lava showers, toward the glowing Open sign, and safety.

There's too many of us, of course; I'm on the outside of the crowd, and I keep banging my shin against the locker-room benches, picking up as many bruises as splinters. Once we made it to This Side, I would have bet that there wasn't a chance in hell I'd spend time in a gym again, but, shit, we are in Hell, eh?

Behind us, the demons come. Some are clouds of acid fog that can eat through a body so fast it will only scream for an eon as it dissolves; others are huge wolves, or curiously mutated cats, their ears long and tufted, their fangs long and yellow. There's one that looks like a pus-covered Pillsbury Doughboy, but there's nothing at all funny about him.

They're all chasing us, and they're all getting closer, and we're not all going to escape.

"We'll hold them here," Karl Cullinane shouts. "Who stands with me?"

The crowd rushes away, leaving some of us behind.

The old man in the ill-fitting British private's uniform puzzles me for a moment—he's too old to be a private soldier—until I hear Eleanor Roosevelt, wrinkled and homely in that comforting way, call him by name and invite him to stand beside her, and then I know it's Colonel Meinertzhagen, slipping out for yet another battle.

A short, slim old man, his eyes nearsighted and in a permanent squint from too many years of examining things too closely, his fingers not quite trembling with age, smiles and gives a shrug as he stoops to send his three grandchildren running toward the exit, then tosses his black bag to one side and steps forward to link arms with the old Roman general.

The general stands himself up straight and murmurs something that I know is old, vulgar Latin—his words end in "-o" where I think there should be an "-us"—but that in the clarity you get only in a dream I know means "It's an honor to stand with you, Doctor."

"Why, General?" he says, his voice thin and reedy. "Wouldn't you have come out of retirement to take care of your grandchildren, if they needed you?"

I don't hear the beginning of the Roman's answer, just "—honors appropriate to the honored."

"I never had any children," another old man says, stepping forward to take the doctor's other arm, "and never even made lieutenant commander, much less flag rank." Under a short brush mustache his smile is not entirely friendly but completely reassuring. He holds his back too straight, beyond that which you expect from a fencer, and maybe that's because he's always been a stiff-necked old bastard, with every bit as much stubbornness as insight—but that's his virtue, not his flaw, and even in a dream I wouldn't change a hair on his permanently balding head any more than I'd dare to change a word he'd written. "But I don't believe they can invalid me out of this one," he says, accepting Cincinnatus' nod as his due.

He is there again, past the old withered form of Tenny, past Karl Cullinane, still strong and powerful in his old age: the leader of the band of sailors, his beard white as milk.

"Though much is taken, much abides," he says. "Younger, I would have tricked them into following me away, and lured them to their doom," he says. "Younger, I would have tried to trade wit for blood. But today, I shall stand with you, and we will hold them, I swear we will." This time the voice is too harsh, as though he had once ruined it, screaming until he'd hurt himself, and there are scars on his powerful arms. Strong arms and shoulders—well-developed as though he was an oarsman, perhaps? Or an archer? There's another scar above his knee, and I know that means something, but what? There's something in his manner that tells of a habit of command, and his eyes see too far.

Karl just claps a hand to his shoulder. His voice cracks around the edges, not with fear, but with age.

"We will hold them," Karl says. "Who else is with me?"

Then I wake up.

* * *

I took my time putting on a fresh white ruffled shirt, black linen trousers pegged nicely at the knee, and a short cape thrown carelessly over my left shoulder—neatly covering the open neck that not only revealed my manly chest but also gave me easy access to the flat knife strapped just below my left armpit—added a few other weapons here and there, and made my way downstairs.

Kirah was already down in the Great Hall of Castle Cullinane. She had dressed for dinner in a black velvet gown that set off her blond hair and light skin wonderfully in the firelight. She had been spending daylight hours inside of late, it seemed; the light sprinkling of freckles I remembered from the old days was gone from her creamy shoulders.

She made me feel all clumsy, and I didn't much like that. "Hi there," I said, wondering where to put my hands. Damn trousers didn't have pockets, but even that would have been clumsy.

I never used to wonder where to put my hands when I was with Kirah.

She smiled briefly, gently. "Good evening, Walter. Did you have a good day?"

"About like usual. Doranne going to join us at dinner?"

She shook her head. "She had a long day in the stables," she said, with just a trace of disapproval in the way she pursed her lips for a moment before a barely visible shrug dismissed the matter. "I put her to bed."

I nodded. "Important to get enough sleep at that age."

"Yes, it is."

I would have said something else equally awkward and stilted so she could have responded with something about as clumsy, but silence seemed to fill the gap just about as well, so I didn't say anything for a few moments, and then two of the serving-girls came through the dark hallway from the kitchen and bustled around the table, filling water mugs and setting out a carafe or two of undoubtedly too-young wine, which filled the silence for yet another moment.

I was starting to say something when Bren Adahan arrived, a light cape covering a lambskin jacket and trousers of a sufficiently creamy white that I would have liked to see the kitchen serving a particularly messy black-bean-sauce dish.

He briefly nodded to me, removed his cape, and folded it neatly over the back of the chair, following it with his swordbelt before he sat down at the table, adjusting the cuffs of his almost glowingly white shirt.

Kirah gave me an empty smile as she took her seat down the table on the other side, next to him.

Aeia came down in a blouse and skirt, the blouse frilled along a neckline that looked just this side of dangerously scooped, and the skirt a floor-length one of raw Kiarian silk that didn't quite cling to her legs. Her hair was back and up in some sort of bun that didn't manage to look severe.

But the whole effect was kind of strange; it was like a little girl playing dress-up. Which was ridiculous. She was an adult woman, into her twenties but not thirties, and hadn't been a little girl, well, as long as I'd known her.

"Good evening," she said, more as a general announcement than any specific wish, and then took her seat next to me.

Janie dashed in, her hair wet from a quick bath, her mannish trousers and shirt far too informal for dinner as she flopped down into place across the table from me, an empty seat between her and Bren Adahan. "Evening, Mom, Dad, Bren, Ay," she said, grabbing up a handful of sweetmeats from the tasting platter that U'len had no doubt deliberately left nearer her place than anybody else's. No, the chief cook doesn't serve in most castles, but U'len was more of an old family retainer than a chief cook, and would no more have let anybody else brown the beef bones for her stock than she would have let some stranger serve Aeia or her mother their food.

Doria appeared at the door, one soldier at her heels, another—Egri, if I remembered right; he was part of the old staff, and the sometimes captain of the guard—at her elbow. She gave him a few whispered parting instructions and made her way to her seat.

Doria, Andrea, Aeia, and Kirah. I was uncomfortable for a moment, but then it reminded me of an old joke: Fred and Bill are at Fred's wedding; Bill's the best man. There are lots of couples dancing, when Fred leans over to Bill and says, "You know, except for my mom, my sister, and my bride, I've slept with every woman in this room."

Bill smiles. "Hey, then, between the two of us, we've had them all."

Well, maybe it wasn't all that funny, after all.

The first course was a clear soup with bits of crunchy greens floating in it, above a half dozen of U'len's translucent, almost transparent, dumplings, thin layers of egg noodle filled with little pieces of wild mushrooms and crispy slivers of spicy West Holtun ham. I still couldn't decide what the secret of the broth was. Normally, I would have tried to charm or lightly bully it out of U'len, and the fat old woman would have enjoyed frustrating me at every conversational turn, but today I just didn't bother. She wouldn't have told me, and I was getting permanently tired of butting my head against walls, even softly.

The conversation at table neatly avoided important subjects, and was chewing its way around to developments in Little Pittsburgh, over in Barony Adahan. I didn't pay much attention, to tell the truth. Little P was smoky and sooty, and while it was turning out the best iron this side of Nehera's kiln, it was doing so in good hands, and that meant it wasn't anybody's problem, not even mine.

U'len had just served up the roast joint of mutton—the secret with mature lamb is always in the marinade, and U'len had one based on wine and garlic that drew all the gamy taste out of the meat without destroying its character—when the quiet of dinner conversation was interrupted by loud sounds from outside the door.

Doria was on her feet and stalking toward the door before I could say anything, not that she would have listened.

Right about then, it would have been handy to have Karl or Tennyty or Ahira or even Jason at my side, but Karl and Tennyty were dead, and the other two were far away.

Naked doesn't mean the same thing as unclothed. It means unprotected; it means there's maybe a problem and there's nobody who you want at your back—well, at your back.

But you deal with the problem anyway. Shit.

I would have made some comment about how there were always interruptions when I was enjoying my dinner, but truth to tell I had, uncharacteristically, eaten several bites of mutton without even noticing how it tasted, so I dropped my eating prong, pulled a brace of pistols from their hidden pockets in my cape, and offered one to Adahan butt-first as he rose from his chair. I mean, I didn't really think we were going to have to fight our way out, but the help in a well-run castle don't have loud conversations outside the Hall during mealtime, not unless there's trouble, and I've killed at least four people I didn't really think I was going to have to.

So I don't much care what I don't really think.

His smile and headshake were condescending as he tucked one of his own pistols in the back of his belt, buckling his swordbelt around him as he followed me.

Trouble was standing in the entry foyer, in the persons of three men in black and silver Imperial livery facing off against Durine, who was blocking their way into the castle, his hands neither terribly close to nor terribly far from the pistols and sword at his belt.

I took an instant dislike to the Imperial captain—he had the sort of over-cared-for skinny mustache that I always associate with Simon Legree and my junior-year English teacher. I've always figured that somebody who has enough time to spend on diddling with a mustache ought to get a real hobby.

"What's the problem, Durine?" Doria asked.

"The problem—" the captain started.

"She asked Durine, not you," Bren Adahan put in, saving me the trouble.

"And who would you be?" the captain asked, his lip curled two degrees past insolent.

"She's Doria Perlstein, baronial regent. And I'm Bren Adahan," he said. "*Baron Adahan.*"

It really was almost as good as pulling Marshall McLuhan out from behind a billboard—better, in context.

The captain's sneer melted into a stiff mask, and the tips of his ears were red as he gave a short, stiff-necked bow. "My apologies, Baron," he said, producing a folded piece of parchment from his belt pouch. "But I am on a mission from the Emperor, and my warrant requires that all Imperial subjects give me 'aid, assistance, help, and succor' in my mission." He tapped a fingernail on the paper. "It's signed by the Emperor himself."

"And you showed it to Durine?" Doria asked.

Durine shrugged. "I don't read much."

She glared at him. I would have told her that she'd missed the point, but it wasn't the time and place. You can't just order the likes of Durine and his friends around, not by flashing a set of credentials. There's

nothing worse that the likes of the captain could do than have them killed, and they've stared that in the face more than a few times, and long since worked out that they're not going to live forever. It might scare them—hell, it does scare them, every single time—but they can't afford to give a damn about how scared they are. If they let that stop them once, just once, it's all over.

The captain had rubbed him the wrong way, and it would take more than an Imperial writ to get him to back down.

You deal with men like that straightforwardly, on their terms. I stared at Durine until he returned the look, for just a moment. I held his gaze with mine, then nodded fractionally, then raised my open palm slightly, for just a second, punctuating the motion with a shrug. *I understand, and you did fine; take it easy—I'll handle things.*

For a moment, it could have gone either way. But then he nodded.

Bren Adahan was smiling behind his hand. *Nicely done*, his smile said.

The captain was still talking to Doria. ". . . case," he said, "now that I've established my credentials, may I have your cooperation?"

"That would depend, I suppose," Doria said, "on what it is that you want."

The captain nodded. "Just the baron—Baron Jason Cullinane, that is. The Emperor requires his presence at the capital."

"Well, he isn't here," I put in. "And what do you want him for?"

"I don't have authorization to discuss that." The captain produced another sheet of parchment. "Then I'm told to use my judgment and bring along anybody else who might be of use. I judge that to consist of you, the baron—"

"—and me," Andy put in, walking up from behind me. "Captain Mastishch."

He did a double take, and then bowed. "Of course, your Highness." Never mind that Andrea wasn't the wife of his Prince and Emperor—Karl was dead—or the mother of the Heir and therefore Dowager Empress, she was close enough to being royalty for Captain Mustache, or Mastish, or whatever his name was.

"And me, too," Aeia put in, from behind her adopted mother.

Well, there was one thing to be said for being arrested. It was a fine interruption in a less-than-tranquil home life, and I wasn't likely to be sleeping alone.

"We leave in the morning," he said. He turned to Doria. "In the name of the Emperor, I will require shelter and food for my horses and men."

"Will he bother to tell the difference?" I muttered.

Bren Adahan didn't bother to hide that smile behind his hand.

I turned and went back to dinner, not inviting Mastishch along.

Of course, Doria did, which ruined both the whole effect and the rest of the meal.

* * *

Clearing her hair from her eyes with a toss of her head, Aeia turned over in bed and tried to burrow under the covers. Sheets were tangled about her waist, almost as though she'd wound them like a sarong.

I reached out and ran a hand down her side, stopping at her hip, pulling her gently toward me.

Her eyes opened. "You *are* awake," she said, turning, her breath warm in my ear.

"Just a little." Better to be awake than to dream. I was dreaming too much, and it was all too confusing.

She rested her head on the crook of my elbow, her eyes searching mine. For what, I don't know, although maybe she did: the tenseness in her body eased.

"It's not that bad, Walter," she said. "Just a trip to Biemestren."

"Just a summons to Biemestren. Three days on the road, with little enough privacy."

She laughed. "Is that what you're worried about? Walter, they've rebuilt most of the Prince's Inns. We'll sleep in clean beds, in a room with a thick door—" she caught herself. "Very nicely done, sir."

"Eh?"

"A nice attempt to distract me, to make me think that what's bothering you is not having enough time alone with me."

I dialed for a smile. "That fear is enough to make a satisfied man hunger in advance, to make a brave man tremble, to—"

"Too prettily put," she said, drawing a sheet around her as she sat up in bed. I admired the strategy; the last time she had tried to push me on this, I had distracted her by reaching for her. "But that's not what's bothering you." A long finger gently stroked my arm from shoulder to wrist; her fingers snaked in among mine, then clutched my hand firmly. "What is?"

I shrugged. "Fears. Dreams. Nightmares. I'm afraid of going out again. I'm getting too old for this. I could get somebody hurt, or worse."

There was more to it than that. The dreams had changed, but they were always the same, and the effect was the same. I was going out not because I was brave or anything, but because I was afraid of my own nightmares. Not because some friends might need me, not because there was, the way the man in my dream said, some work of noble note, but because I couldn't bear to face my own nightmares.

There're times when I'm not very proud of myself.

"You don't have to go out again," she said. "Not alone."

"No," I said.

"Walter—"

"No. I won't take you with me. I will not have you die in my arms on some dirty road somewhere. I won't see you torn to bits by some inhuman thing; I won't watch you blown to bits of bloody, stinking flesh." I started to choke. "I won't do it. I've done it with too many people I love, and I'm not going to do it with you." Karl, Tenny, the lot of them—and now Andy wanted to come on the road with me.

Okay; so be it. I had promised.

But not Aeia. She would stay safe, regardless, even if that meant the end of us. I couldn't—

She touched a fingertip to my lips.

"Shhh. I said I'll wait for you," she whispered, her cheek warm and wet against mine. "I'll always wait for you."

I pulled the sheet away from her and pulled her close.

Her lips were salty with tears, although I couldn't have told you whose they were.

* * *

The last thing I did before leaving was to say goodbye to my wife and daughters, although not quite in that order.

It wasn't even my intention. I mean, I couldn't think of anything that needed saying between Kirah and me.

Janie and Doranne were down in the stables, playing with the horses.

Doranne was dressed in her usual play outfit—grayed cotton top and drawstring trousers over brand new leather boots (if I wasn't a rich man, putting new shoes on my younger daughter would break me quickly)—and Janie was in her riding togs, but with a difference: an overjacket that I hadn't seen before, covered with about half a dozen pockets, varying in size from a thumb-sized one that probably held a small sharpening stone to a big square one that could have held a large lunch. It looked sort of like an Other Side photographer's vest, except with sleeves.

"Nice," I said, as she tucked a withered carrot from the vegetable bin into one of the larger pockets. "New?"

"Mother," she said.

"Yes, Daddy," Doranne said. "Mommy made it for her. Says when I'm old enough to go riding, she'll make me one."

It had a loose fit to it; I patted at the left side, feeling a hard bulge underneath. Ah.

Her smile broadened. "A going-away present from my boyfriend. I figured to keep it on me while you're gone."

"You expecting trouble, sweetness?"

Her shrug was casual. "Not really, but without my daddy here to protect me, I figured that I'd better

keep something handy, particularly if I'm going to go riding often."

"But not at any regular time. You can—"

"Really, Dad, I'm not Doranne." She patted my arm. "I'll be good."

Regular habits are an assassin's or kidnapper's dream, particularly regular habits that involve things like going for a ride. We did the best we could—the local village wardens had their ears and eyes out for strangers—but there's no sense in giving the other guy any edge at all.

I sighed. Back in Endell, my family was surrounded by a whole dwarf nation, fully protected on the occasions that I had left them. A keep in the Middle Lands, even one as well built and well run as the hereditary Furnael keep that was now Castle Cullinane, just wasn't the same, and I didn't like it much.

On the other hand, if I had any real reason to worry, I could pack them off with Ellegon for Home or Endell, the next time the dragon came through. That was only a little more than a week off, if he kept to his regular schedule.

I brought up the subject.

Janie shook her head. "No, I don't think so, Daddy. You might be able to talk me into coming along to Biemestren, but not going away from Holtun-Bieme."

"Oh?"

She looked me in the eye. "Jason asked me to wait for him, before he left. I said I would." The words were casual, but her voice wasn't.

My first thought was that they were both too young, by half, and my second thought was that I didn't want my daughter married off to another suicidal Cullinane, and my third thought was that whatever my thoughts were, I'd best keep them to myself, so I did.

Janie smiled. "Such self-control." She reached up and patted my cheek. "Now give us a hug and kiss goodbye, and then go say goodbye to Mom."

"Yes, dear." I picked up Doranne and held her close for a moment. It would have been longer, but there were horses to play with, and, after all, I was just her father.

* * *

It was a first for me: I knocked on the door to Kirah's bedroom.

Husbands and wives should allow each other some privacy, but for us her private place had always been her sewing room, whether the tiny, southern-exposed room in the Old House, or the little cell off our suite in the Endell warrens—but never our bedroom.

Then again, it wasn't our bedroom, not anymore.

"Come in," she said, her voice muffled by the thick door.

Her eyes widened for a moment when the door opened. She was curled up in a chair, working at some knitting or tatting or whatever, and after a momentary hesitation, the long steel needles clicked and

clacked in the mound of dark yarn on her lap.

I took a step toward her—

—sweeping her up in my arms, the knitting or tating or whatever the hell the damn stuff was falling to one side, ignored by the both of us as I held her close, both tightly and gently, my fingers playing with the small, fine hairs at the base of her neck, hidden under the shower of golden hair, her arms fastening almost painfully hard around me, her warm lips murmuring over and over again, I'm sorry, Walter, please hold me, I'm sorry, Walter, please hold me, I'm sorry, Walter, please hold me . . .

—and stopped myself. "I thought I should stop by and say goodbye. We'll be on the road within the hour."

There was no anger in her eyes, on her face, no hate. Nothing, except perhaps a residual tenderness that hurt more than I thought such a mild emotion could hurt.

"Goodbye, then," she said.

"I guess I should send Bren up to say goodbye."

Her smile was two degrees this side of cold. "I'm sure that won't be necessary, Walter, but thank you."

I shut the door gently behind me; it was all I could do not to try to yank it off its hinges.

But all I would have done was hurt my shoulder and hand.

5

"Welcome to Biemestren"

It's easier to get forgiveness than to get permission.

—Walter Slovotsky

Slash's—Dad's—best friend was always Big Mike Warcinsky, two hundred and fifty pounds of huge-footed, blue-suited cop, the sort of guy who at best never looked quite right in civilian clothes. He could never be bothered to match colors or patterns, and since he always wore one of his fourteen working pairs of black size-thirteen Corcoran walking shoes—"Change your shoes and socks halfway through the day, kiddo, and your feet can take you as far as you wanna go"—and knee-height black support socks, he looked amazingly silly in an aloha shirt and plaid shorts, what with his legs that looked like hairy sausages, and the way his open shirt revealed fishbelly-white flesh below his well-tanned face and neck.

He was funny to watch over the barbeque in the backyard, working the long-handled spatula and fork,

or at the head of the table on Thanksgiving, getting ready to carve the ham—that was, for years, the family tradition for holidays.

I learned something from that funny-looking man on the Weekend of the Two Turkeys, although it took some years to sink in. I should have already learned part of it the time we went fishing on Lake Bemidji, but I'm slow sometimes.

I guess I must have been about six or seven. The first turkey was the first one that Emma had ever made—my brother Steve had finally nagged her into it, because all the other kids' families had turkeys on Thanksgiving, and Steve didn't learn not to give a shit about what all the other kids' families did until after he left for Vietnam.

What Mom didn't know, because she'd never made a turkey before, is that the people who packed the turkey put the giblets package in the fold of flesh at the front of the turkey, where the neck used to be, and not in the body cavity, like they do with chickens.

Well, she cooked the turkey with the paper packet in place, and when Big Mike stood up to the head of the table to carve the bird—Stash never liked handling knives when he could find somebody else to do it—the first thing Big Mike naturally did was to cut open the little bump at the front, where clever cooks hide a bit of extra stuffing to become all crispy on the outside.

Big Mike was in the middle of a story—something improbable about how he'd gotten a local pimp to leave town—as he started carving, and out popped this scorched packet of paper.

It all became very clear to Mom, whose jaw dropped.

Without missing a beat, he flipped it aside and put his carving knife to work on the drumstick, and carved that turkey down to the bone, never once referring to or even looking at the burnt lump of paper. It had ceased to exist for him.

The second turkey appeared that Sunday, when Big Mike came over for our post-Thanksgiving last cookout of the year—the second turkey was an idiot burglar, who, as it turned out, had been across the alley and down the block at Mrs. O'Keefe's, riffling through her jewelry box, when she came home. Understandably, she had started screaming; surprised, in panic, the scumbag had punched her, trying to shut her up, then fled when she wouldn't stop.

Big Mike and I were out in the backyard when we heard the scream and the crash of a door and the pounding of feet, and a few seconds later we saw the burglar as he pulled himself up and over the six-foot-high cedar fence that Dad had built to give us a bit of privacy.

Big Mike had been getting ready to start the hamburgers, over by the far corner, while I'd been playing with some toy or another over by the gate.

"Get the fuck out of my way," the burglar shouted, charging for the open gate, toward me. I remember the burglar as being huge, but that's just my memory betraying me, no doubt—he was probably around seventeen, skinny, almost as scared as I was. In retrospect, it was clear he was going to run right over me. He was young and lean and fast, and he was starting off closer to me than Big Mike was, and there was no way that from a standing start, Big Mike could beat him to me.

But there Big Mike was, tangling up the burglar's feet with one clumsy-looking thrust of his long spatula, sending the kid skidding almost chin first on the ground. One quick kick turned him over, leaving the

burglar staring at the twin points of a barbecue fork inches away from his eyes, and at the funny-dressed fat man in the support socks and black shoes, who was already shouting to Stash to call in for support—Big Mike used the police code number, but I can't for the life of me remember if it was ten-thirteen, seven-eleven, or sixty-nine.

"Just fucking lie there, turkey," he said, sounding bored. "Just fucking lie there, or I'll put your fucking eyes fucking out." He lifted his head and grinned reassuringly at me. "It's okay, kid. Just go tell your mom I need another beer, eh?"

Big Mike held him there for a few minutes, until the police arrived and led him away.

It only occurred to me later that the only possible way for Big Mike to have gotten between the burglar and me was if he had started before either of us had ever seen the burglar, if his first reaction at the crashing sounds had been to get close to Stash's kid, because he was the adult on scene, and the first thing you do when it all hits the fan is protect those who need protecting, and to hell with spilled beers.

I've thought about the Weekend of the Two Turkeys from time to time since then. I know there was more at stake with a burglar who might have seriously hurt me than with Mom just having a few moments of embarrassment, so it's real easy to miss that Big Mike was doing the same thing when he blithely ignored that charred, paper-covered lump as he was doing when, without warning, without even thinking about it, he lunged forward to be sure he was between me and danger:

It's called being a hero.

* * *

I wonder if the first time that Ugh the caveman was in trouble with Grunt, the leader of the tribe—say, for having bitten off too large a piece from the joint roasting over the fire—Grunt made Ugh worry about how much trouble he was in by making Ugh wait outside the cave until Grunt was ready to see him.

Hell, it probably goes back before that. I would have asked Jane Goodall, but she wasn't handy.

We had barely settled into our rooms and I had only managed to get the skimpiest of baths to pull days of road dust out of my pores when the summons came for the three of us—Aeia not included.

So I dressed quickly and joined Andy and Bren, and we were escorted toward the throne room, and we waited.

And waited, all the while getting madder, because even if you know exactly what he's doing, the make-them-wait routine is infuriating.

And waited, while I fumed silently and Andy paced.

If anything could have made me madder, it was the way that Bren Adahan idled in a chair, one leg crossed over the other, a half-smile on his face.

And waited until the door swung outward, and old Enrel slowly, painfully hobbled into the room, supporting himself mainly by leaning on massive Hivar on one side and a knobby stick on the other. He was favoring his right side, and from the way he limped it appeared to be his right hip that was going, degenerating. Healing draughts would only relieve the pain and inflammation temporarily, if that was so; the natural state of the bones and ligaments wasn't healthy. A good Spidersect healer could probably keep the pain manageable, but it would take a Hand cleric to teach the bone and muscle to be healthy

again, and the Hand women kept clear of the Empire.

Bitches.

Enrel forced himself to straighten, and took a few steps away from Hivar.

Hivar was the after picture to Durine's before: a huge man, now bowed with age, but with still enough strength in his wrinkled hands and enough gleam in his dark eyes that only the very strong or the very foolish would have wanted to arm wrestle him.

He and Hivar stood like a couple of mismatched bookends on either side of the young guards, two old Furnael family retainers who probably weren't up to the job of seeing to the Emperor's needs, but who would go home and die if they were dismissed from his service, no matter what the pretext.

"The Emperor will see you now," Enrel said, his voice strong despite his age.

Two heavily armed guards gave us an appropriate glare as the doors to the throne room swung open.

Everybody has to do things differently, I guess. Holding court was something that Karl did only when he felt he had to, but Thomen had a different idea.

And a different look.

Old.

It took me a moment to remember that the graying man on the raised throne at the end of the long red carpet was actually younger than Aeia—he was still in his early twenties. I needed that self-reminder as I looked at a beard that now was shot with the same gray that touched his receding hairline. His forehead had begun to develop wrinkles, and his shoulders a slouch, and there were crow's feet at the corners of his eyes.

Dr. Slovotsky's diagnosis was overwork, his prognosis was guarded, and his prescription would have been for about three tendays of hard physical labor alternated with good food and drink and long hours of sleep, but I didn't put it forward. For one thing, his mother was there in the throne minor to his left, and she was sure to slap down any suggestion I made.

The years hadn't been kind to Beralyn, and for once I was in sympathy with the years.

Hair that had once been a rich brown had gone gray, and not a silvery, full gray, but a dull and thin one. There were hollows in her cheeks, and her sharp jawline had gone all doughy.

The eyes searched me, and then her gaze swung past, but I knew she was still watching me as she sat curled up inside a cloak that should have been too warm for a room that was well heated against a chilly evening by a man-high fireplace.

The servitor took up a position in front of the throne, then beckoned us forward, stopping us with a raised palm a good ten feet from the throne.

Thomen didn't say anything for too long. His mother just watched me.

I knew why Beralyn hated me—she held Karl responsible for her older son's death, and me for her

husband's, and there was some justice in her position—but what the fuck was with Thomen?

The back of my neck itched, and it felt like there was a painful hole to my left where Ahira should have been. We had been relieved of our firearms and my throwing knives—well, the ones they'd found; I wasn't quite naked—but had been allowed to keep our swords, in keeping with our positions: in Bren's case, as a baron of a fully invested barony; in Andrea's, as the other woman who was technically the Dowager Empress; and in my case, because of what a swell guy I am, I supposed.

That had made me feel better; but what didn't make me feel better were the arrow loops high in the wall beyond and behind the throne. For a pair of archers or gunners in the guardroom beyond, the combined beaten-fire area covered the room, except for a roughly triangular area surrounding the throne. Karl had had the arrow loops plugged during his tenure, but the plugs were gone and we were being watched too carefully from behind the darkened curves.

Finally, the Emperor spoke. "Thank you for coming," he said, the chill in his voice making the words purely pro forma. "I don't see Baron Cullinane."

I should have simply let it slide; after all, if he didn't know that Jason hadn't accompanied us, his staff work left more than a lot to be desired.

But my mouth had its own mind. "Well, maybe if you looked a little harder?" I said, pretending to go through my pockets.

It was a tough room; the audience didn't appreciate it. Thomen just eyed me impassively, while his two old retainers glared and the guards pretended not to have heard. A flicker of a smile crossed his mother's dry lips, but it was one of victory, not amusement.

There was a long silence. "He was not in the barony when your captain came for him," Bren said. "He hasn't returned from a trip yet."

Thomen's lips pursed. "I assume you have a way of sending word to him?"

I shrugged. "Same way you could, I suppose. Ellegon should be through soon, and if you ask him real prettily, he'll probably be willing to add some of the usual rendezvous locations to his stops, what with Jason maybe needing a bit of assistance. The dragon can carry a letter from you just . . ."

Just as well as it could from anybody else, asshole, didn't seem to be the right way to put it, even without the epithet. " . . . er, just as well as not."

"That hardly explains why Baron Cullinane is absent from his barony when he's needed there," Dowager Empress Beralyn put in, as though she had been waiting for the opportunity, which seemed more than vaguely likely.

"He left somebody competent in charge," Andrea said, glaring back at her, one Dowager Empress to another. "And I wasn't aware of any requirement that all barons keep their persons within their borders, or even within the borders of Holtun-Bieme," she added, her voice rising ever so slightly in pitch and volume.

Beralyn opened her mouth, then closed it.

Thomen's lips narrowed. "Perhaps there isn't. But there's a matter in Barony Keranahan that needs

looking into, and I wanted Jason to do that for me."

I didn't think that called for an answer. Jason was needed in his barony and needed to be out handling problems for Thomen, both at the same time?

Then again, I didn't exactly think that a raised eyebrow was an answer.

"It appears that Baroness Keranahan is trying to force a young noblewoman into a marriage with one of her minor nobles. A marriage of the Baroness' convenience, not the young woman's. Or mine." He smiled thinly.

It was clearly time for Andrea or Bren to speak up and take the heat off me, but they apparently disagreed, so I shrugged. "You should be able to send any of a number of people to handle that sort of thing."

I mean, sure, it would take more authority than Thomen would typically hand to one of his proctors, but not much else. Somebody with a few brain cells to click together, and maybe a good hand or two with a sword and gun in case things got less tricky and more blunt, but that was about all. Hardly necessary to weigh in with the Cullinane name and legend, and probably not a good idea; you don't want to use your legendary heroes too often, for fear of using up either their legend or the heroes. "If not, you might try the three mus—I mean, Durine, Kethol, and Pirojil."

"Or perhaps yourself, Walter Slovotsky?" His smile was thin. "Certainly that would not be something beyond your abilities or beneath your dignity."

I tried to smile. "I don't have much dignity, but I do have some other obligations." And no desire at all to be running errands for the Furnael family, not at the moment. Particularly not if it was a minor little problem that Thomen's mother approved of me handling. Likely to be the equivalent of just gargling with a little innocent but undiluted H₂SO₄, or having my temperature taken with just a few yards of gently sharpened double-edged sword, or something equally trivial.

"More pressing than doing as I . . . ask?" he asked, his tone of voice lower in a way that was either very deceptive or even more threatening.

Look at it any of three ways. Maybe I needed some time off, in which case, I should be kicking back and spending my days trying to invent the local equivalent of the pina colada, my evenings in conversation with Aeia, and my nights in bed with her.

Or maybe what I needed to be doing was getting Andy and me into shape to go out on the road.

Or maybe I needed to let my bully of a subconscious kick me into getting back on the road to do something important.

None of it reduced down to going out on the road to act as some sort of Dear Abby for Thomen.

"Well, I wouldn't want to put it that way." I raised a hand. "But, please. As a favor to an old family friend: think about it overnight before making a final decision to . . . push the matter."

I could have pointed out that I wasn't technically an Imperial subject—I hadn't been born into their peasant class or sworn a noble oath-of-fealty—but since I was about to ask a favor I didn't think that getting involved in technicalities was a good idea. Or arguing at all with Thomen. He needed the lecture

about how to treat your friends and how not to treat them, but he wasn't about to listen to it from me.

Then again, he could have argued that I wasn't really an old family friend, that my association with his father had gotten his father killed. And if he forgot, his mother was there; she would have gladly pointed it out.

"Very well," he said.

"Another thing, if I may?"

Another glare. "Yes?"

"I find myself in need of . . . a divorce from my wife."

"We will discuss that tomorrow." He turned to Bren and Andrea. "You will join me for dinner, please, along with your families." He looked at me, and then at Andrea. "And be sure to bring your daughter, Aeia." He stood, suddenly, wobbling ever so slightly. "You are dismissed."

Without another word, he turned and walked out of the room, his mother and the rest of his retinue following him.

I looked at Bren, and then at Andrea. "Well, since nobody else is going to say it, I will: Welcome to Biemestren."

* * *

I don't know who said it first, but when in doubt, I check with an engineer.

The senior engineer on duty downstairs at the dungeon armory was somebody I knew, if casually, from years ago in Home, before we'd gone off in our separate directions. Each to his own, eh?

It's good to see old friends again. The years had added some gray to his receding hairline and barely trimmed beard, and some lines around his eyes, and more than a few inches to his waistline, but at least his frown was still intact. Some things should never change.

"Good evening, Walter Slovotsky; I'll be with you in a moment," he said, raising the finger of his free hand to forestall me, not looking up from his writing desk. He dipped the pen in ink and scratched out a few quick phrases, then frowned at them, crossed them out, and substituted something else, then set his pen down and rose, cleaning his ink-stained hands on a rag before extending one hand to me. The balance and weights had been pushed to one side; most of the desk was taken up with his writing paper.

"Hi, Jayar," I said. "Still working on the history?"

"Sort of," he said, gesturing me to a chair. "Thought I'd do a play, now that theater is opening up in Biemestren again. It's been a while, Walter."

"Since you've seen me, or since there's been theater in Biemestren?"

"Both. You've been a bit busy, I take it." Each of us to our own failings; Jayar couldn't help using the phrase "a bit" too much.

"You wouldn't believe it." I mean, I could have told him about the hole between reality and Faerie that

we'd sealed, or about Boioardo, but those were the sorts of things where you had to be there. He might well have believed that I had given away the secret of making black powder, but I didn't see any need to go into that.

He gave one of those all-knowing smiles that I find only barely sufferable when I see it in a mirror. "Perhaps. But since you're not down here to talk over old tunes, and since you're not going to talk about recent ones, what can I do for you?"

I dropped an almost-empty powderbag on the table. "I'll need some of your best, for a start. And if we're not going to talk over old times or recent ones, how about current events?" I jerked my thumb over my shoulder. "I had an audience with Thomen today."

"And it wasn't all you expected, eh?" He pulled a balance and a set of weights, and then a stone pot, out from a cabinet to his right. He hefted my powderbag. "I've seen cleaner—any real chance your powder got contaminated?"

I shrugged. "Seems unlikely, despite everything. But not impossible."

"Better safe than sorry?" At my nod, he pulled a new-looking bag from the drawer, and carefully weighed out a triple load of powder before looking up and smiling. "Enough for a trip to Barony Keranahan, eh?"

I didn't return his smile. "Rather more than enough for that. I'm a talker, not a fighter."

"That's what I hear." He screwed a brass tip onto the ring inset into the mouth of the bag, then set it down in front of me. "As to the Emperor, you've got to see it from his point of view, at least a bit. While he was regent, he had all the . . . mystique of the Cullinanes to call on, to buttress his authority, and he could have turned it all over to the Heir at any time." Jayar sighed. "These days, he's stuck in a box, and can't be expected to like it much, or to be all that friendly toward those who put him there."

"Like me."

He shrugged. "Like you, or Jason, or Ahira. Or even the dragon." Somehow or other, despite his attempt to keep things all neat and in their place, he had spilled perhaps half a teaspoonful of gunpowder on the desk. He looked at me seriously, soberly as he took a piece of paper and used it to sweep the powder into a stone bowl.

I made the sign of the scales with my hands. "Should I be worried, brother Engineer?" Technically, I'm an engineer—pretty much by Engineer definition, since I know how to make gunpowder, and that's an Engineer secret. Well, it was. I traded the secret for our lives in Brae, but I didn't see that mentioning it to this engineer was likely to earn any plaudits or help.

He sobered. "Not, brother Engineer, if you don't confront him directly. But I would say that his mother holds a deep hatred for you, and I would not give her an excuse to argue to him that you are a threat to his reign, or his dynasty." He picked up the piece of flint from the desk, and stroked it lightly against the side of a metal file, sending a spark into the bowl.

With a loud *whoom*, the gunpowder flashed into flame and heat that felt like a sudden blush, and then was gone, leaving behind a cloud of smoke and a stink of sulfur.

"Sometimes," he said, "the easiest thing to do with something is to get rid of it."

* * *

We had been quartered off in the new wing of the keep, up on the third floor, where the imported Nyphien tapestries showed the usual Nyphien scenes of Nyph soldiers defending villages from the onslaught of hordes of stylized firebreathing dragons, even though, at least until recently, it had been hundreds of years since there had been much of a draconic presence in the Eren regions, much less the Middle Lands.

Magical creatures and humans don't seem to get along—with some exceptions.

Hell, if humans don't get along with other humans—granted, with some exceptions—why should magical creatures be any better at it?

Aeia and I had been assigned rooms at the opposite ends of the long hall, but she hadn't even pretended to settle into hers before putting her things in with me and mine. Stubbornness runs in the Cullinane family, and besides, this had been her father's house before it was Thomen's, and she wasn't about to let him tell her where to sleep.

I wish she had asked me; my digs were small. Her room was a three-room suite, suitable to her station; mine appeared to have been quarters for either a not particularly large upstairs maid or perhaps a more royal agoraphobe.

My room had been furnished so as to not overburden the occupant with luxury: the stone walls were bare of any hanging or tapestry; the furnishings consisted of a small, plain stand, a bedframe, and a duckfeather-filled mattress. A bottle of cheap wine, a loaf of dark bread, and a hunk of unlikely cheese sat on a relatively clean plate on the nightstand.

While Aeia hung a lantern from a hook on the wall, I took my bag from the bed and dropped it to the floor, then dropped to all fours to look under the bed for a moment.

"What are you looking for?" she asked.

"Round-shouldered mice."

She took a moment to work it out, then laughed. I liked that about her. She didn't take my word something was funny, the way Kirah had when we were young, and she never asked for an explanation she didn't need, or failed to ask for one when she did.

"I'm supposed to be down at dinner in a few minutes," she said. "With Thomen, and Bren and Mother. And the other Dowager Empress."

"You won't have to sneak me up anything," I said. "The bread and cheese will do." While I could have eaten over in the barracks with the officers or down in the kitchen with the staff, I had ordered a tray and a bottle of wine sent up to the rooms. Probably not my best move, if I wanted the best Biemestren could offer, but that wasn't one of my higher priorities.

She frowned. "That wasn't what I was asking, and you know better, and I know better, and you know that I know you aren't just appetites at both ends," she said, touching a finger first to my lips, and then, well, just below the belt. "Do you want me to try to find anything out?"

"Nah." I shook my head. "Just listen."

Her lips tightened for a moment, then relaxed. "It isn't that you don't think I'm capable of inquiring without getting into trouble, so it's not that. And it isn't that you think I'm in danger, because you know better, so it's probably that you've got somebody else primed to ask around. Mother?"

I shook my head. "No, it's not that." I tried not to think much about Andy, and for a whole variety of reasons. There was something a bit perverse about sharing a bed with her (adopted, granted) daughter that I didn't like to think about, because there was nothing perverse about sharing my life with Aeia. Which didn't mean I'd share every moment, or every thought with her. I'm not built that way.

Sorry.

One corner of one lip turned up. "Did something . . . happen between you and Mother out on the road? Something you want to tell me about?"

That was an easy question. "No." There was nothing I wanted to talk about. What had happened with Andy and me had been more of a collision than anything else.

Here's a difference: When things were right between us, Kirah would have known enough not to ask any further. She would just have let the matter drop, and turned back to her knitting or something.

"Oh." One corner of Aeia's lip turned up. "Then it's something you don't want to talk about, eh?" And she chuckled. "What was that old saying you used to tell me about? From your actor friend?"

" 'Drunk and on the road don't count.' Old theater saying," I said, deadpan.

She nodded. "So, is there something that I need to know about?" Fingers stronger than they looked entwined with mine.

"That's an interesting question."

"Phrased very carefully, too," she said. "And ready to live with whatever your answer is." She touched a finger to my lips for a moment. "I've known you for a long time."

"Then: no. Nothing happened that you need to know about. Okay?"

"Okay." She laid her head on my chest. "Then that's just fine with me, Walter." I could feel her whole body relax. "The thing is, you see, I trust you. Not to tell me everything—not even to tell me the truth all the time. I just trust you."

Which was exactly the right thing to say. And also it left out the wrong things to say. With the people you really care about, it's not just what they say that matters, but what they don't say, what they know you know them well enough to understand without the words. My left hand may not know what my right hand is doing, but it doesn't need to tell my right hand to watch out for it all the time.

When I had first met Aeia, many, many years ago, she had been a badly beaten, ill-used, scared little girl staggering out of a slaver's wagon. Looking back, I can remember seeing something of character and strength in her eyes, but where did she grow this kind of balance and judgment, and when and how had we become part of each other so?

I could have asked, but I guess I don't have to know everything, either.

Her arms came around my neck. "I should go downstairs for supper shortly. You have any idea how we could spend the time until then?"

I thought about it for a moment, and then I thought about how she'd feel when she found me gone later, how she'd smile and shake her head and say that she should have worked it all out before she'd been left seduced and abandoned, but how she really wouldn't mean it, and then I thought about how firm and insistent her lips felt on mine, how warm and sweet her tongue was in my mouth, and how good her hair smelled and how easily a trained thief's fingers, even an aging thief's fingers, could loosen a button or unhook a belt, and then I thought about how silky smooth her skin was, then how firm and strong and limber the muscles were beneath that silky skin, and then I stopped thinking for a while.

Thinking is, sometimes, vastly overrated.

* * *

The wine bottle stood empty, but that was just because I'd taken it down the hall and poured almost all of it down the garderobe, leaving only an inch or so in the glass. Drinking and skulking mix only if you want to get caught.

I'd taken a few moments to memorize the room, and then blown out the lamp. The room was barely lit by the flicker of torches from the inner curtain wall and too much light streaming under the door. I rolled up a thick blanket and laid it down in front of the door, which made me feel for a moment like a college kid. All I needed was a joint and a fan to blow the smoke out the window.

I let my eyes adjust to the dark. Well, it was nice to be here in peacetime: the barred latticework that could have been fastened over the windows had been slid up to the ceiling, although the sockets it would lock into were covered only by the curtains and not blocked even by any furniture. Two brass staples, each about the size of my fist, were embedded in the wall on either side, wooden wedges slipped into them. To slip the wedges out, slide the latticework down into the embedded sockets, then bash the wedges back into place, further locking the latticework down, would take five minutes, max. Less than a day for the staff to switch the keep from peace mode to a wartime siege footing.

I don't know that hoping has ever made something so, but I do it for practice; it just might: I hoped everything was on a relaxed peacetime routine as I set up the washbasin on the battered old dresser next to the window, then blackened my face with a nice water-based gunk I bought from a traveling mummer troupe. When I was finished with it, it matched the mottled color of the dark pants and pullover shirt I'd changed into.

The boots were light, but inside the leather the square toes were metal-capped, and under the toe, between the two layers of the sole, was a concealed strip of steel; with any luck, it would hold in any crack.

I slipped various implements into various pockets, cursing myself for an idiot all the while.

This shouldn't have been necessary.

One of the most important things to keep nearby is money. I should have thought it all through, but I don't like to have the reputation for carrying a lot on me, and didn't figure to have to, not in the Empire—where my signature normally is quickly redeemable by my shares in the New Pittsburgh project—just as I wouldn't have in Home, where I've let Lou sit on much of my earnings from the raiding years.

In practice, what I usually would have done if I'd needed some coin would be to sign a note with the Imperial Treasurer—well, actually, more likely his clerk, or the castle chamberlain, and let Home and the Empire square accounts later.

But that would have required explanations, and I didn't want to give out any explanations, or tempt even somebody as friendly as Jayar to ingratiate himself to the Emperor with a quickly dropped comment. (Or, if I had wanted to give up being overly cynical for a moment, I could have just decided that it was better for Jayar that he didn't know, but you know me; I wouldn't give up being overly cynical unless the pay was right . . .)

It's usually much easier to get forgiveness than to get permission. Particularly when you intend to be long gone, just in case.

So I slipped a bag over my shoulder, then slipped my braided leather rope around one of the brass staples next to the window, slipped into my climbing gloves, and stepped out into the dark of night.

* * *

There's something to be said for doing what you do best, no matter what it is, and there was something special to slipping through the dark of the night at the base of the residence, nothing between me and the guards walking their tours on the walls except air and darkness. Back on the Other Side, I'd not been clumsy, but I'd never have been able to slip between the shadows like a wraith, invisible to all.

And yes, while only an idiot does dangerous things just for the thrill of it, there was a certain something to the knowledge that I was once again taking it all in my own hands. Including, perhaps, getting a little of my own back.

But I'd save the gloating, even private gloating, for later. Emotions could be played out in private later; it was time to exercise talent and skill.

There are no secure buildings, not really—hell, all buildings function as both a container and a shelter. A container is designed primarily to keep something in, and a shelter to keep something out. But what they keep in and what they keep out flows from their design. A jail, for example, is designed to keep a person or persons limited in movement to one space, and most of its design goes toward that end—the locks are on the outside, and the keys kept away; floors, ceilings, and walls are kept smooth so as to make any damage apparent.

It keeps the prisoners from getting out without a whole lot of difficulty.

But getting into a jail isn't usually difficult.

Now, a castle is basically a container designed to keep an army out. The base of the walls slopes out just a touch, so as to allow the residents to drop stones, say, or boiling oil, say, and have both of them splash on anybody trying to get in. Guards walk the parapets with their attention directed outward, and report in regularly so as to alert the authorities by their silence when they've been, well, silenced. (Yes, I've silenced more than a few guards in my time—living out a cliché doesn't bother me—but taking out a guard means you have to be ready to kick everything into high gear. If he lets out a noise when you do it, it's like firing a starting pistol. At best, even if you do it quietly, it's like lighting a fuse of indeterminate length, because everything will hit the fan when he doesn't check in, and you really don't know if you can take him out silently, or how long it'll be until his boss gets suspicious. You'll never find a spherical guard of uniform density when you need one . . .)

The main attention of the defenders is always on the entrances—they're the weak points to invading armies, so they're the parts where extra towers are built, where portcullises sit above traps and moats, and where murder holes look down upon well-designed killing grounds.

But once you get into the inner portion of the castle, the design doesn't tend to restrict movement. Oh, there're a few exceptions. The stairways tend to be narrow, and curve up counterclockwise, to make life easy for a retreating right-handed defender and difficult for a charging right-handed attacker. And certainly the cells in the dungeon aren't designed to allow freedom of movement.

But, largely, the design doesn't make life difficult once you're inside. It's not impossible to design things differently, mind—but that would interfere with the movement of troops inside, which would interfere with the basic function of the structure. It's important to be able to bring your forces to any point to repel a possible invasion—

Even if the design makes life relatively easy for, say, a thief.

It was just a matter of technique: stay in the shadows, where I was all but invisible, until I was sure that there was nobody within view, then move swiftly but silently, weight balanced on the ball of each foot in turn, into the next shadow, and wait, wait, wait, listening.

It took me only a few minutes to make my way around the back of the building and into the shadows at the edge of the main courtyard. The closest call was at the rear entrance to the residence, where I slipped silently into the vines covering the walls while a foursome of guards walked in from their circuit of the walls.

But that wasn't hard, or difficult—I just narrowed my eyes to slits, so no flash of white would give me away, and waited for their footsteps to diminish in the distance. No need to worry about their relief showing up—their relief had found them up on the parapet, or they wouldn't be here.

A lamp flickered high up on the second floor of the main wing, where the Emperor's bedroom suite was located—or, at least, had been back when Karl was the emperor. It had been Prince Pirondael's before Karl, and I didn't have any reason to think that Thomen had changed things, just for the sake of changing things. The way the little bastard was taking to the appurtenances of power, it was a good bet that the room was still his.

The traditional invisible way to do things would have been to rock-climb up the side, digging for finger purchase among the leaves, finding places where the old mortar had given way between the stones, but I was in a hurry, and getting old for this, and more than a little lazy. I took one of a dozen long blackened-steel spikes from my vest, reached above my head and found a soft spot in the earthy mortar, then pushed it in until only six or so inches protruded, then repeated the process, at my waist-level, leaving me somewhere to stand.

I may have been getting old, but I wasn't dead yet, and my abilities hadn't deserted me. In another few seconds, I'd climbed up to the spike and was standing on one foot on it, reaching over my head to repeat the process.

It took me a delightfully short time until I was at the Emperor's mottled-glass window, peeking in.

The window was closed and locked, but the metal shutters hadn't been lowered. No reason, and besides, Thomen hadn't removed the window seat—it would be a nice place to sit and read or write,

with fresh air blowing in through the open window and the light of day streaming into the room.

Slipping the lock was no work at all, and then I was inside, the hinges making only the slightest creak.

I stood silently for a long time, listening. There was movement in the hall outside, but nothing here.

It's always good to prepare a back way out—I unlocked the window in the shower room beyond the bedroom, and oiled the hinges with a vial from my bag, making sure they swung open silently.

I let out a sigh that I hadn't realized I'd been holding in, slid the curtains closed, and sat down on the floor until I got my breath back, or at least most of it. I was definitely feeling every minute of my forty-or-so-years as I allowed myself to lean back and stretch out on the thick carpet, for just a moment.

Getting a bit too old for this. A bit too much exertion for one night, although I didn't see a way around this part of it, and wouldn't have missed the previous part for anything.

I took a small candle lantern from my pack, lit it with a long match from a hidden pocket, and then got to work in the flickering, buttery light.

Over on Thomen's desk, a small stack of the new silver marks, the ones with Thomen's face on them, held down a sheaf of papers. I took half of the stack, changed my mind and took all of it, and then searched through the drawers, taking a few coins here, a few there. Coins jingle; I wound each into a soft cloth, then tied the packet tightly before putting it into my thief's bag.

A gleaming chamber pot sat next to the table—Rank Hath Its Privileges—and there was an old pre-Empire gold candelabra on the table, so I took the candelabra, figuring that Lack of Rank Hath Its Privileges, Too.

It only seemed fair, after all, that if Thomen was going to make it necessary for me to flee town, he should fund it. I mean, given the situation, my other choices would be to steal from somebody who didn't deserve it, or to actually youshouldpardontheexpression work to support myself as I went hunting for Jason, and that hardly seemed either convenient or right,

I blew out my candle, tucked it back into my pack, and slipped back out into the night, closing the window behind me, slipping the catch back into place with a small probe.

I thought about leaving the spikes—hidden in the ivy, they'd hardly draw a lot of attention—but then decided against it, and drew them out as I climbed down. Thieving is sort of like camping—take nothing but pictures, leave nothing but footprints—except different: you want to take a lot more than pictures, and you don't want to leave footprints.

It's also, properly done, a little like magic.

And now, for my next trick: getting the hell out of here.

I stood in the darkness to the side of the main entrance and stripped to the skin, wiping my face first with my shirt and then with a damp washcloth from a leather pouch in my bag. I wished for a mirror, but thoroughness would have to serve.

I pulled my clean clothes out of my bag, placing the thief's outfit inside, then slipped the bag's straps over my right shoulder. My casually-flung cloak covered the bag neatly, and, dressed in a gleaming white shirt

and shiny leather trousers that nobody would possibly associate with a thief, I walked into the light, and, very publicly, back up to my room. I had a note and an IOU to write, and then it would be time to go.

* * *

I blew out the lamp and stood in the dark of the room.

It was all logical, and more than a little reasonable, given the nightmares.

Thomen was going to order me to do something that I didn't want to do, and I had no intention either of conceding or of matching wills with him, not in his Empire, not in his castle.

I didn't have a choice, not with my nightmares turning sweet sleep into a nightly horror show of old men trying to hold back all the demons of hell. It was my subconscious's way of kicking me into doing something important, and that meant getting out on the road, and not just for exercise or some minor errand for the Emperor. I had to do something the back of my mind would recognize as important, or live with the nightmares.

I'll skip the nightmares, thank you very much.

So it was time to get out of Dodge.

We had quartered our horses at a hostler down in the village, so I had access to transportation. I now had money—and a route out of town. A couple of days of hard riding would take me out of the Empire and into Kiar; with a bit of luck, I could pick up Jason's trail on the Cirric coast.

It felt like something was missing, and it took me a moment to realize what it was: I hadn't said goodbye. Not to Aeia, not to Janie and D.A., not to Kirah or Doria. My letter of explanation to Aeia wasn't enough, not emotionally.

Well, screw it. I couldn't delay leaving much longer, or I'd have to drop down into the outer bailey and try to make my way over the outer curtain wall, and while I could do it, the exertions of the evening had already tired me more than they would have ten years before. The last thing I needed before a long night's ride was to wear myself out climbing up and down walls.

So, humming a tune, I threw my rucksack into a large wicker basket, brought the basket up to my shoulder, and walked down the stairs, and out through the open door into the night.

I like the night. Or maybe make that the nights, because there's an infinite variety of them, depending on what you are and what you're doing.

A warm summer night, gentle breezes blowing up a grassy hillock to where I sat with a woman I loved, under a sky so clear, a canopy of stars so bright that I could make out their colors, a slow procession of faerie lights pulsing a heavy blue-to-green adagio off over the horizon—that was different from a coal-black night after a heavy rainstorm, me dressed in black, creeping through darkness barely broken by a shuttered lantern up ahead, watching not only for the guard's back, but for the backup guard, because it surely couldn't be as easy as it seemed—any time it seemed too easy, it was time to reevaluate what was really going on. And both of those were different from a quiet autumn night outside of the Endell warrens, a cold, clammy wind blowing in over the Cirric and the land, waiting for word of a friend's death, the night brightening and warming in my heart if not my skin when I saw a familiar form awkwardly perched on the back of a gelding that would have been gray in the light, as well.

But they all have something in common: you don't see with your eyes, not really—you see with your mind.

As a thief, sneaking around in the darkness, the night had been filled with dark and shadow, too-bright light splashing out carelessly through open doors and undraped windows. Far-off footsteps had thundered like distant drums, while the sound of the wind through the few trees standing within the courtyard was a comforting blanket of white noise into which my own footsteps would disappear.

But now, the night was lit with smoky torches on the battlements, vying with the overhead stars and distant pulsing faerie lights to light up at least a part of the night, and I wasn't sneaking through it: I was marking my place in it, as I headed for the front gate.

During wartime, the gates to the keep had been closed promptly at sunset, and the northern bastion manned as heavily as the barbicans overlooking the main gate. But we were at peace, at least for the time being, and there were barely a dozen soldiers visibly on duty at the gate.

Some things hadn't changed from the old days: high above on the wall, an old soldier stood watch over the main rope, a sharp axe mounted on the wall at a convenient height. The wrought-iron and timbered portcullis could be lowered slowly, as it shortly would be, no doubt, or in case of some urgency it and its twin on the outer gate could be slammed down quickly, perhaps trapping an intruder in the killing ground in between the two, and at least limiting the number of intruders who could make it safely into the outer ward.

Some things had. In the old days, before we had left our imprint on Castle Biemestren, there hadn't been a dark wire running off into the night, and there had been no constant chatter of a telegraph above, as stations up and down the line checked in almost constantly, even when they didn't have any traffic, as a way of announcing that they were still operational, and uninvaded.

I smiled and waved at the guards as I walked out through the gate. Wartime standing orders would have had them stop me, and even in peacetime they certainly had the authority to do that if I left them suspicious, but it was a simple fool-the-mind: you just don't think of somebody making an escape doing it with a bounce in his step and a bulky basket on his shoulder, wearing bright clothes and whistling the coda from *Suite: Judy Blue Eyes*.

Now, if it was the Grateful Dead's *Truckin'*, on the other hand . . .

I had left the keep behind me, and was more than halfway down the dirt road toward the town below, when something stirred in the bushes, and a harsh voice whispered, "Wait."

6

The Indeterminate House

When you cannot make up your mind which of two evenly balanced courses of action you should take—choose the bolder.

—W. J. Slim

Boldness is like a condom. If you rely on it all the time, no matter how good it is, and no matter how good you are, eventually it will break.

—Walter Slovotsky

The early-afternoon downpour kept up a maddeningly even pace as they paused at the fork in the Edgerly-Pemburne road, where an ancient stone carving stood as though waiting for something.

Although, to be honest, Jason could not figure out what the stone carving was supposed to depict. It could have been a human figure long ago, although a squat one, arms held close against its sides. But wind and time had robbed it of all features, and all he could tell was that it had once been something.

It was good to think about something other than the rain, and how miserable it made the day. His oiled-canvas poncho had long gone nonwaterproof in spots, and Jason was soaked to the skin. There was nothing to be done about it, except suffer.

The two dwarves kept up a pleasant conversation about metalworking. That had become the default topic for the two of them, and it was driving Jason slowly mad. Or maybe not so slowly, at that.

Nareen shook his head. "All roads lead somewhere," he said. "Put enough steps in a row, and we shall find ourselves at a warm inn."

"East," Ahira decided.

That made sense. The eastern road, so they had been told, swung a bit wider before it looped back toward Pemburne, but it cut through the woods, and that would get them out of the open, and away from the wind that drove the rain in through every seam and dry spot in his poncho.

He stepped up the pace to a fast walk, ignoring the way the dwarves had to hurry to keep up.

"Ease up, eh?" Ahira said. "We'll get there, and we'll be wet when we do."

Nareen the glassmaker didn't say anything. His thin hair was slicked back against his wrinkled scalp, and little rivulets of water worked their way down through his inadequate poncho to run down his bowed legs, but it didn't seem to bother him.

That made sense. Everything the dwarf said made sense, and if there was one thing that Jason Cullinane was more tired of than being scared all the damn time, it was listening to a dwarf making sense.

That was the trouble with traveling with two of the Moderate People, he decided for at least the thousandth time. They always made sense; they spoke gently; they woke up agreeable and went to bed good-humored.

It was driving him fucking crazy. Crazy enough to let his mind wander. Crazy enough to look at alternatives.

The woods arced over the road ahead, promising some relief from the rain, but as they walked down the

dark path, gray almost to black under the stormy skies, the promise turned out to be a lie. The leaves dripped cold water just as hard as it rained out in the open, just less rhythmically.

Not an improvement.

"So we put one foot in front of the other, and eventually we'll find ourselves in front of a place that is dry, with a fire to dry our clothes and warm our bones," Ahira said.

"Perhaps sooner than we fear, and certainly later than we would prefer," Nareen said. "Even at my age, one doesn't care to be cold and wet all the time."

"Then why don't you *do* something about it?" Jason asked, fairly sure that most of his irritation was showing through.

"But I am, young one," Nareen said.

"Oh?"

"I am enduring it."

Ahira chuckled.

Jason lowered his head and leaned into the storm.

* * *

Edgerly and Pemburne were the usual one day's hard walk apart, but of course that usual measure involved a normal day, when the mud of the road didn't reach up and try to drag down your feet with every step except for those that left you ankle-deep or worse in a puddle, when you didn't try to stay at the edge of the road and brush, walking more on the brush than the road, and when rain and gloom and dark didn't stretch roads out almost interminably.

What Jason wanted was a warm fire to sit by, some warm food to put in his stomach, and a dry place to sleep, preferably with a couple of dogs to keep him warm and comfortable, if a nice fireplace wasn't available.

But it was getting dark, and on a black and rainy night you stayed off the road in the dark. Too many ways to go wrong, when you couldn't see where you were stepping, and anything that produced enough light would make you an easy target for anybody lying in wait. There was no need to be paranoid about it, to assume that this next bend in the road was where somebody hostile waited, but it was time to get off the road and bed down for the night. The elf-light from a glowsteel in his pack meant they didn't have to either panic or impose on Nareen's magic to light their way as they made camp, but it was going to be another night out in the rain.

What he'd have to settle for, again, would be a night in the woods just off the main trail, some cold jerky and dried corn from his pack, and at best a flickering fire that would hiss and sputter all night, barely enough to warm him and not nearly enough to dry him off as he slouched against the bole of a tree, halfway between interminable, red-eyed awakeness and only the lightest of sleeps. He would be woken up in the gray of predawn by some sound, and after making sure that his fire was out, as though the weather wouldn't take care of that for him, he and the two Moderate People would slosh off into the day.

It wasn't the dangers of the road that bothered him, not as much as the constant oppression of it.

Up ahead, at the top of the next hill, a building stood waiting as the rain poured down and the sky went from dark gray to darker.

For a moment, it looked familiar to Jason. It reminded him, of all things, of the sort of entry-buildings that the Andirdell dwarves built outside their warrens—it was a low, one-storied building, curved as though it had been built up against something, although there was nothing there for it to have been built up against.

Or maybe there was. He couldn't see anything much beyond it, except for darkness.

Hard to tell.

Nareen smiled. "I think we shall sleep warm and well, young Cullinane," he said. "With our bellies filled with a thick soup of—he paused to sniff at the air—"carrots and mushrooms and barley and just a trace of turnip and onion, and oily, oily garlic. Perhaps with our heads buzzing with rich brown beer, or even some old wine."

"If you knew that there was an inn up ahead . . ."

The old dwarf smiled. "Well, I told you there was. It was just a question of how far up ahead. And which inn. Until you see it for yourself, the answers to most questions are indeterminate."

Somehow, the mud seemed to weigh Jason's feet down even more, while his legs had somehow become lighter. The prospect of spending a night warm and dry almost pushed him to a run, as badly as he didn't want to appear impatient and immature in front of Ahira and the other dwarf.

Besides, he didn't know who would be there. He gave a hitch to his swordbelt and a pat to the hidden brace of pistols under his soaked poncho. The odds of either pistol firing were negligible, given the time they had spent out in the rain. That was the nice thing about a sword: it was always loaded, it worked wet or dry, and it never misfired.

Ahira had hitched at his battleaxe, too, then glanced at Jason with a too-flat expression that might as well have said that he wished to have somebody else at his side.

Which was exactly backwards, Jason decided. Chasing after Mikyn was Jason's job, and nobody else's. The question was not whether or not Jason was good enough to back up Ahira, but whether or not Ahira was an appropriate companion to Jason.

Ahira must have caught him smiling. "What are you thinking?"

"Whether or not you're the right person to be covering my back at the moment," Jason said.

Ahira laughed. "You Cullinanes always have had a strange sense of humor."

It looked for all the world like an Andirdell-style warren entrance: curved, fitted stones carved to look more like the side of a gray mountain than a building; the door a low half-circle of oak, its hinges hidden, a huge iron doughnut hanging from a thick chain in its center.

Nareen was reaching for it when the door swung open, wafting delicious odors of food and warmth from the brightness beyond.

"Master Nareen and friends, be welcome," a deep voice thrummed in Dwarvish. "Enter my home in peace, and stay in peace." The accent was one Jason couldn't place—the vowels were stretched, the consonants clipped. Sort of like a combination of Endell and Andirdell accents, but with a Pandathaway Erendra overlay.

Jason stooped to follow the dwarves inside, to the mudroom, where a particularly large dwarf, a head taller and a fist's-breadth wider than Ahira, stood with a raised brass lantern clasped in his hamlike fist. Beneath a massive, ugly nose and a coal-black beard that covered his thick chin and neck like curly moss, his smile was broad and white.

"How good to see you again, Master Nareen."

"And you as well, good Sulluren. How is your wife?"

"Busy in the kitchen, I can assure you!" the dwarf said. "There will be rolls fresh from the oven, baked to the lightest brown, and served with ramekins of yellowy butter, and vats of my own mushroom and barley soup, and a mushroom casserole of my own recent creation—the secret is to slice the caps ever so thinly, and then cook them for the veriest instant in rendered duckfat, and then to—"

"And then, perhaps, to invite us in?" Nareen asked. "Where perhaps there's a warm seat by a fire to warm our bones and dry our clothes?"

Jason was completely confused. If Nareen knew the dwarf innkeeper, then he ought to know where they were, but either he had lied or . . .

"My manners, but of course." Sulluren set his lantern down so violently that Jason wondered for a moment if it might either go out or smash something inside and douse them all with flaming oil, but no, all it did was *thuck* its base into the mud.

Thick hands helped with packs and ponchos, as Sulluren relieved all three of them of their burdens, handling their gear with surprising ease.

The dwarf dug the big toe of one of his sandaled feet into the mud beneath the edge of the lantern, and even though he couldn't possibly have seen the carrying handle, flipped it up into the air and caught it neatly on one extended finger.

He smiled up at Jason. "A few centuries of doing something constantly, young Cullinane, and one gets fairly good at it. Even if that something is as modest an occupation as one of innkeeper. But please, come with me."

There was a right angle turn just beyond the mudroom into a low passageway, its stone floor lined with mud scrapers along one side, and opposite a wall filled with carved crannies, now mostly empty.

"There is only one more guest in residence this night," Sulluren said. "I suspect my rates prove too stiff for the casual traveler."

Jason didn't like the sound of that, but Ahira just patted his arm. "I take it you'll take a gold draft on King Maherallen?" he asked.

"Of course," Sulluren said. "He still owes you rather a lot, although I doubt he's happy about your long absence—still, a debt is a debt."

Jason leaned his head next to Ahira. "You know this dwarf, this place?"

Ahira shrugged. "Yes and no. I'd thought that Sulluren's Indeterminate Inn had gone legendary."

Sulluren laughed. "As well you should have, friend Ahira. I go to some trouble to keep it so. I'd hardly care to be overwhelmed with guests if it was known that the Inn was still sometimes to be found in the Eren regions. In fact, I doubt that you would have found me at all, if Vair the Uncertain hadn't lent a hand."

"Vair?"

"Who better to help arrange a rendezvous between unlikely allies at a place of no fixed location?"

"Unlikely allies?"

"Patience, young Cullinane, patience is an expression of the virtue of moderation."

Another right turn brought them into a wide, low room, dark, lit only by the huge, man-high fireplace at the far end, and light streaming out through slatted blinds to the left.

"Your boots, if you please," Sulluren said, gesturing toward a low bench. Following the dwarves' example, Jason sat, and pulled off his wet boots, accepting Sulluren's offer of a soft towel to clean and dry his cold, wet wrinkled feet; he had rarely felt anything as pleasant as the feel of the thick, warm towel between his toes.

"Warm robes will be along shortly; they are being heated on stones at the moment," Sulluren said, bustling off with the boots. "In the meantime, I would suggest you make yourselves comfortable by the fire." He walked through the slatted door.

Jason padded across the thickest, softest rug he had ever felt, toward the fire, past a thick, low table.

Nareen's smile was even broader than usual as he squatted near the fire. "It's been a long time since I've been here," he said, rubbing his knob-knuckled fingers together disturbingly close to the flame.

"Do you mind telling me about it?" Jason asked, more than a little irritated at the way his companions were taking all this strangeness for granted.

"Little to tell, little that I know. The location of the Indeterminate Inn is, well, largely indeterminate. I've heard it claimed that it's built into the structure of reality itself; those who would know say little. I can tell you that we'll see no staff save for Sulluren, our host, that his fees will be large relative to our present finances, but still affordable, and that there's somebody—somebody who does no magic—waiting to meet us here, somebody sent by Vair the Uncertain."

Ahira snorted. "And how would you know all that?"

"Well, I know that the location of the Indeterminate Inn is indeterminate not merely because of what I've heard but because I've been here before, and it wasn't here, if you understand what I mean. And I know we'll see nothing of his wife and servants because although Sulluren claims to have a wife and servants, nobody's ever seen any staff here save Sulluren, and those few who announced an intention to try too hard to find such have either reported themselves frustrated or never been seen again. And I know that

this night will be expensive because all who have stayed in the Inn have reported that they could afford, if just barely, Sulluren's fees.

"And I know that we'll meet somebody sent here by Vair the Uncertain because while I don't see the flames of a wizard, I feel the presence of a human holding an amulet whose crystal I once made for Vair the Uncertain," the dwarf said, turning. "He lurks right there." A thick hand gestured toward a dark archway.

"Quite so." A shape moved out of the far corridor and into the firelight: a medium-tall man, moving easily across the carpet, his face lit by the gentle green glow of the gem that dangled from a silver chain looped elegantly around the fingers of his right hand.

He moved into the light, his hands held out, palms first. The white sleeves of his shirt and the darker ones of his overshirt had been rolled up almost to the elbow; there was nothing strapped to them, and his palms were well away from the wire-wound hilt of the sword at his waist.

He was perhaps a year or two older than Jason, but built slimly, almost effeminately so, slim not quite to the point of skinniness, his close-cropped beard carefully sculpted to maximize the pointiness of his chin.

"Good evening," he said, his voice too smooth. "I am Toryn, at your service."

Jason's hand was resting on the hilt of his sword. "Jason, Baron Cullinane, greets you," he said, formally.

A smile played across the other's lips. "Ah. You will have it formal? Very well: Toryn, Journeyman Slaver, greets you."

A slaver? Ahira's thick fingers were on the wrist of Jason's sword hand. "You are here under an oath of truce?" the dwarf asked.

"Sworn to and bound by Vair the Uncertain," Toryn said. "It was he and the Guildmaster who sent me in this direction." His smile revealed too-white teeth. "He said it wasn't utterly impossible that I might find you out this way."

That sounded like Vair.

Ahira looked up at Jason. "You ask him the next question," he said, suddenly the teacher.

"What did you swear to and how do we know you mean it?"

"A good question. An obvious one, perhaps, but a good one." Moving only his right hand, Toryn raised the amulet to his forehead. His form seemed to waver in the flickering firelight, and then to stretch and lengthen, his thickly curled and heavily oiled ringlets of hair lightening and straightening while his beard thinned and shortened until it was gone, leaving behind only smooth skin over the sharp, pointed jaw.

The image wavered until it was Vair the Uncertain who seemed to stand before him, and it was the elf's voice that was pitched as a tenor but somehow had a feel of baritone in it that answered, "And, with your will, Toryn, I bind you to neither threaten nor permit damage to Jason Cullinane or his companions, this binding to last until your return to the city of Pandathaway or until you are attacked by Jason Cullinane or any of his companions. I give you my voice and my image to repeat my words, but only so long as you hold my amulet and are bound by this geas."

The hand dropped, and Toryn's form melted back into his own. "We have a problem in common," he said. "Guildmaster Yryn has sent me hunting you, hoping that I might be of aid." He raised a hand to his forehead. "As I said, I am at your service." He gestured to a table. "Will you sit? We have, I would suspect, much to discuss."

Jason didn't like his smile.

* * *

Jason, his arms folded across his chest, sat back as Toryn nibbled at a chicken leg crusted over with sage and garlic. He hadn't intended to break bread with the slaver, but hunger had changed his mind. When the platter of chicken had arrived at the table, the smell had been absolutely maddening. The food still smelled wonderful, even with his stomach full and his brain ever so slightly humming from the wine he'd downed.

Ahira had long since finished eating, as had Nareen. The dwarf wizard sat back in his chair, his sausagelike fingers folded comfortably about his middle, his eyes closed as though asleep, although Jason didn't believe for a moment that Nareen really was asleep.

"It's really rather simple," Toryn said from around a mouthful. "There's a commonality of interest between the Guild and the Cullinanes, at least for the moment. You have the equivalent of a rogue brother out there, and we have a definite nuisance to deal with. There are two schools of thought in Pandathaway—one is that it is your father, and the other is that it is another one of your accursed raiders being," he considered the next word for a moment, "naughty." He raised a slim eyebrow. "Unless you have changed your longstanding policy against property owners?"

"Slave owners," Jason said. Ahira's body language and his whispers told him not to pick a fight, but this was a slaver sitting opposite from him. Everything he had ever learned said to go for his weapons and make the slaver dead.

Toryn dismissed it with an airy wave. "I don't propose to debate matters of right and wrong with you. I do propose to aid you in a matter of our mutual benefit," he said, touching a finger to his hairline in sketchy salute, "subject to your orders, and, of course, my geas."

"And find out whether or not this Warrior really is my father," Jason said. "Since none of you was ever able to stop him . . ."

"I never claimed to be acting other than in our interest." Toryn took another nibble. "But if it was only that knowledge I was after, I would simply trick it out of you rather than join you—and please do note that I am joining you at some risk to my person. Now, have we an arrangement?"

"What's in it for us?"

"Horses, for one. And more." Toryn tapped at a breast pocket. "Our Guildmaster has bought some spells from some of the better wizards in Pandathaway. I can't tell you where your Warrior will strike next, but I can tell you where he likely will strike soon." He smoothed his tunic over the pocket. "I ask you one last time: have we an arrangement, Jason Cullinane?"

The obvious question was whether, if the Guild knew that, they had already dispatched a dozen or more assassins to lie in wait, and the only answer to that was, of course.

This was, for them, just another bit of insurance. Assuming that Toryn was telling the truth. The Guild

had, one way or other, come up on the losing side every time they had fought the Cullinanes, and it made sense from their point of view to work out a deal.

The only trouble was, it also made sense from Jason's point of view. Toryn knew something that Jason needed to know, and Jason was by no means certain that the information was in the pocket that Toryn was advertising.

Ahira looked over at him. "Nareen," he said, his eyes on Jason, not on the older dwarf, "can you tell if he's speaking the truth?"

Nareen opened an eye. "Of course." He produced a small red lens and brought it up to his eye, considering the slaver for a moment. "On the geas, of course; as to the rest, it . . . appears to be truthful." The dwarf wizard tucked the lens back in his pouch, refolded his hands across his middle, and again closed his eyes. "It hardly would appear to be complete."

Toryn's smile widened. "Would you expect me to tell you everything I know?"

Ahira shrugged. "It's up to you, Jason. Call it."

It was ridiculous. The right thing to do with a slaver was to kill it dead, to leave the body where its friends would find it, or mount its head on a pole. Let the rest of them know who did it; let the rest of them sleep lightly, wake constantly during the night, fearing the soft sound of a sword cleaving the air toward them.

Karl Cullinane would have known how to deal with a slaver, and that wouldn't include negotiations.

But if Jason didn't come to terms here and now with this slaver, he might never find Mikyn. He had thought of traveling into Pandathaway, to try at some great risk to trick whatever information the Guild had out of them, and here it was being offered to him, as on a platter. All he had to do was say yes.

He was opening his mouth to say no when Toryn rose. "You might wish to discuss it among yourselves," the slaver said, turning and walking closer to the hearth, idly picking up a poker and poking at the glowing coals.

Ahira leaned his head closer. "Tell me."

"My mind says to say yes, but my gut says to leap over the table and grab the slaver by his throat."

Nareen's eyes didn't open. "Not a wise idea, all things considered. Sulluren is famous for not allowing his guests to hurt one another."

"Right. Don't . . . abuse the hospitality," Ahira said. "Still, I'm sure this Toryn knows something—do you think we should try to track him, see if he'll lead us to Mikyn?"

Jason shook his head. "You know better. If we don't deal with him, that would be our obvious move. It would be too easy for him to set up an ambush—"

"There's that geas. He can't."

Jason snorted. "And you know for a fact that there's not another slaver waiting over the next hill, carrying a potion or charm to dispel the geas?"

It made his stomach churn, but it was the right move. His father couldn't have done it.

But I'm not my father, Jason thought. And maybe Karl Cullinane wouldn't have been able to find Mikyn.

To hell with it.

He stood, his mouth tasting of fear and ashes. "Toryn," Jason said, "we have a deal."

Smiling in an infuriatingly superior sort of way, Toryn resumed his seat, apparently ignoring Jason's glare, then called to Sulluren for more wine. "Then let us first swear to it on our blades, and then drink to it, and then rest ourselves well, for tomorrow we take horse away from here."

"Where?"

"We start in Pemburne, and then to Dunden and Murdalk's End."

Jason cocked his head to one side. "We were already on the road to Pemburne—"

"As was I," Toryn said, with that same smile. "It was not impossible that I might run into your Warrior before you did, and save all the . . ." he waved a hand at Jason and Ahira " . . . bother." He raised his glass. "To our partnership."

Jason raised his own glass. "To success." He hoped the wine would wash the bad taste out of his mouth, but it didn't. He drained the glass and poured himself another one.

* * *

Jason wasn't used to drinking quite so much; Jason wasn't much used to drinking; it got a bit blurry after that. He remembered bits and pieces of it later—Ahira telling him the long version of how Tennyet lost her eye, and Toryn's dark complexion whitening a full shade; he remembered Sulluren joining them for a small bottle of dessert wine so dark purple it was almost black, and so sweet and rich and fruity that it seemed to cling to his tongue for days; and Nareen the Glassmaker, his wrinkled forehead sweaty from the drink and the blaze of the fireplace, his voice a sweet, rich baritone, breaking into a dwarvish ballad that had been old when Nareen was young; and he remembered Toryn as a poor storyteller and better listener.

But that was all in bits and pieces.

Mostly he remembered saying goodbye to Nareen: the dwarvish handshake, with the glassmaking wizard's bony hand clasping Jason's forearm while he clasped the ropy muscles in Nareen's, and Nareen's sad comments that he had done all he could, but that their paths must now separate.

He didn't remember many of the words, except for: "You must be who you are, young Cullinane; the son is not the shadow of the father, though truth to tell, the taller the father, the harder it will be to escape the shadow."

"I don' unnerstan', " he said, cursing himself silently for the slurring of his words, and again for repeating himself. "I'm sorry, N'reen, but I don' unnerstan'."

He remembered Nareen's smile. It was good to remember a friend's smile.

* * *

He woke in the gray morning to the peppery, garlicky, meaty smells of sausage cooking, and found himself under his blankets on the hard ground, and Ahira crouched over the morning cookfire, while Toryn tended a trio of grazing horses over across the road.

Nareen, Sulluren, and the Indeterminate Inn were gone.

7

In Which I Find Some Companionship on and for the Road

Waiting around isn't an annoyance; in the right hands, it's an art form.

—Walter Slovotsky

I always have a fallback position, whenever I take a risk: if all else fails, I'll die horribly, at great length, in great pain. Mind you, it's not a good fallback position . . .

—Walter Slovotsky

For me, I guess it all started one summer at Lake Bemidji. Neat place—a lake large enough to be interesting, but not like one of the Great Lakes or the Cirric; you didn't have to be afraid of it, usually. We rented a cabin there one summer; I was maybe five, my brother Steve a couple of years older.

I don't remember much about it, except fragments: the statues of Paul Bunyan and Babe the Blue Ox by the shore; the way that the water on the dock outside our cabin seemed absolutely full of tiny sunfish, so eager to be hooked that you could snag them with a fistful of line, a hook, and a few pieces of raw bacon.

And the day it hailed.

Emma—Mom—was never much for fish, be it catching, cleaning, or eating, but Big Mike and Stash had gotten tired of catching sunfish from the dock, so they rented a little boat, about the size of a rowboat, and took it and my brother Steve and me out into the middle of the lake.

We rode out on a little boat with a little motor until we were far, far away from shore, and started fishing. Stash got himself a pickerel, I think, and I know Big Mike got his first muskie because we heard about it for years, and Steve and I each had landed some decent-sized perch.

We were having such a good time catching fish that we didn't notice that it was getting dark, and not because it was late, but because a storm was coming up out of the west.

It started raining, and Stash—he was still Daddy to me—and Big Mike took a look at each other and Big Mike tilted back his Mets cap and gave a shrug that said, *If it was you and me, I'd say to hell with it, let's get wet, but we got the kids with us*, and Daddy nodded once, just once.

So Big Mike started the tiny little outboard motor and we headed back to shore.

It was about then that the hail started. The first one hit near the boat with a loud plop that carried even over the hissing of the rain. And then there was another and another and then they started hitting the boat.

Not just tiny little hailstones either, but big ones, some the size of big marbles. It was like being in a rock fight with God.

Well, Stash took his shirt off and wrapped it around me, and Big Mike took his cap off and put it on Steve, and the two of them told us to lie down in the bottom of the boat, and while hail drummed down out of the sky, Dad and Big Mike huddled over us, sometimes grunting when a bigger hailstone hit them.

Big Mike ran the boat right up on shore, and he grabbed Steve while Stash grabbed me, and the two of them ran up to the covered porch of the cabin, where the hail still slammed down, like a box of marbles emptied onto a wooden board.

Emma had the light on. I still remember how bright it seemed, even during the day, and how strange it seemed to me that she'd have it on in the afternoon like that.

God, they were battered. Stash had sort of folded his hands over his head, but when Mom gently stripped off his shirt, his back was bruised in dozens of places, already purpling in spots; and Big Mike's bald head was cut open, blood running down the side of his face, mixing with the water.

And Mom was just this side of hysterical, not that I blamed her.

Stash ended up comforting *her*. "Everything's just fine, Emma," he said, taking her face gently in his hands and making her look at Steve and me.

"Everything's okay, Em," Big Mike said, smiling like he'd won a prize.

Funny thing is, with Stash bruised and Big Mike bloody, they both meant it. What they meant was *the kids are okay*.

* * *

The situation called for lightning reflexes, either to come up with a snappy response to the hissed whisper or to whip out an edged or blunt object.

"Huh?" I said.

Bren Adahan stepped out onto the road, a smile on his face that I would have been happy to have the occasion to wipe off—say, with some coarse sand and a brick.

"I thought we had an agreement," he said.

I'd seen that expression before, although it had been many years, and not on his face. It had been on a big screen, and the line had been, "I'm shocked, Rick, shocked that there's gambling going on here."

His evening finery had been exchanged for dark jacket and trousers and heavy boots, suitable for the road, and a well-used rucksack was on his back. "Something about our working together, the next time you went out on the road?"

All too damn clever. Somebody had worked out what I was up to, and I didn't think that Bren was up to following the machinations of my mind. If he was, I had seriously underestimated him, and that was bad.

I shrugged. "Sure: we agreed that when I took Andy out for a little jaunt, you'd come along and keep us company. I don't see her here."

Hetsked as he shook his head. "I wouldn't have thought you'd violate even the spirit of our agreement, Walter Slovotsky." He took a few steps down the road, then turned and waited. "Well, I can hardly come along with you if you don't come along with me, eh?"

"If you know so much, where are we headed?"

He snorted. "Well, I guess we could be headed toward the cobbler—but I'd rather go to the stables."

Well, somebody had to be the straight man. "Eh? The cobbler?"

"Me, I'd rather wear out a horse than my shoes, but it's your call, Walter. You're in charge."

I won't say I'm equipped to enjoy the inevitable, but I am equipped to recognize it. "Let's go.—Just one thing?"

"Aeia," he said.

"Eh?"

His smile was just one inch shy of overt insult. "Aeia told me that you'd be leaving tonight, and I've got to congratulate her for that when we get back, even if she did overreach."

Well, she had promised to trust me, but she hadn't promised not to think about what I'd do and act appropriately. Which suggested that she thought that Adahan really would be of use on the road.

But did I trust her judgment? It was my neck, not hers, and I've always liked making my own decisions where my neck is concerned.

Bren Adahan hefted a bag that clinked. "I come with funds; I just had the chamberlain cash a draft."

Idiot. And so much for Aeia's judgment. The last thing I needed was for the baron to announce that some of us were leaving— "And what did you tell him?"

He shrugged. "Just that I was going to be buying some breeding stock while I was in the capital, and that we all know that Biemish stallions are the most valued and fecund in the Middle Lands—he suggested I double the draft." Adahan chuckled. "You wouldn't believe what Aeia said you'd do to finance the trip."

I made a private deal with myself: one more time, and if he demanded a straight line after that, I'd get to kill him. "In what way?"

"Oh, she said something about how you'd have pilfered some valuables from the castle."

I'm not sure whether I felt clever or stupid when I pulled the gold candelabra out of my bag and tossed it to him.

His mouth opened, then closed. "We'd better get going," he said.

"Well, yeah," I said. I held out the mouth of my bag for the candelabra. "Trick or treat," I said.

"Eh?"

"Sorry." I switched back to Erendra. "That was English for 'give me the candelabra right this moment.' "

"Compact language, this English of yours. I should learn more sometime."

* * *

Reclaiming our four horses—we took Aeia's and Andy's, as well as our own—was easy, and so was the decision to take the southern fork road away from Biemestren, toward Kiar, at least for the first few miles.

Telegraph wire was strung all along the northern road, and it soon would—or at least could—be chattering with instructions to arrest me for various offenses, real and imagined.

The road was a long, twisting gray band in the starlight, laid out along the crest of the gently rolling hills, punctuated every now and then by a sharp twist or intersecting road. The nearest of the Prince's Inns was a full day's ride away from the capital, of course, but by switching mounts we could probably make it well before morning, grab a quick meal and head on out, skipping one night's sleep, just in case there was somebody on our trail.

Just a matter of staying a few steps ahead of the law.

Eventually, of course, Thomen would think better of it. No matter how irritated he was with me, in the long run he wasn't going to either risk a real breach with Home by pushing it too hard or publish the story of how after being imperiously (or imperially) summoned to the Presence, I'd absconded with the silverware. The first would be politically dangerous; the second would make him a laughingstock.

I chuckled to myself. For once, I was grateful to his mother. Hating me though she did, she was devoted to her son, and would keep his welfare in mind, and starting up with the likes of, well, me didn't fit with looking out for him. I mean, I may not have earned it, but I do have a reputation.

Ahead, the road forked off, one fork toward Kiar, another back toward Barony Cullinane.

Adahan was a bit slow; when I took the fork back toward the barony, it took him a full second before he shouted, "Hey! Wait!" and another minute to kick his horse into a canter, leading the two spare horses behind him.

I hadn't thought he'd work it out. Just as well.

He caught up with me.

"Well?"

"Well, what?"

"Well, Walter Slovotsky, this is the road to Barony Cullinane, not toward Kiar."

I would have said that he had a keen eye for the obvious, but I've said that too much and try to repeat myself only when it amuses somebody.

Then again, I'm somebody. "You, Baron, have a keen eye for the obvious."

He didn't like that.

"I thought about it," I said. "You try. We can either ride off in the general direction we think Ahira and Jason are going, and spend more time in the saddle than I care to think about before we cross what's likely to be a cold trail—meanwhile, by the way, ducking whoever it is that Thomen has out looking for us, because you just know that if he sends anybody after us, it's going to be along the road out of the Empire. Or—"

"Or?"

"Or we can head back to the barony, where in about five days, Ellegon's due on his regular route. We can stop by Home, pick up a team of trackers, and when we cross either Mikyn's or Jason's trail, spread out, with Ellegon running interference and communication. Which makes more sense to you?"

His headshake was both rueful and admiring.

"Let's ride," I said. I spurred the horse into a canter before he worked out that this option meant he was going to spend the nights with Kirah and his smile turned self-satisfied enough to make me want to punch it away.

* * *

The wind brought the sound of hoofbeats of two horses at a fast canter from behind us—far behind us, but none too near—in the dark; I spurred my horse into a faster canter. I was leading Aeia's ruddy brown mare, and it protested for a moment, holding back until I gave the hackamore a good pull. I mean, if my horse could canter with me on its back, the least the brown one could do was keep up.

Adahan kept up with me easily; the mottled gelding he was leading trotted along so obediently I suspected he had gone ahead and done what I should have done with my spare horse: put a bit in his mouth and led it by the reins to make it, a er, bit more cooperative.

Problem: what the hell to do? That depended, of course, on what they intended to do about us. Had they been sent off to catch us on our way to Castle Cullinane? Or were they messengers with instructions for Doria to have us arrested? Or . . .

Think of a recon patrol as a guard: you never want to jump them until you're sure you can deal with the consequences.

Ahead, the road forked again: the left would take us toward Barony Cullinane, the right toward Tynaer. When in doubt, give them the wrong answer: I kicked my horse into a fast canter for a few hundred yards, and led Bren down the road toward Tynaer, before letting the animal drop down into a trot, and then a walk.

Adahan was shaking his head as he caught up with me. The hoofbeats behind us were quieter, more distant than before, but all that meant was that we had put some distance between us and them.

A wheatfield, the grain chest high, spread out on our right. In the daytime it would have been all warm and golden, but it was night, and under the flickering stars and pulsing faerie lights it looked all white and gray and spooky. To the left, a wedge of woods rose to block out the night sky. A fine place for hiding.

Adahan smiled, then whispered, "Follow me," and spurred his horse into the field, tromping down the grain for at least twenty, thirty yards while I just sat there for a moment.

Idiot. The beaten-down wheat would mark his passing for anybody who bothered to look, even if he made it to and over the slight rise before our pursuers rode by. He likely would, but it wouldn't do us any good.

On the other hand, neither would me ducking into the woods by myself, forgetting for a moment that trying to ride through wooded land in the dark is a terrific way to get scratched at least, get clotheslined by some dark branch quite probably, and/or lose an eye. So, cursing the highborn idiot under my breath, I tugged hard on the rope of the horse I was leading, and kicked my horse after him.

* * *

By the time the two horsemen rode by, we were over the rise, our horses hitched to a marker post in the depression beyond, and back just at the rise, the tops of the wheat tickling my nose and ears. Any idiot pursuing us would have seen the path through the grass, but the horsemen, both of them in what appeared even from this distance to be black and silver Imperial livery, barely even gave it a glance.

And then they were gone, and we were left in the dark, the breeze cool, the night insects chittering in their mild amusement.

Ooops. If they'd been looking for us—for anyone—they would have noticed the path. The fact that they didn't meant that they weren't, that it was just a couple of couriers being sent to Barony Tyrnael, not anybody in hot pursuit, that my original notion that I could be long gone before Thomen could decide to send somebody after me still made sense, and that I'd just, well, if not panicked, overreacted.

I could have jumped up and down and shouted to the skies, *I never, ever overreact*, and then stabbed my horse in frustration, but I don't think that would have made the point.

Switching horses made more sense, so we did.

"Not everybody is after you, Walter Slovotsky," Adahan said, as he loosened the rear cinch of his saddle and moved it to his spare horse. "Even if you do try to make things happen that way."

"One point for you, Baron."

He snickered. "One question?"

"Yes?"

"Can we get going now, or do you just want to stand there?"

That wasn't a question I wanted to answer with words; I just set the bit squarely in the mouth of the

horse I was going to lead—who says I can't learn—tightened the cinch around the belly of Aeia's stocky horse, and then swung to its back and kicked it into a fast walk.

* * *

Night riding goes well with wondering. I wondered when Bren would ask why, if I was going to Castle Cullinane from the first, I'd needed to supply myself with money by ripping off Thomen.

And I wondered what I'd answer, if I'd say that Thomen had needed a lesson about not screwing around with us, and that it had been both my duty and my pleasure to administer it; I wondered if I'd say that if I hadn't ripped him off, he might have wondered what I was going to do for money and could well have sent somebody to Castle Cullinane to find out if that destination was the answer.

I wondered if I'd tell him the truth: that it hadn't occurred to me until we were safely on the road and an idle thought had reminded me that the dragon was due in, and that a side trip to the barony would save weeks of traveling, and bring Ellegon in on everything.

But he never did ask, and we made the trip to Castle Cullinane in record time.

* * *

I was stretched out on a cot in the courtyard behind the Castle Cullinane residence tower, the early morning sun warming me, while a bedewed glass of chilled herb tea sat on the stones near my elbow. I'd had the pleasure of the company of Doria and my daughters for breakfast, and the somewhat mixed pleasure of Bren Adahan and Kirah having slept in, or at least having kept to their rooms for the morning, which kept the room temperature comfortable.

The girls had gone off on their various plans for the day—having Daddy around was no big treat for them, not after the first day—and Doria had some things to oversee at the farm, and I was practicing the art of waiting patiently, an art that is best practiced horizontal, with refreshments nearby.

Off in the distance, leathery wings beat the air, triggering a chorus of shouts over by the barracks. If I'd opened my eyes, I would have seen people waving to Ellegon as he banked in for a landing.

I heard a familiar roar, felt the ground shudder to a familiar *thunk*, and then a familiar voice in my head.

Good morning, Walter.

I opened my eyes and rolled to my feet to see Ellegon settling down onto the stones of the courtyard, while a team of burly men from the house guard set up the ladder against his broad side, emptying his load of packages.

Ellegon: a bus-length of gray-green dragon, huge vaguely saurian head eyeing me with an expression that would have looked disapproving even if he hadn't meant it, which he probably did. Truth to tell, I would have left him chained in that Pandathaway sewer; Karl letting him loose almost got the lot of us killed, and I wouldn't want to deprive the universe of Stash and Emma's baby boy.

"Anything interesting?" I asked.

A couple of letters for Doria, a new saddle for Andrea and a doll for Doranne. Various and sundry.

"No emergencies pending?"

He snorted. *I predict interesting times. There are emergencies pending all over the Eren regions—in case you hadn't noticed, there's been an epidemic of strange things coming out of Faerie.*

I let that pass. Not only had I noticed, but I'd been at least peripherally useful in stopping the flow, as the dragon knew damn well.

"You mind running a couple of errands with me?"

I guess that would depend on what they are.

"Well, for one thing, I'm about to become awfully unpopular around here—"

Who is she?

Well, there were some honest answers to that—like Andrea, in one sense. She wasn't going to be thrilled with me ducking out instead of bringing her along. But not for this; this could get sticky, and no matter how impressive she was in the gym, the real world's much messier.

Aeia, of course, in another sense.

But there was no need to go into that now. *Shh*, I thought at the dragon. *Nothing like that—and for another, I think Jason and Ahira might be able to use a hand.* Never mind that I needed to chase the nightmares away; put it in terms that the dragon would likely understand and accept.

Then again, maybe I can understand nightmares, and just possibly you should not be quite so condescending.

Hey, it's my head. What I think to myself between my very own ears is something you should have the decency to pretend you don't hear.

Flame roared. *True enough.*

So?

So what?

So, are you in on this?

Well, the next stop on my route is supposed to be Biemestren.

That was easy to handle; he could unload his cargo for Biemestren here—

—I could do any number of things. The question is whether or not I should.

You like being the mailman?

Well, yes, I do. We each contribute in our own way, and with everybody and his brother cultivating dragonbane these days, I'd just as soon stay out of unfriendly territory, lest before asking 'Are you a good witch or a bad witch,' somebody sends another dragonbanned bolt into my otherwise none-too-tender hide.

Fair enough. He had a point. What with the various things that had been leaking out of Faerie, and the fact that dragonbane was a poison not only to dragons but to most magical metabolisms, the cultivation of dragonbane was becoming awfully common, after many years—there just hadn't been any use for the stuff until recently. But now, all over the Eren regions, people had dragonbanded bolts and arrows ready to fly. It made sense for Ellegon to give this one a bye.

True enough. But if I was sensible, I wouldn't be doing this. I take it you're ready to leave?

I didn't bother to open my eyes as I smiled. "Better call Adahan, and let's go." Maybe the dragon could pull him out of bed with Kirah.

Ellegon just looked at me, and had the grace to say nothing about the hypocrisy inherent in that thought.

Where?

"First Home, and then Pandathaway."

Let's fly.

8

Pemburne

Honi soit qui mal y pense.

—Motto of the Order of the Garter

Relax; the universe is out to get you.

—Walter Slovtosky

Baking in the late afternoon sun, the ramshackle guardhouse outside the low wall surrounding the township of Pemburne was manned by a short troop of horsemen, accompanied by a dozen young boys holding spare mounts, and Jason didn't like that much at all. A confrontation between armed men could only end with a negotiation, fight, flight, or some combination, and while a township whose lord tended to go for a fight all too often would itself be a proper and likely victim of surrounding towns, their lords insisting on mercantile peace if nothing else, Jason didn't like to count on the enlightened self-interest of township lords and lordlings.

Flight didn't seem likely, not with the locals having fresh horses and Jason, Ahira, and Toryn weary on the backs of their tired mounts.

Neither did he like the chances of the three of them taking on a dozen well-armed and well-armored soldiers, two armed with slaver rifles, several with short bows, and all with swords.

Jason stopped counting the worn pommels of the swords at six in a row. Veterans, all of them.

Toryn raised an open palm. "Toryn, Journeyman of the Slavers Guild, greets you, and asks that we be conducted to Lord Pelester, at your convenience."

"Another?" one said. "Should we—"

"Silence." The corporal of the guard, a fiftyish man with metal rank tabs of green copper on the shoulders of his harness, had never taken his eyes off Toryn and his companions. "Perhaps. Quite perhaps. You travel on orders of the Guildmaster, yes?"

"Yes," Toryn said. "Given to me by him in person."

"Oh. And how is that old injury to his wrist?"

"Nonexistent," Toryn said, his sneer accompanied by a derisive snort. "That was the previous one. Guildmaster Yryn has a small scar under his lip, hidden by his beard—but that came from biting through it during the Ordeal. It was Eldren who had the bad wrist. The right wrist." He eyed the guard levelly. "And what else would you like to know about private matters concerning my Guild brothers?"

"No offense meant, none at all," the guard said, raising a palm in protest or acquiescence. "Just doing my job, Journeyman, just doing my job. You seek the Warrior? With hired help?" He eyed Jason, holding his gaze long enough to make it clear that he would not turn from a challenge, but not quite long enough to pose a challenge.

"Yes," Jason said. "His coin is as good as any other."

"And you are . . . ?"

Jason almost used Taren, a common name and his usual alias, but he didn't want Toryn to know his usual alias. "Festen of Wehnest," he said. "Called 'the Lucky.'" He jerked a thumb toward Ahira. "My dwarf companion: Denerrin of Endell."

The corporal looked suspicious. "I thought there was some sort of . . . arrangement between Endell and Holtun-Bieme."

Ahira snorted. "There was. I didn't like it. I left."

"And you work for humans now."

"They pay. I work." He patted at the pouch at his belt. "They don't, I walk."

He didn't glare at Jason, but there was something in his manner that made Jason think Ahira was irritated with him. Still, it had been the right move—on the off-chance that one of these knew anything about the Endell warrens, Ahira, who had lived there for a decade, could have given the right answer.

"You have objections to my companions?" Toryn asked, his voice low.

The guard's face broke into a smile that Jason decided was intended to be ingratiating. "Not at all, Master Toryn."

"Journeyman Toryn, if you please." *I don't need to put on airs*, the sniff with which he punctuated the sentence said. "And are there standing orders regarding guildsmen presenting themselves?"

"Yes, we're to show you the hospitality of the town—"

"Then why do we sit here baking in the sun?" Toryn raised a finger, interrupting the start of the guard's protestations. "Lead us to Lord Pelester's keep, and see to our horses, and we'll forget all this impertinent questioning."

The corporal smiled as he shook his head. "That would do me no favor, young Journeyman—but I'll see to your horses and see you to the lord anyway."

* * *

"*In my house*, he was," Lord Pelester raged, gesturing at the serving-girl to pour him more wine. He rose, holding up his hand to tell Toryn to keep his seat, not appearing to notice that he hadn't started to rise. "He sat under my roof, eating my food, and lay under my roof, in a bed of mine, with my favorite slave girl. In my house."

Jason and Ahira hadn't been offered seats or refreshment; they stood behind Toryn's chair, but at no particular position of attention: hired guards devoted to their duty, but not to the appearance of doing their duty. It all fit with their assumed roles, but Jason silently fumed, knowing that the slaver was enjoying lolling in a chair, a hot mug of tea, a longstemmed glass of inky wine, and a platter of sweetmeats at his elbow, while they stood hungry and thirsty.

His lordship had received them in a small study off the keep's great hall, a room whose walls were covered with oil paintings of previous lords in courageous poses—one over the dead body of an improbably small dragon, barely twice the size of a horse.

Jason hadn't had a lot of experience with a lot of dragons—just the one—but the creature looked too old to be so small. Was it a young one, or a small one, or had the artist simply shrunk the dragon to fit into a frame where a lord could pose heroically, the butt of his lance on the blood-soaked ground, one foot on the dragon's chest?

"In my house," Pelester repeated. He was a tall man, smooth complexion over thick cheekbones and massive jaw, peasant's bones wrapped in noble skin. He was dressed in silver and black that reminded Jason of Imperial livery; his fingers were bare of rings—in fact, he wore no jewelry save for a signet ring on a delicate-looking, silver chain around his neck, and he incessantly, almost obscenely fondled the ring as he talked.

His glare fixed on Toryn. "He identified himself as a master of your Guild, and I had no reason to doubt him. It was hours after he was gone the next morning that Sensell, my slave-keeper, was found dead. And if I—" he waved the matter away. "If a spot of indigestion hadn't kept me alone in my own bed, I likely could have joined him."

Well, that explained the extra questioning by the guards. Mikyn had passed himself off as a Guild slaver, and gotten away with it, long enough to kill off Pelester's slave-handler.

Despite everything, it was all Jason could do not to smile. A slave-handler dead, and Toryn the slaver

embarrassed. *Not bad, Mikyn.*

"Well," Toryn said, "we're closer than we've been before. I'll ask for your hospitality tonight for myself, my horses, and my companions, and we'll pick up the trail in the morning."

"Granted, of course." Pelester dismissed the matter with a wave of his hand. "You may have a guest suite in the keep—"

"—and I'll need for my companions to sleep in the outer room." Toryn spread his hands. "They're too devoted to me to allow me to close my eyes otherwise."

"That's hardly necessary here."

"We watch him." Ahira grunted. "He dies, we look bad. He lives, we get paid."

"Of course." Pelester nodded. "You'll dispatch a messenger when you've . . . dealt with him."

"It will be generally known, I promise you," Toryn said.

"That isn't good enough. I want to know, personally, that he's dead. Is there any part of that you don't understand?"

"As you wish it, of course," Toryn said. He sipped at his steaming mug of tea. "You have many slaves here?"

"Just a few. Mostly too old to do much more than help tenants plant their crops. Nothing like it was in my father's time. Most of my own fields are tilled by tenants; I dislike snaring the crop, but it's just too expensive these days to buy labor; cheaper to hire it." He eyed the serving girl. "On the other hand, we do have good crops these days, and that pays for some diversions." Pelester beckoned the serving girl over and pulled her to a sitting position on the arm of his chair, one hand resting possessively on her hip.

She was about Jason's age, slender rather than slim, and the thinness of the creamy cotton shift, belted tightly at the waist to accentuate the swell of her breasts, made it clear that it was her only garment. Her hair was black as coal, framing a delicate face with full, red lips that parted for just a moment, a hint of pink tongue playing at the corner of her mouth.

She smiled and nestled closer to Pelester; he patted her hip in dismissal, and she returned to the sideboard, straightening cups and refilling a boiling copper kettle in its rack over a small brazier.

"Just a few of the household servants, these days, like Marnea, here," Pelester said. "My treat for last year's tax surplus."

"Hmm." It was all Jason could do not to snarl at the way Toryn eyed her professionally. "Klimosian?"

"Indeed." Pelester's eyebrows raised. "Most mistake her for a Salkosian, what with her hair and coloration."

A thin smile. "Salkos hasn't had a famine for eleven years; Klimos' swamp-rice crop failed six years ago, and when they need money, they tend to start by selling daughters who are just barely rounding."

"Quite." Pelester shrugged the matter aside. "Would you like her for the night?"

Marnea's back stiffened, for just a moment, and then she returned to her work. She had been passed around before, it seemed, but she was not used to it.

Jason's fist clenched. The right thing to do was to draw his sword, announce who he was, and hack his way out through the local lord.

But he couldn't do the right thing, not here, not now.

A thin smile crossed Toryn's face. "Not I, but I think it's been too long since Festen's been properly serviced; he's off his feed, and overly tense. Have her sent to him later."

"Indeed," Pelester said, "it has been too long; he reddens at the thought."

"I think we embarrass him; and he's too useful in a fight to anger permanently. Let us change the subject."

Jason could, at the moment, have gladly strangled the slaver.

* * *

"What was that all about?" Jason hissed as soon as the old major-domo, with a bow, had closed the heavy door to their suite behind them. It was a standard sort of arrangement: an outer sitting room, a low couch and chair on the carpeting near the open window; the curtained, arched doorway in the center of the far wall left room for two sleeping pallets in front of it, so that a noble—or slaver—could have his guards sleep across his doorway.

Toryn tapped a finger to his ear. "Keep your voice low, young Festen," he said, quietly, gently, the violence of his glare belying the tone of his voice. "It was only common courtesy." He leaned close to Jason, his breath offensively warm in Jason's ear as he whispered. "And, besides, while you wouldn't have let me have her, one of us ought to talk to her. Had you been listening, you would have heard Pelester telling us he lent her to Mikyn. Perhaps something unexpected slipped out between the sheets. That which slips one way may slip again, eh?" he asked, his smile offensively broad. He gestured to the room beyond. "Denerrin and I will sleep there," he said, raising his voice, "while you can spend the night . . . investigating local customs." Toryn smiled.

Jason was beginning to dislike that smile more than he would have thought possible.

The slaver executed an overelaborate bow. "In the meantime, I learned as an apprentice to get what sleep I can when I can; I will bid the two of you a good night."

Jason watched his back as the slaver disappeared through the curtains.

He turned to Ahira. "Share with me your thoughts, if it please you," he said in Dwarvish, his voice pitched low enough that he wasn't worried about being overheard, even if the locals did understand the Moderate People's language.

"Cloudy." Ahira shrugged. "My thoughts, young son of my friend, are scattered and confused, and they're cloudy." The dwarf smiled, as though at a private joke, before he plopped himself down on the couch and began removing his boots. "I don't know," he said, switching back to Erendra. "I don't doubt the geas—not if cast by Vair the Uncertain and vouched for by Nareen the Glassmaker—but it's just a spell." Blunt fingers removed a boot, then gently rubbed at the gnarled toes.

"I don't know what you mean."

"Magic is, well, literal," Ahira said in English, his voice low. "It doesn't have a subtext—it doesn't mean anything beyond what it explicitly promises. Toryn isn't our partner, he doesn't work from the same principles we do. We can count on him not to slip a knife in our back, and with the geas we can count on him not to sit silent while somebody else does it—but we can't count on him to think seven steps ahead to prevent somebody else from doing it, the way Walter would." The dwarf shook his head. "And he reeks of some sort of unmentioned agenda, and that scares me." Ahira pulled off a second boot. "I wish Walter were here; trickiness is his sort of thing, not mine." He looked at Jason long and hard.

I wish I had your father here instead of you, he might as well have said.

The dwarf tossed his boots toward the arched, curtained doorway, then padded after them across the carpet. "G'night, Jason. Find out what you can."

And then he was alone.

* * *

There was something more than vaguely obscene about all this, Jason decided, as he kicked off his own boots, then loosened his belt and lay back on his bedding, the back of his head pillowed on his hands.

His first time had been with a serving girl, name of Elarrah, but that was hardly the same thing. She was a maid in the castle at Holtun-Bieme, an orphan left behind in the war, several years older than he was, and he was the Heir—they had struck up a friendship that had ended with her sneaking into his room at night, every now and then. Nothing complicated about it, nothing compulsory about it, nothing obscene about it, nothing risky about it—she visited the Spider twice a year, she explained, and was hardly going to keep her job if she angered Jason's father, and could hardly find herself a husband with the Heir's bastard swelling her belly, on her hip, or tagging along behind.

She had married a corporal in the house guard, he had heard—lucky man.

He took another pull at the bottle of wine.

The truth was that it had been too long for him and that, as Walter Slovotsky put it, the terminal hornies was the only terminal disease that you don't die of, and that Marnea was nicely shaped, and that he was tired of waking up with—

The door creaked open, and she was there, carrying a tray in one hand, a shrouded candlestick in the other.

"Good evening," he said.

Her eyes didn't meet his as she set the tray down on a low stand: it held a small platter of cheese and meatrolls, and a tall bottle, along with two glasses.

"And a good evening to you." She knelt by the tray, dressed only in a short patterned wraparound dress, fastened with a tuck at the swell of her breasts and a slip-knotted belt at the waist. As she knelt, the hem rode high up on her thighs. They were very nice thighs.

"I think you'll like this. It's a chilled Elsinian." She poured him a glass of wine, and then another. "Do you

mind? There's no rush unless you feel one—I'm yours for the night." She moved next to him, handing him a glass. Her fingers played with the knot of her belt, and her head was tilted to one side.

"Did Mikyn get the same treatment?" He sipped at the wine. Very nice, and almost icy cold, but not cold enough to draw away a vague taste of vanilla and honey, or a distant flowery whiff that could almost have been a perfume.

"He . . . yes," she said. "Yes. We spent most of the night talking, strangely enough."

"What would you and a Guild slaver have to talk about?" he asked.

She started for a moment, then shrugged. "Various things."

Bullshit. There was something wrong here, and he couldn't quite put his finger on it.

He nibbled at a meatroll. Different than what U'len made—less garlic, he decided, and none of it wild—but in some ways almost as good. Another swig of wine cleared his palate.

She bent over and kissed him, her lips warm against his, her mouth parted, her tongue warm and wet against his. He reached for her belt—

No. This wasn't right. It wasn't playful, like it had been with Elarra, or intense and almost frighteningly fierce, the way it was with Janie. It was somehow dirty and shameful, and not something that the son of Karl Cullinane would have done—

And it wasn't something that Mikyn would have done, either.

Not after the way Mikyn had been mistreated, when he was only a boy, before Karl and his raiders had freed him and his father. There was no reason to believe that Mikyn couldn't function with a woman—but not an owned one, not one with no choice, one under compulsion of whip and iron.

"Mikyn." He pulled back from her. "He told you who he was, didn't he?"

Her eyes grew wide, and she paled, visibly, even in the candlelight. Damn, damn, damn. "No, no, nothing of the sort," she said. "I was fooled, too. He—"

"—pulled away from you, just like I did, only more so." Jason knew that he shouldn't be thinking out loud. But all the bells were ringing in his head, and he knew with an awful clarity what had happened with Mikyn.

"Because he couldn't take you, not under compulsion, because that is to Mikyn the most horrible thing that can happen to somebody, whether it's a little boy or a grown woman."

Her headshake was almost hysterical. "No, please."

Idiot. She wasn't thinking things through. Jason couldn't help doing just that. What would Mikyn have done if he'd found himself exposed so? Remember that he was crazy, that he was on a rogue rampage, killing off slave-owners right and left—but remember that he was also functioning well enough to pass himself off as a traveling farrier or a Guild slaver.

Mikyn was not a drooling idiot; he was devious and he was clever.

"He promised he'd come back for you," Jason said. Mikyn had been a slave, and had grown up around former slaves; he knew full well that there was not necessarily more virtue to be found among the owned than the owners. Marnea would be too likely to talk, and would have to be silenced. There would be two ways to silence her: with death, or with a promise, a believed promise.

She was inching for the door, and at his look turned the slow motion into a quick scabble. Jason grabbed her by an ankle and pulled her back, wrapping one arm around to pin her arms to the side and fastening a hand over her mouth.

What was true for Mikyn was true for Jason. There were two ways to silence her.

"Stop it," he hissed, vaguely embarrassed at the way she had stopped struggling. It wasn't just that he was that much stronger than her; it was that she had been taught not to struggle. "I'm Jason Cullinane," he said. "And I'll honor his promise to you."

He hadn't thought her eyes could get any wider. She relaxed in his arms, and he slowly, gingerly removed his hand from her mouth.

"There you have it," he said. "My life's in your hands; all you have to do is tell who I am, and I'm sure Pelester will be grateful. But do you think he'd free you?"

She shook her head.

"Is that what you want? Freedom, and a place to go?"

She nodded.

"Good," he said. "We'd better go wake the others."

* * *

It was hard to tell who was less thrilled about being woken up from sleep, Toryn or Ahira, although it was close.

Ahira scowled. "I saw no need to complicate matters," he said in Dwarvish. "Had I seen such, I could have complicated them myself."

"I thank you for your observation," Jason responded in the same language, then switched to Erendra. Dwarvish wasn't very good at expressing irritation; the Moderate People weren't much on being irritated.

"What did you expect me to do?" Jason asked the dwarf. He didn't mind the constant sense that whatever he did was inadequate—well, maybe he did—but he surely didn't have to stand for criticism when there was no alternative.

"Is this supposed to be a trick question?" Ahira snorted. "Couldn't you say you were too tired? I think you've been hanging out with Walter too much—even men are allowed to say no, every now and then."

"I wish you'd mentioned that before," Jason said.

"I didn't think I had to."

Jason was about to say something else when he was interrupted by Toryn's laugh. Dressed only in a white silken robe belted tightly at the waist, Toryn lay back on his bedding, propped on one elbow. "Well, it could be worse, although I hardly know how. If you hadn't exposed us, all we would have had to do was tell Lord Pelester that she had gotten more out of Mikyn than a quick poke, and let him ask her, gently, gently, what she knew." He glanced at where Marnea sat in the corner, looking to Jason every now and then for assurance.

Jason tried not to snarl. "I did as I thought best."

"So you did," Toryn said, his expression making it clear that he thought Jason's best failed being good enough by a large measure. He turned to Marnea. "Did he arrange a rendezvous with you, or did he promise to ride back for you?"

"I'll tell you," she said, "after I'm away from here."

Toryn chuckled. "Done. I'll buy you from Pelester, and we'll sell you, say, in—"

"No," Jason said. "We don't sell people."

"Oh, Jason Cullinane," Toryn said with a chuckle. "You may have it your way. Fine; so we'll buy her and free her. I'll tell Pelester in the morning: I've taken a fancy to you, and offer—" He stopped himself and shook his head. "No, that might not work. You're really rather a pretty little thing, and he might well want you more than any money I could credibly spend. And that would mean, if he turned me down, that when you disappeared, we would be the suspects." He tilted his head to one side.

It was Ahira's turn to smile. "Giving the Guild a bad reputation. Such a pity."

"Which is why, friend Ahira, I won't offer to buy her. Even assuming that I don't fear having Pelester's men on my trail." He reached a hand out and lifted her chin. She didn't resist; she was far too used to being handled. "Pity. And now, knowing what she does, we can hardly leave her behind, to trade her knowledge about us for, perhaps, some promise of better treatment, eh? Or freedom, even?" He tapped her on the nose. "Do remember, Marnea, that owners often lie to slaves about such."

He let go of her chin and dismissed the problem with a wave of a hand and a yawn that seemed as much from boredom as from sleepiness. "Well, I'll leave it in the hands of these two; freeing slaves is their business. Mine, for the moment, is resting my eyes." He disappeared back into the sleeping room, returning momentarily with his blankets and his scabbarded sword. He spread the blankets in front of the closed door and lay down, his sword next to him, his careful look at Marnea a warning that hardly needed to be said out loud. He pulled a blanket over himself and closed his eyes. "Wake me in the morning, unless you figure to make a run for it tonight."

Jason turned to Ahira.

"I . . . may have a plan," the dwarf said. "Let me think on it for a while." He tossed a pair of blankets toward Marnea, then kicked Jason's blankets toward the sleeping room. "You get some sleep."

* * *

It was sometime around dawn that she came to him.

His father would have woken completely at the slightest touch, but Jason floundered around before he realized that he wasn't alone in bed, and that warm fingers were working at the buttons of his trousers;

then for a moment, on the edge of sleep, he thought he was back in Biemestren, and with Elarrah.

He thought of pushing her away, or of explaining that they really would rescue her anyway, but her mouth was warm and wet and alive on his, and her hair smelled of soap and flowers, and knowing, practiced fingers were easing him out of his clothing, and he decided that not only wasn't he as noble as his father had been, but that he didn't give a damn, and reached for her.

9

Home

Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in.

—Robert Frost

When arguing with friends or family, the worst position you can be in is when you're right and they know you are. It limits your ability to plead guilty to a lesser, as they know you don't really mean it.

—Walter Slovotsky

Almost twenty years changes a lot.

When I first saw the valley of Varnath, as the elves call it, it was the dark green of forest and grasslands, broken only by silver threads of streams running down from the mountains into the central lake. Brightly colored birds twittered in the trees, and butterflies and the smell of flowers filled the air.

At least, that's the way I remember it. I don't remember as clearly the ache of my tender butt from too many days in the saddle, or the way my jerkin kept rubbing against the spot where some bug the size of my left nut had sucked out a quart of blood, leaving behind God's Own Mosquito Bite.

Then again, which would you choose to have close to the top of your mind? The beauty and the pleasure, or the pain and the itch?

Now, what had been grasslands below was a plaid patchwork of fields, mostly in shades of brown, separated by only strips of forest. Sort of like the valley had been given a bikini wax. Lines of power cable stretched from the forest at the foot of the falls, running both into the town of Home itself and out toward the foothills. Thinner wires ran out toward the nearest farms—having a telegraph handy was more important, perhaps, and certainly a lot cheaper, than electricity.

Over in Engineer Territory, by the lowest of the foothills, near what we called the Batcave (Karl and I used to break into a little tune that went "*dah-dah-dah-dah-dah-dah-dah*," in a joke that even the other Other Siders never found all that funny), a cluster of factories belched foul, sulphurous smoke into the air, and as the warm air currents over a fallow field gave Ellegon some added (and in my opinion, unneeded)

lift, they brought with them the smell of rotting manure.

Which may have been wonderful for next year's wheat and potatoes, but did little for my nostrils.

Progress sometimes stinks.

Still, the lake was clean and clear and blue, and looked inviting, as the dragon circled down toward the town square. Lou knew better than to use the lake as a dumping ground; doesn't take long to turn a small lake into a large, smelly cesspool.

I lowered myself to the solid ground, although as always after a long dragonback ride, it felt just a little jellyish under my feet, and it took me a minute to be able to stand straight instead of like a drunk on his third tankard.

It gets harder to travel as I get older; I felt like I had been either on the road for weeks or buried for days—it's hard to tell the difference—and am sure that I looked it.

Adahan, on the other hand, ran his neatly manicured fingers through his hair, gave a quick tug to his combination pistol/swordbelt, and tucked the ends of his tunic into his trousers, looking disgustingly fresh as he hoisted his bag to his shoulder.

"Well, where do we go?" he asked.

I didn't know; I'd sort of expected to be met.

Understandable. Nobody around here has anything else to do except greet Walter Slovotsky, and ask if they may be of service.

Bren Adahan smirked, and I resolved to have a few short words with the dragon about the nature and practice of private conversation.

And what would you do if I told you to stuff it? Refuse to beg me to help you next time?

A small troop of men was exiting from a low brick building next to the granary, and a stream of schoolchildren was already, well, streaming out of the doors of the schoolhouse toward the square. Voices called out greetings—

—for the dragon.

What did you expect? A parade?

He turned his huge saurian head toward the approaching children.
Stand back, please, until I'm unloaded—you don't want to get in the way.

One of the men—Evain, I think his name was; he had been on Daven's raiding team at one point—called out a greeting to me, but another glared at him and grumbled something about work to be done.

It took only a couple of minutes for the men to unload Ellegon and unstrap his rigging. The dragon, surrounded by at least three dozen children ranging in age from about six to about sixteen, carefully lumbered off toward the lake, their shouts of glee occasionally interrupted by a skyward gout of fire and a mental caution.

*Benric, if you keep pushing Katha, I can promise you you'll be last in line for a dive, and—Menten, be

patient, yes, I'll swim out with you. Karl, you can't climb up on me when I'm walking—it's too tricky.*

That last gave me a start, but I kept it out of my face. There were more than a couple children named after Karl, and even a Walter or two. There was even a chubby-cheeked blond girl, her hair done up in a complex braid that spoke of her mother's Aersten ancestry, named Tenny, although it would be hard to think of a person looking less like Ten.

I looked over at Bren.

He shrugged. "Me, too."

Just as well. I wouldn't want to be the only person spooked.

A horse-drawn flatbed wagon had been pulled up to the pile of bags and boxes, and Bren and I joined in the loading. It was good to be doing something as simple and stable as lifting a bag onto the weathered boards, but with eight of us working, it was only a matter of a couple of minutes until the driver released the brake, and with a click of his tongue and a twitch of the reins, sent the wagon rattling down the road.

Two figures emerged from the dark of the brick house, one dwarf, one human, the dwarf moving at a quick but comfortable hobble despite the fact that his right leg, from just above the knee down, was a knobby piece of wood terminating in a brass ferrule.

"Nehera, Petros," I called out.

The scars that crisscrossed Nehera's lined face, reminders of whippings he had received long ago, had faded almost to invisibility—or, more accurately, taken on the permanent just-this-side-of-sunburn red that years over his forge had given the rest of his face, forearms and hands. His tree-trunk-thick forearms were heat-reddened beneath the short, dark hair, save in a few dozen spots where white scars told of a small spattering of hot metal.

But he stood with his back straight, and his crooked-toothed smile broadened as he extended a hand. "Walter Slovotsky—'tis good to see you, years though it's been." Idly, he used the brass tip of his peg leg to kick a small stone out of the road and into the strip of trees surrounding the square.

The years had been kind to the dwarf, albeit not to Petros, whose face was too deeply lined for somebody ten years younger than me. There was a sort of watery look to his eyes, and when he stopped in front of me, he just glared, which didn't seem to stretch his face into an unusual state. His beard was still scraggly, although that was the only thing that looked young about him. He looked more like a jury than a welcoming committee. "Lou wants to see you," he said. "He's waiting; let's go."

"So what's the problem?" I asked. "Why the cold shoulder?"

"Bast is back," he said, his words paced evenly, carefully. "He says that you've given away the secret of gunpowder."

"Oh," I said. I would have rather said *I did not, and how dare you suggest that I would*, but not only wouldn't that have been true, but I wouldn't have been able to get away with it.

Nehera smiled at me, but Nehera always smiled at everyone.

* * *

I first met Louis Riccetti as a freshman, in a music appreciation class that he was taking to fulfill a distribution requirement and that I was taking because I, well, appreciated music. He had been balding even then—well, to be fair, his hair was thinning and his hairline retreating—his eyes were well on their way to a permanent squint, and his shoulders were tending toward the hunched. He was nineteen, I think, but looked at least five, maybe ten years older. From the pocket protector down to his white socks with brown shoes, he looked like a classic computer geek—although he in fact wasn't; he didn't have much use for computers. Appearances can be deceiving, even when they're not trying to be.

* * *

To a background of Bach and Beethoven, Ravel and Rameau, Mozart and Mendelssohn, Puccini and Prokofiev, we had struck up a distant friendship mainly based on my having spent one summer as an apprentice blacksmith at Sturbridge Village—being a smith is a tough, hot, sweaty job; being a part-time apprentice smith a hundred steps from a locker room complete with high-pressure shower and a Coke machine isn't—and his interest in metalworking of all sorts, which had eventually led to my invitation to a gaming session with Professor Deighton . . .

But that was another country, and another time.

We were all getting older. The fringe of hair that rimmed his scalp was a dingy gray with occasional bits of black, and although his arms and legs were skinny, he had developed a permanent potbelly that pushed against the buttons of his shirt as he pushed his chair back from his desk and folded his hands in his lap, eyeing me with rather more appraisal than approval.

"Greetings, Mr. Mayor," I said, trying for a light tone.

"Hello, Walter. Greetings, Baron Adahan," he said, with a nod and a smile that was clearly intended for Adahan, although the smile was hardly big enough to bother with. "Have a seat."

The shades had been drawn, and the room was dark. On his desk, crowned with a bleached parchment lampshade, an electric light glowed, although the desk had been placed so that more than enough light would stream in through the mottled-glass window for any sort of paperwork. Lou was showing off.

"You want to talk about the gunpowder," I said.

His lips pursed for a moment, and then he nodded. "Yeah. That would be a good start. I want to give you a fair hearing—Bast said you gave out the secret."

"Well, yes, I did, and I did it in order to save not only my own life, and Bast's and Kenda's—but Ahira's, Tenny's, Jason's, and Andy's."

He was toying with a smooth stone, a paperweight or something, that he had taken from his desktop. "He mentioned that," Lou said, as though that factor had already been weighed in my defense and found to be negligible. "He also said that you had a chance to . . . back out of the problem."

Yes, I perhaps could have had Erol Lyneian and all the crew aboard his ship killed, but the rest of us wouldn't have been able to sail it, not in the rocky waters near Ehvenor, not to the hill overlooking the gleaming city, where the Three waited . . .

Without that—without us—Faerie would have continued to leak out into reality, and the trickle of strange, magical creatures would have become a full-fledged flood.

I hadn't known that at the time, though. I had known that Andy said we needed to get closer to Ehvenor, and I had trusted her.

And I'd had little appetite for a fight anyway, not after the way we had almost been killed in Brae, and maybe part of that was because I was slowing down.

"Maybe," I said. "But I was there and you weren't, and it was my call, not yours." I shrugged. "I guess I could have waited until they started sawing away on me, or on Andy or any of the rest, but I didn't. It was a nice bit of strategy—split up two allies quite neatly, and got us out of there intact." I snorted. "And, by the way, put an end to a local lord who stuck a bunch of your engineers up on poles to die of exposure."

He took a deep breath and let it out. "Which doesn't make it right, does it?"

I could have argued, I could have pointed out that the secret was going to get out eventually, and what with Home and the Holtun-Bieme Empire preparing to switch over to smokeless powder and sealed ammunition, it wasn't like I'd given away the store. There had been the too-expensive slaver rifles around for years, after all.

And I could have pointed out that the secret no more belonged to Lou than it did to me, that I knew fifteen-three-and-two as well as he did, even if he had grown to think of it as his property, to be shared with only his most inner circle of engineers.

His eyes rested on mine long enough to make me wish I knew of a side exit. A quick leap over the desk, a slap on the throat to silence him long enough for me to deal with Petros, and—

—and I'd still have Nehera to handle, although the dwarf had never been quick-witted, but—

Ellegon? You wouldn't happen to be ready for a quick getaway, would you?

Probably not. The dragon's mental voice was laconic and indifferent. *I'm playing. Leave me alone.*

—without Ellegon, I'd still be in the valley, having just attacked Lou, the Engineer, who was surrounded by a bunch of disciples only a little more devoted to him than the Apostles were to their Teacher.

Ever wonder why you don't see a lot of little kids named Judas Iscariot?

He smiled thinly. "Well, I guess we'll let it go, given that I don't see any other good choice."

I felt Bren Adahan relax just a trifle, and realized that he had been keyed up, ready to move, to follow my lead, presumably—or, conceivably, to rap me on the head and hand me over to Lou.

Save it for later. "You know what I've always liked about you, Lou?" I asked.

"What?"

"That having me killed never's seemed to you to be a good choice."

He didn't smile at the pleasantry. I would have said something like *What are you, an audience or a jury?* but under the circumstances . . .

"What do you need?" he asked.

"For tonight? Food for four—Bren and I are hungry—two beds, and all the news that anybody's heard about the Warrior. For tomorrow, five of Daven's best trackers, supplies, money, and guns."

"Guns," he said.

Among old friends, it's not always the things you say, but sometimes the things you don't say.

He didn't say: after giving away the secret of black powder, something I've been saving for as long as possible, you're asking me to put revolvers in your hands, and that's asking a lot, Walter, probably more than I should give you.

And I didn't say: look, Lou, I'm not Karl, and I'm not the world's best swordsman, and I'm going in harm's way with Bren Adahan at my side, not Karl and Ahira and Tennetty and Chak, and I need every bit of edge I can get, and a repeating handgun would be a big one.

And he didn't say: the Therranji want to annex us, and to keep them at bay we need an edge, something scary enough that they won't push hard and turn it into war, and right now, smokeless powder is a big part of that, too important to be risked on the likes of you.

And I didn't say: I know. And I know we're always going to disagree on that, but I'm asking you anyway.

And he didn't say: and since you know too much about the making of it, and since I know you'll spend information instead of your life, I can't even let you leave here, much less give you a sample of a repeating handgun.

No. We didn't say anything. But he looked at me for a long time, and then he pulled open a drawer in his desk, pulled out a wooden box, and, removing a keychain from around his neck, opened the box with a small key.

Inside the box, under an oilcloth that Lou pulled aside, on a bed of blue satin, like some sort of jewels, two pistols lay, not quite touching, nested together like a yin and yang—unless you prefer a more earthy metaphor; I always do—surrounded by a circle of half-moon clips, each of which held three shiny brass cartridges.

The pistols weren't black powder flintlocks, but revolvers, more blackened than blued, the barrel length maybe four inches, the grips polished bone, carefully checkered for a good grip. The sights were low and rounded, unlikely to catch on clothing. Not exactly pocket pistols, but easy enough to conceal underneath a tunic, or even strap to an ankle if your trousers were blousy enough. They looked a bit strange to me, but I quickly figured it out—they had been made smooth, with no sharp edges to catch on clothing as you tried to draw. Even the hammer spur was abbreviated and rounded.

Lou knew what he was doing, at least when it came to making things.

He picked one up and idly opened the cylinder, revealing the shiny brass heads of six cartridges, then slowly, gently, closed the cylinder. "If you flick it shut, the way they used to on TV," he said, "you're pretty quickly going to knock the cylinder out of alignment. Screws the accuracy all to hell. Always push the cylinder closed." He tucked it into his belt, then picked up the other, opened it, showed it, closed it. "This one's mine; the other's yours."

Petros was on his feet. "No. You're not."

Petros might as well have not been talking, and when he opened his mouth again, Nehera reached over and laid a flipper of a hand on Petros' arm.

"No safety switch," Lou went on, "but the hammer is blocked from the firing pin unless the trigger's pulled back. It will not fire, even cocked, if the trigger isn't held back, so you can keep a round under the hammer. There's only a few of these," he said, "and they're trickier to make than they look; the rest of your party will have to do with Benden's breechloading flintlocks—paper cartridges," he said. "Faster than muzzleloaders, but not quite up to these. There's a target range out on the East road, and the armorer will issue you as much ammunition as you want," Lou said. "I'd say go through at least two boxes; carry two with you. Save your brass. You can have one of the apprentices clean the gun for you."

The right thing to do was nod silently, but nobody told my mouth that, "I can clean up after myself."

"Yeah." Lou put the gun back in the box, closed the top, turned the key, carefully removed the key and slapped it on top of the box. He slid it across his desk to me, then put his hands on the surface of his desk and pushed himself to his feet. He came around the desk, a hand outstretched.

When I took it, it felt stronger than it used to be.

When I was younger, I used to think that it was something special just between the six of us—me, Ahira, Karl, Andy, Doria, and Lou—because we were Other Siders, trapped in a world we had never made, or because we were such special people. It took me years to realize that it was the years, the years that we had shared not just the big things—sweat and tears, blood and pain, food and shelter, the birth of kids, the death of mutual friends—but the little things: the idle conversation at the end of a long day, the ongoing argument over whether a gelding or a mare made for a better saddlehorse.

It was the little things that were important, and the little things I really missed with Kirah. I've lost too many people I care about, and sometimes I didn't realize how much I cared until they were gone.

And I hadn't realized how important Lou was to me, just personally, until he said, Don't make me wrong, but he didn't need to say it with words; he said it with a smile that spoke of trust, and more important, of friendship.

We were friends again.

"I like the lightbulb," I said. "Impressive."

"Yeah." He grinned. "Thought you might."

* * *

There are parts of all this that you can have for the asking: the mud, the blood, and the crud, for a start. The separation from the family—how many nights have I been robbed of tucking my baby daughter in for the night? The road food and the fear—both taste lousy in my mouth.

But there are compensations: like a lake shore near a stream inlet, where the soft grasses ran not only up to the edge of the lake but into it, and beneath the cold water were soft and pleasant against my feet and between my toes; like warm afternoon air carrying with it the mellow tang of sunbaked grasses and distant cheery shouts from where, hidden beyond the small island placed off-center in the lake, children

played and splashed with a dragon, an occasional gout of flame reaching skyward to punctuate some mental caution; like a box containing two pistols holding down my clothing on the shoreline.

A few feet away, a few feet farther out, beyond the spot where the gentle slope of the lake dropped off to God-knows-how-deep, Bren Adahan was treading water—for the exercise, I guess. He tossed his head to clear the water out of his eyes, sending bright drops arcing high into the sunlight.

"Blood and dust tomorrow, but we swim and soak today, eh, Walter Slovotsky?"

"Something like that, Baron," I said. "Best to put off some suffering, when you can."

Professional trick: when you've got something serious to worry about—say, getting involved in a chase for a former companion who has gone both crazy and ballistic—and there's nothing useful that worrying about that will do, pick something relatively minor and worry about *that*, instead.

It won't do you any good, mind, but you won't feel as bad.

I thought about the hell I'd be in for when I got home, from Andy. I'd said I'd take her out on the road with me, and I would—but not now, not for this. Bad enough to be chasing after Jason and Ahira; worse to be looking for Mikyn; best not to involve her in me fleeing from the Emperor, even though my guess was that he would want to let it all drop rather than letting me defy him so openly. (Take it out on my family? Are you kidding? Nobody in court would even suggest it. Somebody raises their hand to my family, they don't just have Walter Slovotsky cutting it off: add Ahira, Ellegon, and Lou, for starters.)

There wouldn't be any hell to pay from Aeia, or the girls. Aeia would just cock her head to one side and smile, and maybe hold me a little too tight, but I wouldn't mind. Janie and Doranne were used to having me around, and to having me gone—they'd be happy to see me, but neither of them would have missed me the way I missed them.

I heard distant hoofbeats and counted four horses, as I casually felt at the scabbard still strapped to my calf, and closed my eyes for a moment to be sure I could recall the spot on the island where I'd stashed a getaway kit some years back.

But it wasn't anything to worry about—just a couple of pretty young, more than vaguely pretty young women in Engineer jeans and flannel workshirts, each leading a spare horse. The taller, slightly blonder of the two girls tossed a pile of towels to the grass and swung a long leg over the saddle, dismounting prettily. I guess I imprinted early on young women in tight jeans, and the high heels of her riding boots gave an unusually nice line to her legs.

"Walter Slovotsky?" she called out.

Bren jerked a thumb at me. "Him. My name's Bren."

She made a moue. "Yes, Baron. I've heard. I'm Barda; she's Arien. We're journeymen. The Engineer said that if we brought you some towels, fed you enough supper, and asked you real prettily, you might be persuaded to talk about internal combustion engines."

I smiled at Adahan, as though to say, *I won't tell on you if you don't tell on me*, and he chuckled and spread his hands.

"Anything's possible," I said. "After you join us for a swim."

Her smile broadened. It was a pretty smile. Not as pretty as Aeia's, mind, but it was much, much closer. "Well, I thought you'd never ask."

She was already unbuttoning her shirt as she kicked off her boots, and after a quick hesitation, Arien followed her lead.

It's always interesting to watch pretty girls undress. As I say, the work does have its compensations.

* * *

The dream is always the same:

We're trying to make our escape from Hell, millions of us streaming across the hot rocks, while behind us the volcano rises immensely large, spewing demons and lava with equal vigor. Sometimes it's hard to tell the difference—ahead, a glowing red crack in the rock spews forth what at first looks like a blob of lava, but the blob gathers itself together and flows uphill, like an amoeba, except faster, fast enough to engulf one poor bastard who barely has time enough to get a scream out before the molten rock flows over his head, his hair burning until it disappears in the roiling surface.

Up ahead, Lou Riccetti, wearing a fireman's coat, but his balding head bare as always, is out in front of a bunch of fire trucks, directing the men of Company 23 as the water from their hoses holds both lava and demons at bay.

But one of the trucks is unmanned, and there's a gap in their line that needs filling.

"Not exactly our kind o' war, eh, Bull?" His smile threatens to split his broad face in two, but Charley Beckwith's Southern drawl is firmly intact as he and Bull Simons grab a hose and fumble with it before it stiffens as it fills.

Simons chuckles. "Since when did that ever stop either of us?" he shouts back as old Jonas Salk steps in to help steady the hose, rewarded by a quick grin from Simons.

I'm hardly surprised to see Sister Berthe of Toulouse—the nun we used to call "Sister Birth of the Blues"—lunge for a hose that's gotten away from some others, even though she's not able to steady it until Jimmy Stewart lends a hand. Then again, that was the way Sister Berthe was—when they retired her from St. Olaf's, she went to work as a teacher's aide in an inner city school, saying that at least until she couldn't see to read, she'd teach children how to read.

But he is there again. Past where Karl and Andy, both of them old and white-haired, take their places between an ancient Tennyson and a fat, withered Buddha, past where Golda Meir stands arguing with Teddy Roosevelt about who is and isn't too old to be doing this, he stands with his band of sailors. His shoulders are huge, still, and his head is still erect. His skin is browned almost like leather by the sun, his hair and beard are bleached as white as his sailor's tunic, with the gold bands of royalty at its hem. "Come," he calls to his companions, "there is work to be done, once more, once more. The hour grows late." His voice is strange, as though it's been broken, but has carried a long way.

I press through the crowd until I face him. "Who the hell are you?" I ask him.

His face is wrinkled, its creases deep and dark.

"Why," he says, "I'm nobody." And he smiles.

But I have to know who he is. It's important; I can live with the nightmares, with the waiting behind to face the demons, if only I know who he is.

"I'm Nobody," he repeats.

Then I wake up.

* * *

I woke, an old Crosby, Stills and Nash song playing in the back of my head, the blankets under me wet with sweat.

The lamp over on the table next to the door was hooded, its wick trimmed—it was more of a nightlight than anything else. To wake up with somebody new wasn't uncomfortable, but to wake in a strange cabin in the dark would be a bit much.

The windows on both ends of the cabin were covered only with latticed shutters, letting enough cool night air flow through the cabin to chill me to the bone.

I slipped out of bed, rubbing at the odd scratch and bite mark, glad that she had clean fingernails. A towel hung on a hook near the window over the bed; I rubbed myself dry, and at least a little less cold, before I dressed silently, to avoid disturbing Arien.

I give good silent.

She was sort of curled up in the blankets, leaving one long, amazingly strong leg bare from toe to waist.

There was another set of surprises. I'd been flirting mainly with Barda, the more outgoing of the two, all evening, and expected to end the night with her, but the two of them had gone off for a private conversation, and it was Arien who had offered to show me the guest cabin I'd been assigned. While I wouldn't want it to get around, I didn't have the courage to ask whether it was because she had won or lost the coin toss.

There had been other surprises; I'd thought of her as quiet and shy. Live and learn, I always say.

I was still sleepy, but going back to bed right now would mean going back to dream. Better to get a bit of fresh air, and maybe see if the pantry was open over at the apprentice barracks.

I was reaching for the doorknob when I heard Arien turn in the blankets. "Walter . . ." Her voice was muffled by the pillow. ". . . if you're trying to get away, shouldn't you be taking your gear?" she asked.

"Yeah. Had a bad dream; I just need to clear my head."

"Mmm. Wake me when you get back?"

"Sure," I said, lying. I'm not eighteen anymore; I haven't been for more than twenty years. I just needed to clear my head, and then sleep.

"Mmph."

I think she was asleep before I had the door closed behind me.

The six cabins lined the street opposite the Engineer apprentice barracks, a two-story rough-hewn wooden building that looked like somebody had stacked a typical wooden house on top of a log cabin.

Which is what had happened, actually.

It had started off as a storehouse, back before we had a sawmill—we had just squared off a few dozen logs, then built the house like we were working with oversized Lincoln Logs (a dragon is better than a crane, although a crane doesn't leave toothmarks). Home building techniques—and, for that matter, Home home-building techniques—had improved dramatically over the years with the addition of a sawmill, some freed carpenters, and the ironworks.

But there was no reason to tear the old storehouse down, and when it was turned into the barracks, another story had just been piled on top of it. The kitchen was at the rear, and a lantern burned in the window.

Two kids, a skinny, acne-spattered boy of maybe fifteen and a round-faced girl, were working out some sort of math problem on a slate they'd set up on the table over by the door, and Petros was busying himself with a copper kettle on the boxy iron stove, feeding the stove a few pieces of scrap wood, then carefully poking at the fire with a wood-handled poker.

"Evening, Walter," he said evenly, no trace of hostility in his voice. "Tea?"

"Sure."

"Just another minute; it's almost hot enough."

The kids sort of mumbled something, then said a quick goodnight and left, taking their slate with them, when Petros looked pointedly toward the door.

"G'night, kids. Nice meeting you," I said.

Petros dumped a palmful of tea into a teapot, irised the stove's vents open a little, then adjusted the kettle down on the flat burner before finding a chair. He didn't seem to notice that he still had the poker in his hand, and I didn't seem to notice that I had the hilt of a knife concealed in mine.

Then he did look down at the poker in his hand, and just hung it by its leather loop on a peg on the wall.

"Are you usually up this late?" I asked.

"Woman works from sun to sun, but the deputy mayor's job is never done," he said, setting a couple of mugs down on the counter.

"Not bad."

A quiet chuckle. "I listen to Lou a lot." He spooned a dripping teaspoonful of honey into each, then went to the stove for the hot water. "Probably more than anybody ever listened to anybody else. Learned a lot from him, but I didn't learn everything I know from him." It occurred to me that his first move would be to try to splash me with it, and that my move would be to protect my eyes and let the rest of my skin look out for itself. Nail him with the knife, then raise a cry.

But he just poured the steaming water into the porcelain teapot, set the kettle back down next to the stove, and brought the teapot and the mugs over to the table.

"I figured part of my job was to have a word or two with you before you leave in the morning," he said, as though it hadn't been a full minute since either of us spoke, "and I also figured that you'll be on your way early."

"So, have your word."

He nodded, slowly. "It's simple. Lou's retiring from the mayor's job next year. Says he wants to spend more time in the shop, the lab, and his study. I've got the Engineer vote, and enough of Samalyn's farmer faction that the job's mine if I want it."

"I guess congratulations are in order."

He went on as though he hadn't heard me: "I've been working toward this for years now, and for more reasons than I care to go into with the likes of you, I want it."

"You, like, want me to pass out campaign literature?"

"What I want is you to be absent. What I want is no Walter Slovotsky deciding that he's getting too old to be running around saving the world, and that he ought to settle down and relieve Lou of a job Lou never really wanted, with a few young women engineers to keep him warm on cold winter nights."

I could have said something like *that had never occurred to me*, but the truth won't always set you free, or even be believed. "And in return I get to walk out that door alive?"

"No. No threat. I'll not end the night with my throat cut, and the dragon to swear that I threatened you before you bravely defended yourself." He snickered. "No. I'm a farmer and a politician, Walter. I'll not go hand-to-hand with you. I'm not threatening you; I'm just telling you to back off. No showing up unexpectedly around election time. No sudden withdrawals of all of your gold deposits to see what that does to the local economy. And no spilling of the secret of making smokeless powder just to see what interesting things it'll stir up, the way you did with black powder. I don't care if your last years are boring; I don't want any unnecessary excitement here."

"Would you take my word on it?"

"No." He poured tea into both mugs, then set the teapot down and sat back, gesturing at me to take my pick. He shook his head. "I'm not asking you, Walter Slovotsky. I'm just telling you how it is. Drink your tea, go back to your cabin, and in the morning get gone, and stay away from my home."

* * *

The lantern was still dimly lighting the cabin when I got back, and Arien was still asleep as I quickly undressed and slid into bed next to her.

Things change, over the years. I had helped to build this place, and make it live, but it wasn't my home anymore. Just another place to visit, or not.

I lay on my back, my head pillowed on the palms of my hands, and tried to sleep.

10

On the Road Again

To fight and conquer in all our battles is not supreme excellence. Supreme excellence consists in breaking the enemy's resistance without fighting.

—Sun Tzu

When it comes to dealing with the law of averages, it's best to be a habitual offender.

—Walter Slovotsky

Jason had always had good teachers, he had long ago decided. Valeran hadn't just made him a good knifeman, a better swordsman, a decent rifleman and pistolshot, but had taught him that there was a time and place for the use of all weapons, except one.

That one, boy, is your mind, the grizzled old warrior had said, more than once. Never pays to put that one away; always makes sense to keep it well-oiled and active.

Sometimes, though, it was too active.

He sipped at a tepid glass of water from the pitcher on the nightstand, then set it down and walked back to where, splashed with early morning sunlight, Ahira was packing their gear. Ahira's was, as always, packed neatly: each item of clothing carefully folded and laid in, compactly, but seemingly randomly, like how in an old-style stone fence, the stones no two alike, somehow were stacked so as to bring order from chaos.

Toryn's rucksack was simply a container of more sacks: thin canvas bags, some containing clothes, squeezed and wrapped in cord, others bulging with tools or bottles. Incongruously, a small painting of a seascape, perhaps twice the size of Jason's hand, lay on top of the pile. Toryn picked it up for a moment and smiled at it before wrapping it in an oilskin and stowing it away.

"I've saved you some room," he said.

It was all Jason could do not to see how badly this would all end as he finished stuffing a spare jerkin into Toryn's rucksack. It had been rolled tightly, then bound with string, making it as compact as was possible, and it was about the last thing that was going to go into Toryn's rucksack, whether or not it was the last thing they wanted to put into Toryn's rucksack.

Jason grunted as he strapped the cover flap over the mouth of the rucksack, then grunted again as he hoisted it to his shoulder.

Ahira shook his head. "No. It doesn't have to be easy, but it has to *look* easy."

"I don't have your strength."

"So you'll just have to try harder to make it look like you're not trying harder, eh?" The dwarf walked over to the side of the room, where Jason's rucksack lay, one oversized bedroll strapped to its top, another to its bottom.

It wouldn't stand a close inspection, but it looked like the sort of oversized packs that dwarves typically carried; and large as the pack was, it didn't look large enough to contain the girl.

Which it didn't. Not all of her.

Ahira had cut the bottom and top out of his leather rucksack, and now Marnea was curled up painfully tightly inside the shell, kneeling sideways, a blanket wrapped and tied around her legs from knee to toe simulating the bedroll on the bottom, and her head concealed in the false bedroll on top—a wicker cylinder, open at the bottom, that had been a footstool when Jason had gone to sleep, but that Ahira's clever hands had unwoven, then rewoven.

It hadn't been possible for Jason and Toryn to stow Ahira's gear in their own rucksacks, but they'd supplemented them with a few of the spare sailcloth bags that Ahira had, and packed everything as tightly as they could.

"Everybody ready?" Ahira asked.

Jason nodded.

"Now all we have to do is wait for Toryn to get—"

The door swung open at that, and Toryn walked in, pulling a small pair of sandals from inside his tunic.

"Done, and rather brilliantly so," he said, tossing the sandals to Ahira, who stuffed them into the middle of one of the sailcloth bags. Toryn smiled. "Assuming this works, it should be good fun."

Jason stopped himself from saying something about how it wasn't fun, it was important, it was serious, because Toryn would just have laughed at him.

Ahira gave the bag a friendly pat. "Time to be silent," he said. "One grunt could give us away." She would be all but motionless anyway, what with the way her legs were tied into the blanket, and the blanket tied to the bottom of the rucksack. Her arms were jammed tightly against her chest in the main body of the bag, clothing stuffed in to break the bulges of her elbows, but that was about all.

If the confinement made her scream out or grunt, it would quickly be all over.

Toryn adjusted the hem of his tunic, and hefted at his swordbelt, before running fingers through his hair, messing it slightly. "Everybody ready?" he asked.

His moves were smooth and unconcerned, as though he had done this a thousand times before. Jason envied him that self-confidence. Jason was afraid that every twitch of his hand betrayed that he was up to something, that even a blind man could see, would see, that he was up to something, that his voice would crack.

There was a bitter bile taste at the back of his tongue, and for a moment, he thought he would throw up.

Jason forced himself to nod. "Ready," he said, willing his voice not to crack.

"Now, if you please," Ahira said.

Toryn strode to the door and flung it open. "*Where's the girl?*" he shouted, as he stepped out into the corridor, shouting as he went, Jason lagging behind him.

Mikyn's visit had apparently put things on a higher state of alert than Jason would have normally expected. There were shouts down the corridor, and within a few moments, two armsmen appeared, the senior rubbing sleep from his eyes with one hand while the other still fiddled with the buckle of his broad swordbelt, the junior one, maybe only a couple years older than Jason, fully awake, despite the hour.

"Some problem, Journeyman?" the senior armsman grunted. He had finally finished with his swordbelt, and was rubbing a thick hand against the stubble on his chin.

"There is rather more than some minor problem," Toryn said, with a sneer. "I woke early, and went for my dawn constitutional. When I came back, the girl Marnea was gone. Escaped."

"More likely to be about her duties, I'd presume," the armsman said, unimpressed. He jerked his chin at his junior. "Felken, go see if you can find her—start off with the slave quarters, and then check the kitchen. If you have to, see if his Lordship's guard—Olsett, no?—admitted her to his Lordship's quarters, but keep your voice down; I'll not want Lord Pelester wakened just because some slaver is upset because he missed a morning poke before going on his way."

Toryn's lips whitened. "If all of Lord Pelester's men are such idiots, it's a surprise that the Warrior didn't slaughter you all in your beds. Festen," he said, beckoning at Jason, "come with me—we have to see the lord. Denerin—saddle the horses, load our gear, and bring the horses along."

Jason didn't like the slaver, but he had to admire the calm assurance with which Toryn gave orders, never once glancing toward the rucksack containing Marnea.

Ahira shrugged, as he casually lifted that rucksack as though it weighed nothing. "Lend a hand, eh?" he asked the nearest of the armsmen. Jason had been against Ahira asking for that, but the dwarf said it would be out of character not to, and that not employing local help would mean leaving Marnea alone at one point or another.

"I thought dwarves were strong enough to carry for three."

"Five," Ahira said, tucking one of the sailcloth bags under his arm. "Problem is bulk, not weight." He looked at Jason. "Watch out for the boss."

Jason had to run to catch up with Toryn.

* * *

"It's my fault," Toryn said, not waiting to be asked before he poured himself a mug of the tea on Pelester's polished marble table under the crabapple tree. "And I can't tell you how angry it makes me," he said, his light tone giving the lie to his words.

The lord's private suite, through which they had been conducted, was large, light, and airy, light and air in the bedroom provided by the wide doors that opened on three sides of it, opening out into the atrium garden: the lord's sleeping chamber was a tongue, thrust into the garden, protected by the red brick walls

of the residence. There were other openings in the walls, but they were only horizontally slitted windows, set just below the juncture of ceiling and floor. Lesser beings would be allowed to share the fresh breeze of the lord's private garden, and perhaps a distant scent of patchouli and sunbaked endester, but not the explosion of fiery red-orange sunblossoms that rimmed the garden, or the cool greens of the broadleaved trees.

"I understand why I am upset," Pelester said, not sounding at all upset, "but why are you so concerned?" Thick-fingered hands picked up a filigreed silver eating prong, speared a bacon-wrapped morsel of something white—fish, perhaps? or veal?—and popped it in his mouth. Unmindful of the early morning chill, he wore a thin satin dressing gown, its broad sleeves hemmed with silver thread in a design of rearing horses. To the left of his plate, a steaming mug of hot tea sat; to the right, a small silver bell lay on its side in an intricately carved wooden cradle. "It wouldn't seem to be your problem, but mine."

"If you don't ask yourself any questions, so it would," Toryn said.

"Questions?"

"Questions. Like: why should she try to escape now?" Toryn rested a hip on the table as he sipped at the tea, not apparently noticing Pelester's glare. "Just days after you've lent her to the Warrior? And then me? And the morning after I told her that I suspected she knew more than she was letting on."

"What made you suspect that?"

Toryn's grin was insultingly broad. "I didn't, but it seemed to be worth a try before I left her in Festen's hands. She overplayed the innocence, just a little, I finally decided. I'm almost but not quite sure she knew something, and I was going to spend the day questioning her. Her escaping proves that I was right."

He reached out and grabbed a fist-sized loaf of bread from a plate and tossed it to Jason, then picked up another and dipped it in a brown sauce from a tureen.

Pelester's mouth quirked into a frown, but then relaxed. "All it proves," Pelester said, "is that you scared her into doing something . . . foolish."

"It isn't foolish for her to try to escape if she makes good her escape."

"Please," Pelester said, raising a hand, "this is not something new. My family has been keeping slaves for generations. My slave-keeper has a lock of her hair and some nail clippings safely stored, and I've a fast pair of horses heading for Abereen and a wizard; I'll have a troop of men on her trail by tomorrow morning," Pelester said. "Would you care to accompany them?"

"No, I'd rather preempt them." Toryn shook his head. "I'd rather find her before then. Our horses are rested, but I'll want to move quickly—lend me three more and we should have her back and put to the question by tomorrow morning, instead of just starting to search then."

"And how do you expect to find her?"

Toryn nodded at Jason. "Festen here was born a woodsman near Wehnest—he can track a quarry anywhere, particularly if he's had a scent of it." Toryn smiled. "And he's had more than that of little Marnea." He considered it for a moment. "She's fleeing on foot, likely staying off the roads—likely we can pick up her trail quickly, and ride her down by nightfall, and have her talking before your noble head

rests on its pillow. I'll bet gold-for-silver he can find her footprints before you can finish your breakfast."

Jason kept his smile inside. This was likely to be true enough, given that Toryn had just been out for a walk in Marnea's sandals, making those footprints.

Pelester nodded. "Very well." He raised a cautionary finger. "But I'm fond of the little chit—I don't object to you passing her around among yourselves this night, but I don't want her brought back seriously damaged."

"I know my business," Toryn said. "A few bruises and scratches are to be expected—"

"—and are acceptable. A girl so badly abused that I have to send for the Hand, and then deal with screams at night, is not." Pelester rubbed at an earlobe.

Toryn bowed. "Of course."

"Then you shall have the extra horses, and my best wishes, as well." Pelester reached for the silver bell.

* * *

Ahira had their horses saddled and loaded by the time Jason and Toryn reached the stables, which in Pemburne Keep was an old low stone building built up against the main wall, a slanted, lean-to-style shingle roof above it serving to keep out the weather.

As he entered through the broad doors, straw gently crunching under his feet, it was all Jason could do not to gag at the reek of rotting manure. Didn't they ever muck this place out? Not that it would do a lot of good, what with there being too little ventilation.

But it would be a start.

The rigged rucksack where Marnea was hidden had been strapped to the saddle of the largest of their horses, the bay gelding Jason had been riding, and Ahira was busily engaged in some discussion with the two armsmen.

He turned at Jason's and Toryn's approach, and just for a moment, the mask of the dour and phlegmatic dwarf dropped: his eyes went wide beneath his heavy brows, and his thick lips mouthed the words: *We have to hurry.*

It took a moment for Jason to figure it out—the rucksack was twitching, and while that motion was momentarily being hidden by the bulk of the big gelding, all it would take for Marnea to be discovered would be one of the armsmen walking around the other side of the animal, or somebody else walking in. One sneeze, one cough, one sound could expose them all.

Toryn raised a palm. "Quickly, young Festen—take the bay and go see if you can pick up the girl's trail. I'd try the woods to the north, but that's just a guess. Denerrin and I will follow, with the spare horses."

Jason nodded. "Yes, Journeyman." Careful not to touch the rucksack—he had the probably foolish fear that if he so much as brushed it with a finger, it would all fall apart, everything would all fall apart—he pulled himself up to the saddle and kicked the horse into a fast walk out through the broad doors and into the day, out of the stench of the stables.

The gate to the keep was open, and the guards clearly had no orders to stop him; one raised a hand in a

cursory greeting and farewell as he rode through, careful to keep the horse at a brisk walk that had the rucksack constantly bouncing, albeit just a little.

It was hard to tell if Marnea was still moving, or why, and he didn't dare ask as he rode through the streets that were already busy. It was a market day, and rough tables were being set up to line Pemburne's broad main street, the street that led up to and technically into the keep itself.

He thought of asking somebody which way was the quickest way out of town, but it was better not to; he left via the guard station that had admitted them the day before, and then thought about the effect of a more rapid gait on poor Marnea in the rucksack before he decided that he couldn't afford the consideration—not hurrying would look funny—and kicked the horse into a canter toward the woods to the north.

When he was sure that he was far enough away that the wind couldn't carry his voice back to the guards, he let some of the tension ease out of his shoulders.

"You can relax now," he said.

There was a groan from the blanket on top of the rucksack. "I thought I was going to throw up," Marnea said, her voice muffled. "The smell—I kept gagging, and trying not to move, not to say anything."

Jason repressed a shudder. That would have been real, real bad. If they'd been caught at that point, fighting their way out might have been possible, but escaping from a quickly gathered troop of Pelester's armymen would not.

Now, with a little luck—not much, just a little—they would be at least a day away before Pelester had reason to even suspect that he had been swindled, and little enough reason, at that. Toryn and his companions were on Marnea's trail, he would think, and if none of them were heard from, why, what was so surprising about that? Despite Toryn's brags about Festen's abilities, Festen had simply been unable to find the girl, and the slaver and his two companions had simply continued on the path of the Warrior, or Mikyn, or whatever he called himself. The next time a Guild slaver passed through, Pelester would present a bill for the horses, but the Guild's credit was still good.

Jason had to chuckle. There was something sweet about the Guild having to pay for horses that he and Ahira had stolen from a slaveowner.

It was a Walter Slovotsky sort of thing to do, and he liked it. He wished for a moment he had a mirror handy—did his own smile announce how clever he was feeling?

"Don't worry," he said. "Another little while, and we'll be in the forest, and when the others join us, I'll let you out of there, and you can ride like a real person." They would dress her in a spare tunic and trousers of Jason's, and tie her hair back, sailor-style. From a distance, she would pass just fine, and there was no need to get close to anybody.

The path through the forest ran through an open meadow, where after a distant doe raised its head and fled in alarm, they were all alone.

Why wait?

Jason rode off the path into the grasses that were high enough to rub at his boots. He quickly dismounted, and lifted the rucksack-cum-Marnea down to the ground. A few quick strokes of his

beltknife, and she was free, curled on her side, hidden in the grass.

He helped her to her feet. "If you hear anything, just lie down in the grasses, and don't say anything, don't move," he said. "I want to wait for Ahira and Toryn, and—" he saw how her eyes went wide.

Damn. She hadn't known that the dwarf was Ahira, and Jason had just told her. Not good. Ahira was every bit as famous as Walter Slovotsky. Letting his identity slip wasn't dangerous, probably, not as bad—or as good, if it all worked out—as Jason having revealed who he was, but just a bad policy. Don't tell people things they don't need to know, Valeran always used to say. It's no favor to trust somebody with a secret that won't do him any damn good.

He was already pulling clothes from his own rucksack, and she was already stripping off her thin gray shift, carelessly tossing it aside; he snatched it up and stuffed it in a pocket.

Naked in the golden sunlight, she was slim and lovely, but he was Jason Cullinane, dammit, not Walter Slovotsky, and he used his *mind* for thinking. He helped her into a bulky tunic and a pair of trousers, belting it tightly at the hips—not her slim waist—with a leather strap before tying her hair back with a small thong.

From a distance, she would pass, but close-up, it was hopeless. The smooth complexion, naturally reddened at cheekbones and along the jawline, and the full lips weren't those of a boy, or a man.

She smiled, not at all shyly, and put her arms around his neck, pulling herself close to him. "Thank you so much for getting me out of there," she said, lifting her face to be kissed.

She was gorgeous, and last night had been remarkable, but it occurred to Jason that perhaps Marnea wasn't overly bright. If somebody were to be riding through the forest, the last thing they ought to be seeing was two people kissing.

Hoofbeats sounded off in the distance; with a quick, hissed order to stay, he pushed her down in the tall grasses, and led his horse away, toward where tall, gnarled oaks stood at the edge of the meadow, as though the leafy giants had slowly, deliberately, over eons, waddled up to the meadow, only to stop at its shore.

But it was only Ahira and Toryn, the dwarf frowning as he bounced on the back of his small gray gelding, the slaver smiling ear-to-ear as he led a string of three horses, one of them, a brown mare, already saddled, the other two loaded with gear.

Jason called to Marnea, and led his own horse back up to the path, then helped her up to the saddle.

Toryn chuckled. "That was fun. I haven't had such a good time in years—even better than the time I got treble price for an old lame farmhand, I swear."

Jason normally would have been angered by the comparison, and he knew he should have been angered by the comparison, but things were going well, and he couldn't help returning Toryn's infectious smile for just a moment.

"Where to?" he asked, turning to Marnea.

She sat silently on the back of her horse for a moment. "Lesteen," she said, quietly. "He said he had some business in Lesteen, then he'd come back for me. He should be on his way now."

Ahira nodded. "Figure three days to Lesteen, one day scouting it out before he strikes, then another three days back to Pemburne. If he's told you the truth, if you're telling us the truth, we'll catch up with him sometime tomorrow, or the next day."

"Then let's be about it," Toryn said. "But I do foresee a problem, starting tomorrow. Pelester will have a wizard and a tracker on our trail—on Marnea's trail. Perhaps you'll want to reconsider—"

Jason was already reaching for the small amulet on the thong around his neck. He edged his horse over toward Marnea, then handed it to her. "Put this on." He turned back to Toryn. "Prevents being located with magic."

"You do have such wonderful tricks available, don't you?" Toryn's smile was condescending. "Well, then let's ride, shall we?"

* * *

They camped that night on a rocky outcropping high on a hillside. A cookfire would have been asking for trouble, although from whom Jason didn't know—so they didn't light one anyway, and instead made a full dinner of fresh morning bread and the thick garlicky sausages that Toryn had demanded from Pelester's kitchen on his and Ahira's way out, all washed down with a light, sweet wine, chilled by wetting the wineskin and hanging it in the cool night breeze. It tasted of apples and flowers and was ever so lightly honeyed.

Jason took first watch, while the others curled up in their blankets. He set his own blanket on a fairly flat rock and set his weapons down beside him. A small gathering of houses lay far down the hill; he could see an occasional spark from a chimney, and a drifting wind brought the woodsmoke to his nose. And far beyond that, the rocky coast broke on the Cirric, the water black and glossy under the blinking of the stars and the slow, pulsating throb of the distant faerie lights.

They could have had it right, or they could have had it wrong. But they were close to Mikyn right now. There were two roads that led from Pemburne to Lesteen; one, a broad highway, skirted the lowland towns, while the other wound its way up through the rocky, wooded hills, then back down. The two joined—well, the smaller one joined the larger one at a tiny village called Ekenden, an old Dwarvish word meaning, literally, "Nothing." Jason figured they would reach Ekenden the next day, if they pushed themselves and their horses hard enough.

And then . . .

And then it would be over, one way or the other.

Too many faerie lights tonight, most of them strung out near the horizon in a ragged line that pulsed in a slow, even rhythm through a series of dark blues and blood reds, punctuated only occasionally by a throb of green or a flash of yellow.

No, not too many. More than he was used to, he thought, but that didn't mean that there were too many. The rift between Faerie and reality had been healed; he had been there to help, and of all the things that had come of that, more faerie lights weren't a real problem.

He looked over to where Marnea slept, huddled in her blankets, the first night she had slept free in half a dozen years. This counted for more, he decided, or at least as much. He wasn't ready to deal with big issues, just one at a time.

Which was probably how Mikyn saw it. But give it a few more days—they would bring Mikyn in, and end some of it. Let Toryn report that Karl Cullinane was dead and that the Warrior was just another Home raider, one who had gone too far and been reined in. Let the Guild argue, for the length and breadth of the Eren regions, that this suggested that the Home raiders were too violent, too crazy to be trusted.

They were winning, a little bit at a time.

There was a sound behind him. He had expected Marnea, but to his surprise it was Toryn, wearing only a pair of trousers, his feet and chest bare, no weapon in sight.

"It's not your watch yet," Jason said. By now, he trusted Toryn enough to believe that the slaver would keep a good watch, but that didn't mean he was eager to demonstrate that. *Trust* wasn't a word that went well with *slaver*.

Toryn shrugged as he sat down beside Jason, looking down toward the lowlands. "I'm not sleepy," he said. "I would guess I caught enough last night, while you were otherwise occupied. How was she?" He held up a palm. "Apologies, young Cullinane, genuine apologies. I just meant to make polite conversation." He chuckled thinly. "I would take it you get many such . . . gestures of appreciation in your trade."

"It's been known to happen," Jason said, trying to sound older and more experienced than he was, fairly sure it had come off okay, but no better than that.

Toryn chuckled thinly. "Then I guess I should inform the Guild that we should only travel with ugly slaves, of ill temper and little skill in the blankets, eh? So that, at least, while you're celebrating our deaths, instead of having some lovely's heels drumming a mad tattoo on your hairy backside, you will be fending off the attentions and affections of some pig-snouted Sireene, her breath reeking of garlic."

Jason couldn't help smiling. "Yeah, that would do, at that."

Toryn clapped him on the shoulder. "To tell you the truth, young Cullinane, when this is all over, I'll miss you. You have such a simple way about you. Mind, once I'm back in Pandathaway and the geas is removed, I'd happily slit your throat—but even then, I'd miss you."

"Particularly then, Toryn. I wouldn't be a good audience if I was dead, and you like having an audience for your . . . wit."

"I'd say you wound me, if you were capable of it—or if it wasn't true, Jason." Toryn's smile was warm in the darkness, and for a moment, Jason thought he was going to say something else, something important, but then he just asked, "Are you literate in Erendra, or just that Englits of yours?"

"English," Jason said. "And yes. I can make my way through the Erendra glyphs, and even the low form of the Moderate People's runes. Why?"

Toryn shrugged. "Nothing of import. I thought I might like to write you a letter, after all this is over, although I'm not sure who I would entrust with it, or who you wouldn't kill." He chuckled. "Go to sleep, Jason. I'd like to be alone with my geas and my thoughts."

11

Pandathaway

Nine-tenths of wisdom consists in being wise in time.

—Theodore Roosevelt

Serendipity isn't just when you're overrewarded for reasonable effort, like when you dig for worms and strike gold. It's also when you're cleaning your gun, and you've stupidly forgotten to unload it, and it goes off unexpectedly, hitting the burglar you didn't see square between the eyes.

—Walter Slovotsky

There're two ways to pick up a trail, and the easier one, I'd decided, was to do it via finding hunters, not prey.

Nobody had any more interest in where Mikyn was than the Slavers Guild, and it would likely be easier to pick up Jason's and Ahira's trail by finding Mikyn's.

All of which suggested to me, clever fellow that I am, that the best way to find the kid and the dwarf was to get the Guild to tell me.

"And how are you going to do that, Walter Slovotsky?" Bren Adahan asked, raising his voice only enough to carry over the rush of the wind, no more. Too careful, but the baron was always too careful—at, by my guess, five thousand feet in the air above a rocky, wave-beaten shoreline, we were unlikely to be overheard, and equally unlikely to be spotted, save as a shadow against the star-spattered sky that would be more likely to be thought a cloud than a dragon with seven men strapped to his back.

Below us, Pandathaway was spread out across the shoreline, like, well, a city spread out across a shoreline: bounded by waters that seemed oily in the starlight, most of the city dark, save for elf-lights at the junctures of major roads and for the lanterns of patrolling wardens. I let my eye follow the Street of the Wheelwrights to where it met the Avenue of Elms, and found the Great Library, although I needn't have gone to quite so much trouble. The whole building was sparking gently, like a Van de Graaff generator; some wizard was doing something there, and that was presumably a side effect.

While the constant beat of Ellegon's huge wings didn't change, I felt us climbing for a moment, and then suddenly falling. I'm sure I would have fallen from my place if I hadn't been strapped in—or if I hadn't been clinging desperately to Ellegon's rigging.

What was that?

There's a fire smoldering in the cesspit—my old, err, place of employment. For just a moment I caught a flash of how Ellegon had hated being chained for centuries in that cesspit, forced to flame the wastes of Pandathaway's sewers into fog and ash, every moment a stinking agony, and how sweet the first few breaths of free air had tasted in his nostrils, but it was only for a moment.

When the dragon spoke again, his mental voice was calm and level. *We caught a thermal for a moment, then lost it. Not to worry; I'll get you at least most of the way to the ground in one piece.*

As a skydiver friend of mine used to say, it's only the last inch that hurts.

*Yeah, but it hurts *alot* .*

The city fell behind us, and Ellegon pulled my heart to my mouth by standing himself on a wing as he circled down in a too-tight spiral that at least pressed me toward his back, not away from it, but which also pulled groans and cries from everybody except Bren Adahan—

—well, and me. I wasn't about to show weakness while the baron was showing strength.

* * *

A couple of miles to the west of the city a small hill thrust out above the rest of the rocky shoreline, rimmed by a beard of gnarled old elms that had never quite managed to ensconce themselves on its rocky top. Scallen's Anvil, it was called, after a famous smith, and during the autumn thunderstorms, while wizards' spells warded the lightning away from the city, people would watch the lightning bolts strike the anvil over and over again . . .

The rocky surface was cracked and cratered in spots, but it was shielded from direct view by the trees.

Ellegon landed lightly, claws scrabbling for a moment on the rock while his wings continued to beat hard, as though he could leap into the air and avoid a dragonbaned arrow.

As maybe he could.

Grab your baggage and jump, he said, settling down onto the rock. *This train does not stop at this station.*

There are advantages to dealing with a team that's worked together before; by the time Bren Adahan and I had retrieved our own gear and climbed down over Ellegon's scaly sides, the five of them had gotten not only themselves unhooked and down, but all their gear as well. One of them checked over the packs while two others gave a quick once-over to the network of harness that had kept us and our gear on his back, tightening a buckle here and there. If it started to slip off during flight, Ellegon would have no choice but to claw it away, rather than risk having it tangle him up when he landed.

Two days, he said, leaping into the air, the wind from his fast-moving wings threatening to blow me over toward the trees. If two of the trackers hadn't already been sprawled out over the bags, the luggage would have been blown away. *I will check back in two days, and again in five. After that, you are on your own.*

After a few years doing this, some of the routine had become automatic. Henden, Darren, and Lerdeen had already stolen off into the trees, trying to see if there was anybody waiting for us out there, while Chit and Darnelen each produced a brace of pistols and sought cover at the edge of the treeline.

But after a few minutes passed, there was no sound save for the whistling of the wind through the trees, the distant, muted crashing of the waves against the shoreline far below, and a three-part whistle of a swamp-lark that was echoed by Chit, while Darnelen nodded to Bren Adahan and me that it was safe to proceed.

* * *

Before the sun fully rose above the Cirric, we had made it to the gates of Pandathaway; by noon, we were safely settled into a suite of rooms at an inn near the shore, and with Chit and Henden on watch, I was fully asleep.

The daytime is for honest men; I'm a night person.

* * *

Turning a landbound noble into a sailor is either a trivial matter or an impossible one. Middle Lands noblemen tend to wear their hair long in the back, so tying it back in a sailor's ponytail was easy, although they don't wear it long enough for a full sailor's braid. The calluses a sailor gets from hauling ropes are similar enough to those a lord can get working the fields, and some people just callus more easily than others, anyway.

That part was easy.

"So, why," Bren Adahan asked, as I snipped away at his beard—with an idle thought as to what else of his I'd like to snip, given the chance—to round out the squareness of it and make it look less well tended, "do we have to be sailors, anyway?"

Three of the trackers were asleep in the corner of the room, their weapons close to hand, while Chit and Darnelen took first watch. Which mainly consisted of playing a game of bones over a pot of hot tea, although they had set up their table in the middle of the deep rug, their chairs positioned kitty-corner, so that Chit was facing the doors to the balcony while Darnelen faced the door that led out into the hall and downstairs. It's best to work with people you know, trust, and like, but working with competent professionals isn't a bad second choice.

I sighed. "For one thing, because sailors talk. They drink, they sing, and they talk. Aboard ship, there's either a lot that needs to be done right now—say, when you're changing sails—or there's next to nothing, and all you can do is talk. Not always truthfully, mind, but there's a fine line between being known for exaggerating along the edges of a story—which only tends to improve your reputation as a storyteller—and being an out-and-out liar." I gestured at him to stand up. "Now try walking again."

The last thing I really wanted was a partner on this, but . . .

I shook my head. "You're walking like a Middle Lands nobleman," I said in a low voice, barely above a whisper, drawing a grin from Darnelen, which drew a glare from Adahan.

"*I*am a Middle Lands nobleman," Adahan said.

"Why don't you fucking say it a little louder, asshole?" I asked.

Darnelen's smile broadened as he picked up the cup and lightly shook it, then dumped the tiny bones out on the playing board. "I pick this, and this, leaving . . . a Minor Triumph," he said, moving a copper coin to the betting square. "Your throw."

"Try again," I said to Adahan. If Adahan couldn't pick up the walk, I could leave him in the rooms with the trackers, and go out by myself.

And he couldn't. A landbound man expects the ground underneath him to be stable; he carries his weight on the flat of his feet and sometimes on his heels, his knees often locked, sometimes off-balance, because what does it matter? The ground underneath his feet is solid as, well, the ground.

A sailor can't afford to do that. He supports his weight on the balls of his feet, knowing that any time he locks his joints in place they can become a lever to knock him off his feet, and maybe over the railing. The deck underneath his feet is always shifting, and while he can usually anticipate the way it will shift, he's going to be wrong every now and then, when a wave is larger than expected or a sudden gust of wind fills the sails or a change in wind empties them.

So he's always in balance, but ready to catch hold of something if knocked off-balance—

—sort of like a thief, really. And not a bad way to run your life when you think of it.

And Bren just didn't have it.

I shook my head. "Sorry, Baron. You won't pass; I'll have to do it alone."

He thought it over for a moment, then nodded. "Very well, Walter Slovotsky. As we decided, you are in charge, and I'll not endanger you with my incompetence," he said, the tightness of his mouth giving the lie to his quiet words.

I threw on a cloak, hefted my seabag and headed downstairs, passing through the common room without drawing any comment about the sailor who had come out of the room that seven soldiers had walked into. If you sling it sailor-fashion over your shoulder, it's a seabag; if you tuck it awkwardly under your arm, it's just a bag. We weren't carrying ourselves as sailors; we were, officially, seven unemployed soldiers looking for work, perhaps as a wizard's bodyguard, perhaps as guards on a caravan of some sort.

Nothing unusual about that in Pandathaway, which was still the most important trading center in the Eren regions. Hell, you could even buy Home wootz in the Metalworkers' district.

The common room was almost empty, although not for any reason I could see. Over by the man-high fireplace, two hulking men, each sporting a variety of scars and missing parts, were involved in a drinking competition, while next to the beaded curtain leading to the kitchens, Orvin the innkeeper, who was built more like a stevedore than anything else, kept a distant skeptical watch. My guess was that the bout would end in some sort of fight, and so was his, although it probably wouldn't be a serious fight.

But it wasn't my fight. With a brief nod to Orvin, I walked out into the night.

The Tavern of the Rusty Ox—I'm sure that there was a story behind the name, but I never did get the chance to ask—was on Old Horse Street, just south of the broad plaza where Old Horse intersects with Horse Street and with New Horse Street. (Sometime, just give me five minutes alone with a ball peen hammer and the idiot who laid out Pandathaway. Five minutes, that's all I ask.) In the center of the plaza was a double-lifesized statue of, unsurprisingly, a horse—and a nice one at that—from the long face and high head, Pandathaway-bred. It looked all glossy in the dark, lit only by the stars above and the six elf-lights perched high on poles ringing the plaza.

Which didn't leave much shadow. I like shadow; it hides me well.

So instead of hiding near the statue, I found a spot under the eaves of a dark, unlit building, and huddled down in my cloak. There wasn't much traffic this late at night, on foot or on horse or wheel, as most businesses were long since closed up and most Pandathaway residents off to bed, while most of those businesses catering to the late-night crowd, be they taverns or brothels, were down by the water.

I didn't have long to wait until a cloaked figure, the seabag slung properly over his shoulder giving a lie to his landlubber's gait, walked out of Old Horse Street.

I reached out a hand and tapped him on the shoulder, rewarded by a flash of panic on his face as he spun around, one hand going for the hilt of the sailor's knife he carried at his belt.

"Good evening," I said. "If you insist on coming along, we'll just put a pebble in your boot, and let you be a limping sailor. Just keep your mouth shut, and let me do the talking, eh?"

"Why didn't you mention that before?"

Because I don't really want you along, but I'd rather have you along with me than out mucking about by yourself and maybe getting us all in trouble, I thought. "Didn't think of it," I said.

He looked smug. "I thought so."

* * *

Face flushed with bitter beer, Oren of the *Orumeé* leaned back and took another long pull at his pewter tankard. "Been close to a year since I've seen you, Wen'l," he said, wiping the foam from his lips with the back of his arm. "What ships you been working of late?" Think thick: thick fingers, nails short-bitten, gripping the tankard; thick, barrel-chested body; thick black beard, more hacked into shape than trimmed; thick lips; thick voice because too much drinking had made his tongue thick. Thick.

"None, for the past while." I shrugged. "Tried a hand at living ashore," I said, and went into a long and somewhat improbable story about a young wanton whose father owned a winery. I had to move the events around; it had happened a few years back and a few countries away, but that's often the way things are when you're telling a story that has the liability of being true.

"Didn't take, eh?" he asked.

I shrugged. "You know how it is. Once you get used to the feel of sliding lines burning blisters on your palms, of cold food twice a day and warm ale once, of splinters in your feet and rain in your face . . ."

He laughed. "Of a sudden roll slapping the port railing against your kidney, of sleeping in a cramped hold with a dozen unbathed sailors, of surly captains and low pay . . . ah, how could you ever give up such a life?"

"I tried, give me that."

"But it called you back."

"It always does," I said. I sipped at my own beer. I had the distinct impression that the brewer had let some of the hops pass through the digestive tract of a goat before roasting, but you can't have everything. It was cold and wet, and I was thirsty and dry.

Bren Adahan was glaring at me.

"Your friend doesn't talk much," Oren said.

"He's a mute," I said. "Made the mistake of making fun of an island witch, out Filikos way. She made his tongue go stiff, and his pecker limp," I said, I guess turning one of my own wishes into a story for the third time that night, much to Bren's discomfiture.

Rattling off another improbable tale while listening with one ear came easy. Over in the corner, two sailmakers were haggling with the captain of the *Busted Jaw* over the cost of a new balloon sail, while farther down the long, rough table where we sat, a trio of seamen from a ship whose name I didn't catch were involved in a long discussion of the sanitary habits, such as they were, of the mate. Farther on down was a talk about what I took to be local politics, definitely involving entry fees and tariffs, while behind us a steersman from the *Teesia* was engaged in a stroke-by-stroke description of how he had spent his earnings across the street.

Nothing about the Warrior, and I wasn't going to be the one to bring it up.

One easy recipe to get into trouble: plop myself down in a tavern or in the drinking room of a bordello, and ask what the Slavers Guild was up to, whether the Warrior had struck recently, and where. Repeat until somebody noticed that this Wen'l of Lundescarne (there really was a Wen'l of Lundescarne, but he was a peasant, and unlikely to be known beyond the Lundeyll markets, or anywhere more than five miles away from his cottage) seemed overly interested in the Warrior. It would be simple.

It would be somewhat less simple to explain myself to the Guild Council proctors who were the Pandathaway police force, a group of serious unsmiling young men, handy with truncheon, knife, and sword, any of whom would be more than happy to trade in the head of Walter Slovotsky for an embarrassingly large amount of gold.

So I listened as much as I could and talked just enough to get a reputation as a brilliant raconteur, and drank half a mug of beer for every beer-and-refill I ordered.

* * *

It was the fifth place that I heard something.

" . . . Pemburne, it was, that the Warrior last struck," a harsh voice somewhere behind me said. "Just days ago—we had to hold at Endeport while the local lord put some questions to some of our new hands, wondering if they might be him, traveling in disguise. You should have seen the way they surrounded us: two horsemen on the pier, bowmen behind them, a skiff-full of armstrongs coming up on the starboard side, ready to board if we were to make a move. And then they took them off to see if—"

"They weren't him," a bored voice said, "or that would be the story. Get to the *story*, man."

To my right, Bren Adahan had stiffened, but I didn't think our companion across the table noticed, or noticed me kicking him under the table, gently enough not to draw a sound out of him, hard enough to make the point that he shouldn't seem to be particularly interested in this.

"Just his usual," the voice went on. "Although this time it was the lord's slave-keeper he killed, and he did it in the guise of a Guild Slaver. Seems a wizard turned him into the likeness thereof—"

"Oh? And what does a Guild Slaver look like? Or do you mean a specific one?"

"Who's telling the story? You or me? The lord was thinking of selling off some of his women-slaves, and turned the Warrior—thinking he's a Guild Slaver, mind—loose in their quarters for the night. Come morning, all twenty of the women were smiling, the slave-keeper was dead, drained of every drop of blood, his dead eyes and mouth wide, and the Warrior gone. I heard that he had turned himself into a raven and flew away, but that sounds unlikely." As though the rest of it sounded likely.

Bren's eyes caught mine, but I didn't nod.

Pemburne, eh? I needed a map, but that would have to wait for tomorrow. Tomorrow night, late tomorrow night, we'd be in the air. Ellegon would be able to pinpoint Jason's location, once we got close enough. *Hang on, guys; I'll be there.* "I think I'll have another beer."

12

Mikyn

It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood.

—Theodore Roosevelt

Monkeys, whether you watch them in an Other Side zoo or in a Salket forest, fight the same way every time: they start off by threatening, then escalate to pushing and shoving, and then finally get down to it. This may be a good idea for monkeys, but it's a bad idea for humans. If you learn to go from utter peace to all-out war in a heartbeat, your chances of survival go way up. Unless, of course, you pick the wrong heartbeat in which to go from peace to war, but there you have it: the right policy doesn't do you any good in the wrong situation.

—Walter Slovotsky

Ahira raised his left hand, then extended his thick index finger. *Single horseman ahead*, he signed. "You'll hear him in a few minutes," he whispered.

The dwarf pulled on the reins—too gently, then too hard; Ahira never quite had gotten the hang of horses—slowing his gray gelding from a sullen walk to a sullen stop on the broad, flat road.

Jason was already out of his saddle.

The road twisted along a hillside underneath broadleaved trees. Flat enough to engineer with; even

where it narrowed it was wide enough for two broad carts to pass each other, albeit carefully. Flat enough for four horses to ride abreast—although that would have put the outermost rider frighteningly close to the edge. And while the wooded hills behind them were overgrown with leafy beds of fern and ivy that twisted snakelike around the bases of the huge trees, here it was not overgrown at all, as though some wizard had cast a death spell on plants that would dare to try to invade the trees' domain.

Which was not particularly unlikely, come to think of it.

It was the third time this morning that Ahira had stopped all of them, and the third time this morning that Jason and Toryn had, at that command, quickly dismounted, and moved their saddles and bridles from their present mounts to rested ones, and the third time that Jason had managed to beat Toryn back into the saddle. Jason had had good teachers, and hadn't just spent more time on horseback than Toryn had; when the riding lesson ended, it was Jason who had unsaddled and rubbed down the animal, then watered and fed it, while Toryn had probably just handed his horse over to some slave to take care of.

So it was easily a minute before Toryn could possibly finish that Jason gripped the reins of the large roan gelding, put his foot into the stirrup, and hefted himself up to the saddle, kicking the horse into a slow canter, leaving the rest of them behind. If this horseman turned out to be a message courier from Estene, his leather shoulderbag bulging with correspondence, the way it had been the first time, or a squat Aershter whose business on the road was not apparent, the way it had been the second time, it would be simple.

Jason would, for the third time this morning, slow his horse to a walk, because approaching a stranger quickly was a threat, and for the third time this morning hold up his right palm in a universal greeting that completely uncoincidentally demonstrated that he wasn't holding a weapon, and would accept the stranger's greeting with the same nod, and then simply wait beyond the next bend of the road and let the rest of them catch up to him. The dust his horse had kicked up would help to explain why the third member of Ahira's and Toryn's party coughed into a broad handkerchief that covered "his" face.

Jason was so ready for it to be another false alarm that there was a quick heartbeat where he didn't recognize Mikyn.

He could have argued that his old friend's thin brown beard had lightened marginally and thickened considerably since they'd last seen each other, and it certainly was true that Mikyn hadn't been nearly as battered looking in the old days, but mainly it was his eyes. They had always been Mikyn's eyes, nothing special or remarkable about them. Perhaps when Mikyn smiled, there used to be a certain something about the way they crinkled at the corners, or maybe there was something particular about the way he neither stared at nor looked away from things.

These eyes, sunken, stared out at him, holding his own without blinking, without any trace of kindness or hostility. He was Jason's age, and he had always looked older, but now he looked easily forty years old.

And there was something in his eyes. Something of determination at best, perhaps, but probably madness.

And then there was something in Mikyn's face, a flash of fear before the recognition set in, and then the suspicion.

"Jason," he said, and his face broke into a grin.

Yes.

They had been searching for Mikyn, but Jason hadn't worked out even in his own mind what he would say. It all depended on which Mikyn they found—the boy who Jason used to go swimming with at Home, the friend who was found as often in the kitchen of the Old House as in his adopted family's house, the comrade-at-arms who Jason had once let down . . .

Or the cold-blooded killer who had all of the Middle Lands up in arms.

"Damn it, Mikyn," Jason finally said. "You're a hard man to find."

The grin broadened, but the stare was the same. "I meant it to be that way." A frown. "You're looking for me?"

"Yes. Time to come in. To lay it down for a while." To have a bunch of folks who you might listen to explain to you that while the time may come to free slaves right and left, killing anybody in the way, the time isn't now, and isn't likely to come in our lifetimes.

"No. I still haven't found him, not yet. I figure that when I make enough trouble for them, they'll send him after me." He grinned wolfishly. "And until then, I free a few, I kill a few slave-owners."

Him. The slaver they'd met in Enkiar, the one who Mikyn was sure was the one that had abused him and his family, even though it was impossible, and Mikyn's plan madness even if it wasn't.

"I'm sure that'll bother them," Jason said. "Slitting their throats while they sleep. Hell, it bothers me."

A long pause. "It's easier that way. Nobody has the right to own anybody."

"Not arguing that," Jason said. "I'm arguing tactics—and I'm arguing—"

The slow clackity-clack of hoofbeats sounded off in the distance; Mikyn reached inside his cloak.

"Ta havath, eh?" Jason said. *Take it easy, huh?* "It's just the rest of them."

Mikyn's smile broadened when he saw Ahira, and even more a moment later. "Marnea," he said. "Well, I guess that saves me some trouble, eh?" He lifted his head. "Long time, Ahira."

Ahira clumsily reined in his horse, his head cocked to one side. "I wasn't sure you'd be back for her. Didn't sound like you," he said, dropping heavily from his saddle to the road. The dwarf stretched his broad shoulders, and rubbed idly at his backbone.

Mikyn snickered. "Just because I'm doing things my way instead of yours?"

"Something like that."

"Up yours." He shrugged. "You haven't introduced me to your friend."

A chill washed across Jason's back. What would Mikyn do? What would Toryn do? He tried to remember the exact words of the geas—

"Toryn, I want you to meet my friend and companion, Mikyn."

Mikyn looked at him strangely, but Jason wasn't about to explain that Toryn's geas applied to Jason and his companions, and he had to get Mikyn under the tent of that promise right now.

Toryn smiled. "Toryn the Journeyman, they call me."

"Ah." Mikyn nodded. "Journeyman engineer, eh? They make them quicker every day. How *ishe*?"

Toryn shrugged. "Getting a little older every year. Still sharp as always."

"That is the way of it."

"And you? How do you like this new career of being the Warrior?" Toryn asked, his voice just too calm, too level.

Mikyn smiled. "I like it well enough. Jason's trying to talk me into giving it up for a while, with some nonsense about how I can come home and all will be forgiven, and—"

"I don't know why he'd want to do that," Toryn said, with a quick smile. "When I'm here."

Mikyn shook his head, not understanding.

"You see," he said, "I'm not just Jason's associate—I'm a Journeyman—"

—of the Slavers Guild, Jason completed in his mind. Of course.

He had been one step too slow, and Ahira with him. Toryn's geas prevented the slaver from attacking any of them—unless and until one of them attacked him. It did not prevent him from telling Mikyn that he was a Journeyman of—

"—of the Slavers Guild, partnered with Jason and Ahira with their agreement."

Ahira was already moving, his feet pounding on the ground with *athump-thump-thump* that sounded too slow, too late to be any good.

He reached Mikyn's side just as Mikyn's sword was clearing its scabbard. A short leap, a squat, and the dwarf launched himself into the air, knocking Mikyn from the back of his horse.

Jason eased himself out of the saddle. Mikyn was no match for Ahira's dwarven strength.

Toryn's hands had never come near the hilt of his own sword as Jason stalked toward him. "You had your warning, young Cullinane, from the dwarf," he said, ignoring the grunting and groaning. "As much fun as it's been to travel with you, you didn't expect me to not follow my orders, did you?" He held out his hands palms up. "Even if I hadn't wanted to, I was under geas for that, too, although one cast by a wizard of rather smaller stature than Vair the Uncertain. Voluntarily undertaken, you understand; the Guildmaster was afraid that I would find your companionship too agreeable, knowing what a sociable fellow I am."

Marnea was looking daggers at his back, and it was all Jason could do not to draw his own sword. Toryn was probably as good with a blade as his swagger suggested, but Jason wasn't unfamiliar with it himself.

"You will stay where you are," a harsh voice cried out.

Hoofbeats sounded from beyond the bend, a rapid pounding that slowed as the horses—Jason was sure it was at least six, maybe seven—came nearer.

Jason turned, toward where Ahira and Mikyn were still wrestling on the ground. Beyond them, sealing off any escape that way, three bowmen stood, arrows nocked, a fourth man holding their horses.

Lord Pelester, mounted on a huge white gelding, rode around the bend, trailed by a troop of half a dozen mounted soldiers, two with long lances pointed at Jason and the others, four with longswords naked in their hands.

"I was fooled once by a supposed slaver, Journeyman Toryn," he said. "I resolved not to be twice so fooled," he said. "You will all put up your weapons and surrender, or you will die where you are."

* * *

He was a young boy again, sitting in front of a campfire, listening to old Valeran hold forth. Not that it was any hardship to listen to his teacher talk endlessly, the voice hoarse from too many years of shouting commands to his troop.

"The thing of it is," the grizzled old warrior said, "that you always want to hold a little back. It's like keeping a reserve in battle: if it all goes to shit—and boy, more often than you'd like, it all goes to shit—you need something extra, to get you out.

"So you don't go all-out, because when you do that, you're going to fall down out of breath when it's all done, leaving yourself vulnerable. And you can't count on it being done in a few moments.

"So be careful, and don't go all-out. Unless . . ."

Jason had first learned not to walk into a line like that, and then, when he was older, not to leave a line like that hanging. "Unless?"

"Unless it's right. Then from flat-footed idleness you go into all-out action, without a breath, without a blink."

* * *

Without a blink, without a breath, Jason dove for the trees, drawing his sword as he did. Bowstrings thrummed.

13

Ambush

The mice which helplessly find themselves between the cats' teeth acquire no merit from their enforced sacrifice.

—Mahatma Gandhi

God, give me the strength to change that which can be changed, the strength to change that which probably can't be changed, and the strength to change that which can't possibly be changed. Hey, if You can't work miracles, what the hell good are You?

—Walter Slovotsky

They jumped us just outside the Inn of the Spotted Dog. I had about five seconds' warning.

You do this long enough, and if you survive, you develop nerve endings far beyond the envelope of your skin. It's not paranormal, although I can't always say what it is, and it's never, ever an excuse for not paying attention to your surroundings. Dead men don't pay attention to their surroundings.

I'd missed it.

Looking back, there had been something in the way a pair of burly, stocky men that I had mentally tagged as stevedores had looked at me, then looked away from my eyes. Looking back, maybe I caught a half nod or a partial silence from the group of men by the door who had moved just a little too much on their rough benches as Bren and I passed outside, or maybe I noticed the heavy way a cloak hung over the shoulder of another.

The night was clear and star-filled, good for flying. Give us another couple of hours, and we would be. First, we'd make our way to Scallen's Anvil just around midnight, and wait for the dragon. A few hours in the air, and we'd be at Pemburne. Hole up for the day, and then have Ellegon fly a spiral search pattern the next night, looking for Jason. Not a tight spiral, either: Ellegon had been mindtalking with Jason since before the boy was born, and could hear him further away than anybody else—even including Karl, when he was alive.

Then locate Mikyn, finish things up with him, and get Jason and Ahira home. Things would have to be straightened out with Thomen, but that could still be done, particularly with the influence of Barons Cullinane and Adahan—and Ellegon, for that matter.

It was going to be easy.

Until I heard an almost inaudible whisper behind me, and Bren Adahan leaned over and whispered one word: "Trouble."

I caught Adahan's arm and pulled him off-balance. "Hey, watch it," I said, loudly, maybe too loudly. "If you stumble and break your leg, I'll have to leave you behind." As he bumped against me, I muttered, "Break right: I'll break left," and moved, fast, to my left, not waiting for any acknowledgment.

I mean, if he wasn't any use in a fight, fuck him.

Something plucked at my right sleeve and something else tore at the right side of my face as I moved, running broken-field style. Back in the old days, it'd been my job to anticipate the sudden breaks in stride of somebody running with the ball so I could grab him and slam him to the ground, and even years later it gave me a sense of how not to be regular, predictable.

Seven broken steps took me to the mouth of an alley, and I ducked down and in and into shadow.

Given a large enough group, there's always going to be a hero, somebody brave and boldhearted enough to go in first. I had my sword out and ready, and sliced the tip past his swordpoint and through his neck, beating his sword aside and kicking him in the thigh as he staggered past, burbling until he crashed headfirst into a wall and fell down.

By that time, I was supposed to have myself set up, ready to take on the next one, which would make me a sucker for a two-man combination—one ready to knock my sword aside, another prepared to lunge past the first man and into me—so I was already halfway up the wall, my sword clamped in my teeth, supporting myself with my fingertips and toes against the tiny projections of the beams beyond the wattle-and-daub walls.

They surprised me: the first spun his cloak, the weights in the hem causing it to spread out nicely, and then they both lunged in underneath my feet.

I would have applauded, but that would have ruined the effect.

A throwing knife down the back of one neck slowed the first, and I landed both heels solidly on the shoulders of the other. His collarbone snapped like a piece of chalk, and he crumpled underneath me.

By then, of course, I had my sword back in my hand, and had probed delicately for the heart of the first man. The way to a man's heart is through his back, if possible, blade parallel to the ribs.

The other one was still moving, so I stepped on his sword hand while I slipped the tip of my blade in between his third and fourth ribs a couple of times until he quieted down.

I stood there for a moment, panting.

Shit, I'm getting old.

Ten years before, I could have done this without breaking a sweat.

Ten years before, I probably would have spotted the slip that Bren had made that had given us away—assuming it was Bren and not me who had fucked up.

Ten years before, I would have *known* it wasn't me that had screwed up, not merely doubted it.

Ten years before, I would have heard the men arranging themselves at the head of the alley long before their leader cleared his throat.

"Put up your sword, Walter Slovostry," he said. "I have a rifle," he said redundantly, bringing his piece up and into line. "It's all over. Your friends back at the Inn are dead, and another squad should have your companion down by now."

There were three of them, blocking the entrance. I could have turned and run, but I was out of breath and they'd just run me down, even assuming that the one with the slaver rifle didn't miss. Even if I jumped aside fast enough to avoid his shot, I'd be off-balance, and they'd be on me before I could recover.

Ten years before, I might have been able to run out of this trap, but ten years before, I wouldn't have been in this trap.

But ten years before, I didn't have a snubnose revolver in a holster above my right buttock.

I lunged to one side as I drew it, and his rifle went off with the loud and strangely flashless *bang* of slaver rifles, wind whistling by my ear, but as I lost my balance I was still able to get the pistol up at the end of an outstretched hand.

I pulled the trigger, and flame spat out, rewarded by a scream and a groan.

They had been well-trained, for their time. A flintlock pistol only held one round, and a fired pistol was useless—the best technique was to rush the pistoleer before he could bring another pistol into play.

But technology had passed them by, and that saved my life.

They rushed, and I shot four times more.

And then it was awfully quiet, what with the bodies scattered around the alley. It would take some time for the locals to investigate; being too quick to go out and involve oneself with a fight wasn't conducive to a long life.

Still, no sense in hanging around. I reloaded, my shaking fingers barely able to manipulate the speedloader. It was all I could do to tuck the empty shells into a pocket, and I only remembered at the last moment to push the cylinder closed instead of flicking it shut like a TV actor would have.

I was about to take my leave—there was probably another waiting out for me, so I was going to run down the other end of the alley, and make my way back around the block—when I heard one still gasping.

"Healing draughts," he murmured, his fingers trying to walk his hand toward the body lying next to him. "There's healing draughts in Fendel's pouch. Feed them to me, swear to let me live, and I'll tell you something you want to know, even though it's too late."

"Talk first," I said, the pistol lined up with his head. One twitch would be his last. "How did you know it was me?"

"We've been . . . waiting for you. Ever since Toryn didn't report in. If he didn't report back, that meant he had come to terms with the lot of you, and was out chasing the Warrior, taking at least some of you away, leaving the rest vulnerable."

The rest? He couldn't mean Home—Home was well-protected—and that had to mean—

"Barony Cullinane," he said, and his smile was awful. "Team of assassins sent out, to leave a present for you to find when you get back. Find most of your women dead, one or two taken away, to be hurt every moment of every day until you come for them."

He started to tell me what they were going to do with them, in some detail. I stopped him.

I never really promised to let him live, and I wouldn't have kept the promise anyway. Which is probably what he was counting on, trading a world that was just pain for some surcease.

When I unwrapped my fingers from his throat, he was still smiling.

* * *

It took me less than a minute to make my way around the block quietly, and back to where Bren Adahan stood over the bodies of his three. His face was pale and sweaty, and he had one hand pressed against where a dark stain spread over his left side, just above his hip, but he was in better shape than any of his playmates.

"What is it?" he said.

"I'll tell you on the way."

* * *

The top of the Anvil lay beneath a cloudy sky, starlight flickering through in only a few broken places above.

"Is it possible we'll be in time?" Bren asked. A quick swig of healing draughts had taken the white out of his face, but my explanation had put it back.

I shrugged. "Anything's possible." What was certain is that we would be back earlier than we had intended. Maybe, just maybe, the assassins had been slowed by a few extra days. Maybe we would beat them to Castle Cullinane.

And maybe pigs would grow wings and become pigeons.

Walter . . . A distant voice sounded in my head.

Ellegon? We've got troubles.

It took me less time to tell it than I would have thought.

Wings beating the air, threatening to blow us from the surface, the dragon slammed down on the cold stone. *Get on board in ten seconds, or I'll leave without you.*

I scrambled up his leg, and onto his back, his scales cold beneath my fingers.

Do you really think a few seconds is going to make a difference, Ellegon?

I expect to live a long time, Walter. I'll not live knowing that we wasted one second.

Wind whipped dust into the air, and into my eyes.

14

Ambush

The main thing about being a hero is to know when to die.

—Will Rogers

Doing the best thing right away is much better than doing the second-best thing after much hesitation. I didn't say it's easier, mind, just better.

—Walter Slovotsky

Bridge—the card game—was one of Lou Riccetti's innovations that hadn't caught on, and was largely a thing played by the Other Siders, with an exception or two.

Jason's tutor, Valeran, had been an exception. Jason didn't find the game interesting, although his father had insisted that he learn the rudiments of it. What he did find fascinating was the way that old Valeran played: the grizzled old warrior would sit erect at the table, never for a moment letting himself relax, never letting his concentration waver.

"The thing I like about it is that it reminds me of war without being bloody," he had once said. "Particularly when you have to take a view of the hand."

"Take a view of the hand?" Jason hadn't understood. "Peek at the other guy's cards?"

"No, no, no." Valeran had chuckled. "It's something you have to do when it looks like you're not going to make a contract. If you *need* for something to be true—say, for your left-hand enemy to be holding the Emperor, ten and three of Spades, precisely and only the King, Queen, and Lord of Sticks, and to be void in Jewels—then you assume that it's true, no matter how incredibly unlikely it is, because either the incredibly unlikely is about to happen or your hand is about to die horribly." He laughed, and Jason shook his head. "No, you don't understand, do you? Sometimes, see, the cards will lie the way they have to, and it all falls into place beautifully. Most of the time, though, you won't get what you need, and the hand dies." A rough hand felt at his cheek. "And then you can deal and play another hand. Which is how it's different from real life."

* * *

A low grunt to Jason's right became a scream, although whether it was in pain or fury was hard to say; he'd never heard Ahira cry out in either.

Jason didn't turn his head to look. It was all clear in his mind:

He would have to leave the bowmen to Ahira and Mikyn, and take the troop of six horsemen out himself.

Since that was manifestly impossible, he would need for Toryn to back him up, and since calling out an order—even if it were to be obeyed—would just alert the Pemburnians, everybody would have to do his part without being told.

Jason ducked behind his own horse, and came around toward the nearest of the horsemen. He batted aside the probing sword—this one was too tentative by half—and speared the horseman in the calf.

Not good enough. He shouted something, he was never quite sure what, as he slapped the horse across the flank with the flat of his blade, sending the horse galloping into startled flight.

From the corner of his eye, out at the edge of his vision, one of the bowmen was already falling off his horse, broken like a child's toy in Ahira's massive hands, but there wasn't time to take a look at the whole situation: another horseman was bearing down on him, lance targeting Jason's chest like it had eyes.

His father would have grabbed the lance and pulled it and the lancer from the saddle, but Jason wasn't his father, and didn't have that almost incredible strength.

But he did have a sword, and he could use its guard to catch the head of the lance, just behind the metal-clad point, and push it away.

Form was everything: as the horse came abreast, he took a single step to the right while his backstroke brought the tip of his sword up, into, and through the lancer's throat, letting him gallop past with blood fountaining between the clumsy fingers that suddenly came up to clutch at his own neck, the lance dropping.

Jason reached for the discarded lance, but another one blurred out of the edge of his vision and caught him on the side of his head. Nothing had ever hurt worse, but he couldn't, he didn't let the darkness around the rim of his mind creep in and haul him down: he brought up his sword, almost blindly, but managed to catch an attempted second blow just above the hilt.

He couldn't see. The blow had set bright sparks off in his head, and they were warring with the darkness, but he didn't need sight, not when he had a sword in his hand, in contact with the spear of an enemy: Jason slid his sword up the spear, in light contact, until the blade hit something, probably the lancer's heavy glove, and Jason turned the movement into a lunge, the point of his sword lodging somewhere in something.

He pulled it out with a twist, still blinded by the knock on the head, but decided that he'd been in one place for too much time, so he more staggered than ran to his right.

And collided *hard* with a tree; the rough bark caught him on the face and in the middle of the chest at the same time, his own momentum splitting his lip as it knocked the air right out of him, sending his sword dropping from nerveless fingers as he fell backward.

He rolled around on the ground, trying to get some breath in his lungs, some sight into his eyes, or his sword into his hands, knowing that it was all for nothing, that they had no chance at all, but unwilling to give up as long as he could move.

He had been clawing around on the ground for several moments when he wondered why he wasn't dead yet.

Jason raised his head, forcing himself to see through the pain.

It was all over, or as all over as it was going to be. There was a new path next to the road where Ahira, berserk strength upon him, had run through otherwise impenetrable brush. It couldn't have even slowed him down much, or he wouldn't have reached the spot next to where the mounted bowmen waited. But he clearly had. There weren't bowmen there anymore, just bodies, or parts of them, shallow pools of dark blood already drawing flies. One arm had been flung into the brush; it hung there, as though beckoning.

The dwarf squatted in front of the pile of pieces and offal, loud breath coming in noisy gasps.

A man lay in front of him, his neck at a sharp angle that told of it being broken, and it took Jason a moment to connect that with the tree limb in front of it. This had been Jason's first opponent, the horseman whose mount he had panicked into galloping flight.

Ahira looked up at Jason, and nodded, just once, and then his eyes swept by.

Toryn, unmarked, was standing over the inert body of another soldier, his sword probing, as though testing, then thrusting into and out of the torso, emerging dripping.

Marnea sat on Lord Pelester's chest, stained with blood from her face to her waist, the way she kept plunging a knife over and over again into the red mess that had been his face announcing that she hadn't been badly hurt, not physically, at least.

And Mikyn stood next to a tree, pinned neatly to it by an arrow that projected out of his dead, open mouth.

Sour vomit filled Jason's mouth, and splattered onto the dust and blood of the road.

* * *

"Enough for me."

Jason set one last rock into place and straightened, rubbing the relatively clean backs of his hands against his sweaty forehead. It would be nice to ride down to the Cirric and clean himself off, but once they got going, they had best get going quickly. The extra string of horses should make that easy.

The ground was hard and rocky, and the small shovel that had been part of Mikyn's gear was dull and ill-designed. Jason, his back aching from the tops of his shoulders to the base of his spine, finally decided on a shallow grave and a rocky cairn.

There would be time later to go through the rest of it, although it was hard to figure out who it ought to end up with. Mikyn's father was dead, and he had long ago abandoned Daherrin's raiding team, so there was no close buddy or family to give it to.

Marnea maybe.

He tried not to look at the heap of bodies barely concealed in the brush by the side of the road. That wasn't his problem. Getting away was his problem, but on horseback they should be able to outrun any likely pursuit, assuming there was going to be a further pursuit.

Using the flat of his battleaxe like a hammer, Ahira pounded a waist-high—chest-high for him—post into the ground at the head of Mikyn's cairn, while Marnea added another few stones.

Toryn's hands toyed with his horse's cinch-strap, as though he hadn't already tightened it half a dozen times. If Jason hadn't known better, he would have thought that the slaver was delaying taking his leave—but it was more likely that the motion was keeping his hands away from the hilt of his sword, and at this point he wanted to give neither Jason nor Ahira an excuse to violate their truce, what remained of it.

"It's been a pleasure, young Cullinane," he said. "Geas and all."

Ahira cocked his head to one side. "Does the geas still apply? I thought Mikyn's attack might have

broken it."

"Did he attack me? Or did he just start to?" Toryn's fingers toyed with the ends of his mustache. "I couldn't say for sure, and I wouldn't want to bet my life what the spell would think." He smiled. "I know what Vair the Uncertain would say, something about how it would be unwise to count on it either way, no?"

"Quite probably." Jason couldn't help smiling. He opened his mouth, closed it. The trouble was, he didn't want Toryn to leave, either. The—the slaver had been not only good in the fight, he had been reliable, he had made all the right moves in all the right directions, and without that, they would all have been dead. Jason was well-trained, and Ahira was a phenomenon, and yes, Marnea had taken out Pelester herself, but without Toryn, all three of them would have been spitted on a lance.

To hell with it. If he didn't say it, he would always regret it. "Ever consider a change of profession?"

He had half-expected Toryn to snicker, but not to sigh, shake his head, and then nod. "Yes, friend Jason, I have. I've been considering it for the past couple of days, ever since I realized that being involved with the two of you has been more fun than I've ever had in my life. It's much more fun than what I . . . do. I guess that's one of the reasons the Guildmaster picked me for this; he thought I'd fit in well enough with you that you wouldn't end up killing me."

"So?"

"So, I know things I haven't told you. Or, at least, think I do. It would be nice to be wrong for once, but in order for that—" he shook his head. "Never mind. If you knew what I know, you'd never forgive me for what I have done, and for what I have not said." Toryn put his foot in a stirrup and swung up to his horse's back. "And neither would I."

Jason watched him ride away for the longest time, wondering what kind of monster he had become that he found himself regretting Toryn's riding away more than Mikyn's death.

He turned to see Ahira nailing a small scrap of leather to Mikyn's headpost.

" 'The Warrior Lives,' eh?"

"Well, what would you leave as an inscription?" The dwarf smiled a little sadly. "Let's get going. We've a long ride back to your barony, and I don't want to take the most direct route. Not sure that Toryn won't have nobody waiting for us."

While Jason was trying to work his way through the compounded negatives to see if what Ahira said was what Jason knew the dwarf meant, Marnea spoke up.

"What's to become of me?" Marnea asked.

Jason wasn't sure if he heard a note of fear in her voice. "Well," he said with a smile, "if nothing else, we can always use another family retainer around the castle, one who's as handy with a knife as you are. Not that you're likely to see a lot of action there."

She grinned, wolfishly.

Ahira was already in the saddle of his gray gelding. "Let's get moving, people," he said.

Sorry, Mikyn, Jason thought. But this could have ended with me a lot sorrier.

15

Heads on the Battlements

Nothing is so wretched or foolish as to anticipate misfortunes. What madness it is to be expecting evil before it comes.

—Seneca

The thing that feels best of all the things in the universe is either of my daughters' arms wrapped around my neck.

—Walter Slovotsky

Gray. Everything was gray, and damp, and had been forever.

I can remember, in the old days, one overcast day when Ellegon had made a pickup outside of Wehnest, and the dragon had climbed up through the clammy whiteness of a cloud layer to break through into golden sunshine, playing on white fluffiness below.

The top of the cloudscape hadn't been flat—it had been a white mountain range, where gentle cottony hillocks and valleys were broken by high-thrusting white mountains, some topped with impossible crests and spires that would have fallen had they been something more substantial than clouds.

But they had looked substantial, and if I blinked for a moment the cloudscape wasn't a bleached landscape, but was a roiling ocean frozen in time and space, lofty crests caught in midbreak above frosty troughs.

Out of concern for either his passengers' comfort or his own, that day Ellegon had gone to some trouble to avoid flying into clouds, and instead had followed the white terrain, flying fast, deep through snowy valleys, then climbing, climbing only to barely fit through a cottony pass in a snowy range up ahead.

It had been like making a run on the Death Star, I guess.

But not today. We had entered the clouds in the dark, and had flown through a black night that only became a ghastly, cold gray as daylight had dawned somewhere.

And the gray had gone on forever.

I could turn in the saddle just far enough to see Bren Adahan strapped in behind me, but the wind screamed by far too loudly for any conversation to be possible. In the old days, in a lighter mood, we

could have talked via Ellegon—the dragon would relay comments, sometimes adding editorial remarks of his own.

But not now. I had tried a couple of times to say something to Ellegon, but there had been no response. It was as though I was just baggage, being carried through the wet and dark toward some horrid destination.

Please, God, let us be on time.

Looked at coldly, it all made horrible sense. The slavers had always overvalued Karl—and later me, and Ahira, and Jason—personally, preferring to think of their problems as simply a bunch of Other Side troublemakers rather than political changes that were going to transform the Eren regions, one way or another.

And since the times they had sent assassins after us had always failed, they had just waited, waited until a moment where they knew that we were away from those we loved, and that they were vulnerable in a small castle in a small barony in Holtun-Bieme. Just a matter of waiting until some sort of intelligence reported us all gone, and then they'd strike.

Brilliant. I had found out earlier than they had anticipated, but it was probably too late since the word had gotten out at all. The assassins had been dispatched the moment they first knew all of us were away, and—

—and I couldn't think of what would happen next. They would have set things up so that my only chance to free whoever was left alive would be to walk into a trap that I had no chance of walking out of.

So be it, I decided. I'd have to work it so that they'd let go of whoever they were holding, but the slavers couldn't make everybody walk into a death trap. There were people I could count on, like Durine, Kethol, and Pirojil, and maybe Daherrin.

They would avenge all of us.

That thought didn't dispel the grayness. All I could think of was what an idiot I'd been, leaving most of what I loved alone and vulnerable, trusting to a few soldiers and my reputation to protect them.

Idiot. I was an—

The dragon broke through the clouds above Castle Cullinane, and even from this height I could see the heads mounted on pikes on the battlement below.

I had never heard a dragon scream before; flame flared loud, roaring hot, from Ellegon's massive jaws, the speed of his flight washing too much heat back over me, so much so that I had to huddle deep in my cloak to avoid getting burned.

But the fire stopped, and I heard a distant laughter in my mind that I couldn't possibly have been close enough to hear with my ears, and Ellegon swooped out of the sky like a hawk, his fast-moving wings pounding the air as he braked just in time to prevent us from smashing ourselves against the stones of the courtyard.

The heads on the battlements,* Ellegon said in my mind, in sweet words I'll never forget, *all have beards .

There had been some damage, but just around the edges. The remnants of a ladder lay next to the eastern wall; it was mainly just a pile of sticks, as though some careless, angry giant had ripped it off and crushed it. There were scorch marks on the wall above the main kitchen's windows, and a distant rotting smell that I didn't like to think about.

But a familiar little face peeked out of the darkness of an entrance: Andy, one arm in a sling, was just inside the doorway, a vague smile on her face, insolently leaning against the wall.

I heard "Hi, Daddy," and my baby daughter was already slapping her hands against the dragon's scaly side before my trembling fingers could release me from my harness and lower me to the ground. "Everybody's okay."

* * *

Things got a little fuzzy after that. I do remember not being bothered by the way that Bren Adahan swooped up Kirah into his arms, and the sounds of his sobbing mixed with his laughter, and I remember hurting both of us when I hugged Janie—the pistol stuck into her belt pressed too hard against both of our hips.

And maybe most of all I remember Aeia, her breath warm in my ear. "*Itold* you I'd wait for you." And I will never forget how good it felt to have her mouth warm on mine.

But it wasn't all solemn; I laugh when I remember Doria's words of greeting: "I don't know what you're crying about, Walter. We're the ones who had to clean this all up."

* * *

You want details? I wanted details.

Which is all I got, and only bit by bit.

* * *

Like:

Andy, midevening, her face lit almost demonically by the only light in the room, a flickering oil lamp on the table at her elbow. She sat back in an overstuffed easy chair, still wearing her leathers, one leather-encased leg thrown carelessly over the chair's arm. It was a nice leg. "I was just outside my room, to take my boots off and go to bed, when one of the bastards snaked his arm around my neck. What he got started with a bootheel raked down his shin from knee to ankle, and ended sometime later with his head on a pole." She shrugged. "If he'd wanted me dead, he could have had that. Tried to get fancy; figured he'd play for a while first." She smiled. "Bad choice."

* * *

Like:

Janie, late at night in the watchtower on the southwest corner of the castle's wall, her eyes on the night, a bowl of iced sweetlemon glacé precariously balanced on the rail. I wasn't prepared to believe that the killings hadn't affected her, but she wasn't ready to discuss it. Just:

"Well, Jason left his spare pistol with me, and I don't think they were ready to deal with a six-shooter." She shrugged. "And then there were these two." She bent to pat the head of Nick, who gazed lovingly up at her, while Nora eyed me with something between distrust and distaste.

I reached out to put an arm around Janie's waist, but Nora's ears flattened until Janie shook her head and gestured at Nora to be still.

"Nice doggies," I said.

"Depends on if you play nice or not." Janie smiled.

* * *

Like:

Fat U'len in her kitchen just before dawn, her cleaver beating a rapid tattoo against her cutting board, shredding a piece of ham into strips that looked like short, pink noodles. "Kirah and my Doranne were here in the kitchen when two of them broke in, and one of them went for the baby." She gestured over to the tiny mattress and blanket in the corner, separated from the stove by a wooden latticework that let the heat keep the sleeper warm. "I didn't do much," she said, as her massive arms worked the pump over the sink, more sluicing off than rinsing an onion. A quick stroke took off its roots, another its head, and a quick slice-and-flick removed the brown outer skin. Another series of rapid strokes against the cutting board made the onion appear to fly apart, leaving behind only a neat little minced pile. "Kirah had her knitting with her, and she pulled out a pair of knitting needles and jumped one of them, which gave me enough time to get to my cleaver," she said, gently breaking an egg against the blade, economically dropping the yolk and white into a bowl and in the same motion tossing the shells into the garbage bin. "Just as happy we had the healing draughts handy," she said. "She got herself hurt, although he got himself hurt more. Now, if I'm going to make you an omelette, you'd better eat it all, understood?" She gestured with the cleaver. "Understood?"

"Yes'm."

* * *

Like:

Doria, once again curled up on her chair in the foyer. "You can give Aeia a lot of the credit. Her and Andy. She heard somebody out in the hall trying to walk too quietly, and got me out of my room. It was about that time that Andy showed up, armed for bear, ready for blood. She and Aeia were going to get Kirah and the baby up from downstairs when it all hit the fan." She patted at my leg. "We would have liked having you around, Walter, but we didn't need you." She shrugged, and smiled, and hugged me. "Sorry if that makes you feel unwanted."

* * *

Like:

Doranne at the breakfast table, more stabbing at than eating her raisin-spotted porridge. "Bad man said he was going to hurt me. Mommy and U'len stopped him, and Mommy told me not to look." She looked up at me and smiled. "It's okay, Daddy. Medicine made Mommy better, and they wouldn't give medicine to the bad man."

* * *

Like:

Aeia in our bed, laughing and sweaty above me, the tips of her hair like silk against my face. "Walter, you worry too much."

Out in the night, flame roared skyward, partly in laughter, partly in relief.

16

The Dream Is the Same

Tyranny and anarchy are never far asunder.

—Jeremy Bentham

Give me a place to stand, and I'll probably move along anyway.

—Walter Slovotsky

The nightmare is always the same:

We're trying to make our escape from Hell, millions of us running through the immense castle's unbelievably long corridors, past the empty rooms, toward the main gate, and safety.

Too many of us, no matter how much the corridor widens, there's always too many of us; I'm constantly being scraped against the red-hot walls, blisters flaring and bursting with a horrid pain that doesn't go away even as they disappear.

Everybody I've ever loved is there, and some of them look to me for guidance, as though I'm supposed to know something. What the hell do they want of me?

Behind us, the demons follow: silent men in black, blades flowering from their fingertips, seeking innocent flesh.

We follow the crowd as it plunges into a stairwell at the end of the corridor and down through the endless spiral of staircase that I hope leads to safety, as though safety is a place.

They're all swept away from me: Janie, reaching out a hand to bring her baby sister along; Aeia, mouthing a promise to wait for me; Doria, smiling reassuringly as she vanishes in the crowd; Kirah, with a quick squeeze on my arm that speaks of a lingering sort of affection.

"Once more," Karl says, a hand clasped to my shoulder. "One last time, Walter."

And then what, asshole?

They all line up, blocking the corridor. All the old ones, too old to do this, but unwilling to give in to age, any more than they'd accept defeat by any other enemy.

"But we're not here," old Jonas Salk says, his right hand shattering a demon with just a gesture, "this is just your dream, just a figment of your imagination. I'd be in my lab, where I belong."

Eleanor Roosevelt rends another demon with her fingers, and tosses it aside. "And I would be giving speeches, I trust, where they would be listened to. That's my place, Walter."

Sister Berthe reaches out a gentle hand to pat my shoulder, then pulls the ruler out of her habit and slaps another demon into dust. "I taught you what a metaphor is, Walter. That's all your dreams are. You don't have to be so," she sniffs, "literal all the time."

The old sailor is there, his beard white as fleece against his lined, leathery face, the scar on his leg, taking his position next to me—

Omygod. I know who he is, finally.

" 'Though much is taken, much remains,' " I say to him, and he smiles.

"Some work of noble note," he says, "but it need not be your work of yesterday." He looks down at me, concerned. "You're getting a bit too old for this, Cricket," he says, his face my father's, his voice Big Mike's. "You can't be a young stud all your life. Time to learn how to be an older stud, eh?"

And then I wake up.

* * *

Doria and Bren Adahan were downstairs in a room off the main corridor that had always been called the Prince's Den for no reason that anybody I knew of knew.

She was wearing a black robe, as though she had come from bed, but there was a suspicious bulge at the waistline under it that made me decide this was no accident.

Bren looked like an ad for some sort of postcoital clothing catalogue: a thin, loose, long cotton shirt open to the waist, the high collar almost covering a bite mark at the base of his neck.

He smiled a greeting, and I returned it as I plopped down in the chair next to Doria's.

"Late-night crowd, eh?" I asked as I reached for a bit of sweetroll on the plate by her elbow.

Doria shrugged her shoulders. They were nice shoulders. "And you've been dreaming again. Care to talk about it?"

"Ulysses," I said. "I've been dreaming of all the old ones, starting with Ulysses."

At the edge of my vision, Bren's forehead wrinkled, but Doria nodded. " 'To sail beyond the sunset, eh?' She turned to Bren. "It's a poem some of us studied, about an old king, too old for wandering and adventuring, who sets out again, because even if he's not what he once was . . ." She closed her eyes for a moment.

" 'Tho' much is taken,' " she said, opening her eyes and looking at me, " 'much abides; and tho'

" 'We are not now that strength which in old days

" 'Moved earth and heaven; that which we are, we are . . . ' " Her voice trailed off.

It had been too many years since Sister Berthe had taught me the poem, but the years didn't matter.

" ' . . . that which we are, we are;

" 'One equal temper of heroic hearts,

" 'Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will

" 'To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.' " I shrugged. "Sorry; I can't give it all up. And I'm not going to try."

She nodded. "So, you're leaving us?" Doria was always a step or two beyond me.

"Yes, and no." I thought about it for a moment, and thought about how neither Bren nor I was meeting the other's eyes, and how that wasn't because we were angry or anything, but because we'd divided the world into halves, his to watch out for and mine.

I didn't particularly like him, and I very much didn't like the thought of Kirah lying warm in his arms at night, but sometimes it doesn't matter even to me what I like.

"The point isn't to keep doing what you've been doing until you get too old for it, but to keep making yourself useful. I'm starting to slow down, and while I'm more than a match for most, I'm not a match for all. 'Tho' much is taken, much abides'—I'm going to have to leave this jumping out of windows and fighting in alleyways for the younger folks sooner or later, and I'd better get used to the idea that that's a good thing, not a bad thing. There's other things I can do, and not necessarily boring ones, either."

Doria smiled. "Still a little fight in the old boy, eh?"

"Maybe." I shrugged.

You up for a night flight tomorrow night? I asked Ellegon.

Depends where, I suppose. Oh, sure. Why not? What have you got in mind?

Job interview.

Bren looked over at me, and tilted his head to one side. "You want some company?"

I nodded. "I was sort of counting on it."

17

Job Interview

It is not enough to be busy; so are the ants. The question is: What are we busy about?

—Henry David Thoreau

While it doesn't get the good press that hard work and industry get, laziness is a talent to be cultivated, like any other.

—Walter Slovotsky

The room was dark, almost completely dark, lit only by shreds of distant lantern light leaking in under the door to the hallway outside. Enough for me, mind; my night vision has always been good, and I'd taken the precaution of blindfolding myself on the trip over to give my eyes plenty of time to adapt to the dark. Ellegon had dropped us off on the roof of the donjon quite silently before more noisily arriving in the courtyard, and it had hardly been any trouble at all to work our way down from the top and into the room.

He lay alone in his massive bed, which made things simpler. I mean, we could have handled it if he had company, but I liked it this way.

Bren Adahan grinned wolfishly as he drew his sword and lightly, gently touched the sleeping Emperor on the chest.

Give him credit: Thomen came awake instantly, and neither cried out nor reached for the hidden flintlock pistol that had been tucked under his mattress, but now was displayed quite prominently in my belt.

"Good evening, Your Majesty," Bren said, striking a match and lighting Thomen's bedside lantern. Golden light flared, casting shadows all about the room, lighting Bren's face demonically from below.

Thomen's head jerked around, first toward him, and then toward me. His beard was all crushed and his mustache kind of askew, as though he'd been sleeping, which seemed reasonable, since he'd been sleeping. I would have offered him a comb, a brush, and a few minutes to get himself together, but that would have ruined the effect.

"We've come about a couple of jobs," I said. "I think you need a pair of special representatives, for difficult political problems. Care to review my qualifications?"

Sometime or another, Thomen had learned to be a politician; I couldn't tell anything by the expression on his face. "I had thought I'd offered you such a position, not too long ago."

I shook my head. "No. I'm not talking about running around playing catch every time your mother finds something that likes to throw spears. We may have other projects in the fire, every now and then."

"Seems likely. When things quiet down in Pandathaway, I intend to kill whoever it is that sent assassins after Kirah and her daughters," Bren said, without heat, in the quiet way that a death sentence is passed.

"Make that 'we intend'—but save the details for later," I said to shut him up, then turned back to Thomen. "We'll work for you, not your mother; and that means we report to you, and not to your mother."

"Whenever we want to," Bren put in. "Even in the middle of the night."

Thomen's smile was crooked. "You seem to have arranged that part of it already."

I rubbed at the small of my back. "I'm starting to get too old to be jumping in and out of windows. Next time I get to walk in, through the door. Any time, night or day. That's for a starter."

"And?"

"And, him." I jerked my thumb at Bren. "He sits in for you when you're taking some time off."

"The Biemish barons will love that," Thomen said, sarcastically.

I smiled. "I've been thinking about that, and I've got a few ideas about how to make them like it better."

"You do?"

"I do."

In fact, with the idea properly sold, the Biemish barons would like it better if it were a Holt occupying the office, as there was no possibility of a Holt seizing permanent power. The Furnael dynasty wasn't even a generation old, and the Biemish barons were certainly nervous about other Biemish barons taking the throne. But I'd save that for later.

"In any case," I went on, "you do take some time off—all work and no play makes Thomen a dull Emperor. You need to spend more time with your butt in a saddle and less with it on a throne. Bren will keep the throne warm for you."

"And you?"

"I'll run important errands for you, with Bren when he's available, but with whatever support I think necessary: a few bodyguards, a troop from the House Guard, or a baronial army. And a nice title—Imperial Proctor, maybe. Something that suggests it'd be real unhandy if anything were to happen to me."

"I take it there's more."

"Sure. Our families live in the castle, here, under your protection, when we aren't based out of Little Pittsburgh and Castle Adahan. They come and they go as they please, with Imperial troops for their security, too." I turned to Bren. "What next?"

"Next, we need to arrange a divorce," Bren said. "And a marriage, as well. Or is it two marriages?" He looked over at me.

"I haven't exactly asked her, yet," I said. "I sort of figured I'd have to dispose of one wife before I take on another one, eh?"

Bren laughed.

And, after a moment, so did Thomen. "Imperial Proctor, eh? Well, true enough, I could find some work for you."

"Some work of noble note, eh?"

He looked at me kind of funny. "Rather." And then he smiled. "One thing, though?"

"Yes?"

"I don't care where it is, or what happened to it, but I want my candelabra back. Soon."

"Done."

* * *

The guards in the entranceway probably would have done something if the Emperor himself, in dressing gown and sandals, hadn't let us out of the Imperial sleeping chambers, but under the circumstances, about the only thing they could do was glare.

And salute, once matters were properly explained to them. Imperial Proctor, eh?

As we walked down the hall toward the long, winding staircase, Bren Adahan chuckled. "I don't know as I believe in this new, er, conservative policy of yours. Seems to me we might have wanted to have a backup plan, if the Emperor hadn't been so cooperative, or if he hadn't meant what he said."

Well, I could have told him about how I'd asked Ellegon to monitor Thomen for honesty, and how the dragon was ready to pick us up on the roof where he'd dropped us off, but I don't like to give away all my secrets.

It would ruin the effect, at that.

Shh. "I always have a backup plan handy, Bren."

He snorted. "Dying horribly, at length, and in great pain, is not a plan."

I shrugged. "Well, it's not a good one." I yawned. "Any idea where I can go to get some sleep?"

L'ENVOI I

Home Again

Eternal rest sounds comforting in the pulpit; well, you try it once, and see how heavy time will hang on your hands.

—Mark Twain

The hot bath is an art form, and one I wish I had the time to practice more assiduously.

—Walter Slovotsky

Even after five days back home, the best thing in the world was to sit back in the hot bath and let the almost scalding water soak the dirt out of his pores and the ache out of his bones.

"Ahira?" Jason Cullinane called out. "It's starting to cool again."

In a moment, the dwarf appeared, a long set of tongs holding a red-hot piece of scrap iron, which he plunged into the water. The steam momentarily hid his face and Jason quickly kicked water at the iron to move the heat around.

Much better. "Thanks."

Things were settling down, for the time being. Walter and Bren were moving their families over to Biemestren within the next tenday, which was going to make things a bit quiet around here. Janie was going to stay on for a while, which was nice, although Marnea's presence probably had a lot to do with that.

There had been rumors of some strange creatures to the south and west again. Probably some remnant of what had strayed out of Faerie; probably a good idea to go look into it.

He said as much to the dwarf.

Ahira nodded. "In a few weeks. I want some time with the kids before we go. Your mother's going to want to come along, you know."

Jason shrugged. There were worse things in the world than that, although he really would have wanted a bit larger group.

Still . . .

Ahira flashed a broad smile, then turned to leave. "If you'll excuse me, I've got a knife I'm working on."

"Enjoy."

Doria poked her head in through the door. "Somebody here to see you."

"Imperial messenger?"

She shook her head. "Won't give a name. Tall, a bit on the skinny side, maybe. Neat beard. Kind of cute, if you like that type." She smiled. "I like that type. Says you'll want to see him."

Toryn—"You left him alone?"

"The hilt of his sword looked a little too well worn for that, and if it hadn't, it would have looked too new, or too perfect." She smiled. "So he's under guard, disarmed, in manacles, if you call that alone. I was wondering if you wanted to wait to see him until you got out—"

Jason was already out of the bath, wrapping a towel about his waist and seizing up his weapons belt before following Ahira out into the day.

Toryn was standing out near the main entrance, trying his best to look insouciant despite the iron manacles and the stern-eyed guards.

"New style of dress?" he asked.

"What are you doing here?"

Toryn pursed his lips for a moment, as though considering, then shrugged. "Truth to tell, I didn't want to discuss in front of the Guildmaster how I didn't even try to kill the both of you, when you were so winded and vulnerable after the fight with Pelester, and the geas possibly broken. He wasn't likely to believe that it was impossible for me, and might have insisted on running me over to Wizard's Guildhall for a truth spell." Toryn shrugged. "And that might have been awkward. I decided to hope," he said, "that the assassins might have failed, so I decided to head this way, rather than back to Pandathaway."

"And if they hadn't failed, you would have—"

"—turned my horse around and ridden away," Toryn said, "and rather quickly, at that. But the word in all the villages is that they did fail, and I thought that under the circumstances, you might find my . . . omissions forgivable," he said, "or at the very least give me a running start." He brought his manacled hands up, as though studying his manicure. "Alternately, we could find the nearest Spider and have him attest to my truthfulness, and then we might see if there's something . . . interesting to do."

Jason cocked his head to one side. "What makes you think we've got something on?"

Toryn smiled. "Just a hunch."

L'ENVOI II

Home Again

Home is where the heart is.

—Pliny the Elder

No, wherever she is, wherever my kids are, that's home. And if that sounds a bit too sentimental, well, I'll just have to live with it.

—Walter Slovotsky

The dreams are always different, these days. But the days have been getting kind of hectic.

Aeia says, well—I'll tell you about it sometime.

Trust me.

Appendix

By Way of an Appendix

Since this is the poem that's running—sometimes amok—through Walter's subconscious throughout the novel, and since I couldn't quite talk Doria and Walter into reciting all of it in Chapter 16—I tried, honest, but they've got minds of their own—I thought I'd save you the trouble of looking it up.

It's one of my favorites.

—J.R.

Ulysses

—by Alfred, Lord Tennyson

*It little profits that an idle king,
By this still hearth, among these barren crags,
Match'd with an aged wife, I mete and dole
Unequal laws unto a savage race,
That hoard, and sleep, and feed, and know not me.
I cannot rest from travel: I will drink
Life to the lees: all times I have enjoy'd
Greatly, have suffer'd greatly, both with those
That loved me, and alone; on shore, and when
Thro' scudding drifts the rainy Hyades
Vext the dim sea: I am become a name;
For always roaming with a hungry heart
Much have I seen and known; cities of men
And manners, climates, councils, governments,
Myself not least, but honour'd of them all;
And drunk delight of battle with my peers,
Far on the ringing plains of windy Troy.
I am a part of all that I have met;*

*Yet all experience is an arch wherethro'
Gleams that untravell'd world, whose margin fades
For ever and for ever when I move.
How dull it is to pause, to make an end,*

*To rust unburnish'd, not to shine in use!
As tho' to breathe were life. Life piled on life
Were all too little, and of one to me
Little remains: but every hour is saved
From that eternal silence, something more,
A bringer of new things; and vile it were
For some three suns to store and hoard myself,
And this grey spirit yearning in desire
To follow knowledge, like a sinking star,
Beyond the utmost bound of human thought.
This is my son, mine own Telemachus,
To whom I leave the sceptre and the isle—*

*Well-loved of me, discerning to fulfil
This labour, by slow prudence to make mild
A rugged people, and thro' soft degrees
Subdue them to the useful and the good.
Most blameless is he, centred in the sphere
Of common duties, decent not to fail
In offices of tenderness, and pay
Meet adoration to my household gods,
When I am gone. He works his work, I mine.
There lies the port: the vessel puffs her sail:
There gloom the dark broad seas. My mariners,
Souls that have toil'd, and wrought, and thought with me—
That ever with a frolic welcome took
The thunder and the sunshine, and opposed
Free hearts, free foreheads—you and I are old;*

*Old age hath yet his honour and his toil;
Death closes all: but something ere the end,
Some work of noble note, may yet be done,
Not unbecoming men that strove with Gods.
The lights begin to twinkle from the rocks:
The long day wanes: the slow moon climbs: the deep
Moans round with many voices. Come, my friends,
'Tis not too late to seek a newer world.
Push off, and sitting well in order smite
The sounding furrows; for my purpose holds
To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths
Of all the western stars, until I die.
It may be that the gulfs will wash us down:
It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles,
And see the great Achilles, whom we knew.
Tho' much is taken, much abides; and tho'
We are not now that strength which in old days*

*Moved earth and heaven; that which we are, we are;
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.*

THE END

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