

JOHN MORRESSY

THE GAME IS A FOOT

THE WIZARD KEDRIGERN would have conceded, reluctantly and grudgingly, that an inn had one advantage over a campsite in the woods: it was more likely to be warm. In a good humor, he might even admit possible superiority in a second area: an inn might conceivably be dry as well. That was as far as he would go in praise of inns. Aside from those two undeniable but unpredictable comforts, he considered a stay at an inn a poor second to a night spent by a brook, with a good fire to keep away the wildlife large and small and a solid protective spell to discourage human intruders.

Home, of course, was his first preference, and he left it with reluctance. Home meant the company of Princess, the efficiency of Spot, and the comfort of his fireside and his books. Inns offered misery at exorbitant prices. Inns were dirty, noisy, crowded, smoky, and smelly. The food was awful, the wine corrosive, the service unspeakable, and the rooms small. The beds were full of lice and the building was full of people, all of whom chattered while awake and snored when asleep. Dogs barked and cats yowled through the night. The animals could be silenced and the lice kept at bay by a spell, but coping with the people was difficult without calling attention to oneself, and that was not Kedrigern's way. He had learned long ago that a sensible wizard does not call attention to himself without good cause.

But when the rain is falling and the wind is rising and wolves are howling in the moonless night and a man is far from home and weary in mind and body and low on magical reserves from working a difficult disenchantment, prejudices melt away and reason yields. When he glimpsed the light ahead, and coming closer saw through the shifting curtain of rain the unmistakable outlines of an inn and its stable and outbuildings, Kedrigern felt a warm glow of benevolence toward all inns and innkeepers. Surely this establishment, so fortunately found, would prove to be the One Good Inn, the exception to the unhappy rule. A master chef. A connoisseur's cellar. A punctilious housekeeper. Amiable company. He fervently hoped so.

For a time, it seemed that this might be the case. The place looked uncommonly clean. He obtained a room and a bed all to himself, a rare boon. A fragrant stew was bubbling in the cooking pot, and when he sat down to dine he found the bread almost fresh, and the wine drinkable. Having eaten, he settled himself before the fire for warming and drying. The only other guests were a middle-aged couple and a husky young man with a firm jaw and a stern expression. They were seated on benches, the couple sleeping soundly. Their snoring was all but inaudible.

Kedrigern nodded to the young man, who returned the nod but said nothing. That was fine with Kedrigern. He was not a man given to small talk and idle chat. This inn was turning out to be all he could wish, short of being in his own cottage.

After a time the innkeeper, a slow-moving man named Corgin, drew up a stool and joined them. The company sat for a time in silence, listening to the wind complain around the corners of the inn while the fire crackled and the sleepers snored. Kedrigern felt pleasantly drowsy, and began to nod off. Corgin, his voice lowered out of concern for the sleeping couple, leaned to him and asked, "What brings a scholar out on such a foul night, if I may ask, Master Siger?"

Caught off his guard, Kedrigern gave a start and blinked. He was momentarily puzzled, but quickly recovered his wits. Siger. Scholar. Yes, of course, Siger of Trondhjem. He had identified himself as an itinerant scholar. It was an incognito he used often in his travels, one that aroused no unwarranted fear or unhealthy suspicion among those he encountered. "I'm on my way to visit a philosopher. I have some questions about his observations on mutability," he replied.

"Oh. Mutability." Corgin nodded, looking very serious.

"Fascinating subject, mutability."

"Don't know much about it, myself."

"Hardly anyone does."

After a long pause, Corgin asked, "What is mutability, anyway?"

"I'm not quite certain. That's why I'm visiting the philosopher," Kedrigern said.

Corgin pondered that for a time, then gave another slow nod. The young man did not join the conversation, and the sleepers slept on. The dialogue lapsed, as Kedrigern had meant it to. He yawned. After a long silence, the innkeeper said, "We don't get many philosophers passing this way."

"Philosophers aren't much for traveling."

"No." After a longer silence, the innkeeper said, "We get a lot of merchants. Some pilgrims. Last month a courier stayed here. No philosophers, though. Or scholars."

Kedrigern gave a little noncommittal grunt. He could feel his eyes, and his mind, glazing over.

"We have a sheriff here tonight," said the innkeeper, indicating with his thumb the young man.

Kedrigern raised a hand in salute. "I'm Siger of Trondhjem," he said, giving his scholar's pseudonym.

"My name is Rury," said the sheriff. "I enforce the king's justice in this part of the kingdom."

"Are you here in your professional capacity, or are --"

A knock at the door broke in on his inquiry and shattered the peaceful scene in an instant. It was not a casual knock, but an importunate blow that resounded through the house and set pots and dishes to rattling, and it was quickly followed by a dozen more blows of equal force and several indistinct, but angry, shouts. Corgin sprang to his feet and hurried to the door. The sleeping couple started awake with a cry of alarm. Rury's hand went to his dagger. Kedrigern, who more out of habit than caution had worked a basic warning spell before entering the inn, was unperturbed. "Nothing to worry about. It's only a traveler," he said.

Rury gave him a quick suspicious glance. "How do you know?"

"A simple exercise in logic. Robbers don't knock, they break in. And any traveler looking for a meal and a bed on a night like this is sure to knock impatiently."

Kedrigern was outwardly nonchalant; inwardly he was furious with himself for his lapse. Once reveal the slightest hint of wizardly power and everyone in the vicinity wants a spell or a charm or a disenchantment, and there goes your peace and quiet.

A cold breeze swept through the room and set the fire to fluttering. The door crashed shut and a loud grating voice bellowed, "Food for me and my men, and your best chamber, and be quick about it, innkeeper! I travel on the king's business. I am Sir Buldram of the Hard Hand, famed throughout the land for my hot temper."

The words had an immediate effect on the hearthside company. Rury muttered under his breath and spat into the flames. The sleepers, now wide awake, exchanged a dark glance; the man bared his teeth and growled indistinct but unmistakably angry words.

Corgin backed into the room, bowing and babbling, "Yes, Sir Buldram. I'll prepare your accommodations. Best chamber in the house. Right over the kitchen. Always fragrant and warm. Sit right down and I'll bring stew for you and your men. An honor and a privilege to serve you, Sir Buldram." He paused to rub the tabletop clean with his apron.

"Bring your best wine, and bring it quickly! And if it is not to my taste, I'll pour a hogshead of it down your throat, do you hear me?" the bellowing voice came again, followed by heavy footsteps and the appearance of a huge figure in red and black who strode to the hearth, turned his back to the fire, folded his brawny arms, and glared upon the other guests.

Sir Buldrum loomed a head over Kedrigern and extended a hand's-breadth wider on either side. His scowling face was red, his beard and brows black, his head close-cropped. He looked with contempt from one face to another, then said to the older couple, "It's time for the likes of you to be in your beds. Be off. I require your bench."

The man rose slowly and helped his wife to her feet. His voice shook as he said, "It's fitting. You took our home and our land. Now you take our bench, too."

"Be careful, grandfather. You speak to a servant of the king," said the knight. He glowered down on the couple for a moment, then smiled -- an unexpected and unpleasant spectacle -- and said, "I remember you. Yes, I remember you well, old man. Kettry is your name. And your wife is named Hilla. Rebellious types. Refused to pay the king's taxes."

"We had no money," said the woman.

"You had a house, crops, animals, furniture."

"And you took it all," said the man.

"Not half what you owed. But since you seem to have held back enough to squander on an inn, I'll collect the balance when I depart, or take it out of your hides."

Kedrigern had had enough of this. He had entered the inn intending to conserve his magic, but Sir Buldrum's manner was so intolerable, his voice so harsh, his very presence so offensive that it could not be ignored. People like Buldrum, unless stopped in their tracks, only got worse.

He opted for a simple spell. Before Buldrum's men joined the company, he gestured toward the fire and whispered a phrase. The fire flared up and billowed forth a roaring golden tongue. A great cloud of steam arose, and the knight's cloak went up in flames. He gave a cry and began groping at his cloak pin. Kedrigern jumped up, snatched a heavy salver from one of the tables, and began to swat Buldrum's back and buttocks vigorously, shouting, "Quick, lend a hand! We must save him!"

Rury and Kettry rushed to beat at the flames with poker and shovel. Hilla doused the knight with ale. After several minutes of frenzied activity and wild shouts, with Buldrum howling and cursing and the others crying, "Over here! Get this spot! Harder, it's not out yet!" and beating at the flames with zeal, Buldrum finally managed to free himself from his cloak. It fell to the floor, and the firefighters trampled it into a soggy mass while the knight looked on, speechless, rubbing his broad backside. Kedrigern glanced at him, let out a cry of alarm, and flung a mug of ale directly in his face.

"His beard! It's smoking!" he said, taking up another mug. "We must make sure it's out."

"Enough of your help!" Buldrum roared, throwing up his hands. "Buldrum of the Hard Hand needs no man's help."

Kedrigern looked at him with an expression of childlike innocence. "We couldn't stand by idle while a servant of the king went up in flames, sir knight."

"It would be disloyal," Rury said, and Kettry and Hilla nodded in agreement. Two hard-faced men burst into the room, swords drawn. "Is all well, my lord?" "Idiots! Where were you when your master was on fire?"

"We had to...the horses...the baggage...we were..." the first man started to babble, but Buldrum's fist knocked him to the floor. A second blow sent the other one down before he could speak.

"I feel better now," said the knight. "Where is that landlord? I'll teach him to run an inn with a faulty fireplace. I'll give him such a thrashing..."

Buldrum's speech dissolved into a series of inarticulate growls accompanied by a waving of fists. His dripping face was the color of an eggplant.

"He's preparing food for you. If you thrash him, you won't eat," said Kedrigern.

After another growl and a hateful glare all around, Buldrum said, "I'll thrash him tomorrow, just before we leave. What are you all gawking at? I require privacy. I'm on the king's business. Off with you! Go!"

Kedrigern was willing enough to turn in, but he disliked the manner of this dismissal. For the general good, a man like Sir Buldram had to be taken down a few notches. Servant of the king or not, he was an obnoxious lout and a public nuisance. Aside from the enjoyable and entertaining interlude provided by putting out the fire on his cloak, his arrival had spoiled a pleasant evening. And who was he, anyway? In itself, the title "servant of the king" meant very little. What king did he serve? In this corner of the world, kings were as common as flies in a stable. Anyone who could gather a few score bullies and skullcrackers called himself a king and set about terrorizing and plundering those with a smaller band of brigands or none at all. The political situation was completely out of hand, and people like Buldram were proliferating. Someone had to do something. Buldram could not be permitted to take that elderly couple's last possessions, or pummel the innkeeper, or commit any other outrages. He needed a lesson. So did any king who employed such men. While he pondered a course of action, Kedrigern smothered a great yawn. That decided him. He was too weary to work a properly imaginative spell. A good night's sleep, and he would come up with something suitable for Sir Buldram in the morning, and add a delayed-action spell for him to bring back to his king. That was the way to handle people of that sort. The process would take only a small amount of magic, and it would be magic well spent.

With the question settled for the time being, he turned and started up the narrow stairs behind Rury, with Kettry and Hilla following. He heard Kettry mutter, "Someone ought to cut that devil's throat," and Hilla add, "One of his men will do it, mark my words. Look at the way he treats them."

Rury turned and said, "Let's hear no more of that talk. Buldram's a swine, but he serves the king."

"It's easy for him to say that, but how do we know it's true? He may be a brigand," Kedrigern suggested.

"He serves King Osmall. I've seen him at the court."

"He didn't recognize you. He recognized us, but not you," Kettry said, a note of suspicion in his voice.

"Buldram recognizes only those he considers important and those he can abuse. He's a thoroughgoing blackguard, and I despise him. But I have my responsibilities. If someone kills him, I'll have to see that the murderer is hanged. So let's hear no more talk about it," Rury said.

A wan and harried servant, a pitiful little creature hardly more than a child, was busy preparing the chamber at the end of the hallway for Sir Buldram. When Kedrigern addressed her, she cringed as if from a blow.

"It's all right, child. We only want to know where our rooms are," he said. With a sad smile, she conducted them to their rooms. This done, she scurried back to her labors.

Corgin's inn was unusual in that it provided each visitor or couple with an individual chamber. This was an unheard-of luxury. The usual practice among innkeepers was to cram as many guests as possible into a common bed, or accommodate them closely packed on straw pallets on the floor. True, Corgin's rooms were tiny, the walls were thin, the linen was dubious, and the vermin were numerous and hungry, but that was only to be expected. Kedrigern was satisfied. He had dined well and now enjoyed privacy and a measure of quiet. And the roof leaked scarcely at all.

A small spell secured him against drips and intruders, and another directed the vermin to Sir Buldram's chamber. He considered a silencing spell to keep out the sound of snoring, but decided to conserve his magic. It was unlikely that anyone would snore loudly enough to be heard over the howling of the wind and beating of the rain.

Kedrigern's chamber was directly over the main room of the inn. He reconsidered the wisdom of a silencing spell when Buldram's roar ascended from below, followed by the noisy chomping and clatter of his dining and his loud swearing at his men, the servant girl, and the innkeeper. He settled for a very small spell to block sound from below.

He had just drifted off to sleep when a loud angry voice and a door slamming

down the hall awoke him. Sir Buldrum had retired. Just as he was going off once again he heard a cry of rage and a stream of curses. Silence then returned.

He awoke once more during the night. The wind had died. Someone was snoring with a sound like the uprooting of forest giants or the pouring of buckets of gravel down an iron chute at brief intervals. The noise came from the direction of Sir Buldrum's chamber.

Kedrigern was hesitant to resort to a stronger silencing spell; in dribs and drabs, this stay was costing him more magic than he wanted to expend. He lay awake for a time. He tried sleeping with his fingers in his ears, which proved impossible. He considered alternative courses of action, some of them drastic. In the midst of his deliberation, the snoring suddenly stopped. He waited for it to resume at greater volume. It did not. With a sigh of relief, he pulled the covers close around him and went back to sleep.

Next morning Kedrigern was awakened rudely by shouts, running footsteps, and pounding at his door. Someone was hammering on every door, and amid the general hullabaloo, he could distinguish the words, "Sir Buldrum...can't be awakened...foul play!"

He splashed cold water on his face, dressed quickly, and lifted the spell on his door. People were milling about the hallway in various states of agitation. Buldrum's two men-at-arms were standing in front of the knight's door, both talking at the same time. Corgin was pulling at his hair and wailing, "Something terrible has happened, I know it, I know it! I'm ruined! Ruined!" The little servant girl was weeping piteously. Only Rury remained calm, and when Kedrigern joined the group the sheriff took complete charge. "Everyone is here now. We can begin," he said.

"Kettry and Hilla are missing," Kedrigern pointed out.

"They fled in the night. If a foul deed has been done, they're obviously the guilty ones. We'll run them down, never fear."

"Corgin's wife isn't here, either."

"She's in the kitchen. I've already questioned her. Corgin, give me the key to the room," he said.

Cringing and ducking, Corgin said, "I don't have it, your honor. Buldrum took it so he could lock the room from inside. He said he trusted no one."

"That's right, sheriff. Even in his own castle, he locks himself in at night and bars the door," said one of the men-at-arms. The other added, "We heard him turn the key, and we heard the bar fall in place. We spent the night on our pallets outside the door."

"Sound asleep, I suppose," Rury said.

They shook their heads in vigorous denial. "One of us was always awake," said the first.

"We had to be alert. Buldrum used to check, and if we were both asleep, he'd thrash us bloody," said the second.

"Was he carrying much gold?"

"Hardly a bit. He hadn't started collecting. This was his first stop."

The second man said, "He wasn't protecting gold, he was protecting his life. There's many have sworn to put a knife in Buldrum of the Hard Hand."

Rury looked at the man's bruised cheek and then at his companion's black eye. He said nothing.

Corgin pushed himself forward and said, "Oh, sir, he may only be sleeping soundly. He had a good bit of wine last evening."

The men-at-arms supported his words. "He's a terrible one for the wine. Two full pitchers he drank, sheriff," they said.

"If you think he's lying in there drunk, why did you raise the alarm?"

"He told us he wanted to get an early start this morning. We were ready at first light, and when he didn't come out, we knocked on the door and he didn't answer. So we knocked again, and a third time. He didn't make a sound."

"Let's waste no more time," Rury said. "Break the door down."

"That's good solid oak. It would take six men with a battering ram to bring it down," Corgin said.

"Is there a window?"

"Yes, sir. But it's very small and it doesn't open. Nailed tight shut, it is. We keep our guests safe from robbers and thieves."

"What if you had a fire?"

Corgin was silent for a long time, as if a fire at his inn were something beyond his imagination. "Oh, a fire is a terrible thing, sir. We wouldn't want that."

Rury seemed uncertain what to do next. The others were all looking at one another with a variety of suspicious expressions. Kedrigern grew impatient. He did not wish to be delayed in getting home because Buldram was snoring away in a drunken stupor. He did not care a fig for Buldram's rest, or his health, or his problems, whatever they might be. "The servant is a very small girl," he said. "Pry open the window and let her go in and open the door."

Over Corgin's wails about the reputation of his inn, the suggestion was followed. The rain had stopped, and the ground at the rear of the inn was nearly dry. In a very short time a ladder had been set in place and the window had been wrenched open. The servant was thrust through, protesting shrilly all the while. No sooner was she in the room than she let out a wild cry of horror and rushed back to the window, scrambling frantically over Rury and the men-at-arms, who did their unavailing best to thrust her back up the ladder. Corgin took a substantial stick from the woodpile. "I'll give her a good beating. She'll do as she's told when I'm done."

Kedrigern stayed him. "Let me talk to her."

He took the girl aside and sat her down. She was trembling, weeping and babbling incoherently. Her terror was plain to see. He spoke to her gently, his voice low and unhurried, and she grew calm. No magic was required, merely patience.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Gup, sir."

"Charming name. Now listen, Gup. You must go back into the room. It's very important."

Her head lowered, she muttered, "I can't, sir. The big loud man is dead, sir, and it's my fault. I killed him."

Kedrigern's astonishment at once gave way to a surge of pity. Gup was a woeful sight, pale and pinched, with dark circles under her eyes, underfed and overworked. She looked like a bundle of sticks wrapped in a rag. It was plain to see that her young life had been miserable, and now it might end on the gallows. "How did you manage to kill such a big man, Gup? He was locked in the room, wasn't he?"

"I wished him dead, sir. I was working as fast as I could, sir, truly I was, but he kicked me and hit me and cursed me and I wished him dead. I didn't really mean for him to die, but he hurt me so much I couldn't help the wish." Kedrigern gave a deep sigh of relief. "And is that how you killed him?"

"Yes, sir. I'm terrible sorry, sir. It was wicked of me."

"Are you sure he's dead?"

"Oh, yes, sir. He's lying there purple as a plum with his eyes wide open and an awful look on his face, and he's not moving. And it's all my fault. I have to hang now, don't I?"

"I don't think so, Gup. But you must go back in the room and open the door for the sheriff."

She paled and looked up at him in terror. "Oh, sir, I can't do that! I can't go back in that room with him! Don't make me, please!"

"You're the only one who can, Gup. We need your help, and you must be brave. And I promise you this: if you do as I ask, you won't have to tell anyone about your wish, and I won't tell, either. No one will ever know."

"And they won't hang me?"

Kedrigern shook his head. "Nobody's going to hang you, Gup."

She sniffled and wiped her nose with a skinny dirty forearm. "Thank you, sir." Without another word, she rose and went to the ladder. Minutes later, the door of Sir Buldram's chamber was wide open and Rury was alone inside, standing

over the knight's body.

While everyone's attention was on the sheriff, Kedrigern slid his hand inside his shirt and drew out the medallion of his guild. He quickly scanned the room through the Aperture of True Vision, then returned the medallion to concealment. The room bore no trace of magic, past or present.

That was a relief. If there had been wrongdoing, it was of human agency, strictly a problem for the sheriff, and there was no need for a wizard to get mixed up in it. Or so he thought.

"Siger, you're a scholar. What do you make of this?" Rury called out to him. Kedrigern entered, and at Rury's order, closed the door behind him, excluding the others. He studied the rigid figure on the bed and said, "Looks dead to me."

"Dead as the bedpost," Rury said, shaking his head slowly. "It's a shame, a terrible shame."

Kedrigern looked up, surprised. "I thought you despised him."

"Oh, I did. I was hoping to hang him. He was stealing from the king, I'm positive of it, but I can't accuse a man of his rank without irrefutable proof. And now he's been murdered. This is a terrible disappointment for me, Siger."

"Are you sure he was murdered?"

"No doubt about it," Rury said, pointing to the dagger in Buldram's hand. Kedrigern, in riposte, pointed to the garments neatly hung on pegs and the boots standing by the bedside. "There's no sign of a struggle."

"He was taken by surprise. The dagger was a vain attempt to defend himself against the attacker."

"What attacker? Nobody could get into the room."

"Someone did. How else could they kill him?"

"Poison," Kedrigern suggested.

"He wasn't poisoned. His men ate food from the same pot and drank wine from the same pitcher. He made the innkeeper taste everything before serving it."

"Very well, he wasn't poisoned. He wasn't strangled, either."

"Yes, we can rule out strangling," Rury said.

"No one bashed in his skull."

"And he wasn't stabbed. There's no blood anywhere," Rury said. He sounded disappointed.

Kedrigern said, "He must have died of natural causes. Many people do, you know."

"A man with as many enemies as Buldram doesn't die a natural death. Someone killed him."

Rury's logic was not persuasive, but Kedrigern saw no point in arguing. "If he was killed, there has to be a wound," he said. "Let's look for it."

They stripped off Buldram's nightshirt and examined him from head to foot. The body was heavily embroidered with scars, but they found no wound. Kedrigern called Rury's attention to a tiny puncture on the sole of Buldram's foot.

"Doesn't mean a thing. Couldn't be a snakebite. There'd be two punctures," said the sheriff.

Kedrigern wanted to be helpful. "Maybe it was a snake with one fang."

Rury gave him a dubious look. "Never heard of such a thing. More likely it's a splinter. These floors must be bristling with them."

"They seem smooth to me," Kedrigern said.

Rury thought about that for a moment, then shrugged. "It doesn't matter. Splinters don't kill people, people kill people. We're looking for a murderer. And maybe --" At a sudden thought, he reached under Buldram's pillow and groped around. He withdrew a small purse and held it up with a crestfallen look.

"At least we don't have to look for a thief," Kedrigern said.

"This tells us one thing: the murderer sought revenge, not gold."

"What murderer? No one could have gotten in," Kedrigern said. He was losing patience rapidly.

Rury scratched his head in silence and then said, "Buldram was elfshot. I

should have recognized the signs."

"But there are no signs."

"Elf-shots leave no sign. That's how you recognize them."

"But elf-shots only affect cattle. And they don't kill, they only lame. It won't do, Rury."

The sheriff thought some more. At last he said with an air of great confidence, "Then he was murdered by an assassin."

"A pretty clever assassin, to get in and out of a sealed room and kill someone without leaving a wound."

"It was a ghost assassin."

"I've never heard of such a thing."

"You scholars don't know everything, Siger. Look at the facts: Buldrum wasn't stabbed or poisoned or strangled; there are no wounds on his body; no one could have gotten into the room. Yet he had his dagger drawn to fight off an assassin. Therefore he was assassinated. And it could only have been a ghost assassin." Rury folded his arms and looked smug.

"Why did he draw his dagger? He couldn't have seen a ghost assassin."

With a triumphant gesture, Rury said, "Ah, but he sensed it. A man knows when there's a ghost about."

Kedrigern threw up his hands. Reasoning with Rury was a hopeless undertaking. The smell of fresh-baked bread was rising from the kitchen just below, and he was hungry. Buldrum might have had a thousand enemies, but none of them could have had a hand in this. Obviously, the man had had a fit of some kind during the night. If Rury was too dense to grasp that, there was little to be done with him. In any event, obvious facts seemed to matter little to the sheriff.

"Have it your way. It was a ghost assassin," Kedrigern said.

"That's the only logical solution. And it presents a problem."

"What problem? You've solved the mystery."

"But I can't hang a ghost."

"No, I suppose you can't. Is that a problem?"

"Don't be thick, man! If a servant of the king is murdered, someone has to be hung. Justice demands it. So I'll have to find someone to hang."

"Oh, really now, Rury --"

The sheriff broke in, "You have nothing to worry about. You've assisted my investigation. I'll hang Kettry. May as well hang Hilla, too."

Kedrigern frowned. He had long been troubled by the casual attitude toward life -- the life of others -- shown by people who could look forward, at best, to a mere fifty- or sixty-year lifespan. From the standpoint of a wizard with a reasonable life expectancy upwards of five hundred years, it seemed an absurdly improvident attitude. "You'll have to find them first. I'm sure they're far from here by now," he said. "And if they left during the rain, they won't be easy to track."

Rury gave a little grunt of annoyance. "Hadn't thought of that. One of the men-at-arms will have to do."

"But they couldn't have done it."

"All right, then. I'll hang the servant."

"The servant?!" Kedrigern cried. "She's only a child."

Rury considered that for a moment. "Yes, I suppose she's a bad choice. Doesn't weigh any more than a cat. It's difficult hanging the small ones. Something always seems to go wrong."

Kedrigern's annoyance was yielding to growing anger. He had a simple straightforward view of justice: the guilty should be punished, and the innocent should not. "Rury, you can't send someone to the gallows who didn't commit the crime," he said.

"I have to hang someone. It's my job. Any number of people would have done Buldrum in if they had the chance, wouldn't they? They would have been glad to be rid of him. He was the king's most effective tax collector."

"But you can't hang an innocent person. That's not justice."

With a smile and an easy confident gesture, Rury said, "No problem there. I put them on the rack, and they confess their guilt. They always do. I haven't



hung an innocent person yet."

A corollary of Kedrigern's view of justice was that those condemned as guilty should indeed be guilty, and not unfortunate victims of circumstance, mischance, or the exigencies of those charged with executing the law. Rury might be an upright man by the local standards, but Kedrigern considered those standards to be deplorably low.

The situation was getting completely out of hand. Buldrum was causing more trouble dead than he did when alive. Something had to be done. From the look of things, only magic would serve.

Kedrigern reached inside his shirt and laid his fingers on his medallion. It bore two notches, the Cleft of Clemency and the slightly smaller Kerf of Judgment. Each of them had considerable power, and he employed them rarely. This was clearly a proper occasion. He placed a fingertip in each notch, turned aside to speak a few words very softly, and then reached out and laid his hand on Rury's shoulder.

"There's no reason to hang anyone. You know that, don't you, Rury?" he said. The sheriff looked at him and blinked. He seemed confused. He hesitated for a moment, then said in a monotone, as if reciting an old formula, "A murderer must hang. That's the law."

"That's right, Rury. But there's been no murder here. Isn't it obvious that Buldrum died of a sudden fever? He shows all the signs. His face was distorted, and he was in an agitated state. I'm sure all the wine he drank and the excitement over his burning cloak hastened his end. He died of a brain fever."

In the same dreamy voice, Rury said, "A brain fever. Yes, it must have been a brain fever. It's obvious. No wounds. Face distorted. Wine...cloak.... No murder at all. A brain fever."

Kedrigern removed his hand from Rury's shoulder and said, "A brilliant deduction. You've convinced me, Rury. Let's tell the others."

It was astonishing how quickly memories flooded back into everyone's mind when Rury announced his conclusions. The men-at-arms recalled Buldrum's mention of feeling out of sorts earlier in the day. Corgin spoke of his alarm at the knight's flushed face and excited manner -- sure signs of the onset of brain fever -- and described how Buldrum had eaten only three small helpings of the excellent stew and drunk eight goblets of wine in quick succession, as if consumed with thirst. Even Gup observed that when the poor loud man had kicked her, it seemed to cost him a great deal of effort. Only Corgin's wife was unavailable for comment, having spent the entire evening in the kitchen. Clearly the consensus supported Rury. Everyone was lavish in praise of his speed and ingenuity in solving what had appeared to be a baffling mystery. The rains of the previous night, though fierce, had ended before dawn. Now the clouds had passed, the sun was shining, and the roads were passable. No one seemed inclined to tarry at the inn.

Buldrum's men wrapped his body in the sheet on which it lay and piled it in the baggage wagon. Rury proposed to leave with them for King Osmall's court to announce the death of the royal tax collector and deliver his report on the case. Kedrigern found him in the fatal chamber, making a final examination of Buldrum's belongings.

"I had hoped to find an account book," Rury said in greeting. "Buldrum has collected a great deal of money for the king over the years."

"Buldrum didn't strike me as the sort of man who reads and writes. He may have kept everything in his head."

"More likely he simply chose not to keep records. Too bad." Lowering his voice, Rury said, "From the gossip I've heard around the court, he helped himself to a good portion of what he collected. His victims would say nothing; they were all terrified. It was my hope that I'd find proof among his belongings. It looks as though the proof doesn't exist."

Ordinarily, Kedrigern admired anyone who was conscientious about his work, but Rury's eagerness to hang people seemed almost obsessive. A reminder seemed in order. "Buldrum was fortunate to have died peacefully in bed," he observed,

adding, "of natural causes."

"Not so peacefully. You're forgetting the dagger in his hand. There's no way to explain that," Rury said.

Kedrigern dismissed that detail with a slighting gesture. "It was right in character. Buldrum was a knight. A man like that would react to any provocation -- even an ache or pain -- by drawing a weapon."

"Perhaps you're right. Unfortunately for him, he couldn't frighten off brain fever," said Rury with obvious relish.

"Not so unfortunate. It beats hanging."

Rury's satisfaction became less pronounced. He held out his hand. "Thank you for your assistance, Siger. I won't forget how helpful you were."

You'll never know how helpful I was, Kedrigern thought as he bid a cheerful farewell to the sheriff.

Left alone in the chamber, the impress of Buldrum's body still visible in the bed, he reflected on the morning's events. The incident was closed, but nothing at all had been solved. The true cause of Buldrum's death was a mystery, and likely to remain one.

The only indisputable fact about the whole affair was that the man was dead; Kedrigern had not the vaguest notion of what really had done him in, though he was certain what had not. Not brain fever, or the hand of Hilla or Kettry or one of his own men-at-arms, or the wish of a servant girl. Corgin and his wife had not even been mentioned as possible culprits. Magic in any form could definitely be ruled out. As for elvish arrows or a ghost assassin, the less said the better. There was not a mark on the man except for that pinprick on the sole of his foot. Rury had attributed that to a splinter, and for once he was probably right.

But there had been no splinter in Buldrum's foot. And there was that dagger in his hand.... Why? Kedrigern shook his head, still puzzled. These were small points, probably insignificant, but they bothered him. He turned the question over in his mind. It was possible...no, surely not...unless...perhaps....

And then it came clear. He laughed aloud as the obvious answer burst upon him: Buldrum had been digging out the splinter when he died.

Kedrigern marveled at the simplicity of the explanation. It was self-evident, and it clarified everything -- except the exact cause of death, and that was best left to the doctors of physic. But it was reasonable to assume that Buldrum had suffered an apoplexy while raging about the splinter. Perhaps he had actually had an attack of brain fever, as well.

He turned to leave the chamber, and then it occurred to him that one more thing remained unexplained. Corgin maintained his inn with great care. The floors were clean and smooth. They were not, as Rury had suggested, bristling with splinters, as was usually the case in such establishments. So where had that splinter come from?

It was an inconsequential detail, but Kedrigern was curious. Better to settle this matter once and for all and go his way with his mind clear of unanswered questions. He had an orderly mind, and wanted closure. He drew out his medallion and surveyed the floor through the Aperture of True Vision to see if he could spot the rough patch where Buldrum had picked up the splinter.

The floors of the room were as smooth as the palm of his hand. He found no trace of a splinter, but his eye was caught by the glint of metal. He knelt, and as he bent to examine it more closely, the pleasant aroma of fresh-baked bread wafted up between the cracks in the floor. Clean and smooth the floorboards might be, but they were not tightly fitted, he thought, recalling Buldrum's uproar so clearly audible on the previous night.

The object he had seen appeared to be the tip of a long, thick needle. It barely protruded above floor level. Kedrigern reached down to try to tug it free, but a sudden suspicion made him withdraw his hand. This was an unusual needle. How, he wondered, did a needle, any needle, come to be in such a position? How did it come to be in this chamber at all? A needle was completely out of place here. Buldrum was definitely not the sort of man to mend his own garments, or relax with a bit of fancy embroidery. Something was

amiss.

He thought about his discovery for a time. Then, gathering his pack and blanket, he went below and entered the kitchen, where Corgin and his wife were laboring. He brushed past them, his eyes scanning the low ceiling. With a bright, "Ah, there you are," he reached up and tugged something free. Corgin and his wife exchanged a frightened glance. Kedrigern held out his hand to display the long kitchen skewer that had been lodged, point upward, between the boards.

He turned to the innkeeper and his wife, who were now clinging to one another, gaping at him in unconcealed panic. "You forgot to remove one of the skewers. Tell me, Corgin, what poison did you use? It must have been very powerful to kill a man Buldram's size," he said.

The innkeeper paled. He broke from his wife and staggered back. His wife gave a despairing cry of, "He knows! He knows everything! He must be a wizard!" and buried her face in her hands.

Kedrigern folded his arms and looked on them with a firm no-nonsense gaze.

"Perhaps I am, Goodwife Corgin. And perhaps I'm simply a man who notices things that others don't. But I want an answer."

"He would have taken everything, like he did to Kettry and Hilla and the rest. He's robbed everyone in the valley, and for leagues around," Corgin said, his voice quaking.

"He squeezed us dry. He robbed the people and he robbed the king, and nobody could stop him," his wife blurted.

"He bragged about it last night, when he told me he was going to assess us six crowns in tax. 'Three for the king and three for his loyal tax collector,' he said. He knew we couldn't pay. Six crowns is more than we make in two years. He would have seized our inn, the way he's seized land and farms and cattle these last seven years."

"We've worked so hard. We keep our inn spotless and serve good food, and we don't cheat travelers...it wasn't fair, your honor!" said Corgin's wife amid copious tears.

"Did Buldram actually admit that he stole from the king?"

"He boasted about it! He knows nobody among us would dare to denounce him," she said.

"Who'd listen to us?" Corgin said. "So we did him in."

At Kedrigern's urging, he described the method. He and his wife had been in the kitchen, lamenting their imminent ruin, listening to Buldram's heavy tread overhead, when the idea had come to them. They had heard the knight's boots hit the floor when he drew them off, and knew that he was walking about the room barefoot. Taking a dozen sharp skewers, they coated the tips with a poison they had obtained from a mountebank in lieu of payment, and forced them up through cracks in the ceiling near the site of the bed. Then they waited. When they heard Buldram's cry, followed by a stream of vivid imprecations, they knew their plan had succeeded. They acted quickly to remove the skewers. In their joy and relief they overlooked one, and that was their undoing.

"But we wouldn't have let that sheriff hang nobody, I swear," said the innkeeper's wife. "Not even Gup."

"How decent of you," said Kedrigern.

"There's no need to summon the sheriff back," Corgin said with a deep sigh.

"We'll go out and hang ourselves in the barn."

"Can't we have lunch first? No sense in wasting this good soup," his wife said, looking dolefully at the bubbling stockpot.

They turned to Kedrigern in appeal. He thought for a very brief time and then said, "Why don't you two just have lunch and forget the hanging? There's no need for anyone to hang."

Corgin sighed again. "How much do you want? We're not wealthy, but we'll give you --"

Kedrigern held up a hand to silence him. "You misunderstand me. You said that Buldram confessed to stealing from the king."

"He didn't confess it, he boasted of it!"

"And what is the penalty for stealing from the king?"

"Death," they said with one voice.

"It would appear to me that justice has been served far more effectively than Rury would have served it," said Kedrigern with a resigned shrug. "Let's say no more on the subject. But don't make a habit of treating your guests this way."

"We've never done such a thing before. Never even thought of it!" cried Goodwife Corgin.

"And we'll never do it again, your honor, never, I swear! Oh, thank you, thank you!" Corgin blurted, falling to his knees. "How can we repay you?"

"Anything you want, your excellency!" his wife cried, dropping heavily to her knees at his side.

"Oh, get up," Kedrigern said. He had been well paid for his work on this trip, and had no wish to take a few coins from hard-working people. When Corgin and his wife had climbed, groaning, to their feet, he said, "Here's what I want: you must treat Gup well from now on. Feed her decently and stop thrashing her. She has a good heart."

The innkeeper and his wife exchanged a puzzled glance. Corgin laughed -- a tentative laugh, as if at a joke he did not understand -- and said, "She's only a foundling brat, your honor."

"No need to concern yourself with the likes of Gup," said his wife. "She doesn't even --"

Their words transformed Kedrigern. The look that he turned on them made the innkeeper recoil as if from a blow and his wife emit a shriek of terror. The wizard seemed to grow; he extended his hand and held them with his blazing eyes for a terrifying instant; but before he could blast them to dust, he dropped his hand. He covered his eyes and stepped back. He stood for a moment breathing slowly and deeply to compose himself. When he spoke, his voice was calm but icy.

"Treat foundlings well, Corgin. You never know who they may turn out to be," he said without looking at them.

Corgin's voice cracked when he tried to reply. He finally managed to squeak out, "We will, we will, your honor, sir. We'll treat her like our own daughter."

"Do better than that. She deserves good food and warm clothing. Fair wages. And no more beatings."

"No, your honor. Never again. Not even a harsh word."

"Start by giving her a good meal. Right now. She's earned it many times over."

"Yes, your honor. A grand big bowl of soup, your honor. And plenty of bread."

"Even a bit of meat," his wife added. "And an apple."

"And your honor...the skewer?" Corgin said, reaching out a hopeful hand.

"I'll keep that for a time," Kedrigern said.

When he saw Gup seated before a huge bowl of soup, with a slice of buttered bread in one hand and a spoon in the other and an expression on her face of astonished bliss, he took up his belongings and left the inn. The morning mist had dissipated, and now the sky was bright and the air was cool and bracing. It was a good morning to be on the road.

All things considered, he was satisfied with the night's work. He was not absolutely certain how a king's magistrate would look upon his decision, but in his own mind it seemed a judgment worthy of Solomon. A confessed thief had paid the lawful penalty of his crimes, and no innocent person was in danger of hanging. That was about as close to justice as one could expect in Osmall's kingdom. Hilla and Kettry were safely away. Poor little Gup was enjoying a respite from her customary mistreatment, and the improvement in her condition was likely to last. The skewer, safe in Kedrigern's possession, was surety for that.

As for himself, Kedrigern had learned a valuable lesson: when traveling, always carry a pair of bedroom slippers. With thick soles.