

11-1990

All Points Distant

Scott Earle

Western Kentucky University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.wku.edu/theses>



Part of the [Fiction Commons](#), and the [Literature in English, North America Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Earle, Scott, "All Points Distant" (1990). *Masters Theses & Specialist Projects*. Paper 2292.
<https://digitalcommons.wku.edu/theses/2292>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by TopSCHOLAR®. It has been accepted for inclusion in Masters Theses & Specialist Projects by an authorized administrator of TopSCHOLAR®. For more information, please contact topscholar@wku.edu.

Earle,

Scott

1990

All Points Distant

Recommended November 30, 1990
(Date)

Pat Carr
Director of Thesis

James Flynn

Frank Steele

Approved December 7, 1990
(Date)

Elmer Gray
Dean of the Graduate College

AUTHORIZATION FOR USE OF THESIS

Permission is hereby

- granted to the Western Kentucky University Library to make, or allow to be made photocopies, microfilm or other copies of this thesis for appropriate research for scholarly purposes.
- reserved to the author for the making of any copies of this thesis except for brief sections for research or scholarly purposes.

Signed: Ferry Scott Earle

Date: 12-7-90

Please place an "X" in the appropriate box.

This form will be filed with the original of the thesis and will control future use of the thesis.

All Points Distant

by Scott Earle



Original
Board
1900

Chapter 1

"One is the loneliest number. . . ."

Three Dog Night

"Tell me one more time what we're doing out here?" She looked from the prominent "No Trespassing" sign, its faded letters scrawling across warped wood, to his apologetic smile.

"I told you: this guy will make a great interview! My dad knew him a little, and I met him once a few years back. I'm sure he'll remember me." He got out of the car and examined the padlock on the main gate. The distant hiss of a coal truck through late summer heat and dry leaves left its echoes in the quiet.

"We'll have to walk it from here. The house should only be about a quarter mile." He gestured with one hand while scanning the thick woods. "Lots of privacy out here."

She stepped out into her "skeptical" pose: brown arms folded across her chest, green eyes narrowed, lips pursed and thin. Turning, he screwed up his own

face and planted his fists on his hips in mock challenge. "Come on, where's your sense of adventure? You said you needed some excitement in your life! I'll help you up."

She looked at him coolly. "No thanks, Indiana!" She swung one foot onto a fence post and swept over to drop lightly on the other side.

He shook his head, thinking again how damned fine she could look in cut-offs and one of his old tee-shirts. He hopped over too.

They started walking through weeds that rose knee-high and itched against their bare legs. The sun came out now and then through heavy clouds. Old pin oaks, darkly austere, kept their shade to either side of the path. Crickets hummed and leaped alongside the two, as if keeping up.

"His name's Bill Ward. He graduated from Vandy in '75 near the top of his class. He was going to some law school, but then he quit for no reason and left town."

"How do you know all this?"

"Hearsay, mostly. You know how people talk in a small town." He glanced at her and smiled, glanced away. He seldom looked her in the eyes for long.

"So then what happened?" She slapped at a mosquito.

"He came back for his daddy's funeral. That was six years ago. He took over the family farm and just sorta stayed out of everyone's way."

She watched a wind come up and shake the tops of the oaks, but at ground level the air remained still. Sweat had soaked them both and plastered her shirt against the outlines of her bra. "It is peaceful out here. But he still doesn't sound all that interesting."

"He's been everywhere! Europe, China, Tibet. . . . Story goes that once he tried to pawn a flowery silk kimono. Mr. Holton said it was barely girl-sized. The tightwad wouldn't offer but a few bucks for it."

The path opened to a wide yard; further back, rows of corn and tobacco peeked above the ubiquitous weeds. A large two-story house with white paint peeling along its side stood near the center, a barn reduced to a light pink beside it.

"I guess this is it." She let him take her hand as they cut across the front yard.

The house was old and oddly shaped, more like a Western ranchhouse than anything else. More modern additions jutted from the bottom floor, giving it a disjointed look; the paint there, just beginning to peel, was a kind of cream. It all seemed solid but tired. Broad windows looked out from the first floor,

two smaller ones from above. A few shingles on the slanted roof of the front porch had fallen off. Fat white chickens picked their way across the porch and in and out the front door. Their smell overwhelmed the scent of grass and honeysuckle; a wind chime broke in above the porch swing, adding its delicate clashing to the general quiet.

"Holy shit, look at this!" He pointed to a tarpaulined shape beside the house and dragged her to it. "That's a Porsche, by God. How'd Bill Ward get a car like that?"

"Sshhh." She smiled at him but disengaged her hand. "I guess your mystery man is fairly interesting after all. Wierd, too. Look at the weeds--that car hasn't been moved in weeks, maybe longer. And this place is going to pot."

"Tell me about it," he murmured, looking away to hide a frown. He tried to say something more, but his jaw clenched tight instead.

He had just stretched out one finger to the tarp when the growl came close behind them; she was careful to turn slow and easy. A big golden retriever stood about ten feet off, sniffing them and rumbling softly. It made no move at all.

"Get behind me--" He was looking around. "If only I had a piece of wood. . ."

"No, no, it's okay." She stepped forward deliberately and knelt about five feet in front of the dog. "Here, boy. Come on, I won't hurt you. It's all right."

"You're crazy. If that sucker moves--"

"Sshhh. Come on, boy. That's it, it's okay."

She pitched her voice low and held out one hand for the dog to sniff. Its tail began to move slowly back and forth; it examined the hand, licked it.

"I'll be damned! You and your animals!" He was laughing now.

She grinned up at him and carefully scratched the dog behind its ears. The tail increased its tempo.

"What's your name, boy? No collar. . . but you look nice and healthy: well-fed, coat brushed. Someone must take care of you."

"Is it old Bill? Are you his dog, boy?"

The retriever sat there with his eyes closed and smiled with his tongue as they took turns petting and scratching him.

"Let's go try the house." The three made their way onto the front porch, scattering chickens. The dog gave a playful snap at one bird as he went by.

"Hello!" They knocked and waited. The front door was half open, and flies buzzed through it. The inside looked gloomy--clucks came out now and then.

The dog trotted on in.

"You think we should. . .?"

"I don't know, we're already trespassing. He could get us for breaking and entering too!"

"He's probably drunk or something. He could be out in the fields. Hello!" He pounded on the side of the house. The dog came back out, looked at them, whined. "Let's go in. Come on!" He flashed her his most roguish grin.

"You know, someday this need for excitement is going to get you in trouble." But she followed.

They saw a long, wide hallway with doors on either side. There was a stairway ahead on the right and an opening close on their left. It all smelled of dust and chicken.

"Let's try this." He was whispering.

The opening led to a large stone-flagged kitchen. Beams of sunlight came in from the window above the wide porcelain sink, highlighting the dust motes that floated lazily and settled along the table and floor. A few plump chickens were here, too, pecking at the bread crusts and bits of corn that littered the stone. The walls were tongue-in-groove slat oak, smooth and dark. They at least were still beautiful.

"Man, will you look at this place!"

She smiled mischevously. "Maybe you've come out

to interview a psycho."

"I don't know--you see any butcher knives lying around?" They both started giggling. The dog came up behind them and gave a soft bark.

"Jesus God!"

"You scared us, boy!" She was laughing so hard now that tears were rolling from the corners of her eyes. "You should have seen. . .the expression on your face!"

He laughed too. "You should have seen yours!"

The dog smiled as if sharing the joke. Then it turned back into the hallway and sat on its haunches.

"You trying to lead us somewhere, boy?"

"Let's try it." They followed the dog into the hall and down to a side branch on the right, just before the stairs. The dog trotted down this short passage to a door at the end, scratched against it, and waited.

"Smart boy. Is this where old Bill keeps the dog chow?"

"Shut up. Maybe something's wrong, and he can't get to his master."

"Could be." He went up to the door and rapped twice. "Hello. Anybody home? Mr. Bill?" They both started giggling again; he pitched his voice to a high falsetto: "Oh no, Mister Bill!"

"You're crazy."

He grinned at her and tried the knob. "You ain't seen nothin' yet!"

The door opened with a slight shudder and vibrated its way to silence. They peered into the dark; shades had been pulled on the windows here. It was even more spacious than the kitchen--grooved oak lined this room, too, a shade brighter near the far wall, where the room had been extended. A large stone fireplace dominated that side. It was all bare space but for a deep rug thrown toward one corner and patterned in reds and browns.

There was a man sitting on it.

The dog trotted up to the figure and whined, licking his fingers. The man didn't move. He wore faded jeans and a light cotton shirt with the tails hanging out. He sat upright with his head back and mouth just slightly open. His legs were folded across each other, and the hands rested easily on his knees. The eyes were closed.

"This is wild!" He was whispering again. They still stood in the doorway.

"I think that's a yoga trance."

"How do you know?"

"You're not the only one who reads a lot."

"Oh yeah, I forgot who I was talking to!"

The man on the rug had not so much as twitched; he hardly seemed to breathe. He looked in his mid-thirties, with a thick growth of stubble on his cheeks to match the long brown hair that fell across his forehead and spilled along his shoulders. He was broad-shouldered but thin, wiry beneath the shirt. The lines of his face looked slack, vacant.

The two advanced slowly into the room and stood over him. The dog looked up at them expectantly. The room extended its quiet around them.

"You think we should wake him?"

Chapter 2

"Where is the honor in defeat?

It can be found in the soul."

Cravat Thurl, of the White Robes

The clouds loomed low and thick across the width of the sky, layered in soft hues of pink that deepened to red in the higher reaches. The air between the clouds was an electric blue; bright flashes crisscrossed the spaces between and left their signature imprinted briefly on the eyes that followed them. The slow, rolling booms of thunder counterpointed the fife and drum, láeyr and song below.

The city swarmed with people. The broad avenue that led to the Great Capitol Circle breathed and writhed with a thousand different rhythms as stragglers shouldered their way into the dancing, chanting mass; here a merchant's cart had been shoved aside and a dancer placed upon a table, her eyes closed, arms outstretched, and copper hair unbound and whipping in time to the drummers; the huge silvered curve of the Ring was already filling as farmers in

their best robes--some threadbare and holed but all clean and bright with dyes--mingled shoulder to shoulder with statesmen and rulers, duelists and merchants, all bedecked with purple gilt and sharp amber diamonds, emerald clusters proclaiming rank, power; a young man in brocaded scarlet leather calmly cleaned his blade on the cloak of the man he had just run through, to the smiling cheers of those behind him and the chink of money passed from hand to hand: the Games were in full swing.

"Curelean! Ho!"

The big man turned and scanned the stands, found the speaker and raised an arm in reply. He continued down the steep flight towards his seat, nodding here and there to those he knew. Trader and nobleman alike gave him respectful distance as he passed, for which he allowed himself a small contented smile. It did not reach his eyes, which passed in regular sweeps through the crowd, and his left hand cupped the scabbard of a long saber as it swung against his hip--he never relaxed in public.

He found the proper box about halfway down the vast side of the Ring and settled in. Below lay the fresh dark lines of the night's track, beaten and smoothed already in preparation for the races. The runners stood naked and shiny with oil, stretching or

practicing kicks and feints. The first race would be run without weapons.

". . . lost over six thousand men. And not conscripts, either!"

"The barbarians lost thirty thousand, rot and gut their mangy hides! They'll not be raiding our borders again."

"Did you hear about the witch burning yesterday? They got the whole coven--one sorceror too."

"Ah! How did he die?"

"They say he screamed curses even as the flames licked him."

"Tantélin preserve us! We'll have drought soon."

The big man leaned back in his seat and listened to the slurred but excited conversation behind him. The expression on his broad face remained politely neutral, but his eyes took on a hard focus and his right hand brushed the cool patterned hilt. Without turning he identified the two speakers, a pair of young rakes who knew less about war and witches than they did about etiquette or swordplay. But then their fathers had been much the same--and had died young.

A flare below signalled the start of the first race. He leaned forward silently. A low, rising thrum began to build through the crowd as the betting commenced in earnest.

"Eighteen dreckii on Cavanal! Who'll take me up?"

"Fifteen on Tenéckin! No, wait. . ."

The big man ignored the shifting bets shouted around him and concentrated on the race. The two fastest runners had been set upon early and beaten off the course; they sat side by side glaring at a line of retreating backs. Of the seven that remained, three were far in front--a wiry fellow made his move and ducked the leader's elbow, but he failed to see the leg that tripped him from behind and trampled him in the hard clay. The crowd shouted its approval.

The two leaders bore down for the finish, neither wasting force on striking the other. Their arms and legs blurred into the sprint and each leaned forward, eyes staring and cheeks rippling with effort. One found the surge to cross the line ahead.

Curelean stood and joined in the salute; the Ring seemed to shiver along its length with applause. Below, the two runners lay on their hands and knees, sucking air. One pushed himself slowly to his feet; he walked over to where the other lay. He stood there a moment, chest rising and falling slowly, gathering strength. Then he bent and raised the victor up on one shoulder. The roar went on.

"Won some coin, did you, Curelean?" One of the

rakes had grabbed the big man's shoulder and turned him partly around, smiling beery breath into his face at six-inch range.

Curelean forced his hand away from the saber hilt. He kept his voice controlled and even: "I lost two hundred dreckii."

The rake's thin face puckered. "Then why were you cheering?"

Curelean shrugged. "It was a good race."

* * *

He held the haunch in one hand and attacked it with strong teeth, took care to wipe off the dribbles of grease on his chin. The wine washed it down nicely. He brushed both hands clean and allowed himself to lean back into the booth's soft cushion.

"Barkeep. Another." He gestured to his empty cup. "Please."

"Yes, Lord Curelean!" The tall, pot-bellied man produced another bottle immediately from behind the low counter. Weaving deftly between clear round tables, he held the wine in both enormous hands close to his body, like a treasure. He executed a polite

bow at Curelean's booth. "It is good to have you here again, sir."

"My pleasure. One reason I come to the Games is to taste your vintage! Your roast is improving as well." He gave a slow half-smile.

"Thank you, sir. My wife will appreciate that!" The barkeep smiled in return, bowed and left.

Curelean opened the bottle and half-closed his eyes as the cool spicy scent came to him. He poured slowly. The tavern was small and quiet, the way he liked it: excellent fare with a minimum of disturbance. Its smooth sloping walls reminded him of the caves below the flat expanse of the Pondi--shelters at once confining and secure.

The broad central firepit was cold, but a woman swayed there to the soft dance of the læyr and the amusement of three young farmhands in worn sweat-soaked jerkins. They laughed in long loud whoops, eyed the dancer's legs, and sloshed their beer as they drank. Curelean frowned into his cup.

The enduring carnival outside made itself heard with drumbeats and snatches of song that penetrated the thick walls. The noise rose sharply and died back again as a man came in.

He wore soft leather breeches and a green silk shirt free of ornamentation. He moved in long, quick

steps that left his cloak swirling about his ankles.
A scabbard and sword hung at his left hip.

"Ho, Tomsin! Wine, please."

Curelean's head jerked up.

The barkeep grinned wide and held forth a bottle.
"I thought you'd be coming!" The two clapped shoulders, chuckling at each other. The stranger's hood rested back to show a long mop of brown hair that spilled along the shoulders. Thick stubble lined the profile of his jaw.

Curelean rose from his seat.

"When did you get in?"

"Not long ago. I just caught the first race."

"How was it?"

"Really--" The stranger broke off at the footsteps behind him. He turned, and his long pink face extended its smile. "Sarnji!" He moved to take Curelean's hand.

"Don't call me that." The voice was low, but it carried enough that the dancer slowed and the farmhands stopped their conversation. "That is a friendship name."

The stranger's hand dropped; the smile was gone.
"I don't understand. What's going on?"

"I believe you know." Curelean's smile was grim.
"What happened to you, Drawlin--last Arkāda, after the

matches? Where did you go?"

The stranger's eyes took on a wary look that edged into regret. "I left for home. . . by ship along the coast."

Curelean moved closer to stare down at the smaller man. "You lie."

They now had the tavern's undivided attention.

The barkeep made a gesture of placation:

"Gentlemen, please, we may settle this peacefully. Sit down, have anoth--"

"Would you be so quick to intercede if you knew your friend had made a pact with the Dark One?"

Curelean kept his eyes on Drawlin, who stared back with a kind of sad defiance. The barkeep inched away involuntarily, mouth open. He glanced at Drawlin and shut it.

"Sarn. . .Curelean, listen! We've been friends too long--"

"Yes, we have." The voice was thick with suppressed rage. He stepped back a pace and half-turned to his staring audience. "I followed you that night; I was hoping to find out which of the town ladies you would choose!" He frowned deeper. "I had a wager on Nascertina, that smallish whore you liked so much. When I saw you turn into the alley, I thought the bet was mine." Softer now.

The man named Drawlin looked like he wanted to sink through the floor. He brushed back strands of hair that had fallen across his eyes.

"I found you sitting on the ground, against the wall." He snorted, glared at the smaller man. "I thought you stabbed and left for dead! I remember shouting for the Watch, running towards you." His eyes clouded with the distance they travelled.

"What happened then, General?" One of the farmhands stared open-eyed and innocent at Curelean's back while his friends tried to hush him down. He sobered quickly enough when Curelean glanced his way.

Drawlin shook his head. "You don't have to say any more."

"Yes, I do. While I ran your body began to shimmer--like heat off stone on a cloudless day." He glanced up, eyes unfocused. "Yes, that's how it was. You shimmered, and you faded. Until you were gone."

A deeper quiet had settled on the tavern. The dancer moved behind the three farmhands.

"I should have been expecting a witch, not a whore, eh?" The saber slid an inch out of its sheath.

"Curelean, things are not as they seem here! It was night, a dark alley--how could you even be sure it was me?"

"It was you." But the voice seemed less sure of

itself.

"Goddammit, I am not a wizard!" Drawlin met the other's stare. "You've got to listen--"

"Then fight me now. I will give you a gentleman's chance to vindicate yourself. You may prove your innocence. Fate will decide if I am right."

The unbroken rhythm of celebration could still be heard outside. In the dim quiet no one moved.

"This is crazy. I don't want to fight you!"

"Then you'll face the Court!" The saber sang out into the room.

Drawlin was quicker. He slid back in three smooth steps, a fencer's motion, wheeled, and was through the door.

Curelean burst out into the roar and chant of the crowd. He almost skewered a man before he stopped. A woman rubbed her bare nipples against his side and tried to kiss him; he shook her off to wade through the dancers. Chaos surrounded him.

"Rot take it all!"

Drawlin was gone.

Chapter 3

"He's a magic man, momma."

Heart

The dog began to whine. The man on the rug shuddered once as his head lolled forward. A long, tired "Aaaaahhhh" came from the shadows of his mouth.

"What the . . .?"

"This doesn't look like yoga. Maybe we should get out of here!"

The head jerked up, eyes wide and staring--they had the look a man has when caught masturbating. The retriever's bark seemed reamplified off the walls.

"I think you're right." He grabbed her hand and they backed towards the door.

The man stood, taking his time about it and blinking his eyes. He swayed back against the wall. "What. . .what the hell are you doing?" His voice gradually rose in volume. "On my farm? In my house!" His right hand shot past his left hip and closed on air.

"This guy's fucking certifiable!" They tore

through the open door into the hall. The dog bounded after them, yelping--in excitement or confusion, it was difficult to tell.

"Sam! Stay!" The owner pointed to a section of floor; the retriever skidded to a stop, head bobbing. "And shut up! Can't even think." He staggered out of the room into the main hall, heard outraged squawking and saw his chickens launching themselves across the front porch.

A young couple were running across his yard.

"Hey, you two! Hold on!"

They kept going.

He stumbled down the steps into the grass. "It's all right, dammit! I just want to talk!" If the voice wasn't completely friendly, at least it sounded more sane.

They slowed about thirty yards away and glanced at each other, breathing hard. Both turned.

"Christ, this looks familiar." He pitched his voice louder: "It would save my voice if I didn't have to shout! Come here, will you?"

"Why should we--so you can shoot us?" Her face was flushed, eyes sharp.

The youth bent his head down near her ear:

"That's it, give him ideas! Maybe if you get him pissed off enough he'll press charges! Against me,

anyway, if he recognized me."

The owner held up empty hands. "Truce, okay?"

They appeared to be thinking it over. The young man shrugged; the girl strode past him, and he hurried to catch up.

Sam emerged from the shadows to stand beside his master, who was shading himself with one hand from the afternoon light.

"Aren't you Richard Darnelson's boy?"

"Yessir." He stopped about twenty feet away. He wore a yellow practice jersey with 72 in white letters, and blue jeans that had holes ripped along the thighs. "I'm Jim. We met once a few years back, remember? This is Sarah Muller."

"Bill Ward." He brushed long brown hair away from his forehead. "Well. What the hell were you two doing in my house?"

"Uh, we knocked on the door. . ."

* * *

They sat in the kitchen on chairs pulled up to the table, still damp from Bill's washclothing. Chickens clucked around them. Bill and Sarah sipped

coffee.

"So anyway, I thought you were probably the most interesting man in Muhlenberg County to try and interview--and since you knew my dad, well. . ."

"You thought I'd be happy to oblige." Bill said it quietly, without malice, eyes on the table top. Most of his attention seemed directed elsewhere. "I knew your dad. A long time ago."

"Hey, you're not that old!" Sarah studied him over the rim of her coffee mug. He glanced at her, for the first time taking a good look. His smile showed strong white teeth and creases along the corners of his eyes. She smiled back.

"Muller's a German name, isn't it? Kommt deine Familie aus Deutschland?"

She blushed down to her neck. "I don't know any German."

"Ah. Sorry."

"How many languages do you know, anyway?" Jim sat with his chair backwards and leaned forward against its spokes.

Bill paused, considering. "I used to know bits of Spanish, Latin, German, Greek, Russian, Chinese, and Japanese. But I'm getting rusty now."

Jim and Sarah glanced at each other. "Um-hm."

The almost horizontal rays of sunlight streaming

from the window turned the curls of Jim's hair, Stiltskin-like, to burnished gold. His smile was open, boyish.

Sarah turned back to Bill. "You see, the interview is an assignment for Jim's Journalism class."

"Hmmm. How do you like it?"

"What?"

"The class."

"Oh, it's okay. I've had better."

"When will you get your degree?"

"One of these years! I'm a Sophomore now."

"How about you?" He noticed red hued in highlights through her hair. The eyes were very bright green.

"I'm a Junior." She eased her shoulders back a little, which had an advantageous effect on her breasts. The lines of Bill's mouth took on a wry cast.

"Hey, I thought we were supposed to be the ones asking the questions!" Jim laughed.

"Who said there was going to be an interview?" Chickens pecked in the silence. He could feel the old anger, the taut outrage of muscles. Not any of their damn business. He saw the almost laughably clear expression of the one--surprise, and hurt; high color

rose in the other's cheeks. Do you want this? Let it go!

Jim recovered quickly. "It's the least you can do after all the trouble we've caused you!"

Bill eased down into his chair. His sudden smile was disarming. "You've got balls, you know that?"

The three of them laughed a long time there among the dust and chickens and faint ribbons of light. None of them could tell exactly why.

"You have a tape recorder?"

"Right here." Jim fumbled the tiny thing out of one pocket.

"Shoot."

* * *

". . .and I picked this up in a small village outside Honshu." He gently fingered the cut woodblock, dark and smooth with tiny whorls, ripples in the grain. A cherry blossom rooted there in perpetual bloom.

Bill placed it back on the shelf beside its neighbor, a small stocky man in elaborate armor, katana held high, edge sliding back behind the head

and ready. His was an exercise in patience.

The room was long and high-ceilinged, built to the same generous scale as the rest of the house. Two old lamps, one on each side of the bed, gave a yellowed light. Shelves lined three walls.

"They're beautiful." She said it almost to herself.

Bill swelled with proprietary pride. "Yes, aren't they?"

Sam lay on the edge of the bed, gazing from one to another. Occasionally his tail beat out a thump.

Jim was speaking into his recorder: ". . .some Pueblo Indian pottery. It's chalk white with tiny black figures--there's a line of dancers, a battle scene, a couple making love, a girl weaving . . .very nice." Pause. "He also has an Indian rug (the other kind of Indian). . . which shows the god Vishnu holding a lotus blossom. I think." Click. "Isn't that right, Bill?"

"Hmmm?"

"This is supposed to be Vishnu, on the rug?"

"Oh. Yes."

Jim pressed the button again. "All these are symbols of Bill Ward's adventures."

Bill tried to frown, but it lost ground immediately. "Try not to get carried away!"

Jim grinned.

Sarah crossed the room to the wall-spanning bookshelves beside the low bed. There was no dust here. She scanned the volumes--mostly hardbound, paperbacks scattered among and between--some fat and old, some shiny with youth. There were textbooks on geology and chemistry, Webster's dictionary in two maroon volumes, Atlases of the world and the United States, collections of plays by Shakespeare and others, how-to books, novels. . . .

She ran her fingers along the old smooth spines and breathed in the book smell.

Jim stopped his monologue to stand beside her. He rested one hand lightly on the small of her back, where the tee-shirt still lay tight against her skin.

She tensed, swung her head to look at him, then turned again to the shelves. She made no effort to move away. "This is a great collection: Great Expectations, David Copperfield, Hard Times--A Tale of Two Cities! I loved that one."

Jim nodded. "I like Dickens."

Bill strode over behind them. On the way his hand stretched automatically to pat Sam's head. The tail thumped.

"Check this out! Stories of Rome, Classical Mythology. . . The Shaman and the Magician: Journeys

Between the Worlds. You've got some wild stuff,
Bill!"

Bill gave a thin smile that nobody saw. "I have
unusual interests."

Sarah left the shelf to fix him with those
startling green eyes. "So what made you come back to
stay here, Mr. World-traveler?"

His face went slack with thought. "Well, this is
home. I grew up here. After my dad died, staying
here just seemed like the thing to do." His eyes
focused somewhere outside the room. "Besides, I like
it out here. It's quiet and private. At least,
usually."

"Sorry about that." Jim's expression contained
about equal parts embarrassment, contriteness, and
irrepressible redneck. "I can be kind of an asshole
sometimes."

Bill assumed a mock grandfatherly persona:
"Don't let it happen again, young man!"

Sarah laughed. "You mean we're not welcome any
time?"

He let the question hang. Careful, Bill. "I
would prefer you call first."

"Your phone's out. We tried it."

"It is?" He couldn't keep the surprise out of
his voice. Jim and Sarah exchanged glances.

"Uh, if you don't mind my asking--" The tape recorder dangled forgotten from Jim's hand. "--how'd you get the Porsche?"

"Jim!" He fidgeted under Sarah's stare.

Bill shook his head. "That's my concession to self-indulgence." He paused, made up his mind whether to go on, and frowned absently. "I saved a little money teaching English in Japan; the Japanese pay pretty well. When I came back here, I inherited the mortgage and debts, but I also collected the life insurance. I took my money and spent it on the car." He said it like an admission of sin.

"You don't drive it much, do you?" Sarah angled her head to look into his eyes and seemed to study what she saw there, as if trying to peer through to the man hidden inside.

Bill looked away. "As I said, I like it here."

"I didn't mean--"

He smiled reassuringly. "It's all right. I guess I've gotten tired of traveling around." Tell them another one.

"Must get kind of lonely." She softened her gaze.

Bill chuckled--or at least tried to. That wasn't exactly what came out. "Sam and I manage pretty well." That's it, Ward, you're on a roll!

"Well, much as I hate to say it, we need to be getting back." Jim lifted his wrist meaningfully.

"It's a quarter past nine already."

"Yes, well--"

"It was certainly a pleasure meeting you."

"For me, too. Jim, tell your father I said hello."

"Sure. And thanks again for the interview! I really appreciate it."

There was a general awkward moving about. Sam got up and started nuzzling hands. Sarah laughed, bent down to pet him.

"Good boy! It was nice meeting you, too."

"Do you need a flashlight? There are a lot of ruts on the way to the road." They walked back out into the main hallway and past the stairs. The old wood creaked.

"Thanks anyway. We'll manage--if my car's still there!"

"It should be. If you have any problems, come on back."

Sarah stopped to smile at him in the half-dusk of the porch. "Well, goodbye."

"Goodbye." He watched them walk out of his light. He stood there a while, listening to the darkness, until he heard the car give its cough and

roar away.



Chapter 4

"Looks as though there'll be more pain."

Electric Light Orchestra

She turned the key and pushed the door open. The room was quiet, dark, White Linen lingering faintly in the air. A pile of old records could just be seen from the feeble porch light. She pulled Jim into the room after her, then switched on the desk lamp and closed the door.

"Do you feel like a pizza?"

Looking him steadily in the face, she began to pull the tee-shirt over her head.

"Guess not."

* * *

The only light came in from the half-open door. He heard Sam whine somewhere outside.

Don't worry about it, boy.

The water felt pleasantly warm and soothing; he never felt his aches until he slid into the bath and began losing them. Tiny waves lapped against the high porcelain walls of his tub when he moved. The razor balanced precariously on one side.

He lay full-length, knees angled up and head back, long black strands matted along his shoulders. A small silver cross rested against his chest, delicate links of chain intertwined with tangles of hair like relics overgrown and forgotten. He examined the strong old boards of the ceiling through his eyelashes, which lent a haze and insubstantiality to his view.

Why shouldn't I? Why the hell not? The whole of Arkadros will think I'm a wizard now--but what the fuck does that matter, anyway? It's not real, Bill! Get that through your damn warped skull! That's what acid trips do: fry your brain. Give you flashbacks years after you stopped. Make the dreams more real than your black Porsche. Fuck it! Nothing's real.

One hand reached up to idly pluck the razor off its nest.

That girl is real. Forgotten how much it hurt to look at a beautiful woman. How long. . .? Five years? Six? Even dope heads get lonely, huh? Not to mention horny. So order more girlie mags! You're too

fucked up for anybody. Even yourself.

The razor hovered over a smooth white section of his left wrist. The blue roads lay dormant and vulnerable just beneath the roof of skin.

Yeah, use more metaphors! Mr. Summa cum laude.
What are you waiting for?

His view blurred further; he never blinked. He was vaguely aware of a dull ache, teeth clenched tight.

This is a journey too.

The razor descended gently.

He let the hand drop back into the water, the warm soothing water. It began to turn bright pink, like the clouds above the City. Hell of a way to die, Ward. You're giving up, you bastard.

He shot up halfway out of the water. Blood trickled down his hand and dropped into the tub. Shit! I don't even have a note!

He stared at the wall. God, the mildew. Never did clean it up. Who cares, anyway? Who am I gonna leave a note to? Sarnji?

He thought that was hilarious. He sat down again, his chest shaking with each heave, as the blood splattered against his skin and the side of the tub.

Damn, I'm making a mess. This is very messy, Bill. Look at this. I can't believe this shit!

Maybe I'm dreaming now.

Sam began to howl. It was a low, desperate, mournful sound that carried through the wooden walls and bounced around his head.

For the first time, he was afraid.

What the hell am I doing?

The razor, which still lay innocent and gleaming in his right hand, rolled easily into freefall. It made a plunk! into the warm pink.

Bill tried to stand. His knees wouldn't let him. A tremendous warmth and ease seemed spread through all his limbs, as if the bath were heating itself. He groped around the sides of the tub, not even sure what he was looking for.

No. I'm not going. I'm staying right here, by God! I'm sorry, God oh Lord I'm sorry please don't let me die!

His left hand found a towel on one side of the tub. He pressed it hard to the cut and lay back, trying to draw in air.

I'm not going to pass out. I'm all right, I can't pass out. Please! I will never, ever do anything this stupid again!

Outside, Sam continued to howl.

Chapter 5

"So oftentimes it happens that we live our lives in chains, and we never even know we have the key."

The Eagles

The sun felt warm as it burned away the early-morning haze around him. Flies buzzed among the corn stalks. He picked an ear off a stalk and shucked it quickly; the watch on his left wrist almost covered the pink, week-old scar. He drove his thumb nail into the soft white meat of a kernel. Still too moist.

The sky was a deep blue with white clouds in fine layered streaks. A con trail, high and faint, cut diagonally across the horizon. The long even rows of corn, just beginning to brown along their tips, stretched ahead for half an acre. Every now and then the rumble of a coal truck filtered through the trees and across the still rows. It all seemed peaceful, static, like a photograph.

Sam trotted up with a stick.

"Don't you ever get tired of this?" He threw the stick in a high arch into the woods behind him.

Sam bounded after it joyfully.

"Must be nice to have a purpose in life." He chuckled and was surprised by the sound of his own laughter. It didn't last.

"Why isn't this good enough?" The clouds gave no answer. "Shouldn't it be?" He turned slowly on his heel, the rich corn smell about him, and let his eyes settle on the fields and well-familiar roofs of house and barn, taking his time. Worlds of time.

"No, nothing wrong here."

Sam returned with the stick. Bill threw it again. He shook himself, and the thoughtful look left his eyes.

He set off for the house with long, eager strides.

* * *

Before he opened his eyes, he heard the water. Its murmur was rhythmic, soothing; he felt grass on his bare skin and remembered floating in the Gulf of Mexico, with the sun bright on his face and warm salty waves lapping about his ears; the sound had that same promise, the same lure.

He blinked the world into focus: thick gold bars of sunlight slanted down between the branches overhead. Tiny motes spun in the light and fell towards earth. He sat on a massy sward that rolled away into trees--the white tops of boulders rose from the deep green in haphazard clumps. Small and shallow and clear, a stream moved past his right elbow. He dipped to take a drink.

The water reflected butternut and paper birch, silver ansel and dogwood in wild disarray; some he didn't recognize. He brought a cupped hand to his mouth and took a cold, sweet swallow.

Ahead and to his left the trees parted to form a small clearing; sunlight curtained it off from the shadows. Short flowers with translucent petals and blood-red stems carpeted this place. He smiled, got to his feet, and walked into the light.

The mass of flowers gave under his bare feet, a smooth and springy motion, and straightened when he passed, imparting a bouncing rhythm to each step. The flower he knelt to pick came away from the soil with some reluctance. Its glassy surface filtered the light, like rock candy; tiny crimson fingers rose from its center. He seated himself carefully and turned it over--the clear, thin petals bent easily under his fingertips. It was like a blown-glass sculpture

infinitely superior to the kind that grow in malls.

He glanced up. A doe stood at the other edge of the clearing, thirty feet away. She lifted one curved black hoof in greeting. Fine mottled patterns along her coat threw back the light; he could see even the delicate halo that lined each ear. She regarded him with calm brown eyes.

He held very still, thinking of the first deer he saw up close, materialized on the blacktop's edge as his father's truck hurtled by. He had pressed his face to the rear window in simple delight. And later he had missed the first deer he shot at--five times, until his father killed it. He never went hunting after that.

The doe was still there. They studied each other in complete stasis, enacting a solemn and ancient ritual. He waited her out.

She moved with patient and deliberate grace, placing her steps, stopping now and then to test the air; the light altered its slant; the stream murmured as before. The doe was close. He lifted one hand and carefully smoothed her flank. She shied away, bent to nibble at stray blades of grass. He knew the child's foolish grin was on his face.

He closed his eyes then and let his body relax, muscle by muscle. The flower rested easily in his

palm. The sound of the stream lingered for a while, still beckoning; then it too lost force.

The flower slipped through his fingers. He came back for it. It fell to earth again.

Sweat began to bead along his forehead, the familiar ache intensifying with each effort. He gripped the flower with both hands as if he meant to wring the color out of it, and still he lost his hold. Pain redoubled itself in echoes and smashed against the walls of his skull, like sonic booms. A low moan of frustration or anguish was coming from his throat. He could no longer hear the stream. He let the echoes travel through and past him, the pain stronger but more detached now; he drew in air he could not feel and tensed to try one more time.

Just the one thing. Just the one little thing!

He wrapped himself around it and flung himself away.

* * *

He heard the water's quiet drone. It took him a long time to place it. He opened his eyes and stared around his bedroom; everything was still in place. He

always half-expected to find his furniture gone, new owners moved in around him--using him as a doorstep, perhaps. The bathroom sink let fall another drip.

He let his eyes adjust to the shadows and stared at the drawn curtains across the room. He felt the familiar sense of dislocation, the jumble that left him wondering.

Then he saw the flower.

It lay on the rug in front of his crossed legs--dull in the gloom, small, unobtrusive. Here.

"Yes!" He clenched one fist and raised it at the ceiling.

Sam let out a bark from behind the door.

"Who's crazy, Sam boy? Huh? Whooooooo!" And he answered each bark with a whoop of his own.

Chapter 6

"Temptation, frustration, so bad it makes him cry--"

The Police

Bill geared the Porsche down into the toll booth lane and fished two quarters from his pocket. KDF out of Nashville was sending him good driving music--he turned the volume down on an old Heart song, rolled down the window, flipped in his coins and gave a nod to the staring booth attendant. He hit the volume again as he let the Porsche scream in first up the ramp.

He looked to the shoebox on the seat beside him and laid a protective hand on it. "'Come on home, girl, he said with a smile. . . .'"

It had been a long time since he sang in the car; he grinned to himself as he moved onto Morgantown Road. Then his mouth went dry again, his stomach clenching itself. He swallowed to keep down the nausea and work up spit.

Almost forgot why I'm here! This is as bad as a first date. It's all right, it's going to work. It

has to.

But he couldn't imagine anything past laying it down on the table, as if that one act would constitute the sovereign cure for his life.

He turned left onto Russelville Road and saw the solitary rise of Pearce Ford Tower ahead--Western Kentucky University's phallic symbol. One side of his mouth turned up with the remembrance. A good friend had lived there on the 19th floor, in a cubicle the size of Bill's bathroom. Ah, college life! Somehow he could not remember the man's name.

He flicked the music off, started talking to himself--a habit he used when concentrating. "Hmmm, should be around here. . . ."

He found the right building in five minutes; fifteen minutes later he stepped out of the Porsche into the street two blocks away, shoebox cupped in both hands.

The sidewalk angled up into the broad hill that dominated the campus. He bent forward slightly and set a good pace. A steady flow of students crossed the crest of the hill ahead on their way to class; he was toiling up the down side, away from campus, and nearly had the walk to himself.

A low, gray stone wall with raised crenellations along its length bordered his left. It reminded him

of a castle battlement. Distinguished trees rose behind in fall splendor: Sugar Maple, Red Mulberry, American Linden. A tiny plaque set in each trunk gave the name of the tree in English and Latin.

A waist-high chunk of rock, slate gray and pockmarked, squatted among brown and gold leaves--it might have been a meteor, or fossilized swiss cheese. A pretty young girl in a blue pullover and a ponytail leaned against it, giving him an appraising stare. To his left, behind the girl, a sign said Kelly Thompson Complex For Science in large black letters.

The building was red brick and white concrete, vertical rows of windows, glass facing lower down. Manicured shrubs lined the front. The silvered dome of a planetarium shone on the right.

He squared his shoulders to go in.

* * *

She was standing in a doorway facing back into the room and talking. An easy, unaffected smile played about her face and animated her body as she leaned into the door jamb. She looked very young.

He continued his stride and stared ahead,

unaccountably flustered. He had not expected to find her here.

Or didn't you? You knew she worked here in the Biology department! Bet your hands are sweating.

He thought how ludicrous he must look carrying an old shoebox through the halls. Maybe she wouldn't see him.

"Bill!"

He stopped dead, five feet away. She met him with a delighted smile; he found himself returning it. They stood that way a moment while blood rushed steadily to his face. He became uncomfortably aware of what they were doing.

"So!" She glanced at the shoebox. "What are you doing here?"

"Uh, well--"

"Let's get out of the way." She laughed and gestured to the room; they were blocking the doorway to students trying to leave. She led him further down the hall.

Okay, what the hell do you say now? You're doing fine so far: "Uh, well!" Good start. Sarah, I'm here to prove I'm not insane! Want to watch?

"I'm here. . . to take care of some business."
He gave a feeble motion to the box.

"Oh." She nodded gravely. "What's in it?"

"This?"

She giggled. "Yes, that!"

"Nothing, really. It's not very important."

"Well it must be, to make you drive all the way out here." She paused, staring openly into his face.

"That is why you're here, isn't it?"

"Well, yeah--" He trailed off, feeling more like a schoolboy all the time. What the hell was happening to him?

"Where are you taking it?"

He pushed hair back out of his eyes. "Actually, I was looking around--I had thought about having something analyzed--"

"Oh! What is it?"

A frown passed across his face. "It's a flower."

She narrowed her eyes, which focused her stare to greater intensity. He had the idea she was picking the insides of his brain and felt puzzled by what she saw. "You need the Herbarium," was all she said.

"Room 218. I'll take you there."

"Oh, that's all right--"

"No, it's okay, I'm through for the day." She paused again. "Unless you really don't want me along."

"No, no, I didn't mean. . .well, I mean. . . okay."

She led him up a flight of stairs to the next floor. He followed automatically, doubts whirling through his head. He was acutely aware of her presence; he hadn't counted on this.

You can still back out. Just get the hell out.

He saw the sign on the door. No.

The room was big, filled with rows of gray metal cabinets that towered above the people. On the left, set high against the ceiling, stained-pine cabinets stretched to the far wall. A young man had opened a metal drawer and was bending over a pressed flower.

"Chris!"

He looked around. He had an oval face and dark wavy hair that ran down the base of his neck. He smiled.

"Hi, Sarah. How's it going?"

"Just fine. I have a friend here who needs something looked at."

"All right." Chris and Bill exchanged nods.

The absurdity of his situation hit Bill full strength. He clutched the box and looked around in aimless desperation.

Chris pointed a hand at the black counter that ran under the wooden cabinets. "You can just put it over here."

Bill nodded but didn't move. His knees flexed

and locked again. He swallowed.

Sarah nudged him playfully. "Go on, will you?"

He walked over to the counter and laid the box down. His hands trembled just slightly. He took off the cover, brought out a bundle wrapped in a brown towel, and placed it on the counter. Carefully, he peeled each layer back.

Chris leaned over. "Um-hm. Where'd you get this?"

"I found it somewhere."

Chris looked up at him, and then bent back down. He brought a desk lamp to bear on the flower and studied it in the light.

"Do you think you could analyze it? Maybe look at it under a microscope?"

Sarah leaned silently over Bill's shoulder.

Chris touched a petal gently. He frowned at it in his hand. "Uh, yeah, I guess--" He glanced at Sarah. "I've got a lot of stuff to do, but I might look at it later on today. Could you come back later, or leave it here?"

"We can come back later." Sarah smiled at him. "Thanks a lot, Chris."

"No problem."

Bill held his ground. "What time do you think you might have it done?"

"Oh, uh, any time. . .how about three?"

Bill nodded. "Okay."

Sarah motioned to him. "Come on, let's go."

As they stepped into the hall, Bill felt his shoulders lift a little higher. He let out air, looked at Sarah. "Where are we going?"

She grinned. "I know a great place to eat."

* * *

"This is good." He took another bite of lasagna, then caught some sauce on his toast and downed that too.

Sarah munched happily on a Caesar's Salad. "The food here's really good, if you know what to order."

They were in a quiet corner with a view through the glass front of the restaurant. The place was stylish, green plants and brass fixtures. He looked at her across the table. "You sound like an expert."

She smiled. "I come out here now and then."

"How's Jim?"

"Oh, he's fine."

They didn't say anything else for quite some time.

He saw her reach for her purse. "No, let me get this."

"No, I'll pay, I invited you here."

"Really, it would make me feel better." He smiled. "I know about trying to eat on a college budget."

She regarded him with those eyes. "All right."

On the way out they both grabbed a mint.

"You never did tell me about that mysterious flower of yours."

He opened up the passenger door for her from force of habit, but she smiled and thanked him. He got in with a pensive look. "Let's find out what they say in the lab. Then I'll tell you." He started the car and shrugged apologetically. "It's kind of a long story."

* * *

The flower was lying in the same place. The room looked empty. "Hello!"

Chris came out of an office in the back. He nodded to them, but his eyes slid down to watch his feet as he walked across the floor.

"How did it come out?"

He shrugged. "Looks like plastic."

"Yes, I noticed it had a lot of similar properties. So it's a kind of natural synthetic polymer?"

"Uh, well. . ." Chris started to frown, eyes on the table top.

"Do you need to do some more tests?"

Sarah watched them both, a look of concern settling on her face.

Bill stopped; his body went very still. "You didn't run any tests, did you?" The voice was dangerously low.

Chris blushed. "I'm sorry, but I just don't have the time to analyze what is obviously plastic! We don't handle stuff like this--" He waved a hand at the flower. "--here. You might try the chemistry department. Or take it back wherever you bought it."

Bill's jaw worked, but nothing came out. Chris took a step back. Sarah moved up to lay a hand on Bill's arm.

"Bill, it's okay! We can try the chemistry--"

"No, Goddamit!" He snatched the flower, almost trying to break it, and made for the door with long, stiff strides. "What's the use?"

Sarah followed him out.

Chapter 7

"How can I refuse?"

Heart

"I'll get some tea, okay? Make yourself at home." She disappeared behind a wall, and he heard a refrigerator open.

He paced across the room without looking at it, shaking his head and scowling to himself. He still had the flower in one fist.

Sarah returned with a tall glass in each hand. She stopped to watch him pace; the smile she wore disintegrated into a worried frown. She set the glasses down.

"Oh, hey, it's all right! It can't be that bad."

He stopped, lifted his head to face her, gave a look of helpless misery. She came towards him without a word. She wrapped her arms around him and lightly stroked the back of his neck, a mother's gesture.

His eyes opened wider. For a long moment he fought it, staring forward, body rigid. Then he let go.

He cried onto her shoulder. It was a raw, embarrassed sound that forced its way out of his throat. It kept on coming out.

She held him tighter, still stroking his hair. "Sssshhhh. It's all right. It'll be all right."

The flower dropped to the floor.

* * *

They made love on her bed, beneath an old Minnie Mouse blanket. He moved to a desperate, frenzied rhythm, but she matched each stroke. He put his mouth close to her ear and closed his eyes, shuddered, found her mouth. This and this and this.

They lay unmoving in the dark.

Chapter 8

"Don't do me like that!"

Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers

He was shaving when the knock came. Sam bounded out of the room, barking.

"Sam! Shit. Who?" Still toweling his face, he walked out after the dog, turned the corner and saw a figure silhouetted at his front door. Sam was wagging his tail.

"Sarah?"

"Uh, no--it's Jim."

Bill stopped. Then he remembered himself and kept walking. "Come on in."

Jim pushed the door wide and stepped through in one smooth motion. He wore black jeans, a white shirt, and a blue-jean jacket. Sam swung his entire backside around while he licked Jim's hands.

"Hey, big boy! Howya doin'?" He slid his hands behind the retriever's head and tousled the scruffy folds of his neck.

"Hope I'm not intruding or anything."

"No, no, not at all."

"Good." There was a pause. "Uh, you were expecting Sarah?"

Bill took in a breath. "Well, you two are about my only visitors--so I figured I had a 50-50 chance of getting the right one." His laugh sounded forced, but Jim's expression never changed.

"Oh."

"So, what brings you out here?" Bill finished toweling the lotion off his face.

Jim opened his jacket and produced a fold of paper from an inside pocket. "I thought you might want to see this."

Bill smiled down at the sheets. "The interview."

"Yep."

"I hope this wasn't too much trouble for you, running it out here from Western."

Jim laughed. "No, it's Saturday. I'm home for the weekend."

Bill looked up. "Oh." He lifted the paper. "Am I going to like this?"

Jim grinned. "Read it and find out!"

* * *

Jim popped the hood; Bill whistled.

"Very nice."

"It's a 327 with 390 horses--the Corvette engine. I put it in myself."

Bill traced the intricate architecture with his eyes: the gleaming expanse of the chrome breather, bright orange for the engine block, hoses twisting like black snakes. He and Jim both nodded with that rare understanding between men who appreciate what they are looking at.

"Course, it probably wouldn't keep up with your ride!"

"I've never taken the Porsche all the way, but I get the feeling this baby would do more than just keep up."

"It's hard to find a Camaro convertible. I was lucky to get this one." There was an unmistakable pride in Jim's voice as he closed the hood. He brushed a hand against the blued side of a fender and leaned against it. They stood there a while, silent, watching a jet pass across the sky. A cold wind met them from the north.

"Have you seen Sarah lately?" Jim was still watching the horizon.

Bill opened his mouth, shut it. He opened it

again. "Uh, no. Why do you ask?"

Jim shrugged. "No reason." He turned, but his eyes swiveled past Bill to focus on the ground.

"Well, the truth is, I haven't seen much of her lately myself. I was kind of wondering if she'd been out here."

Bill didn't say anything.

"We've been having a few problems. I don't really know what it is. I keep asking if I've done something to piss her off--she says no, but things aren't the same."

Bill nodded, stared at weeds.

"So, anyway--" An awkward silence rose. "I don't know--I thought maybe you might know a little bit more about the female mind than I do."

Bill didn't know whether to smile or wince. His head shook slowly back and forth.

"I mean, what would you do in my situation? I get the feeling she's avoiding me, that she doesn't want to talk to me. I don't know if I should confront her or what."

Bill remembered Sam as a puppy once chasing a bee and getting stung; Jim wore that same expression: puzzlement, hurt. Go ahead, Ward. Tell him. Just come right out and tell him. The poor bastard doesn't deserve this. But you're not sure what's going on

yourself, do you?

"I. . .think you should talk to her about it."

"Yeah. Yeah, that's what I thought, too." The jet trail drifted high above them. The clouds moved.

"Well. I should probably be heading on."

"Thanks for coming." They shook hands. "And thanks for bringing the interview; I enjoyed it."

"No problem, man. I'll see you around. Thanks for the advice."

Bill watched the car pull away out of sight.

Chapter 9

"Never communicate with your enemy--
unless you wish to make him your friend."
Objat Tunákin, Praeceptor, Tunji Province

The sand crunched beneath his feet as he wound down into the cavern. Long brown hair fell across his forehead; he paused to pull it back with knotted cloth. Silver shone at his throat. A thin wind whistled past, rustling the folds of his cloak. The bitter-sweet smell of the desert followed him in.

He picked his way with care down the slick glassy slope, one arm thrust high to hold a sputtering torch, the other outstretched to follow a curving wall. The light was thrown back in flickers and hues of red, brilliant orange; the tunnel took on a kaleidoscopic splendor that he barely noticed. He kept his eyes on the ground before his feet, sure purpose in each step. His torch flared and smoked when he rounded a corner, found level footing--the walls tightened to meet him, then writhed away in sinuous tunnels branching into dark. He took the opening on the left.

The wind fell behind; ahead, the passage glowed with new light, fiery and strong. Hunched over, hair brushing the smooth roof, he smothered his torch, laid it softly down, and listened. The shrill of wind. . .and a quick stamp of feet, a hiss of breath sucked in and released, a soft sliding, stopping, and moving again. The light there danced; his tunnel curved into the sounds.

Holding the long scabbard of his blade away from the walls, he crept on.

The tunnel swelled into a high, wide room before narrowing again--a snake after swallowing prey. Torches set in niches along the walls gave off a smoky radiance. A powerful figure, bare to the waist, feinted and sliced at air; the muscles of his back bunched under light blue skin.

"I thought I'd find you here."

The man whirled, blade tip high. It sent back the room's already reflected light. "You!"

"Me, Sarnji."

"Damn you, I said never to use that name!" The broad mass of his chest rose and fell, tightly striated and rolling with sweat. More than one man had backed down before the sight.

Drawlin stepped forward as his blade hissed free.

"Damn you, old friend. I have the right to use

that name. Goddamit, I've earned it! Time and friendship and trust--you don't just throw them away!"

Doubt followed surprise across Curelean's face. But the point of his sabre never wavered. "You track me here, draw your sword, and talk of friendship? Are you mad?"

Drawlin threw back his head and laughed. "Maybe I am."

He came on with a double advance that brought him to lunging range. Curelean parried the attack, gave back a vicious head cut that knocked Drawlin's rapier spinning and sent him stumbling back. Curelean pressed the advantage with a straight thrust--Drawlin twisted as the blade moved past his side and grabbed the wrist, using the big man's own momentum to pull him forward. Curelean slipped on the slick floor of the cave and went down. When he rose, his opponent waited blade in hand.

Curelean led with his saber, feet wide and knees bent for balance. "What is it that you want from me, Wizard?"

"Satisfaction."

Drawlin parried a cut in sixte and twisted his lighter tip to slide across Curelean's arm. The bright blood welled forth.

Curelean smiled, executed a rapid series of

attacks that sent Drawlin back against a wall. Two of these drew blood. Drawlin whirled away from the longer blade to move back into clear space.

Thrust. Parry, riposte--parry, riposte again. Step back.

The scuffle of leather boots and an occasional grunt counterpointed the sharp staccato of metal coming together. Both men fought for traction on the smooth floor; it appeared to throw off their aim. Thrusts that should have been fatal missed instead.

Drawlin was breathing hard now, circling left to minimize the punishing force of Curelean's blows. His wrist tingled with each solid contact, while mirrored sparks jumped in bright glory from the walls.

Curelean animated his blade with undiminished power, whipping strokes hard against the wiry man's defenses, chasing him across the room.

Drawlin moved then within the rhythm of the attacks, bent low, blade down, and sidestepped so the next cut missed him completely. Without the check of a parry, Curelean's saber continued its sweep to screech against the cave floor. His entire side was exposed.

Drawlin placed his sword tip just under the rib cage to pucker the azure skin. Neither man moved.

"What are you going to do, Wizard? Kill me?"

Sarnji's face, suffused purple and clenched, grew calm with stoic control.

Drawlin pulled the rapier back and sheathed it. "That was never my intention."

They stood a while looking at each other, breathing slowly.

Sarnji shook his head. "You continue to baffle me, my friend."

Drawlin laughed, relief clear in each weary shake. "Haven't I always?"

Sarnji eyed his sword before sheathing it. "I think I chipped my blade."

"That's what you get for practicing in a cave."

"Evidently I need more of it. If only our army would do the same."

They shook hands solemnly. "You should see about that cut."

"It is unimportant. Worry about your own."

They stared at each other, broke into grins. Sarnji had big, even teeth, surprisingly white.

"Did you know I have a new concubine? Her name's Shari, and she cooks."

"Another? What does your wife think?" Red drops fell upon the cave floor. Silently Drawlin offered his head band; Curelean wrapped it around his arm.

"She doesn't know yet. She's still traveling on

the coast. Frost, she takes lovers--discreetly, of course. I don't see why she objects to my concubines."

"Maybe because she has to look at them every day."

"Not when she's on the coast! Come back to the house with me. I'll introduce you."

"Well, if she can cook. . ."

They left the torches flickering behind them.

Chapter 10

"Remember to let her into your heart. . . ."

The Beatles

"Sorry I'm late." Bill stood over the table. He nodded at Jim and exchanged a look with Sarah that lasted longer than it should have. He noticed she was blushing.

"Grab a seat, man. We're just getting started." Jim held up a slice of pepperoni.

"I went to the doctor--guess what he told me. . . ." A woman with a shaved head was singing on VH1. Scattered couples sat at round tables with tiny plates of pizza and spaghetti. Ceiling fans revolved uselessly in the heated room.

Bill sat down, Sarah on his left. He stared at air thoughtfully.

"Aren't you going up to the bar?" She glanced at Bill sideways; when Jim looked up from his plate, she shifted her eyes away.

Bill smiled politely. "I've already eaten."

"You sure? This is good." Jim took another

bite. "So, welcome to Bowling Green anyways! Glad you could make it."

"Thanks for inviting me."

Jim swallowed around a smile. "I'm not used to writing letters. You really ought to get your phone hooked up!"

Bill nodded. "Yeah, I guess so." The music played softly behind them. "If you'll excuse me for a minute. . ."

She was waiting for him outside the bathroom door, face flushed and beautiful. "You said you needed time to think things over--well, I gave it to you! It's been over two weeks now. I can't call you, you haven't returned my letters--"

"This is not the place to have a discussion, Sarah." He glanced around the cramped foyer: cheap wood paneling, doors to the bathrooms and kitchen, a yellowed fern turning gently above. Couples moved around the pizza bar ahead; a young man came into view, bent over the bar. It wasn't Jim.

"You don't know what's going on." His voice was low. "I've got problems--"

"We've all got problems, Bill." Sarah fixed him with her eyes until he looked away.

"You don't understand. I'm not really. . .I'm not. . .fit to be with you. You or anyone."

She moved her head to stare up at him again.
"Bullshit. I don't believe that. You're just
afraid--afraid and trying to push me away!"

He colored darkly. "I see you're still with
Jim."

"Dammit, you know that's over! I just haven't
found a good chance to tell him. I don't want him to
be hurt."

They frowned at each other. "So what do we do
now?"

An old man in a grey coat walked past them into
the john. They waited silently until the door swung
shut.

"The question is, what do you do now? Were you
only faking that day? Was I your one-night-stand?"
She moved closer, the fabric of her sweater almost
touching him. "Are you going to run away again?"

The lines of his face froze. His eyes grew lost,
distant, like the first time she saw them open; the
pupils dilated, swallowing rings of brown. When he
blinked, they came back to rest on her. One hand
reached out and wrapped hers tight. "No. I'm through
running."

Her smile opened slowly, unsure at first, then
spread so that her whole body spoke it. She stood on
her toes; he grinned and closed the gap between them.

They didn't say anything.

* * *

Jim was frowning when they came back. "You guys have a little pow-wow in the bathroom? Or did someone fall in?"

The smile that had been playing about Sarah's lips vanished. "I had to freshen up, Jim."

Bill did not volunteer an answer. The set of his mouth was serious, almost sad, but a new vigor animated every move, and a clearness was in his eyes. He looked older and younger at the same time.

Jim went quiet as they sat down, just stared slowly from one to another, a hand idly twisting spaghetti around his fork.

The silence became profound--there was nothing to say. Jim kept his eyes on his plate now. Bill and Sarah studied each other with surreptitious care. Slowly the room began to empty. After a time, Bill excused himself to leave. He hesitated by the table, smiled at Sarah, and tucked his chair back in place. He turned a polite, somber gaze upon the top of Jim's head. "Thanks again for inviting me."

Jim mumbled, unmoving: "No problem."

He watched Sarah's eyes follow Bill out.

Chapter 11

"The love you need ain't gonna see you through."

Electric Light Orchestra

Jim walked in when Sarah opened the door. His hands were buried in the pockets of his gold high school letterman's jacket; his shoulders made round bulges in the fabric. He never looked at her, just moved past and planted himself squarely in the center of the room.

Sarah shut out the cold behind him. She wrapped her arms around herself, shivering in a thin tee-shirt that looked about his size. "Jim, what are you doing here? I told you I had to study; I've got that test tomorrow."

If he heard the question, he ignored it. He seemed to be studying the tips of his Nikes.

Sarah kept still, but her voice rose a notch. "What the hell is going on?"

Jim made her wait. When he shook his head he hissed air, like he had been holding his breath. "You want to know the real bitch of it all, Sarah? I got a

B on that fucking interview!" He tried to chuckle, but it didn't come out quite right.

Sarah's jaw worked. "What are you talking about?"

"I think you know." He raised his eyes; they looked at each other; a long, miserable silence wrapped them together.

"I don't know what to say: we didn't plan anything, it just happened--I never meant to hurt you, please believe me, Jim, it's true--" Her voice almost caught, but she clamped it tight instead.

Jim's voice was soft, puzzled, as if he was working something out to himself. "For a while I had a hard time believing it. I don't know. . .it just never crossed my mind! I didn't think. Why didn't I think about it?"

Sarah moved a step closer, stopped herself.

"Jim, it's not your fault--" She stopped that, too.

He continued, oblivious: "I know sometimes I may not have, uh, been good at showing how I feel. . . ." The words faltered. The look of her eyes was almost too much to bear.

"I'm sorry, Jim. I'm so sorry."

"Goddamit, why are you crying? It's not your fucking heart that's broken!" He raged around the room, hands out and flexing, building himself up to

shake her, hit himself, break something. He never did.

Sarah stood in the same place. Her face was in her hands.

Jim dropped on the sofa, all the manic energy gone. He rested his hands on his knees, regarding them through a shiny haze. "Two years, Sarah. Are you ready to throw all that away?" He swallowed, paused for a great effort. "I, I--"

"I love him, Jim." She let her hands fall away from her face.

He winced, turned away.

You saw this coming. Somewhere you did. The harder you wanted it, the more she pushed you away. The guy's got a Porsche, for Christ's sake! Oh, I speak French, Italian, fucking German. . .So I love her, and she loves him. Huh. Just like that. . .I'm on the outside looking in.

She waited silently, respectfully, while he bent his head to cry.

When he turned around, he actually forced a smile to his face. "Hey, don't worry! I'll be all right. Now's my chance to take that Wilson girl out!"

She laughed despite herself, as he had always made her laugh. Then she coughed and wiped her cheeks dry with her palms.

He did the same. They looked at each other in the new silence.

"Well, you take care of yourself." He opened the door.

"You too."

He did not look back.

Chapter 12

". . .turn some pages."

REO Speedwagon

He woke up to Sam's bark and the slide of tires on grass outside his window. He heard a deep-throated rumble tick down into silence. A car door opened and slammed shut.

He knew who it was.

He slid his feet across the covers and down to the cool wood floor, which completed the job of waking him up. Sam bounded out the open door and down the hall, nails scritchng as he rounded the corner. Bill reached the closet, found without light an old robe, comfortable and thick with his own smell. He worked his feet into slippers, then held still, listening: no sound but Sam's whine and the rheumatoid squeaks of the old house. He padded into the hall without hitting the switch, savoring the cover darkness gave him. As if he would be less ashamed without the light.

He walked slowly, taking his time, thinking (with

the mind's unaccountable ability to notice the most unrelated things to the business at hand) how nice it felt to be inside, with the warm heat coming up through vents to ruffle the hem of his robe. It was the only thing he liked about cold weather.

He saw Sam's eager shape shiver and nod before the door. He twisted the lock, grasped the smooth chill knob; the wash of air coming in stripped the comfort from his bones. Sam nudged open the screen door to leap into the yard. Bill stepped out to the edge of the porch and peered into the night.

It was a night summer could not have produced-- alive with stark and utter clarity, stars wheeling thick and bright across the sky. The moon, waxing almost full, painted corn stubble and grass stalk shiny silver. The Camaro was slewed to Bill's left, its sleek hood affording a diagonal view of the house; Jim leaned there with a bottle in one hand, the other resting lightly on Sam's upturned head. The two men looked at each other a long time.

Jim pushed himself off the hood and came forward, taking slow deliberate strides. The soles of his tennis shoes crunched in the silvered weeds; Sam followed, a little less eager without the prospect of play. Around them the night stretched in cold quiet indifference.

He stopped before the porch steps, face shadowed and inscrutable. Bill glanced at the square bottle, caught the Jim Beam label: it was a quarter empty. They examined each other from this closer range, still silent, waiting for a backstage whisper, a cue.

The first move is yours. God knows I owe you that.

The arms of Jim's coat gleamed slick and black in the white light; the G with its slanted stripes looked vaguely childish. The jacket seemed tight around the shoulders, as if he had recently outgrown it. Jim shrugged, let out air in a long smoky plume, and raised the bottle high.

"I hate drinking alone."

* * *

The open bottle lay forgotten on one side; beer cans rolled gently back and forth along the old wood of the porch. Bill and Jim hunched together on the porch steps, forearms resting easily on knees, heads swiveling occasionally to emphasize a word or survey the frosted scene. They didn't feel the cold.

"You know, I thought about just coming out here

and beating the shit out of you." The tone was judicious; Jim's stare had no heat in it.

Bill nodded gravely.

"But I thought what the hell! It just didn't seem like the right thing to do." Jim belched to the heavens in expert fashion, squeezing at least three syllables out of it. "Did I ever tell you about the time I went to Nashville to get laid?"

Bill considered this. "Nope."

"Oh, man. It was about three years ago--me and some friends had gotten trashed, and like idiots we drove to Nashville looking to get laid. None of us knew dick about Nashville." The lines of his mouth softened. "So we're tooling around downtown at three in the morning, looking for babes, and as we go by we see two of 'em standing on a street corner. We yell at them, they yell back. So my dumbass friend Jason makes a U-turn right there! Now we're goin' the wrong way down a one-way street--" Jim gesticulated his arms in a general way for emphasis; Bill chuckled dutifully with the picture. "--and this cop hits his blue lights behind us! Jason guns it, and we spend the next twenty minutes taking turns at seventy miles an hour--my friend Ron's leaning his head out the window and puking as we go along! I think he was trying to hit the cop. We never made it back to that

street corner." Jim smiled with the remembrance.

Sam barked from somewhere in the house.

"Thanks, Sam. See, he liked it!"

"He's a smart dog."

"Smarter'n we are."

A few scattered clouds set high up in the east bore the marks of the coming rise. The moon didn't play quite so prominent a part in the sky; the stars too had retreated a little. Not that they had ever seemed close, but now they veiled themselves more tightly.

"I've seen some wild times." Bill mused the words softly.

Jim cocked his head.

"Once I took a dare to swim the Hruul naked--this was in late autumn, when ice floes were common." His eyes had found a well-familiar point in space, and rested there. "It was foolish and stupid and might have gotten me killed, but I was trying to prove my bravery to a certain young lady! It was the fashion then to impress women through the most idiotic and dangerous stunts imaginable." Now it was his turn to smile, remembering. "So I drank hot kaag for courage, smeared my body with oil, and dove in. I'd never felt such cold."

Jim shivered sympathetically.

"About halfway across, I knew I wouldn't make it. I was tiring, seizing up--the current was taking me out to sea. It was at about this point that the kaag and the courage deserted me. My friends and lady love were nowhere in sight; the river had carried me a mile or more since the last time I'd checked. I thought I was falling asleep in the water!"

Jim was quiet, listening.

Bill kept his eyes on the same space. "Then I saw the boat, a fisherman's yawl, on the river ahead of me. There were only about three or four miles left before we hit the bay. I started yelling, swimming, waving my arms--the next I remember, I was being hauled aboard like a fish. My friends all told me it was a noble effort, but the young lady was not impressed. The only thing I got out of it was a healthy dose of frostbite."

Jim looked at him with new respect. "Man, you are one good bullshitter!"

Bill's face grew quizzical; then his eyes widened, and he nodded slowly.

The sun colored the tops of the trees and gradually worked its way down to the porch and yard. Sam came back out to have his ears scratched. The two men watched the day arrive. They didn't say very much--but they kept the distance friends keep, side-

by-side in the warm growing light.

Chapter 13

"Now we come to the end of all things. . . ."

The Book of Life and Death

The city was burning. Flames jumped and danced from house to house--licking white shells and the essence within, blackening stone, running along balustrades and down polished columns to drip in shiny lambent pools. Smoke mingled with the night to shut out the stars.

He heard the crackling and the killing around him, smelled flesh in the popping smoke, saw figures stumbling through shadow and incandescent glare, felt the blade as it bit into an old woman, arms raised in supplication. Her choked cry was answered by the wild hoarse shouts of the slayers.

They moved in and out of the dark like nightmares, fearless and sure in their element--tall, rangy, swords bright with fire and blood. Singly and in groups, they hunted.

He kept to the shadows, stopped to listen for the stamp of boots, look for the shine of blades, and

slowly worked his way along the twisting street deeper into the city. Behind his shoulder, a great oval of fire painted the horizon: the Ring too was dying.

He almost stumbled over the body of a child. It lay face-up, arms and legs oddly akimbo, head thrown back--in the red glow flies crawled already over the cool lips, the pupils baffled and astonished, the slick crusted gash of the throat. Son of an aristocrat. A forest was woven into the richly-textured shirt, tiny leaves now spotted and darkened. A finger on the left hand bent at a cruel angle--doubtless the ring there had been difficult in the getting. Drawlín took a step back, shuddered once, and retched into the wall.

He ran then, unthinking, as if he could put enough distance between himself and the face of death.

The street not far ahead was blocked by flaming debris; a cluster of figures moved there in silhouette. Drawlín brought himself up short, still in shadow, and tried to think past the relentless thud of his own heart. He breathed in the thick bitter air and watched the people ahead: two men with their backs to the street were drinking, shouting laughter at two more who wrestled on the ground. . .no, wait.

The rapier slid quietly from its sheath.

The first man died before he could even turn

around; Drawlín wrenched his brand free and met the hasty attack of the other, stepped outside the axe's swing and drove the rapier in under the ribs. The body twisted so that the blade snapped inside. The third man was just now looking back to see why the laughter had stopped--outrage chased fear across his broad sweating face. The woman beneath him strained against his weight.

Drawlín bent down for the axe while the man heaved himself up, one hand pulling at his trousers while the other found a sword. He bore a huge belly, arms like tight sausages, hair limed into spikes, the stale-sour reek of ale--came on grunting with wild slashing cuts that sent Drawlín back, the axe heavy and unfamiliar in his hands.

The berserk smiled, advancing his blade with practiced confidence. He chuckled at the desperate clumsiness of Drawlín's attack, laughed more when the wiry man slipped, on the verge of falling. He raised his sword for the killing stroke.

Drawlín recovered before the stumble really began; too late, his enemy recognized the feint. The axe was in his belly.

At the sound of Drawlín's step, the woman rose and looked at him vaguely, clutching the remains of her dress about her. She was pretty, slight. There

was blood on her thighs.

"It's all right. No one's going to hurt you."
He paused awkwardly and would have raised his palms to her, but they fairly dripped with blood.

Her eyes focused; pain, and a great weariness, flooded in. She seemed a thousand years old. "My family. . .?"

He shrugged helplessly. "My Lady, I know not."
His stare traveled (with a measure of self-disgust) to the right side of her dress, where a huge rent exposed the breast. She ignored his look--she was beyond all shame, now.

They made a calm pocket amid the tumult. Faintly the mingled roar of heat and the voices of human pain and fear came to them, like a distant but relentless surf. The woman stooped, brought up a long thin dagger, studied the firelight reflected in it.

"My Lady, what are--"

"My family." She pointed slowly at the flames.
"In there."

He was unable to meet her eyes.

Knuckles white around the dagger hilt, she strode out into the dark. He didn't try to stop her.

"God. God damn it all to hell!" The smoke was getting to him. He blinked it away, cast about for a new blade--the rapist's longsword was rust-free and

had a good balance. He carried it naked in one fist, slicing air with angry cuts.

Retracing his steps, he found a side alley and followed it at a cautious pace. Here it was almost quiet--no slayers, just the bodies they had left behind. He emerged into the lurid glare of an avenue, hugged one wall, and continued in his original direction; whatever drove him was stronger than the fear and hate etched on his face.

The buildings ahead clustered more thickly, and the street narrowed to meet them. These still stood untouched. Old, massive, they had weathered even time, and seemed impervious or at least indifferent to anything mere men could do. Gradually a new sound rose upon the air, supplanting the distant smacks of fire at its feast; Drawlin stepped more quickly, saw dark shapes, a bobbing mass of torches, metal raised high and gleaming: battle.

The streets before him writhed with living and dying. He cursed, looked about, and turned his eyes up to the latticed stairways that climbed the sides of each building. "I go this way. . ." He traced a path through the air with his finger. "Yes." He looked both ways before crossing the street.

He walked at ground level as long as he dared, then found a stairway and began to climb, anticipating

company at every landing. The sword felt good in his hand, and he was glad of the ornate latticework that hid him from the street. The luck that favors brave men, cowards, and fools was with him--he met no one, only heard now and then muffled whimpers from closed and battered doors.

He emerged onto the roof with the city below and before him. A slight wind was here, cool and clean, blowing towards the fires behind; he turned and saw the great billows of smoke rising and snaking majestically into each other, red sparks flashing high in the gloom. The clash of arms surfaced from five stories below; he moved to the edge of the roof, laid himself flat, sword to one side, and peered down.

From his height, the combatants looked so fiercely seemed more like interchangeable pieces, less like men. He saw now that a disciplined company of troops had blockaded the intersection and were stubbornly, desperately, holding it--though not for long. Their front was only one or two men deep in places, and they were losing the war of attrition; the mass which battered against them surged with horrific energy. Something whirred past Drawlin's temple, jerking him back to the safety of the roof. He didn't stay to ponder which side had sent the arrow.

"Now for the hard part." He crossed to the next

edge of the building and peered down again: this was behind and at right angles to the battle, but soldiers still milled below. He'd be in plain view when he jumped. The opposite roof was fifteen feet away and a full flight shorter--good for his leap, hard for the landing.

He tossed the longsword ahead, then stepped back. He shook his legs out and sucked deep breaths, bent his neck and grasped the silver chain about his throat. When he looked up, a grim smile played about his lips. He was alive.

He backed up more, measured the distance, leaned forward. Step. Step, step, step, step, step step step step plant! He did not look down.

Arms wide, he felt like a bird of prey as the street passed below and the roof rushed up to meet him. He hit the rough stone, rolled into a ball, and came up grinning twenty feet from the edge. Ignoring the throb of his left elbow and the slick stickiness there, he retrieved the sword, crossed the roof, and did it again.

The buildings leaned increasingly together, like mushrooms; at times he could almost step from one to another. When he reached an impossible gap or a taller roof, he climbed down to the street--always the fighting drove him up again. So he traveled the city

one roof at a time. The wind shifted, and the fire followed in his wake.

* * *

A grove of trees shrouded the house from his view--he knew they were there from memory, but his eyes only registered a general blot and an absence of anything resembling light. He could have walked into one before he saw it. He covered the ground with short slow steps, one hand in front, and strained his ears to try and make up for the greater lack. The smoke-scent carried on the breeze promised light soon enough.

A chorus of anguished yelps broke out in front of him and continued for quite some time, varying in pitch and intensity. He centered on the sounds and quickened his pace. Before long he saw torchlight through the trees, and the outlines of men.

A knot of figures were performing a strange sort of hopping dance by the edge of the grove, originating the yells, too. They shook their weapons and spat at the darkly imposing mansion in the clearing's center, but they kept a respectful distance.

Drawlín circled around the edge of the grove just within the tree-line and gave the men a wide berth. They faced the building's deceptively open front; he would approach the rear. His eyes picked out men there, as well--except these were sprawled on the grass, decorating themselves with arrow shafts. He smiled.

"Ho! Curelean!" No answer from window or parapeted roof. He was afraid to call too loudly, lest the wrong people hear. "Sarnji!" He waited, listened, surveyed the broad clear expanse and the trees around it. "God help me."

He stepped out into the clearing.

* * *

The pain was the first thing he noticed, concentrated in a fiery crease along his left temple. He opened his eyes, saw a blurred shape jerk into motion and leave his line of sight. A swath of bandages circled his head. His tongue felt thick.

"He is awake, Lord."

"Good. Go back to your post." Then, in softer tones: "My thanks. You've served me well."

A familiar face came into view. "How do you feel?"

"How do you think?" The room focused slowly: tall, dim, richly spartan, with the lone bed beneath him whose value could have bought whole buildings and the families inside. Curelean wore chain mail, tight-chinked and silvered, across his breast. His arms were bare. He leaned close, neck tensed and a darker blue. The unmistakable din of melee pierced the thick walls, but it seemed remote, of no significance.

"I apologize for the accident." Sarnji gave an embarrassed nod at the bandage. "One of my men decided not to take any chances. It happened before I got there."

Drawlin tried to sit up, thought better of it.

"Why are you here?"

He shrugged. "I came to say goodbye."

The soot-blackened lips turned up slightly. "You picked a god-cursed time to do it! But, it is good to see you."

Drawlin smiled back. "And you." Curelean offered a cup; the wine tasted bitter but felt good going down. The night's events whirled, faint and chaotic: bad dreams recollected. "Sarnji, what happened. . .with the men?"

"What? What men?"

"I heard screams near the house, just as I arrived."

The smile became a genuine beam that shrugged aside the gloom. "Ah, that. Burning oil! Someone has to bathe the damn barbarians!"

The laughing hurt Drawlín's head, but he enjoyed it anyway. "So, what's going on? How long have I been--"

"Long enough." The face was smooth again. "They've surrounded the house completely; more are coming."

"The City is gone." Gradually, the noises outside began to quiet.

"Yes, I know."

Drawlín dropped his gaze. "And your family?"

"Well away, thank the gods! My wife's little trips have come to some good after all." There was a calmness in his voice and eyes.

Drawlín realized then for the first time that his friend was going to die.

"Are you able to stand?"

He lay there, mutely uncomprehending.

"I said, are--"

"Yes. Yes. Give me your hand." The room swayed once before recovering itself. He leaned on Sarnji's arm as they went out.

The night air was thick with smoke; fire red-limned the horizon now and flickered with a thousand shiny tongues below. The roof stretched about eighty feet, with roughly a dozen men scattered along its length. Two of those were worrying at a veined cornerstone with bars, hammers, and chisels. Curelean leaned over to Drawlín: "Keep low--don't make an easy mark. And don't go too near the edge."

He noticed that Sarnji ignored his own advice. "Yes, Father."

A short man in scaled mail, with a graying beard and blood dripping down one cheek, stepped deferentially to his lord's side. "Kicked 'em back again, my liege!"

"Well done. And the oil?"

The man shook his head wistfully. "We used the last of it."

Curelean nodded. "Have the men start bringing up furniture." He looked towards the two still hacking at the cornerstone. "I want that to fall on cue!"

They nodded grimly and turned back to work.

Sarnji put a hand on Drawlín's shoulder, smiled at the older man by his side: "Drawlín, meet my foreman, Hosk."

"A pleasure--"

"He's the one who shot you."

Hosk smiled ingratiatingly. "Sorry about that. I only used a sling bullet."

Drawlín grunted. "Lucky for me."

A deep roar sounded from the massed throats below, rising in volume and fury until the men stopped their work to look at one another. Each wore exactly the same face.

Hosk spat over the side. "Lord, here they come again."

* * *

The axe made a weighty thunk! as it bit into the door. At the second hit the shiny tip of the blade appeared, and a long splinter flew into the room.

Curelean faced the door, two paces back. Blood caked his face and neck, but he waited steadily on the balls of his feet, a thin dripping sabre in each hand. "They were good men--good men, rot take you! Come on!"

The axe hit the door again.

"This is crazy!"

Curelean glanced over one shoulder. "I agree."

"Come with me!"

Thunk! A grinning face eyed them through the hole.

"No!" Sarnji shook his head, almost gently.

"No. Thank you. This is my home."

Drawlin heaved his sword at the grinning face; a shriek came satisfyingly through the door. "But you'll die, God damn it! At least let me try!"

Curelean shook his head again with that infuriating calmness. The rage had left his eyes, and Drawlin ached with the loss they already spoke--clear, exalted, and a little sad. "Ah, my friend, all men die. It's the facing it that matters. That, and the living itself."

The door shuddered under two axes now; the floor was littered with long jagged strips.

Curelean smiled. "Go. You'll do well to save yourself! Do it now!"

Drawlin saw the door crumbling, felt the pain searing his temple, and knew the sense of his own mortality. "I'll need time--"

"Time is in short supply."

The door fell in with a crash.

"But I'll buy what you need." He leaped to fill the door; the blades flashed; a man went down.

Drawlin forced himself to sit while his body screamed to run, help, fight, move! His fingers

twitched. The sharp kiss of swords rang heavily on his ears. He swallowed hard and closed his eyes on Curelean's straining back. "Goodbye, my friend."

His first thought was that a sword had reached him after all--the pain of his wound multiplied until it was all he knew. Sarnji and the room, gone; himself, gone. He surged into the pain, gasped, fell back. Again. It waxed so great that he wished he had died, would die--anything to make it stop!

Chapter 14

"Just what you want to be, you will be in the end."

The Moody Blues

It was one of those late-fall days thrown in to cushion the onset of winter: bright, warm, beautiful. The house gleamed softly blue with a fresh coat of paint. Disgruntled clucks and squawks came now and then from the wire shed beside the barn--and nowhere else.

Bill whistled a tune from Mozart as he bent back down to the paint. Generous dollops of it colored his face and shirt, but he slapped another brushfull to the house with gusto. He jerked when the fingers went around his ribs.

"Oh, stop! Come on. . .now. . .you know I'm ticklish!" He was writhing so that drops of blue flew in all directions.

Sarah giggled. "Yeah, I know!" She was streaked with paint too.

Sam watched them from a safe distance.

Sarah was eyeing the side of the house

doubtfully. "Think it'll be done today?"

Bill squinted at it. "I don't know. Sooner or later, we'll get it."

Sensing a safe break in the action, Sam trotted up with a stick.

"All right, boy!" Sarah threw it far into the yard; he was halfway there before it touched earth. "I really love it out here," she whispered, staring out across the open fields and the thick line of trees.

Bill heard it. "Enjoy it while you can, my dear! School's tomorrow."

"Don't remind me." She smiled and rested a hand on his arm. "Honey, you think I should quit school?"

He looked down at her upturned face. "Nope."

The smile broadened; she was very beautiful then. "Good." A certain look came into those eyes: "You don't mind if I stay the night, do you? I can leave early."

Stay as long as you like! I'm not running anywhere.

"No. No, I don't mind at all." They leaned into each other.

Sam came back for another pass.