



Illustrated by Tomislav Tikulin

The Journeyman: In the Great North Wood

Michael F. Flynn

*"It's a long and dusty road,
It's a hot and a heavy load.
—Tom Paxton*

A bird in the hand

The Harborside of New Cuffy was in full morning bustle when Teodorq sunna Nagarajan the Ironhand strode down the hill from his overnight bodyguard job. Fishermen newly docked from

their labors hawked their wares on the breakwater while gulls overhead shrieked their portion. Ships' bells clanged the watch in harbor. Shutters slammed back on windows and night soil plummeted onto unwary passersby. A ship fresh in from Old Cuffy curled lines toward waiting longshoremen.

Greenies, both overseamen and colonials, shoved past the pale-faced native coastalmen their grandsires had conquered. Spiced among them like raisins in porridge were outlanders: tall, tan forestmen with noses like the blades of their throwing-axes, dusky, yellow-haired swampmen in vests of stiff gator hide, and golden ironmen from those Houses that had bent the knee. Teo had even glimpsed a fellow plainsman wearing the feathered bonnet of a Ptarmigan and gawping at houses piled three stories high.

They had lost their tribes, these men, or, like the greenies, had never had them. No one stood between them and their rulers. Hence, their only safety lay in obscurity, and no place offered more of that useful commodity than the jumble of alleys, taverns, joy houses, chandleries, and pawnshops called the Harborside Mews.

Bodyguarding was oft an overnight occupation, sending Teo homebound with coin-filled poke just when the victuals were freshest. At the poulterer's stall, he acquired the plucked carcass of a pheasant large enough for his three partners and himself and slung it in a bag on his quarterstaff.

At the boardwalk, he paused to watch the gangplank roll off the ship. "One piece say big hat arriving," he said to a bystander in halting *xhavla*. After several months in New Cuffy, he had mastered the rudiments of the greenie's tongue.

"Nah," the *greecow* replied. "The governor woulda sent an escort."

True, the ships often brought convicts, or men down on their luck and looking to escape—from the law, from their wives, from the south end of a northbound plow-mule. Some even came looking for adventure; though if they were lucky, they didn't find it. But Teo, who only bet on sure things, had spotted the big hat on deck while on his way down the hill.

A short fellow dressed in a knee-length red-and-gold jacket and wearing an oversized, broad-brimmed hat with feather plume stepped daintily upon the gangplank. He carried a gold-headed walking stick. Several younger men as finely dressed clustered about him, and another with the ink-stained fingers of a secretary followed a few paces behind.

The newcomer doffed his hat and shook his head to unfurl his neck-frill to the morning sun. "Hails, New Cuffy," he said. New Cuffy, embodied in the usual dockside ragtag, made indifferent response, of which "up yours" was most audible.

"Smell *his* feet," said Teo's neighbor, who was no fonder of big hats than were other colonials, but he paid the bet with no complaint.

Seven Quail Cutpurse, a displaced forestman who made his living among large but inattentive crowds, watched the big hat while fingering a knife hilt hidden behind his coattail. Nearby, a coastalmen named Pushaluq Mugger slapped a cosh repeatedly into his palm. They were nerving themselves up for something.

"That can't be good," Teodorq muttered. He studied on the crowd, but saw no one else preparing for an assault. An ironman in the livery of House Moose on the other side of the boardwalk seemed also to have taken note of the brigands and stood with arms crossed, awaiting developments.

Teo hoped more attackers were lurking, since defeating only two was a feat unworthy of the son of Nagarajan.

As the big hat strode toward Harbor Street, Teodorq slipped the pole from his bundle. He pushed against the forestman and said, "Seven Quail, you are discovered." At the same time, he shoved his staff across a bystander's shoulder hard into Pushaluq's throat. The coastalmen dropped to his knees, gagging. But Seven Quail turned with a snarl and stabbed Teodorq with his serrated knife.

Teo, for his part, had held the pheasant like a shield. The knife pierced the bag and sank deep into the body of the bird. Not yet realizing his mistake, Seven Quail twisted, and Teo caught the serrations on the bones and yanked the weapon from the cutpurse's grip. Seven Quail turned to

run, but Teo reversed the swing on his staff and stunned the man on the back of his pate.

He stepped back and studied on the situation.

As he had suspected, two others had lurked on the far side of the boardwalk, but both had been laid low by the walking sticks of the big hat's escort. The big hat himself stood considering in their midst.

Teo gathered up his torn bag and mangled pheasant, restored his bindle stiff, and with a philosophical sigh continued on his way. Bad luck for his bird. He was none too sure he wanted to eat a pheasant into which one of Seven Quail's knives had sunk.

Bad luck, too, for Seven Quail and his accomplices, who had surely been bought men. No one in the Mews half-world plucked fruit that high up the tree; not on their own tick. Someone had offered money, and Seven Quail had been stupid enough to take it.

He wondered who the big hat was to warrant four assassins.

* * *

The twisting lanes led to Bunny Mixowa's boarding house. Bunny was third-generation New Cuff and ran a tavern on the ground floor, collected rents, and drank enough *absence* to keep himself oblivious to his boarders' activities. Teo and his friends occupied the third floor, which had been divided into several rooms.

He found Chum Varòwanop in the eatery, chopping vegetables into a stewpot. The swampman paused and wiped his forehead with the back of his knife-hand. "What'd ye get us for dinner?" He spoke the shortgrass *plavver* that had been the common tongue in the Foreign Legion of House Tiger.

Chum had been a "battle engine-maker" for the Tigers and, with Teo's Horse Archers, had fought at Joojen's Creek, where the Legion had repulsed three companies of New Cuffy militia. Good work spoiled, for the greenie Royals had circled through Moose-land and broke Cliffside Keep.

Teo plopped the game bag on the table. Chum inspected the pheasant. "You stole the bird," he guessed, "and tried to carve the poor fowl on the run."

Teo described the hoo-rah at the docks and how he had cleverly used the pheasant to block Seven Quail's knife and disarm him.

"So you ruined our dinner?" asked Chum.

Chum shrugged. "Don't like sneak ambushes."

"Stupid plainsman." Sammi o' th' Eagles spoke from the common room. "Those best kind." Sammi was a hillman, pale with straight black hair and slanted eyes. He spoke other languages using the grammar of his own, which possessed an alarming shortage of conjugations.

"It was Seven Quail," Teo told him.

"Oh. That different. Kill him?"

"Poled him. Rest is up to the greens."

"Seven Quail owe Sammi five *pieces*."

"Good luck collecting."

"What about the damn bird?" Chum complained.

"Bring suit in the 'cheating court,'" said Anya Goregovona Herpstonesdoor, who stepped from her private room dressed for her job at the chandlery. "If Seven Quail is executed, his legal property 'cheats to the government, and Sammi can sue for his debt."

"Not believe it."

"That you can bring suit?"

"No, that Seven Quail got *legal* property."

Rather than raise questions among the greenies, the princess of Cliffside Keep pretended to be "Anna Overcreek," a shortgrass woman, with Chum acting as her common-law husband. She had dyed her hair, painted *uuli* symbols up her arms, and grown her braids to "married" length. There was no Cliffside Keep to be princess of, and House Tiger had been slaughtered in the battle. She had sworn eternal vengeance against House Moose, who had fought that day on the green side.

"Tavern-gossip claims," she said, "that Yar Yoodavig and the remnants of the Legion still fly

the Tiger-striped banner.”

Chum sighed and took the bird to the cutting board. “Maybe I can cut out the parts his knife touched. Teo, you can be the taste-tester. Princess,” he answered her unspoken question, “even if we did learn the formula for the thunderpowder like the Yar asked, I’ve no more pigeons and Yoodavig does not advertise his whereabouts.”

“Oh!” said Teo. “Almost forgot. Saw a moosehead down by the Harbor.”

The princess turned. “And you slew the traitor not on the spot?”

“I was busy. Besides, he woulda died without knowing why, and that is a bad death.”

Sammi looked at him. “There good one?”

“Nah. Point is, lots of Moosers been to Cliffside Keep over the years, and it’d be a good idea if this guy didn’t get a close look at Anya here.”

“Until you kill him,” Anya said. She snatched up her bonnet and scarf and stalked out of their rooms. Nor had she neglected to fasten the straps on her scabbards.

Sammi waited a bit, before following. The three of them were taking turns secretly escorting the princess to the chandlery.

“Don’t let her see you,” Chum warned.

“What you expect to see, when Sammi follows?”

* * *

Afterward, Teo shook his head. “I thought castrating Mamu after the battle canceled that debt.” He meant the heir of House Moose, to whom Anya had been betrothed. Her refusal, though permitted by custom, had turned Mamu and his House to the greensies.

Chum winced and stirred the pot. “Mamu shoulda waited to drag her back to Moose Hold before he went all frisky on her.”

“Or at least disarmed her,” Teodorq suggested.

“I think that’s why everyone’s supposed to get naked first.”

* * *

Teo preferred sleeping on the roof, but he was wakened shortly after drifting off by voices below. He snapped alert and pulled his short-sword from its place inside the bedroll. *Slow awakening, no awakening*, men said on the Great Grass. He stuck a dagger into his belt in case he had to fight with both hands and a smile on his face in case he didn’t have to fight at all.

He threw back the roof hatch and the voices below ceased.

Chum was still at the stew pot, but he had put the hacked-up pheasant aside. In its place he had a plump goose. He was chatting with one of the big hat’s minions, who sat with one leg crossed over his knee, though when the hatch door flew open, the fop’s hand had moved on his stick. Teo grunted. These overseamen were not as foolish as they appeared.

Chum gestured at the goose. “Yo, Teo. That big hat you helped this morning gave us the bird.”

The big hat, Teo mused, had learned his identity, traced his residence, and knew the pheasant had been ruined in his defense. That was a lot of knowing, even if it had taken him until midafternoon to know it.

Teo slid down the ladder. A rich man’s gratitude is never cause for heel-dragging.

Mr. Fancy Pants stood and kissed both Teo’s cheeks. “My master, Lar Feddy, is grateful for your actions this morning,” the man said, “and sends this mean and paltry bird as recompense for the magnificent fowl you sacrificed in his protection. He was especially impressed by the grace with which you dispatched the two men. One does not expect polish and style from rude barbarians.”

Teo scratched his crotch. “Nah, I guess not.”

“Lar Feddy has made inquiries and has learned that you hire out as a bodyguard.”

Teo crossed his arms and waited. There might be an evening’s employment out of his morning’s impulse. He wondered how much he dared raise his rates. This Lar Feddy seemed to have deep pockets as well as a big hat. But if he had “made inquiries” he likely knew Teo’s customary fee.

“The lar proposes,” the man went on, “to mount an expedition into the Great North Woods in

search of antiquities. It will be a dangerous undertaking of several moon-laps duration—there are unpacified tribes, not to mention the usual hazards of a wilderness trek—and he needs a bold man to handle security. We Gay Companions will protect his person, but we want you to organize a crew to guard our digs and campsites. The governor,” he added with no change of expression, “has no soldiers to spare.”

Nagarajan’s son was not deaf to the sound of opportunity banging with both her fists on his doorpost. He exchanged looks with Chum, and said, “I’ll need a staff: a camp-master, a hunter, a scout, a couple lieutenants.”

The Gay Companion tossed a poke to Teo, who formed a fair estimate of its contents from its trajectory. “Hire as many as you think needful,” the man said, “up to the limits of that purse. The digging party will include twenty laborers, a cook and quartermaster, doctor, and two overseers as well as the archeologist and his people.”

Teo didn’t ask what an archeologist was. He thought the size of the security detail depended more on the size of the threat than on the size of the threatened. “When do you want us?”

“It will take half a moon-lap to gather the rest of the party, some of whom are arriving on *Fair Zephyr*. But plan to come by the governor’s guesthouse to render daily progress reports. Ask for Eiskwy Naldo.” He indicated himself with a wave of the hand.

“And what if’n I take this here poke and light a shuck.”

Eiskwy Naldo smiled and with spare motion whipped his walking stick around so the weighted end halted a bare thumb’s-width from Teodorq’s nose. “You won’t abscond,” the Gay Companion said. “Lar Feddy is a good judge of character. He is seldom wrong; and he is *never* wrong twice.”

* * *

That evening, Teodorq and his companions gathered around the goose in a festive mood. But Teo was thoughtful. “I think we’ll *earn* this poke. A walk in the Woods is no stroll in the park.” He used a goose-leg as a pointer. “We’ll need guards. That’s me and whoever I can round up what won’t slit our throats for the purse.”

“Short list,” Sammi commented.

“I gotta couple folks in mind. We go into the Woods, ain’t no road signs. So we need scouts. That’s you, Sammi. Find folks you can work with.”

“Forestm’n best for scouting forest, but ‘short list’ rule out most, I think.”

“Then a hunter to bring in game, which is the Princess here using her Overcreek identity. And we’ll need someone to oversee camp construction, latrines, and all that, which falls to Chum’s skills.”

The engine-maker grunted. “And why ain’t the governor sending the escort.”

“I can guess at that,” Princess Anya said. “Chandlery gossip says there are two parties back in Old Cuffy who wrangle for the favor of their *roy*. Though their true disagreement is over which of them should control the public purse.”

“And this Feddy character and the governor belong to opposite parties,” Teo guessed.

“Feddy’s people want the Crimson Crown to finance investigations into the Lost Learnings. The *roy* is Feddy’s cousin, so his allies want to kiss his shiny butt and his enemies don’t dare move against him openly. Instead they poor-mouth their budgets so as not give him what he needs.”

“So he hire stupid plainsman, who got no dog in fight.”

“Right. Nor would it surprise me if he knows about the rest of us, too. None of us have a stake in green politics.”

“He is a knowing man,” Teo agreed. “Lucky the governor sent no escort to the harbor, and left an opening for Seven Quail—and my own heroic *stunt*.”

“Big coincidence,” said Sammi.

Chum looked to the princess. “These greenies are as transparent as children.”

Anya smiled without humor. “For lessons in intrigue, they should visit the Northlands.”

* * *

A stroll in a park

Teo had knocked about New Cuffy long enough to gauge most of the muscle vendors, and he looked a few up over the next few days. All had reputations for “riding for the brand.”

Furad Jonson was a second-generation New Cuff, light green because his grandmother had been a coastalman. A “fade” such men were called by those indifferent to provoking brawls. He was thick in the neck and shoulders, but with a narrow waist and graceful walk.

Shizzleback Koh had come over from Old Cuffy with the regiments before mustering out. Stolid and imperturbable and possessed of an enormous strength, he had once lifted Teo off the ground on a bet. An expert marksman, his thunderstick had spiral grooves cut in the barrel.

The third strong arm was a forestman named Bigger Bull, but who answered to the name Tiny. He was lean and wiry, and a popular hire for debt collection, since most greenies were intimidated by forestmen. Their legendary fighting prowess was not in the least impaired by the fact that they had lost in the end. Where Furad excelled in grace and Shizz in strength, Tiny was best of all at stealth.

“Big question, Tiny,” Teo said when the four had gathered in Bunny’s tavern to drink their bargain. “The big hat on this trek is a greenie straight out of Old Cuffy, he and his people. You think you can work with him? I mean, considering what his folk done to yours.”

Tiny took a pull of black beer from his tankard and glanced first at Shizz, then at Furad. He set the tankard down. “You mean the guy what’s paying me?”

“Yah.”

Tiny smiled without showing teeth. “Then I don’t see no problem.” He looked at the other two lieutenants. “You guys have any aches working with a savage?”

Furad snorted. “Hell, Tiny, you ain’t no savage. Teo here, *he’s* a savage. What you are is you’re a barbarian. Big difference. Shizz?”

Shizzleback Koh spat betel juice into a spittoon. “I think I burned a stockade or two when I was in blacks. A job’s a job. But you put up a good fight, and a fighting man respects that. I don’t think you’ll slip into my tent some night and slit my throat crying ‘Revenge!’”

Furad laughed. Tiny did not.

Shizz whipped out his knife and extended his left hand. “Ye know what I want, Tiny.”

The forestman nodded and extended his own left hand. Shizz cut a slice in both their palms, and when the blood was flowing, they clasped hands.

Furad shook his head. “Forestmen,” he said. But he and Teodorq extended their own hands and mingled their blood with the others. Eiskwy Naldo would have everyone mark papers later, but the contract was sealed then and there.

As they were leaving, Teo spoke to Furad. “Bad cess, what happened to Tiny’s folk.”

Furad shrugged. “My grammaw was coastal. Was she still alive, she could tell you what the forestmen did to coastalmen afore the greenies come.” He shook his head and gathered his shoulder pouch. “Ain’t shedding no tears. They got what they used to give. Tiny’s okay ‘cause he knows his folks got beat. Where we’re goin’, they don’t.”

* * *

The governor’s palace was a fine, three-story stone building. Lar Feddy’s people had been given offices on the second floor, and the narrow slivers of sunlight admitted by the windows lightened the room in slices: a desk and oil lamp, a table, a few chairs.

“Don’t the Lar’s private man handle this stuff?” Teo asked the eiskwy when he brought the roster to Naldo for his approval.

The squire shrugged. “Jago secretary has gone back home with *Calm Waters*,” he said, studying the roster. “You realize there is bad blood between the forestmen and my race. Can you guarantee that these men will not kill us and scurry back to their hovels?”

“None of the stockades in the southern dales would take in a fugitive, cause yuh’d bring your thunder tubes against them. As for the northerners, they ain’t welcoming of strangers, even other forestmen.”

Naldo asked Teo if he had vetted the politics of the greenies on the list, and Teodorq assured him that they were either partisans of the Wangos—Lar Feddy’s party—or didn’t give a rat’s p²-toot either way.

A thickset greenie in a golden robe entered, escorting the moosehead Teo had noticed in Harborside. The Moose wore a brown and red-checked surcoat sporting a tilted oak tree and a crescent moon. The ironmen had come down off the Great Escarpment several generations before and had brushed aside the shortgrassmen in the west. They had dealt handily with the forestmen to their east; but had found their iron suits less useful in fending off thunder tubes.

Naldo dipped his head and said, "Hails, Sinna Bob. Is this the man?"

"Ayah," said the party's archeologist. He spoke the greenie language with a different accent than Naldo, clipping his words into tight bunches. "This'n's *Zari* Asherkai Evlish Kourlanner, exiled from the Moose House. He can lead us to some ancient ruins in the northern dales."

"Old walls," the Moose agreed. "Woods-runners fear."

Teo was gratified to meet someone who spoke the greenie language worse than he did. He did not trust a Moose farther than he could throw one—which, granted was a considerable distance for one with the prowess of Teodorq sunna Nagarajan—but he smiled at the newcomer and decided to feign ignorance of ironman *yashiq*. People oft spoke incautiously when they thought no one heard.

* * *

When Teo returned to Bunny's, Sammi beckoned him into the tavern. "Sammi got present for stupid plainsman," he declared. Inside, at a darkened table sat the Ptarmigan Teo had glimpsed a few weeks earlier. He was slowly putting himself outside of a tankard of ale.

"*Second* stupid plainsman," Sammi announced. "Only this one not trying to kill Teddy."

"He always like this?" asked the Ptarm, pointing with his tankard.

"Pretty much."

"Hillmen." This, with an air of having said all that was needful.

"Sammi's okay. What's yer handle?"

"Chorch sunna Voothateff the Hawkeye."

Teo thought "Ironhand" a better sobriquet than "Hawkeye," but he exchanged salutes and took a guess. "Hawkeye . . . Sammi hired yuh for scouting."

Chorch roofed his eyes with the palm of his hand and peered into the recesses of the tavern.

"Man's gotta do," he said.

Teo turned to Sammi. "Thought you was gonna hire forestmen."

"Got three tree-huggers already. Wanted someone like us, got no weenie for these eastern fusses."

Teo grunted. "Sinna Bob hired himself a Moose."

"The same you saw?"

"What's a sinnabob?" asked Chorch.

"He's the archeologist for this expedition."

Chorch considered that. "Wonderful. What's an archeologist?"

"He digs old stuff up from the ground."

"Hunh. Everybody needs a hobby, I guess."

Chorch pointed at Teo's fist, which now gripped a fresh tankard delivered by the wench. "Scorpions," he said, meaning the tats on Teo's hands. Chorch wore only a plainsman's vest on his torso and both arms were inked with bird wings. "You the Scorp we heard about up north, what killed a Serpentine? The song is his three brothers taken off after yuh, and none of 'em ever come back."

"None of 'em ever will. Which reminds me. You got a bow? A *real* bow, I mean."

The Ptarmigan pursed his lips. "Sure. Not much use in the forest. Trees jump out and get in the way."

"Any good?"

Chorch rolled his eyes.

"Awright. If you're a scout, you'll report to Sammi here. Yuh got any problem with a hillman being yer boss?"

"Why? He got a problem with you being his?"

"We got a girl who's a top hunter. She may nab you time to time for the hunt."

“Running off with a girl into the woods? There a downside?”

Sammi said, “She got knives, knows how to use ’em.”

“Her husband’s camp captain,” Teo said. “He’s a swamper.”

“Me and swampers get along,” Chorch promised. “I come east through the swamps cause I heard there was trouble up in the Pinch.”

“Anything south of the swamplands? Big towns? *Hiteq*?” Teo and Sammi were supposed to be looking for the two big encampments of the starmen. So far, they had heard no whisper of their location.

Chochi shook his head. “Nah. There’s a brackish sea with some kind of nasties swimming in it. And there’s the tar formations.”

“The what?” asked Sammi.

The plainsman spread his hands. “It’s what the swampers call it. Their legends say all of World once needed tar formation. Don’t ask me what they meant. I don’t think they know, either.”

* * *

The expedition departed late, thanks to a windy send-off speech by the governor, so they did not pass Eboronkis on Coastal Road until midday. Chum called a halt when the sun was fist-high to the horizon and the scouts directed them into a broad meadow bordered on two sides by cultivated fields, where Chum set the diggers to excavating trenches and building ramparts from the displaced earth. Asherkai frowned as he watched the camp take shape. “*Such elaborate preparation necessary?*” he asked in the irontalk. “*This civilized country.*”

Teo feigned incomprehension, and Chum answered for him. “Maybe deep in forest land we are grateful for practice, hey? ‘Work bugs out,’ we say in the swamps. And we got us some fear-some big bugs back down there.”

The Moose dismissed the concern. “North clans peaceful now.”

“But they still send out occasional war parties,” Chum said. “Bigger Bull says it’s how young men prove themselves to their girls. So I suppose the raiding will stop once young men stop getting horny, which I expect to happen . . .” He gauged the course of the stars already flecking the evening sky. “. . . ’bout two hours after never.”

Sammi returned an hour later and reported no hostile movement in the environs, but pickets had been left in sundry trees to sound an early warning. Anya’s people brought back a load of venison, butchered and dressed.

“There be another village up the road,” she explained, affecting the shortgrass accent that went with her disguise. “We done tracked the wily prey to his lair and dispatched him with some well-aimed coins.”

Lar Feddy and his people changed out of their ceremonials into green-and-dun doublets with trows tucked into knee boots. They replaced their big hats with felt *thongkas*—black, brimless caps in the form of truncated cones. The Lar’s men had been “in blacks” and carried muskets as well as their singleticks.

Dusk had fallen over the meadow, and the forest line had become a black screen below the fading sky. The officers gathered in the center of the camp, where the servants had pitched the Lar’s pavilion, to review the construction effort when Sammi reported that Second Jay had seen a forestman wearing southern paints watching their camp.

“What’d Jay do with the body?” Teo asked.

Sammi laughed. “Stupid plainsman. Not want sneaky forestman. Want man *hire* sneaky forestman. We wait. Next time, triangulate.”

* * *

A shot in the dark

Over the next few weeks, the “dig” excavated several mounds enfolding ancient villages. The first site was in a forest glen not too deep into Konglin’s Wood north of the Fevvaq Drift where a few courses of stone poked above the soil, and Fallawan, the headman of the coastals, had his people run up stakes and strings as Sinna Bob directed. The men set about excavating, after which the women—also wearing coveralls—crouched in the grid squares and sifted the soil with hand-spades and sieves. They uncovered jewelry and bits of pottery, which Sinna Bob and

his assistants carefully studied and labeled.

The glen was fed by a waterfall tumbling off the Poori Scarp, and Sinna Bob commented that both *poori* and *fevva q* were coastalman words “proving that the Old Coastal culture once spread farther inland before the forestmen arrived.” *Konglin*, however, was a forester word. Teo wondered what practical use such kennings had.

They proceeded up the defiles that broke the fall line, where powerful waterfalls tumbled from the High Woods onto the coastal plain. Teo had gotten so accustomed to the ubiquitous water wheels employed by both ironmen and greenies that these cataracts seemed naked without them, and he supposed the newcomers would be eager to seize these energy resources. Tough beans for the forestmen caught between them, but if Sinna Bob was right, the forestmen had seized the land from the Old Coastals. *Karma’s a bitch*, as the prairiemen said.

Scouts caught occasional sight of the man who shadowed them but, per orders, gave no sign of noticing.

At Deerstream, they came out of the forest onto a broad meadow planted in beans, casaba, and oats, in the center of which stood a stronghold with a wooden palisade. Forestmen with “raccoon-eye” face paint lined the parapets. They brandished bows and shouted insults and poetic satires to drive them away. Teo wondered what a “boot of combat” might be and why it mattered if his mother wore a pair.

Tiny stripped to the waist and painted his face and upper body in ochre. He faced the walls prudently beyond bowshot and recited his brag-sheet in a kind of rhythmic sing-song. The Coons hooted at his southern accent, but paid respectful heed to his résumé. In the end, they sent out an emissary to discuss the company’s passage through their land. Tiny pledged the emissary’s safety and sent Second Jay into the stockade as a security deposit.

Afterward, it was no more dicey than juggling porcupines.

The firearms carried by Teo and his staff served as both a caution and an enticement to the Raccoons, and Teo had no doubt that all during the feasting and pledges of mutual goodwill—what Sammi called the “kissy-face”—the Coons were plotting how they might liberate a few thundersticks for themselves. Second Jay told them afterward that the Raccoons were a big clan.

“They had studs in there from other stockades—different color ‘coon masks’—but I also seen two guys with scalplocks and hand prints in the bare space on each side. Didn’t recognize their clan.”

Tiny explained that “unlike the men of the southern dales,” the northern folk honored their pledged word only under duress.

“Just sort of assurance warms Sammi heart-cockles,” the hillman grumbled as the company moved on toward its next objective, “to know such people in his rear.” Ten Point Buck, one of his scouts, countered with a speculation on who Sammi might welcome “in his rear,” and Sammi sent him to take the point.

* * *

That evening, Fallawan headman, the senior digger, came to Teo and asked that his people be given weapons. Perhaps pikes? Their parents had once used tridents to jab salmon.

Teo hesitated. “You guys ain’t warriors,” he told him. “Yuh won’t be able to handle real fighters like the Raccoons.”

But Fallawan straightened. “Then, when will we learn? Next moon-lap, maybe? Or when Ruby dunks behind Sun? Or maybe after we all lie dead with a forestman pissing on our corpses? Sir, we not become warriors by cowering. A man is weak only if he cringes. A man who struggles may lose, but he is a man.”

The answer pleased Teo, and he told Furd to see to it that any digger who asked be given a weapon. The greenies were wary, but realized that every armed man improved the odds in case of attack. Chum agreed to train them in pike-drill.

* * *

At the fire that night, Teo listened to the chatter with only one ear. He would be happier when they were farther from Fort Deerstream. He didn’t trust the Coons.

“See, what I don’t get,” Tiny said to Shizz around a mouthful of beans, “is how come you guys

are green in the first place.” He sat with his back to the fire, watching a sentry pace back and forth along the south rampart.

“Cause we’re prettier?” guessed Shizz.

Tiny gestured with his fork. “I gonna have to school Popuulo. Damn fool is pacing sentry like a metronome. ‘Pretty’ would be a better argument, Shizz, if it wasn’t you making it.”

“What do you say, Teo?” asked Furad.

Teo glanced at the half-breed, then at the darker man from Old Cuffy. “I come a long way, and I seen a lot of folk. Swampers like Chum over there, they’s short and wide and real dark and got yellow hair. Us plainsmen, being the best of all men, are a noble bronze. Sammi’s people are all pale like coastals, but they got fat cheeks and slitty eyes. The ironmen like Asherkai got golden-skin and red hair. So that some folk comes along green doesn’t startle the son of Nagarajan. On the prairie, we say, ‘It is what it is.’”

Tiny broke off a piece of bread. “Asherkai told me was an ancient god named Dorne. He watches everyone and selects those who are best and lets them have children. Those who don’t measure up, he turns over to the Fates.”

The others laughed, and Shizz said, “Well that makes no kinda sense. I know some pretty damn stupid guys who got plenty of children.”

“How many children you say you got?” asked Furad.

“Hey,” said Tiny. “Just saying what that moose told me. He said the green skin lets the Cuffs ‘drink sunlight’ like trees and plants. ‘At’s why they ‘sunbathe’ so often. Gives ‘em an ‘ablutionary edge.’”

“A what?”

“I dunno. That’s what he said. ‘Ablution’ means ‘to wash’. So it means a whole race of people gets clean, I guess. The greenies get extra nutrition from sunlight. Not much, but it lets ‘em feed more kids from the same land. So, little by little, the greens took over.” Tiny shrugged. “It kinda makes sense.”

“It’s what we do on the Grass,” said Teo, “when we wanna breed better milk cows or beefier steers; ‘ceptin’ here, yuh say this god Dorne does it?”

“That, I fear, is a religious superstition,” said Lar Feddy. Teo and his strong arms shuffled to a more attentive posture. In his field outfit, the lar looked like anyone else, but something in his manner never let you forget who he was. Two of his Companions flanked him.

“This ‘natural selection’ is the peasant belief that nature has magical powers to ‘select.’ But think. If it were true, what would we find when we dig deep into the ground?”

“Dirt?” guessed Furad.

The lar smiled briefly. “If change occurs through incremental accumulation of small benefits, as Dorne-worshippers say, then we ourselves must be at the end of such a chain. But when we dig, we find nothing but men like ourselves.”

“Even the skyfolk?” asked Teo.

“Even the skyfolk. They had *hiteq*, but their bones are no different. No, we are the result of intelligent design. The ‘skyfolk’ used their *hiteq* to shape us in some manner we no longer comprehend—our *marapankals*, the legends say—to give us our lustrous, verdant bodies.”

“What’d they design Teo for?” asked Furad with a hook of the thumb.

“Bravery,” suggested Teo.

No one had the chance to respond to this obvious truth, for an arrow cut between them, brushing the shoulder of Lar Feddy and embedding itself in the wood of the fire. One of the Gay Companions stepped between his lar and the arrow’s path, and the second arrow took him in the chest. The second Companion meanwhile pushed the lar to the ground and covered him with his own body.

Tiny swatted Teodorq in the arm. “South rampart.”

Teo and his staff ran to the parapet. “Sentry didn’t call out,” Tiny observed.

“Yah. Hope he’s dead.”

The forestman raised his eyebrows. “How come?”

“Otherwise, he’s a traitor.”

Teo sent Furad and Shizz to the flanks, and he and Tiny vaulted to the parapet in the center. They stood back to back, scanning the sentry's walk, and Tiny pointed. "There."

But the shadowy figure with the bloody knife was Asherkai. He gestured to the body at his feet. "I kill him!"

Two bodies lay at Asherkai's feet. One was Popuulo, knifed in the heart. The other was a forestman. The ironman had taken him from behind, pushed his head forward and to the side, and sliced his neck arteries.

Sammi showed up a moment later and studied the body by torchlight. "Our mascot, follow us from New Cuffy."

"He painted like Coon," Asherkai pointed out.

"Paint cheap. Face cost more."

Tiny shook his head. "Bad luck, to die in the wrong colors. Coon ghosts won't let him in; and his own ancestors will drive him off."

"Man try impress girl," Sammi decided, "do stupid things. Hit anyone?"

"One of the Companions. He jumped between his boss and the archer."

Sammi grunted. "Companion pay good. Job description suck toads."

* * *

Teo put his crew on high alert for the rest of the evening, but no further attempts were made.

"What we call 'hit man' in hill country," Sammi told them. "But who hire him? Governor?"

Naldo disagreed. "The governor's a time-server. Such a move is overbold for his sort."

"Besides," said Anna Overcreek, "So many forestmen have cause to be a-hating you greenfolk, why your governor have to *pay*?"

"That best hireling," said Sammi. "Work 'pro bono.'"

* * *

When they broke camp in the early morning, Teo passed a few moments with Tiny. "Too bad about Popuulo," he suggested.

Bigger Bull shook his head. "He marched sentry too regular."

"Something bothers me," Teo said.

"Me, too. Wonder if they're the same something."

"Popuulo was stabbed under the breastbone."

Teo's segundo nodded. "Yeah. The fade noticed the same thing. Means he was facing the guy what stabbed him."

"Yuh shouldn't call Furad a 'fade.'"

"Not to his face. But he ain't here."

"Why yuh think Popuulo didn't raise no alarm?"

Tiny gave it some thought. "Never had a chance. Us forestmen are quiet and fast; and that's a paralyzing stroke, up under the rib cage. Why, what are you thinking?"

"Maybe he helped the fellow over the rampart? He was expecting thanks, got a knife instead."

"All the thanks traitors deserve."

Teo had a hard time imagining a coastalman helping a forestman; but he remembered that Pushalug had joined Seven Quail to attack Lar Feddy.

* * *

House Moose had leveraged its green alliance to push itself forward into the northern sector of the Nobeshtinny Valley, although they had not yet staked claim to the adjoining part of the North Woods, evidently preferring a buffer between themselves and their ally. Lar Feddy's archeological expedition was sufficiently important that a delegation met them in a valley meadow just west of the Woods.

The Moose welcome wagon was a squadron of their light cavalry. After the ceremonies, Teo wandered toward their camp, where murmurs of low conversation mixed with bouts of broad laughter. Tankards of ale flashed in the dimming sunlight and campfires. He saw Asherkai among them and wondered that an exile would find such a jolly welcome. But fighting men, he reflected, often held different opinions than those who held their leashes.

"Teodorq!" Asherkai said, waving a tankard. "This *Yà r* Engitha Iordikough. *Yà r* like greenie

gabitán.” He turned to the *yar* and said in *yashiq*, (“Teodorq sunna Nagarajan the Ironhand is savage Lord Feddy makes ‘yar’ for his little party.”)

(“An unlikely set of spies,”) one of the bannermen snickered.

Asherkai spread his hands. (“Strange to say, expedition just as it purports. Feddy and his pet Wisdom really come to dig up old ruins.”)

The other ironmen laughed at this. The *yar* extended an arm to Teo and said, (“You let coastalmen bugger you every night and beg for more.”)

Teo realized his knowledge of *yahiq* was being tested, and he answered in the *sprock* of the Great Grass. [“I pray that weasels will pull your viscera through the new asshole which it will be my privilege to rip you.”] The *yar* laughed in incomprehension. He turned to his lieutenant and said, (“Give this savage some ale.”)

When the mug was delivered, the *yar* said, (“Whence came he?”)

(“Far west,”) said Asherkai, (“beyond shortgrass. I gather they know naught of windlass or waterwheel, and their swords and armor are much inferior.”)

(“Then our lances would have them easily,”) one of the soldiers said with smug assurance. Teo grinned at him and took a drink of the ale. He wondered if he should perform some primitive dance to impress these men.

(“Don’t be too sure, bannerman,”) Asherkai said. In shortgrass *plavver*, he added. (“They are said to be wonderful light cavalry, and they have powerful bows.”)

Since Teo was supposed to know *plavver*, he nodded and began to recount a stunt with horses, but Asherkai turned to the *yar* and said, again in *yashiq*, (“Boasting is their main strength. They slay their enemies by talking them to death.”)

The cavalymen laughed, but their *yar* responded in a more serious tone, (“Yet men with inferior arms may still prevail through clever stratagems.”) The officers looked at one another and at Asherkai, and much was said in the silence that fell.

One of the men said to Asherkai, (“How do you find life among greenies?”)

(“They have more comforts than we do, but—by that One!—they are arrogant people.”)

(“Think they’re better than us, do they?”)

(“Merely because they have better *teq*. As if what devices a man holds made him more worthy or honorable!”)

(“They’ll get their comeuppance soon,”) the captain prophesied, and the others laughed.

A potentially self-destructive attitude for an ally, Teo thought. The ruins of Cliffs Keep made no less impressive a pile of rubble than Moose Hold would, should the provocation arise.

The *yar* spoke closely to Asherkai. (“Any idea how yet they make powder?”)

Teo had become engaged in *plavver* with a young cavalryman regarding the plains horse and its equipage. But an attentive man might listen to two discussions at the same time, and the *yar*’s question tugged at Teo’s attention.

Asherkai shook his head. (“They use sorry, ugly, and celery, but in what proportions I have not discovered. They mix, dry, corn, and grind it, but no metal is used lest it strike a spark.”)

Teo had worked with a blacksmith during his time in Tiger’s Foreign Legion, so he knew that *ugly* was the charcoal used in the smithy fires. *Sorry*, he was unsure of, but thought it might be the yellow stinkstone. About *celery* he had no clue, but he thought the princess might, for her uncle had been an alchemist.

Funny. Teo and his comrades had been trying to learn the recipe for thunderpowder ever since they had come to New Cuffy, and here it had fallen onto his blanket.

Oh, Asherkai, he thought. Not an exile, after all; but a spy.

* * *

When Teo entered the tent that Chum and Anya shared, he found Chum acting husbandly. He and Anya drew away from each other, but Teo grinned. He sat across from them and told them what he had just learned.

The princess grew excited. She remembered her uncle saying *celery* was made from crystals found when dunghills were turned over. She would have forked a horse on the spot and lit a shuck for the Tigerlands, except Teo reminded her she did not know where Yoodavig and the

Legion were holed up.

“Besides,” added Teo, “there’s something going on with the mooseheads and the greens, except the greens don’t know it. I hear what Sammi calls ‘trash talk,’ but that don’t make no sense. They’re allies.”

“Sometimes the most onerous yokes,” Anya said, “are those without bulky chains. A man may rebel against the boot on his neck, but what does he do about the friendly arm weighing round his shoulders? The moose are partners with the greens, but they’re very much the junior partner, and they know it. What makes it worse is the greens know it.”

* * *

A sight from a site

The expedition proceeded east by northeast through the rocky, tree-girt crags of the North Woods. Asherkai led them to the ruins he had promised: a broad field of stones peeking above the soil. It had streets, like New Cuffy, but they were laid out in a radial pattern of concentric circles. Sinna Bob grew excited and said they represented a previously unknown culture, which he named the Wheel-and-Spoke People. The site, he called Spokewheel Town. The more they explored it, the bigger it grew.

“We could spend a lifetime here in the study of it,” Lar Feddy explained.

Teo hoped the lar was being figurative. The next day, he climbed with some trepidation the crag overlooking the dig site. He thought the prospect from the crest should give him a good view of the surroundings.

Naturally, Sammi o’ th’ Eagles already squatted there.

“Sammi surprised,” the hillman said. “Vertical not your bag.”

Teo grunted and acted as if the climb had been no big deal. He took his look-glass from its pouch and studied on matters.

North, the land lay shattered in knife-like slabs of gray stone—as if it had fallen and broken like pottery. To the west, signs of activity: Coons, following at a distance.

Eastward, a swath of trees, thinner and of a different color, ran through the forest like a carpenter’s chalk-line. Teo, being unfamiliar with the habits of trees, wondered if this was unusual. He followed the line with his glass to where it reached the mountainside . . .

. . . and kept going.

Someone had cut a slice off the mountain, and the chalk-line continued across its face. A road, visible only from this vantage, running from Spokewheel Town to . . . someplace else. Another buried town? In its plummet from the Battle in the Sky, the wrecked shuttle he and Sammi had discovered had plowed a trench through the shortgrass prairie, but this gash had a more purposeful look.

Off to the south, diffused by their passage through the leaves, drifted the sketchy plumes of dry-wood fires. One cluster was almost due south, another farther off to the southeast.

Teo closed the look-glass. “I’m thinking Raccoons. How many d’yuh suppose?”

“More than us,” Sammi said. “Need tighter estimate?”

* * *

The scouts reported the Coons would likely reach Spokewheel in two, maybe three days. Teo told Chum to throw an abatis out, just in case, but making a stand at Spokewheel was out of the question. “We got our backs to a wall,” Chum pointed out, “and higher ground in front of us covered with trees. They’d get right on top of us afore we seen ’em.”

The north country was too rough. They’d lose more than half the party trying to escape that way. West and south were Coons. That meant they would have to go east. But Teo had a bad feeling they were being herded into that choice. Against a forestmen war party, they had the chance of a snowball in Big Summer; but against active *hiteq* of the Commonwealth of Suns, there was no chance at all.

No chance, but there was a possibility.

He and Sammi were “authorized persons.” If there was a ghost at the end of the road, it might protect them.

And if there wasn’t, or if it didn’t, they wouldn’t be any more dead.

* * *

At this time of year, the red star ran ahead of Sun, and trees, rocks, and people emerged from the darkness into a dull red half-light. The watch roused the sleepers, and they struggled into order and set off bleary-eyed, conscious that their lives went with them. Behind them they abandoned their camp and most of their supplies.

Chum had felled trees with their branches directed outward. In the center of this semi-circle he had laagered the wagons. It seemed a substantial redoubt, and the Coons could not but suppose that Lar Feddy's party cowered in its center.

"Don't think of surrender," Tiny explained before they set out. "If they catch Teo or Chorchi or Sammi, they'll be curious, cause they ain't seen your kind before. Maybe Chum, too, this far north. They'll probably keep you alive longer."

"Lucky us," Sammi murmured.

"Trust me, it won't be no favor. And Asherkai here . . . Well, they been fighting the kettleheads since their great-grampers' day. They hate them more'n they hate greenies, and they've had more practice at it. Us guys . . ." He meant the southern forestmen in the expedition. ". . . they don't like no better. So nobody better think of appealing for mercy. 'Cause they ain't got none extra."

After that cheery pep talk, Teo sent Sammi and his scouts out to mark the road so they would not fall prey to the obstacles Chum had planted.

Anna Overstreet and her hunters would drive the draft-oxen behind the main body to obscure their trail. At some opportune point, she would turn the herd southeast to trample a path through the wilderness until reaching a place where the animals could be loosed. Then she and her people would cut back toward the main road and rejoin them. It was an old Plains stunt, and the forestmen, who did not herd cattle, might not know it.

Everyone packed as much of the food, arms, and medical supplies as they could carry. Everything else was abandoned in place. Hacking through the abatis and plundering the laager would buy time; but once their trackers found the trail, they would catch up fast. With luck, they would follow the oxen. With even more luck, Anna and her people would get away.

The princess was woods-savvy and knew how to use a crossbow. Still, it was a dangerous stunt Teo was laying on her, and Chum offered to go with her. But Teo needed Chum with the main body to rig the booby traps, and he had to turn away for a moment while Chum supposedly embraced his supposed wife.

* * *

Most of the company had already set out when Furad Jonson brought Asherkai Evlisk Kourlaner, looking unhappy because his right arm was twisted up behind his back.

"Like you said, Teddy," Furad told him. "The bugging coward was hiding back in the rocks." He pushed the ironman forward, and Asherkai staggered a few steps and almost fell to his knees.

Teo held up a hand to still Furad's anger. In *xhavla* he said, "*Zari* Asherkai ain't no coward; he's a tool. He thinks he got a safe passage 'cause he don't understand how tools get rewarded." He turned to Asherkai and said in *yashiq*, "Whatever token yer captain given yuh, don't expect the Coons to honor it."

"You speak our language!" Asherkai cried, as if discovering the greatest betrayal of the expedition. Then he thought of what Teo must have overheard. "You better watch your back," he warned.

"Nah, I get a crick in my neck I do that. Git along with Furad here, and Chorchi and me'll catch up in a while."

But Asherkai drew himself up. "They'll chase you down. Why should I join you only to die?"

Teo showed his teeth. "Because then yuh get to die in the company of heroes."

The knight shook his head. "Forestmen won't come near these ruins. A lone man may conceal himself in the rocks until they have passed by."

Furad looked at Teo, and Teo shrugged. "Yuh can't force a man to be a hero. Some folks ain't got it in them."

Asherkai scowled. "I am accounted a brave man where I come from."

“Yeah?” Teo looked around at the crags and the forest of strange, needle-leaved trees. “Too bad this ain’t where yuh come from.”

* * *

They found Chorchi waiting at the forest’s edge. “Where’s Asherkai?”

“He’s gonna hide in the taboo land until the foresters take after us; then he’ll *skedaddle*. He’s been trying to get the lar killed ever since he arrived: in Harborside, back in camp a while back, now his buddies told the Coons where he’s taking us. That’s how Popuulo got it in front. He thought Asherkai was a friend.”

Chorchi thought about that. “Glad he’s staying behind. I’m mighty particular who I die with.”

Furad hooked a thumb at the plainsman. “He’s kidding, right?” He pulled his horse around and said, “Why the weenie over Feddy? He seems a harmless goof.” But Teo did not know, and Furad cantered after the expedition.

Teo and Chorchi tethered their mounts and picked a tree with a clear sight on Spokewheel. Chorchi lifted himself into the branches. He set a brazier in a crotch of the tree and blew the charcoal into life. Teo climbed to another perch, and they both fastened tow around their arrowheads.

Teo’s bow was curled nearly in a circle, and he braced it against his knees and pulled back on the limbs to string it.

“Ever do this perched in a tree like a bugging bird?” grunted Chorchi as he pulled back on his own bow. “What happens if yuh fall?”

“Land on top of you.”

Chorchi snorted and looped his bowstring. He practiced a draw, and Teo could hear the laminate groan.

“Sounds good,” he said. “Who built it?”

“Ever hear of Aperish dorra Rada?”

“A woman?”

“No, a guy calls himself ‘dorra.’ Of course, a woman. She’s a bowyer with the Mustangs.”

“How does it draw? A woman’s bow?”

“Oh, she has a brother who does flight test.”

The two men settled back in their respective sniper nests to wait. At about the eighth hour, Chorchi woke Teo and pointed with his bow where Coons had emerged from the forest.

It took the forestmen about an hour to hack their way through the abatis. It was too far to hear their cussing, but Teo amused himself by imagining it. Now and then, the forestmen loosed flights of arrows into the laager, followed by shouts of self-congratulation.

“Heh,” said Chorchi. “Wait’ll they find no one’s home. That’s always a big let-down.”

“Asherkai’s back there.”

“Didn’t he say they’d never enter taboo ground?”

“Yup. Makes yuh wonder, dunnit? Heads up. They found the wine barrels.”

Chorchi waited until a fair number were clustered around the barrels, dipping cups into it and swigging the wine. It was a good vintage, too, Lar Feddy had said. Then he touched the tow on the arrowhead to the charcoal in the brazier and when it was flaming, drew back to his cheek and let fly.

The range was as far as they had dared, but the arrow arced true into the pit full of thunder-powder. The powder sparked, and a couple of foresters went *waterfog?* and watched it fizz down into the hole.

“It’s like they never seen how greenie powder works,” said Chorchi.

“Probably never have,” agreed Teo.

The buried barrel ignited and blew off a dozen Coons atop it. In the confusion, Teo loosed several arrows into the brush at the head of the abatis, setting it alight.

“They’re scattering,” Chorchi pointed out.

“No one said they was stupid.”

“Nah, if they was smart, they’d wonder if we buried more’n one barrel . . .” He loosed a second fire-arrow.

This time, about half the Coons realized what the sparking powder meant, but the explosion still caught half a dozen who hadn't gotten the memo.

About then, the forestmen noticed that the brush behind them was afire, and they backed away into the barren rocks behind the dig site. And that's how they found Asherkai.

Realizing himself betrayed, the kettlehead darted forward into a narrow cleft, where attackers could approach only one at a time. He had donned his helmet and bore his shield and longsword.

Teo had studied swordplay in Tiger's Foreign Legion, and he admired the art with which Asherkai fought his doom. "Skyguard," he whispered. "The Bull. Thrust. But the Coons'll get their shit together about . . . now."

The attacking forestmen backed out from the cleft, and a man with a bow stepped up out of sword-reach and sent a shaft into Asherkai's thigh.

Asherkai leaped forward in a perfect lunge in Plow and skewered the archer through the body. But the stunt took him out of position, and four other foresters leaped upon him, pulling him to the ground. A knife flashed, hamstringing him. They dragged him out into the open.

"Ain't they gonna kill him?" Chorch asked.

Teo shook his head. "Not right off."

* * *

By this time the fire in the abatis had spread to all three sides of the site, effectively penning the Raccoons against the rocks. Angered at being tricked, they set up a stake, stripped Asherkai naked, and tied him to it with a rawhide thong around his neck.

Chorch nudged Teo. "C'mon," he said. "This'll keep 'em busy for a while."

But Teo said, "I promised Anna something."

The Coon warriors were whooping and hollering around the staked man, darting in to slash at him with their knives. Asherkai spat in the face of one of his tormenters.

Teo saw his opening and let fly. The shaft passed between two Coons and pierced Asherkai in the heart. The dancers stopped in confusion.

"I think yuh made 'em mad," Chorch suggested.

"Kill a prisoner if you must," Teo said. "But don't *play* with him. Let's ride. Them Coons know how to tie their bootlaces, and we spoiled their fun. Once them flames die down . . ."

He whistled for his pony, and dropped from his branch into the saddle. Chorch descended by swinging from a vine. "Show off," Teo muttered.

* * *

A ghost of a road

Just past the point where the oxen had veered off southward, Teo and Chorch found Sinna Bob crouched in the middle of the road studying a long gray-white cylinder lying half-buried in the soil. Teo groaned. "Sweet breath of Awachi! Do you plan to wait here for the Second Coming of the Treasure Fleet?"

Sinna Bob stood and brushed off his hands. "No, just for you." He gestured at the cylinder. "It's some kind of *smack*. It used to stand upright with a rail on top. You can see parts of the rail where it fell, over there."

"That's real nice," said Teo, "but . . ."

"Story holds that they once ran carriages along the rail—*terrains*, they were called—though I don't see how the horses would've kept their balance on such a narrow track."

Teo shrugged. That humanity had once possessed preternatural powers all men knew. But those powers had been lost in a great Fall at the dawn of time.

Sinna Bob swung up onto his sorrel. "Furad said you should 'step dainty.' The ground here is littered with sheets of *smack* where the soil won't stick. He said if we only step on the hard stuff, we'll leave no prints, and the only trail will be the one the oxen left."

Teo realized that Sinna Bob had volunteered to stay behind and pass on that information, and he looked on the archeologist with new respect. It was a good idea, though less good for Anna than for the rest. He told Chorch to keep an eye on the Raccoons and see which way they went.

"I'll keep a Hawkeye," the Ptarm grinned, rolling his eyes.

Sinna Bob shook his head. "Are all you plainsmen like that?"
Teo and Chorchi blinked. "Like what?"

* * *

Trees were sparse on the ghost road, but deadfall cluttered the path. "Whate'er be under the soil," Sinna Bob said, "it blocks the roots; so the trees spring up and wither, and their rotting corpses decompose. That's why the forest looks different from up the crag."

Teo sighed. Nothing short of death would still Sinna Bob's speculations.

Chorchi caught up with them later that afternoon. "After they got through the flames," he told Teo, "they followed after Anna's drove like yuh thought, but they was back after a couple hours, so they musta figured it out."

"What about Anna and the other hunters?" Chum asked.

Chorchi would not look at him. "Don't know. Not all the Coons come back, and some what did had quarrels in them, so they musta got in crossbow range. But they didn't bring no prisoners back. All of Anna's hunters had horses and the Coons are mostly afoot, so . . ." He turned abruptly to Teo. "The tiger pit surprised them. Next time they saw the road strewn with straw, they went around it. Smart idea, to dig the second pit off the side of the road. I tell yuh, Teddy, the good news is there ain't as many chasing us as there used to be."

Furad scowled. "What's the bad news?"

"The ones left are what we call 'highly motivated.'"

* * *

The land on the right fell away, and they found themselves on the shelf across the mountain-side. Up close, the shelf was not so obviously artificial and so less daunting. Chum looked over the edge at the pylons, ribbons, and *terrain* carriages jumbled in the forest below and fingered the small skulls he wore around his neck. "That cliff is too sheer," he said. "How will she climb up?" No one answered him.

The Coons began to close up. Just before dusk, they lost Second Jay, who did not return from drag. "Give him plenty paving stones," Sammi said. Hillmen believed the path to the heavens was paved with the skulls of a man's enemies.

Teo decided to widen their lead by pressing on after dark. The Gay Companions brought out their dark lanterns, and the company broke into squads tied by ropes to each Companion. Using the headlamps to show the way, they moved cautiously, keeping their left hands on the wall of the cut. The Coons, lacking such devices, could not move at all in the dark.

Dawn found Chorchi waiting for them at the end of the shelf. "Bridge," he said. "I think it spans a gorge between two mountains. I dropped a rock over the side and never heard it hit; so it must be tolerable deep. Stay in the center where I laid the signs."

The sheer of a screaming eagle split the early morn and sent a quiver through every man and woman who heard it, and even Eiskwy Naldo started and pulled up short. Chorchi turned to Teo.

"Sounds like Sammi found something."

* * *

The red sun was high already, and Sun was casting long spears of light through the eastern passes when Teo reached the end of the road. The way farther east was blocked by the steep slope of another mountain; but that was not what had caused the expedition to stop.

They had bunched on a broad plaza littered with boulders from an ancient landslide. From it, a crescent of steps led up to a great cave in the mountainside, and within this cave lay a vast town. Sparkling lights filled the cave mouth like a beaded curtain, and behind it, they could make out rows of buildings. Empty windows gaped; broken balustrades slumped; shattered causeways jutted from upper floors. Mineral-tinted stone had flowed from the ceiling to meet spikes growing up from the floor. In places, they engulfed whole buildings as if the mountain were a living thing digesting the city in its gullet. How far into the depths of the mountain the town ran, Teo could not tell.

The expedition milled and shifted like cattle before a stampede. To the south, the precipice they had been skirting had softened into a gentle slope that rolled off toward the forest floor. A

tempting line of flight, but taking it would yield the high ground to the Raccoons.

The proper move was up the steps and take defensive positions among the buildings. Teo pushed his way to the fore, where Sammi sat atop his mountain pony between the expedition and the cave.

“Why ain’t yuh moved them into position?” Teo demanded.

In answer, Sammi dipped his head, and Teo saw the scatter of scorched bones that littered the steps. They ranged from whitened and brittle antiques to near-intact skeletons bearing scraps of burnt flesh. Some of the human skeletons had arms and legs tied with leather thongs.

“Sammi wait all this long walkabout to hear Teddy say it.”

Teo glanced at the hillman, then back at the carpet of bones.

“That can’t be good.”

* * *

A carpet of bones

Eiskwy Naldo stepped his horse beside Teo. He studied the scattered bones. “Whatever guards this place guards it still. Some of those bones are fresh.” He turned and looked about. “Capped by rock,” he noted, “and hidden from any view but directly in front. They did not wish to be found.”

“There was a war,” Teo told him in a faraway voice. “A war in the sky, when the first men came to World. Not even the son of Nagarajan understands, but Sammi and I once encountered a *shuttle* out on the shortgrass prairie in which lived a ghost. She told us World was to be a . . . a base deep in the enemy’s rear. But it was discovered and a terrible battle fought whose outlines no man can guess. The Commonwealth won, Jamly told us, but at a dreadful cost. The starmen no longer had the means to mount their flank attack—and no one came from Terra ever again.”

“I’d always wondered,” Eiskwy said, “whether Terra was a real place.” The squire gusted his breath. “The Raccoons are behind us. This stands before us. A steep mountain blocks our east. And to our south, a gentle, welcoming slope. That’s too tempting a route to lack a surprise at the bottom.”

“Yah. Those campfires we saw from the crag at Spokewheel.”

“This plaza is not defensible.”

“The cave is,” Teo answered.

Naldo glanced at the bone-riddled stairs. “Perhaps the sack of crowns I gave you was not enough.”

“It’s a poor hand comes askin’ more just ’cause the job’s a little tougher’n he figured.” He swung out of his saddle and stood by his pony, stroking its neck. “Besides,” he added, “where would I spend it?”

From his bedroll, he removed a set of coveralls he had secured when the expedition had started. They were not gold like Jamly’s, but he had sewn on it various sigils the ghost had worn.

Sammi said, “Of all stupid *stunts* stupid plainsman pull, this most stupid of all.”

“Yah. It sure enough is,” said Teo.

Sammi shook out a second set of coveralls, this one bearing two red chevrons. Teo said nothing, but the hillman said, “When Chorchi sings this *stunt*, he will not sing that Sammi o’ th’ Eagles stepped aside.”

Teo had noticed long before that when Sammi was serious, his *sprock* was as grammatical as any plainsman’s. Teo gripped the man’s forearm.

The Raccoons had arrived and were bunched up at the far end of the bridge, not yet nerved to cross. *This* place, not Spokewheel was their true taboo. After the two had donned their coveralls, Teo crossed the plaza to face them.

He passed Shizz, who waited behind the boulders. The ex-soldier spat on the ground. “They got to goad themselves into it.”

Teo faced the bridge. “I high Teodorq sunna Nagarajan,” he cried out in the *yashiq*, “called Ironhand for reasons modesty prevents me enumerating. I keep people like you for house pets. But here’s a question I got.

“A passel of you guys been following us—though not as many as started out, on account of

yuh run into me—so my question is: who’s back at Fort Deerstream fluttering your women while yer out here? Don’t fall off the stalk if’n yuh find moose on yer stockade walls when yer survivors trickle back home.” He turned about face and walked to the base of the stairs, where Sammi waited.

“They argue among selves,” the hillman said.

“Good. A tongue can be as sharp as a sword for cutting down the enemy.”

“Hey,” said Chorchi, “watcha want me to do with your bones. You know, afterward?”

Teo did not answer. He turned and faced the staircase.

“Took Jamly all night learn *sprock*,” Sammi pointed out.

“Yah. But *xhavla* seems more like that third starman script, so maybe if there’s a ghost here, she’ll learn it faster.” He stopped short of the bone carpet and struck his breast in the salute Jamly had used. “*Vanakkam*,” he cried. “I hight Teodorq sunna Nagarajan, Subadar of Scouts for Shuttle Starbright-17, appertaining to Great Ark *Hay Paag* CST 19437, known also as *Bold Vision*, out of Port Huangdon, Tau Ceti, of and for the Treasure Fleet designated as *Operation End Run*,” Plainsmen routinely memorized songs thousands of lines long. It needed little effort to recall what Jamly ghost had told him years ago.

“To give yuh time to figure out my *xhavla*, I’ll give yuh the report on the shuttle. It’s commander, J.N. Raavaneshwaran, was killed in battle with the People of Sand and Iron. Command has passed to a talking image calling herself Jamly. The shuttle was damaged in the battle and now lies buried deep in a cleft many leagues riding to the west. String engines, nonfunctional. Reaction engines, nonfunctional. Internal gravity grids, nonfunctional. Defensive batteries, nonfunctional. Close defense weaponry, three batteries functional. Well, two, now. Life support . . .”

“Not my department.” A voice echoed from the cave as from a megaphone, eliciting a great gasp from the expedition. The Raccoons on the other side of the bridge fell to their knees and covered their faces.

Though strangely accented, the voice had spoken a recognizable *xhavla*. Teo heaved a sigh of relief. The bone carpet had argued for active *hiteq*, but he would have felt a great fool talking to a ghost that was not there.

“Describe thy mission, subadar.”

“My *n ayakkan* and me was sent by Starbright-17 to locate Iabran and Varucciyamen and send back assistance. We was to be given succor by any other outposts of the Treasure Fleet.”

“Art thou equipped to perform maintenance work?” the voice enquired.

“No. But we can check for major damage and report when we reach Varucciyamen.”

The voice remained silent. Sammi whispered, “Raccoons edging onto bridge.”

Teo nodded and said, “Not meaning to rush yuh or nothing, whatever yer name is, but we could use a bit of that succor round about now.”

“Silence! Thy request is being considered higher up.”

Teo glanced skyward, but saw nothing.

“Your uniforms are not up to regulation. And ye have no transponders to grant entry through the security screen.”

Teo did not know what a transponder was, nor did he see a “security screen”—which was a squadron of light cavalry sent out to hide the movements of the main army. “We was recruited by Starbright-17 only a few years ago, and the . . . ‘system’ what sewed uniforms wasn’t working. Jamly didn’t have no *transponders* for this place.”

“Without transponders, admitting ye would require lowering the screens.”

The “screens” must be the sparkly curtain. “If yuh could do that, we’d be right pleased.”

“Are ye beset by mutineers?”

Teo wasn’t sure that entirely captured the current situation, but he said, “Yah! Can our inspectors take shelter?”

“But if we cannot raise shields again, Phanklar Noi would lie defenseless.”

Who was seeking protection here? “We have a security squadron,” Teo said. “We’ll help yuh defend yerself in the meantime.”

Another long silence. More Raccoons had crossed the bridge and were urging their comrades to follow, though others had turned about and fled. Shizz had set a mixed group—coastals with pikes, Gay Companions with muskets, Chorchi with his compound bow—into a skirmish line behind the ancient landslide.

The Voice spoke up, “Lacking instructions from higher up, we take it upon ourselves to give ye safe conduct into Phanklar Noi. Please confine yourselves to public areas only and do not litter.” The fireflies vanished.

Teo did not move. “Does that include my inspection party?” He swept his arm to indicate the expedition personnel.

“Do they hold a warrant or commission from the Commonwealth of Suns?”

“No. I, uh, hired them for this inspection.”

“Very well. Thou wilt be responsible for the conduct of all civilian contract workers whilst thou art here.”

Teo took a deep breath and before he could think better of it stepped up and across the carpet of bones.

* * *

A snake in a cave

The Raccoons raised a shout of triumph when Teo and Sammi stepped forward, but fell into a confused murmur on seeing them cross the dead zone in safety. Then, they howled. No betrayal stings more than that of a favored god’s.

On the seventh step, Sammi exhaled. “Maybe not such stupid *stunt*. Now what?”

Teo fell to considering. Anonymous buildings ran back into a darkness pierced only by a few dim, lonely lights. A low susurrus like the whispers of distant ghosts teased his ears. The odor of dust and rot and heat stung his nose.

“Now we get the rest of our people under the protection of Phanklar,” he said, “before them Coons shake off their surprise.” He turned about and beckoned, but the others evidenced a profound hesitation.

Then Lar Feddy and his entourage stepped forward, and, while his Gay Companions could not help but glance at the bones they kicked aside, the lar and Sinna Bob kept their eyes fixed on the ancient town. That seemed to break the spell, and the others clambered up the steps behind them.

The Raccoons at the bridge surged forward. Chorchi loosed three arrows in quick succession. Shizzleback Koh’s special grooved musket fired with a loud crack. He slung it over his back, fired his second, and fell back to reload. Teo climbed atop a broken statue and sent his own arrows into the mass of attackers.

“Supporting fire,” he said to the air, “would be real fine about now.”

Several nearby machines hummed and jerked, smoke drifted from a slit in the rocks along with a strange, sharp odor, but the Commonwealth *hiteq* did not act.

“Defense report,” the voice told him, “*lesarprankya* batteries frozen in place.”

The day was too warm for anything to freeze, and Teo wondered if the ghost was lying.

Sammi grunted. “Succor sucks.”

Teo shrugged. “Least we got the higher ground. Phanklar, what’s the problem?”

“Close defense batteries cannot elevate. Limited play in *azimuth*. Lower steps thoroughly covered.”

Which was why they had been littered with bones and the plaza had not. Teo cupped his hands and hollered to the rear guard. “Run!”

Chorchi hollered back. “Don’t know how!”

“It’s like walking, only faster! Phanklar . . .” he addressed the Voice. “Can you mark friend from foe as they fall back?”

“Not without transponders.”

The remaining Gay Companions had taken position behind a low masonry wall bearing the inscription *Venwenda a Bangalore Novi*. They waited with muskets cocked.

Teo cupped his hands again and shouted in *xhavla*. “Chorchi! Furad! Lure ’em onto the steps

here, but don't get mixed together! Phanklar can't tell yez apart, so yuh gotta get up here before they reach yuh."

Chorchi and Furas nodded. Shizz hawked and spat, and rammed another ball down his musket barrel. The three Gay Companions with them loosed a volley and fell back. The four coastalsmen wiped their palms on their coveralls, shifted grips on their pikes.

Chum Varowanop joined Teo on the plinth and raised his camp megaphone to his lips. "Fallawan!" he bellowed. "Execute *Pufferfish* on hut! Then *Buckaut!*"

Teo gave him a quizzical look, and the engineer explained, "I been drilling my people since you give 'em pikes."

Teo studied the lay of the land. The clear ground ran from the bridge to the plaza, but at one point it narrowed where several boulders had tumbled from the mountain and the overhead railroad had fallen. If the Raccoons put on a rush, they would bottleneck there. "At the boulders," he told Chum.

The rearguard shouldered arms and ran for the steps. Teo cautioned the Voice that the approaching men were part of the security detail. When the coastals reached the neck, Chum hollered "Hut!" through his megaphone, and Fallawan and his men whirled about, grounded their pikes and braced them against their feet, putting a prickly cork in the bottleneck.

The Raccoons, dashing forward, impaled themselves on the pikes. Fallawan's people dropped their pikes and ran.

Teo turned to Chum. "Remind me not to get yuh mad at me."

But now the Raccoons had a clear field. They hurled spears, and their archers came to the fore. One of the spears got Fallawan in the back, and he sprawled facedown in the dirt. An arrow struck one of the Gay Companions in the calf, but his two fellows flanked him and carried him between them. Chorchi turned on the bottom step and sent arrows to pick off the spearmen and archers, and Teo did the same from his vantage point. Naldo shouted, "Remember your time in blacks! Volley fire! Fire!" The Companions behind the wall rose as one and fired together over the heads of their own people and into the Raccoons.

The rearguard scrambled up the steps, the forestmen close behind, but Teo waited until all of his own people were safely above the sixth step before he hollered, "Raise the screen!"

He wasn't sure what that meant, but the fireflies returned, and the Raccoons on the lower steps began to scream. Their jerkins and breechcloths burst into flame, skin blackened; hair caught fire. A few tumbled down the steps to the plaza. Others tried to haul their burning fellows from the dead zone and lost fingers or hands to the *lesarprankya*.

The defenders watched with horror. Several of Sinna Bob's people vomited. Even Teo, accustomed as he was to the unsentimental life on the Great Grass, found himself taking pity on his enemy.

Eiskwy Naldo cried, "Volley fire, fire!" and his Gay Companions sent a second sleet of lead into the retreating Coons. But this time the musket balls flashed as they passed through the screen, and nothing struck the attackers but a white-hot mist.

In the confusion, the defenders nearly overlooked a handful of Raccoons who had made it up the steps before the screens were raised. These had used their hand axes to kill another of the coastalsmen in the rearguard before they too had been caught up in the horror. Now one of them broke and ran down, only to discover that the screen barred exit as well and he too added his bones to the litter.

The surviving Raccoons circled their backs and stood with axes ready. Before Teo could say anything, the coastals had swarmed their ancient enemy with whatever weapons were to hand, from clamming knives to adventitious rocks, and beat and stabbed them to cries of "Fallawan! Fallawan!" Furas Jonson waded into the fray and snatched one Coon to safety. He spun him around to stagger before Teo.

"Thought you might wanna keep a pet," he said.

The forestman raised his axe to strike, but Furas plucked it neatly from his grasp, and the man swung an empty hand.

Chorchi kicked the man's legs from under him and hogtied him prairie-style with a strip of

rawhide. The Ptarm stood and brushed his hands. “That’s that.”

A Coon arrow protruded from his shoulder blade.

* * *

They retreated deeper into the rock-hewn town and, breaking into smaller groups, took shelter in various buildings that Chum and Lay Apkael designated. Teo dispatched Sammi and his people to explore and map their refuge while he and the strong arms remained at the front.

Teo didn’t know what the Raccoons might try, but he didn’t want to be surprised when they tried it. Lar Feddy came to stand beside him, and together they watched the Coons making camp. After a while, the lar said, “We outnumber them now. And they will be demoralized. A sudden, sharp sally might tip the balance.”

Teo shook his head. “Outnumbering ain’t just headcount.” He could not imagine the coastalmen in a stand-up fight, nor Lar Feddy’s archeologists, nor the women. The side with the last man standing was not always a victor. He remembered how Jamly ghost had swelled with pride in the wreckage of the shuttle and cried, *We won!* Sometimes even victory had the look and feel of defeat. “We’re safe for now. No need for desperate gambles.”

Chorchy returned to the front of the cave with the stub of the arrow still protruding from his shoulder. Teo glanced at it and said, “Impressive.”

“I thought I might hang my medicine bag from it,” the Ptarm said. “Lay Thevra said the arrowhead’s stuck in the bone. Pulling it out would make it worse and cutting it out needs cleaner conditions. Something something *wigirovis*—them’s small little buggers, need alcohol to kill ’em.” He grunted. “Could use some alcohol myself. Everyone’s waiting for you two at the council fire.”

“Where’s the council fire?” Teo asked.

“That’s why they sent me to fetch you.”

“Doke. Lemme ask the Voice a couple things. Phanklar,” he said to the Voice, “what weapons do yuh have that can help drive the . . . uh, ‘mutineers’ away?”

“Those reports were filed with the higher authorities.”

Teo sighed. “Gimme the short version so I can organize our defenses.”

“The racks of the missiles were exhausted prior to *reboot*, presumably in the original fighting. The *eeyem* defenses went offline three thousand four hundred and seventy-eight sun-cycles before present. The *lesars* can *raster* solid objects at short range, but my ability to alter their elevation and *azimuth* failed seven hundred and fifty-two cycles before present.”

Chorchy nodded his head in the direction the voice had come from. “He talks pretty. Got any idea what he means?”

“Not a clue.” He addressed Phanklar again. “If we need to attack the ‘mutineers,’ yuh’ll have to lower yer screens while we . . .”

“My *relays* are ancient and corroded, and each time they flip there is a *probability* that they will not flip back. If the *relays* fail open, Phanklar Noi will lay unprotected, contrary to my programming.”

Teo completed the thought. If they failed closed, the screen could not be lowered to let the expedition out.

“Awright. Can we talk to these higher ups? Explain the situation?”

“*Commlink* with *master system* became intermittent one thousand, six hundred twelve cycles before present. Last *handshake* occurred eight hundred fifty-three cycles ago. I will attempt to reestablish contact.”

Teo did not think the attempt would work. “Look, can yuh make an image of yerself?” he asked. “I don’t like talking to empty air.”

“Negative, subadar. *Holoprojection* went offline two thousand, seven hundred and twenty-three cycles ago.”

“Yah, I kinda thought so.”

“When all my systems were go,” the Voice insisted, “not even a high velocity *flechette* would have gotten through my Screen.”

“Yah,” said Teo, “you was hell on wheels back in the day.”

“When ‘all his systems were *go . . .*,” said Chorchi. “Sounds like all his systems *went*.”
Teo agreed. The starmen had built for the ages; but the ages had come and gone.

* * *

The council fire burned in what had once been a plaza fountain. The surrounding buildings gleamed half-lit in the ruddy flames of ancient furniture. Shadowed window-openings stared like sightless eyes. An outsized statue of a man wearing an ankle-length kilt lay toppled and broken-limbed beside the basin he had once graced. The plinth bore three inscriptions in starman scripts, the last one of which read: GRAN-CAPT. NIYAMAKKARAR KOMESH-XHAWILDON. The statue’s visage was grim and determined.

Sammi approached out of the gloom and dropped into a squat beside the fire. “This where party is?” He pulled a strip of jerky from his bag and began to gnaw on it.

“What’d yer scouts find?” Teo asked him.

The hillman waved the jerky at the archeologist. “Mostly found Sinna Bob. Wherever scouts go, diggers there—draw sketches, brush dirt with wee little brushes. Maybe recruit diggers into scouts.”

“We should learn as much as we can about this refuge,” Sinna Bob interjected.

Teo agreed but cautioned him. “Remember, yer taking inventory for a future repair team. Otherwise, Phanklar might take the pokin’ around unkindly.”

“Ayuh,” the greenie said. “Been talking to the Voices.”

Teo turned back to Sammi. “Tell me the starmen weren’t so stupid they didn’t build a back way out of this hole.”

Sammi nodded at the fallen statue. “Long ago earthquake seal up everything half league back. More than old stone dude fall down.”

So, no escape that way. Teo asked Naldo how much thunderpowder and shot were available, and the squire told him, “Enough for one stiff fight.”

Lay Apkael spoke up. “But we don’t have to fight. They can’t get in, can they?”

“Yah, but yuh might’ve noticed we can’t get out, neither. All them Coons gotta do is sit there and wait till we starve. Chum, what’s our food situation?”

“Good news is we got plenty of water. Shafts run deep underground. Dark as hell after the party’s over, but Govinhend digger discovered an underground stream.”

“So what’s the bad news?”

“I estimate three, four days rations, including the horses. I don’t mean rations *for* the horses. I mean, counting the horses as rations. Ain’t no grass or grain in here, so they’re going to starve no matter what.”

“Nothing edible in here?”

Chum looked around. “Probably stale by now.”

“Okay, set up a rationing plan. Maybe the Coons’ll get tired and go home. What is it, Tiny?”

“If they was southerners, they’d prance around and brag on themselves, then they’d pack up and leave. Mebbe these northerners been picking stuff up from fighting Asherkai’s people. Discipline, tactics . . .”

“Have you found any star weapons?” asked Naldo.

“Well, Phanklar says those *lesars* of his can’t tilt or swivel. So the forestmen are safe unless they get it in their heads to run up the steps, which I don’t expect they aim to do.”

Sinna Bob spoke up. “My people can try to loosen them up.”

“What about hand weapons?” Naldo insisted. “Anything?”

Sammi shook his head. “Starmen leave, take all useful. Leave jack.”

Sinna Bob raised his hand, but Teo said, “Ain’t got time for ancient stuff, Bob. Lay Thevra, how’s the medical situation?”

“Three abed, five walking wounded—and Chorchi, depending how you count him. We brought all the medicines and instruments we could carry when we left Spokewheel. We might starve and die in here, but we’ll be nicely patched up when we do. What should we do with the corpses?”

“Might need later,” said Sammi. “Run out of horses.”

Lays Apkael and Thevra regarded him with horror. Chum crossed his arms and looked grim. Teo said, "It may not come to that."

Sinna Bob spoke up. "Maybe one o' the other Voices can help us," he suggested.

Everyone looked at him. Teo said, "Other voices?"

"Well," the archeologist said, "when *Master System* 'crashed,' some of the *subsystems* survived. The one you've been callin' 'Phanklar' is *Gatekeeper*. Phanklar Noi be the town." He unrolled a sheet of parchment on which he had sketched a map of the cave-town. "The Voices here and here didn't ken what went down at the entrance. They didn't even know *Gatekeeper* was still 'functional.' These two can talk to each other, but with none of the others. This'n here is cut off—and I think it's gone mad."

On the list of notions that bothered Teodorq, that of active *hiteq* gone mad ranked fairly high. "Why didn't yuh tell me this before?"

"You said you didn't want to hear about any ancient stuff."

Teo counted to ten in the *sprock* before he asked the archeologist, "Any of 'em call himself 'Armory'?"

Sinna Bob tossed his head. "Ayuh. The crazy one."

Teodorq sighed. It figured.

* * *

Morning came, and, with Sinna Bob's help, Teo and Sammi found *Armory*. This ghost occupied a stout, windowless building on the east side of the cavern, partly buried in the rubble from the cave-in. The door was shut, and high above, near the roof of the cave, a luminous circle glowed.

When Teo approached, a scratchy voice like a half-heard whisper said, "No admittance! Proper authorization required!" Then it muttered, "*Inventory-out-of-balance-Shelf-count-mismatch-to-book-count.*" When Teo knocked again, the voice whined. "What?!"

Teo drew a deep breath. "I am Teodorq Subadar, chief of scouts for Shuttle Starbright-17, Great Ark *Hay Paag* CST 19437. I was sent here by *Gatekeeper* to collect weapons to defend Phanklar from mutineers camped outside the Screen."

The mutterings paused, and the scratchy voice said, "*Gatekeeper* silent. Warrant not recognized. Authorization from higher up not received. Please download proper scripts." It fell back into its solitary maunderings. "*I-have-failed-in-my-duty-I-shall-be-deactivated-Asking-for-instructions—No-answer-Why-have-they-forsaken-me?*"

"Can yuh tell me at least if yuh got any weapons left in there?"

Dead silence. Then the ghost said, "Makest thou accusations? Extreme penalties level five for unauthorized stock withdrawals. Second warning."

Sinna Bob touched Teo on the arm. "Maybe we could force the door?"

But Teo shook his head. "I got no idea what a level five extreme penalty might be, but I ain't purely anxious to find out."

Besides, he figured the armory had been looted by the mutineers long ago.

Without completing the necessary forms.

* * *

During the night, instead of decamping, the Coons had built a wooden stockade wall facing the cave. Furad, who had the watch told him the Coons had been joined by forestmen with the handprints on either side of their scalplocks.

"Musta been that second band what you seen from the crag."

Teo grunted. "It's just a wall," he pointed out. "They're exposed on the sides and back."

"No offense, Teddy, but I don't think they gotta worry a lot about that."

Teo looked for Sinna Bob and found him in a small room whose location he had learned from *Directory*. The *lesar* cannon was a surprisingly small machine, all *smack* and metal, layered thick with dust. The muzzle end was an array of thin tubes, which the archeologist's assistant cleaned with a soft rag. Teo watched for a time. The device was mounted on large ratcheted wheels, a fact which oddly elated the archeologist.

Sinna Bob indicated the teeth where the gears seemed almost fused from corrosion. Two

other assistants were scrubbing it clean with wire brushes. “We understand wheels and gears. If’n we can unstick the mounts, we can aim this *lesar* wherever we want.”

Teo did not hope for much success. “Keep at it,” he told the fellow, “but be careful with all that poking and cutting. Talk things over with Guardian before yuh try anything.”

* * *

Days passed, and the forestmen showed no sign of giving up.

Teo joined Eiskwy Naldo, who sat behind the plinth on a folding camp chair with a musket propped up beside him. When Teo glanced pointedly at the weapon, the squire shrugged. “All that talk the other day made me cautious about the Screen failing. I asked Guardian, and he said it could happen any time. Something about *reliability distributions*, *mean-time-before-failure*, and *bathtub curves*.”

“Bathtub curves . . .”

Naldo shrugged. “That’s what he said. Anyway, that’s why he doesn’t want to turn it off and on too much. He invoked *constant hazard rates*, *exponentials*, and other occult manifestations. I wasn’t about to go against that kind of magic.”

“It ain’t magic, Naldo.”

The Chief Companion shrugged. “It’ll do until the real thing comes along. How much longer can we hold out?”

“Chum butchered another horse today. Lay Apkael is smoking the meat and saving the drippings. Then she pounds the meat into small pieces and mixes it with the fat and with dried fruits and vegetables she brought on the march.”

“Some plains trick you taught her?”

“We call it *fehwiggen*. We can stretch the horsemeat by going thin rations, but . . .”

“But if we do have to fight at the end, we’ll be too weak to look . . . songworthy. Isn’t that what your people say? A feat must be ‘songworthy.’”

“Stunt. We say ‘*stunt*,’ not ‘*feat*.’”

Naldo grunted. “My Lar is making notes on your language, and Sammi’s, too.”

“Yah. He been asking us about shortgrass *plavver*, too.”

“Seems rather pointless, doesn’t it.” Naldo lofted a stone out the entrance and watched the *lesar* cannons “*raster*” it so only a flurry of sparkling dust settled beyond the Screen. “Ever wonder what kind of people they were?” the Squire asked.

“The starmen? Damned big *mojo*. The kind of folk who could build weapons like *lesar* cannons.”

Naldo crossed his legs at his ankles. “The Coons will try something soon. They’re impatient like us. I think the starmen were patient. They thought in ages. But they were also the kind of people who *needed* to build weapons like *lesar* cannons. And despite their . . . *mojo* . . . they had to hide themselves in here. What does that tell us about them?”

“They had a war to fight. The People of Sand and Iron.”

“Do you think there are any left? The starmen, I mean. Out there.” He gestured toward the sky, where evening had deepened and grown cold, and the stars had hardened in a cloudless sky.

“They never come back.”

“No,” said Naldo. “They never did. Maybe those Sand-and-Iron people did them in; or maybe they did each other in. Or maybe they won, but like they ‘won’ here. I think even the Great States—Cuffy, Yavalprawns, Edamere, and the rest—would seem to them as the coastalmen seem to us.”

Teo said, “I been on a long, long journey, and I seen a lot of folks, and I come to one conclusion. We’re all alike, down in the bone. I met good men in each place—and bad ones, too. And sometimes they was the same man. I expect the starmen weren’t no different.”

Naldo shied another stone at the screen. But this one sailed through the fireflies and clattered on the steps beyond. Teo and Naldo sat silently for a time; then Naldo spoke.

“Interesting.”

* * *

Teo set the diggers and scouts to scavenging among the ruins and preparing piles of stones and debris marked by their source. Sinna Bob sat on the welcome sign and tossed them at the shield, noting which ones disintegrated and which did not. In this manner, he learned that the outer shells of the buildings and the flooring of the plazas were impervious to the *lesars*.

“And the stairs, o’course,” he decided. “I’ve wondered how the Guardian’s *lesar* could *raster* anything on the steps, but leave the steps themselves untouched.”

Furad looked at him. “You said that like you knew what it meant.”

“Surely, it means the *stuff* the steps are made from is immune to the *lesars*.”

“Yet the stone can be broken and shaped,” Naldo pointed out. “If we can get more pieces, we can form them into musket balls and fire *through* the screen onto the enemy.”

“That might make ’em mad,” Chorch said with a straight face.

* * *

Chum built tumblers to rough the pieces into balls, and the Gay Companions set themselves to filing these to the proper size and roundness for their muskets. “They’ll play hell with the barrels,” Naldo said, “but we don’t have powder for too many volleys anyhow.”

* * *

Teo found Sammi roasting a snake. He waved the spit as Teo approached. “Good serpent.”

Teo sat cross-legged beside his friend and accepted a morsel of snake-meat, which he sucked off the bone. “Never cared too much for serps,” he said. “Too bony.”

“Complaining?”

“No.” After a moment, he added reflectively, “Serpentines and Sidewinders weren’t allowed to eat snakes. But nothing stopped us Scorpions from enjoying a wriggler now and then. Of course, we couldn’t eat scorpions and they could, but I think they got the short end of that bargain. You share this out to the others?”

Sammi shrugged. “Shizz wouldn’t touch it and Furad wasn’t too sure; but Tiny pronounced it tasty. So did Chorch and Ten-point. Depends on what their mamas used to cook, I think.”

The two men ate in companionable silence. After a time, Teo said, “Sammi? Where’d yuh find a snake in this here cave? I mean, how’d he get in here without Guardian toasting him?”

“Probably wriggle through cracks in cave-in.” Sammi pointed the skewer toward the rear of the cave. “Found him in front of Armory, just under ceiling light.”

Teo glanced at the circle of light high up on the wall of Armory. “Funny place to put a light.”

“Starmen funny people,” Sammi suggested. “Hey, even funnier when light not stay put. Used to be above door.”

“Hunh.” Teo and Sammi sat and watched the light and marked its slow crawl across the face of the building. Furad, passing by, saw them staring and paused. After a time, he caught on what they were watching. “Another ghost?” He made a sign against evil. “Hey, Tiny,” the half-breed called. “C’mere and lookit this.”

Bigger Bull sauntered over and crossed his arms over his chest. “That there’s the sun.”

Sammi started. “How he get in cave?”

Tiny laughed. “Naw. Look how it’s movin’. Sun’s shining though something, and that there’s a projection.”

“Like one of them ‘hollow projections’?” asked Furad.

Teo finished the slice of snake he had been eating and spat out the rib. “Think I’ll go take me a look.”

“Hey,” said Sammi. “That scout job!”

“So come along. If sunlight found a way in, it might show us a way out.”

“If not,” said Sammi with relish, “maybe find more serpents.”

* * *

A moose in the pudding

Sammi fetched climbing ropes from the baggage, and the four of them started up the rock-slide beside the Armory. Sammi the hillman took the lead, followed by Teo and Furad. Tiny, who had skinned up trees since childhood, went last as safetyman.

The first pitch was no more than clambering over rubble. Foot- and hand-holds were plentiful,

and the rocks had long settled in.

"Hey," said Furad, "the ghost is slipping away."

"It ain't no ghost, ya fade," Tiny told him. "I toldja that."

"Whaddaya know about ghosts, treehugger? A ghost can wrap itself in sunlight as easy as dust or air . . . or water. I seen some strange things down in the deeps, I tell you."

"Whatever the sunlight is shining through," Tiny insisted, "the sun is moving past it. So the projection is moving the other way, see?"

They reached a level spot halfway up, and Sammi considered the remaining pitch. "Just mornin' stroll for hillman. Sammi and Tiny finish climb and anchor ropes. Then help pull."

Sammi and Tiny tied themselves together with ropes. Sammi went up first, his hands and feet finding cracks and knobs invisible to mortals. When he had ascended a rope's length, he drove a spike into a crack in the rock and waited for Tiny to join him with a longer rope knotted for climbing, which he secured to the spike. The two ascended in this fashion until they vanished into the oddly bright upper reaches of the rock-fall.

Furad looked at Teo, rubbed his hands together. "Not sure I like this."

Teo grinned. "It's like diving off Rattleshore, just up instead of down."

But Furad shook his head. "Big difference in how you hit the surface."

Teo heard Sammi and Tiny scrambling around on the ledge above. A moment later, Sammi stuck his head out over the ledge. "Give us time to secure the ropes. This, you got to see!"

Teo decided that the first should be last, so once the ropes were anchored he sent Furad up—"In case I gotta catch yuh if yuh fall."—and came up behind him. When he reached the ledge, Furad and Tiny gripped him by either shoulder and hauled him up. Sammi peered into his face. "You okay, Teo?"

Teo gulped and swallowed. "Fine. Now I know why you guys look so pale."

The ledge ran south toward the light source and north into the rock-fall where the ceiling had caved in. Fragments of *smack* thrust out from between the slabs. A ditch ran down the center of the ledge, and in it squatted two of the longhouses Sinna Bob had identified as "carriages" for the "railroad." The ditch was largely filled with dirt, in which grew mottled shrubs, but Teo could make out the "rail." *End of the road*, he thought.

The carriages had buckled slightly from the weight of the dripstone slowly engulfing them. Empty windows ran along their sides and half-closed holes marked where doors had failed partly open. Furad stuck his head inside. "Chairs," he announced. "Everything covered in dirt and droppings."

"These carriages," Teo decided, "used to run between here and Spokewheel Town."

"They ain't got no wheels," Tiny objected.

Nor was there a tongue to which a team of horses could be hitched, but Teo reserved judgment. Furad stepped inside the carriage, and lights flickered on and a pleasant woman's voice said, "*Lakamam toya r*." Furad yelped and leapt back. The light flickered out, and the voice tailed off.

Even Tiny, who didn't believe in ghosts, seemed uneasy. Teo pointed out that disembodied voices were the rule, not the exception in Phanklar Noi, but this was hardly a comfort to any of them. The Guardian, after all, would have killed them had Teo not been an "authorized person."

Tiny entered the carriage, and the *stunt* with the lights and the voices repeated: "*Lakamam toya r*," followed by "*Wiyoo chickenfoo shunbay*," and then in Old Xhavra: "*Ready thyself for the floatation*."

"Flotation?" said Furad. "Where's the water?"

Teo wondered if they had misunderstood the ancient *xhavra*, or if the carriages were like the canal boats the greenies poled between Farmersville and New Cuffy. Maybe the trench had once been filled with water.

Sammi had gone off to the right. Now he returned and hissed at them. "This way. But quiet. Tube like Chum's megaphone."

They followed the hillman up the ditch, which led to a circular hole in the mountain where the rail jutted out to the last standing pylon. Hand- and foot-holds formed a ladder down the side

of the pylon.

“No screen here. Sammi check.” He waved a branch from a shrub. “Look around edge, but careful.”

The rail tunnel emerged on the side of the mountain around the corner from the great cave and consequently unnoticed from the front. They could crawl out the rail and climb down the pylon.

Pretty much into the Raccoon camp.

They pulled back a few paces from the opening. Sammi said, “Escape route not so good when lead to enemy camp.”

Furad nodded. “And our way out is their way in.”

“They ain’t figured it out yet,” Tiny added, “cause those bushes screen the opening. But if they see us stick our heads out, they’ll catch on quick.”

Teo rubbed his chin, “This does give us a way to make a flank attack.”

“Jamly tell us all World once flank attack. How that turn out?”

* * *

They rigged a rope ladder, and Chorchi climbed to the ledge, where he could watch whether the Coons would discover the entry, climb the pylon, and dance along the rail. Chorchi thought that would be quite a stunt, but Tiny said climbing trees and walking branches was a forestman pastime. Chorchi and Shizz, who possessed weapons accurate at long range, would trade watches here. If the time came, they could snipe into the enemy flank from their vantage point.

Teo spent the evening considering how he might use the tunnel. He visited Sinna Bob, where he and his assistants had camped by the “bunker.” In the *sprock*, “to bunk” meant to sleep, so a “bunker” would be someone-who-sleeps. He did not understand why the hideouts for the *lesar* cannons were called “bunkers,” unless the guns were somehow asleep.

Sinna Bob told him he was near to loosening the *lesar*. “We succeeded in deflecting it by a degree to the left this afternoon. A few more days, and we’ll have free movement in the device.”

Teo told Sinna Bob about the encounter with Jamly way out on the shortgrass prairie. The archeologist grew excited and proposed an expedition to dig the shuttle out and Teo would guide it. Then he seemed to remember where he was, and added, “When we get out of this.”

“Sorry, Bob. But Jamly made me a subadar of scouts and sent Sammi and me to look for Iabran and Varucciayamen. She’d be right peeved if’n we come back empty-handed.”

Sinna Bob started. “Iabran? You mean the ruins ’neath the capital of Yavalprawns? Y’see, ‘ia’ becomes ‘ya’ and ‘bran’ becomes ‘prawn’ and . . .”

Teo felt some of the excitement that informed the archeologist. This was the first hint of the old starman settlements! Teo admitted, if only to himself, that Sinna Bob’s study of ancient tongues might have a practical use, after all.

* * *

Teo joined Sammi at the council fire. “Sammi,” he said, “I been thinking.”

“Sammi not interrupt stupid plainsman on splendid innovation.”

“Hunh?”

“Nothing. What thought hatched by strenuous clucking?”

“Well, we been talking about making a sortie that will probably result in all of us getting croaked . . .”

“Songworthy, right?”

“Yah. Well the whole reason is we’re running out of food. Otherwise, we could all sit tight until the Raccoons go away.”

“Can sit tight other way, too. Starve to death, go into rigor.”

“Not very songworthy, though. What’s the point of an impregnable fortress if it’s manned by corpses? So I been wondering. What if we didn’t run out of food?”

Sammi thought it over. “What if we all grew wings,” he suggested, “and flew out tunnel mouth like *gin*?”

“I’m serious, yuh hill-rat. There’s game in the woods up the mountain, right? So what if I lead a band of hunters down the pylon tonight and we sneak into the woods, bag us some game,

then bring it back tomorrow night? You guys can haul it up to the tunnel in a basket. We can hide in the woods, where the Coons won't be expecting us, and make deliveries each night."

"Until stupid forestmen catch on. Maybe two, three days before someone sneezes or 'Reeking Rodent' takes leak by pylon at wrong time of night."

"I know." Teo grinned. "That's what makes it such a great *stunt!*"

Sammi sighed and closed his eyes. "Sammi fasting, have vision." He tilted his head back. "Vision of stupid plainsman climbing down handholds on pylon. In dark. Gets height-dizzy and falls, spilling brains on rocks. Fortunately, that not make much mess."

"Yuh got a better idea?"

Sammi did not open his eyes. He let his breath out. "Sing song about Sammi. Live forever, gets boring."

"I can't send yuh out on a mission like that and not go with yuh. Naldo can handle things on the front."

"Sammi appreciate suicidal death wish. Warms heart-cockles. But someone must juggle . . ." He counted on the fingers of his right hand. ". . . away team, stone balls, Sinna Bob's *Jesar*, and snipers in rail tunnel—so all work together like fingers of one hand." And so saying, he clenched those fingers into a fist.

Teo knew his friend was right, but he did not have to like it. Sammi clapped him on the arm. "Hardest part for leader. Send people out, and wait for them not come back. Besides, you plan to go over sea to find Varucci-whatever, and Sammi not liking sea, so best I stay behind. What better place stay behind than here?"

Teo scratched himself. "Lay Ishbaal's House of Joy in the Harborside Mews comes to mind."

* * *

Both moons had set when Sammi led Tiny, Ten-point Buck, and Chum's segundo, Henerik Valoa, down the pylon. Teo and Chorchi waited at the mouth of the tunnel with their bows strung, but the away team raised no alarm as they descended and crept into the woods. Teo relaxed for the time being. The next critical point would come when they put their game in the basket that Shizz would lower for them the next night.

At the council fire next morning, the son of Nagarajan tried to convince himself that all his various plans would work and he and his people could outlast the Coons besieging them. But the Coons seemed to have other plans.

"In combat as in sport," Lar Feddy assured him, "all is complicated by the presence of the other team."

"Yah, but forestmen don't got standing armies like you greenies or even full time warriors like the ironmen. So every day they're here is a day they're not back at Ft. Deerstream taking care of business. It must worry them some, especially with harvest coming on. A passel of 'em already lit a shuck, and I think others been sneaking off by ones and twos."

"That stopped this morning," Naldo told him. "A party of five Raccoons packed it in at dawn and headed off to the bridge. But a couple of those other foresters, the Scalplocks, were standing guard there and turned them back with nocked arrows. The Raccoons didn't look too happy, though. Like they found a mouse in the pudding."

"Found a what?" asked Teo.

"A mouse in the pudding. It's an old Cuff proverb meaning an unpleasant surprise."

Teo agreed the aphorism was apt.

"Who are those guys anyway?" asked Furad. "The Scalplocks. Seems like they been calling the shots out there."

Teo rose to his feet. "Let's see what our pet has to say. Always knew he'd come in handy."

They had kept the prisoner in one of the abandoned buildings, in a windowless room. He was bound securely to a floor-to-ceiling pipe with his hands tied behind his back. Four coastalmen, armed with oyster knives sat guard over him at the four points of his compass, so the captive would always have his back to at least one of them.

"Behaving himself?" Teo asked Westadam.

The coastal shrugged. "He's been *trash talking* my mother." He spoke unaccented *xhavla*,

though with some coastal words thrown in.

“Getting to yuh?”

“Nossir. You never knew my mother. And after all, he’s the one all tied up, and my *boat-brothers* and I have the knives.”

The prisoner’s name was Stout Oak. Furad carried out the questioning, since he knew the forestman *tzhadta*, and the prisoner spoke neither *xhavla* nor *yashiq*. In previous interrogations, the prisoner’s information on Raccoon numbers—“as countless as the stars of the skies”—had proven less than useful, but since Teo knew nothing about the Scalplocks, even a lie would be an improvement. *The arrow of a lie*, prairiemen said, *oft points backward toward the truth*.

Furad supplemented his words with hand gestures, running his left hand down the center of his scalp and clapping both hands to the sides of his head. A joke about forestmen was that the best way to shut one up was to grab his arms.

Stout Oak spat on the floor.

Furad translated. “He does not think too highly of the Scalplocks.”

“Ask why they’re walking on Coon paths.”

Stout Oak tossed his head back and spoke in a high nasal. Now and then he tugged against his bonds, trying to gesture, but Teo was not about to order him unloosed simply to render him more eloquent. Furad nodded and listened, but said nothing. Stout Oak spoke some more, and Furad continued to nod.

Finally, Teo interrupted. “What’s he saying?”

Furad held up a hand and said, “I’m waiting for the tense marker.” He gestured to the prisoner to fall silent and turned to Teo and Naldo. “His language puts a lot of crap in the back end of the sentence that you and me load up front. If he wanted to call you ‘that big clumsy barbarian,’ for example, he’d say, ‘barbarian, clumsy, big, that-one,’ listing the ‘designators’ after the ‘nominator’ in his order of importance. At the end, he would add a particle indicating whether he’s referring to the past, the far past, the speculative, and so on. Sometimes, they add ‘not’ at the tail, meaning everything you heard so far is reversed. It’s why forestmen have a reputation for deception.”

“I think there’s better reasons than that,” Teo said.

“Lar Feddy will be fascinated,” Naldo put in, “but what does he say about the Scalplocks?”

“Nothing yet. He’s been bragging on their ferocity and prowess. Didn’t think you was interested in that part.”

The Squire made an impatient gesture. “Get on with it.”

As the back-and-forth continued, Stout Oak’s expression alternated between haughty and compliant. Teo wondered if he was confused by Furad, who although clearly a green—and therefore to be feared—possessed many coastal features—and was therefore to be despised. This deep in the forest, he had likely never seen a “fade.”

Finally, Furad sighed and rocked back on his heels. “Gist of it’s this. This new clan come from the western forest and defeated the Raccoons because they did not fight fair. Forest clans usually hit and run, go home and brag on their victory, then plan revenge for their defeat. They don’t know how to write off battle-deaths, so their fights are feuds, not wars. These new guys? They fought wars.”

“So what are those handprints on their heads?” asked the Squire.

Teo smacked himself on the forehead. “Sweet breath of Awachi! They’re Moose antlers! House Moose been training up its own forest legion.”

* * *

Shizz was on watch at the tunnel mouth when the Crown Stars crept above the crest of the eastern mountain. Teo woke Chum and Fliipi Hanadasoa, one of the strongest of the Gay Companions, and together they repaired to the sentry post. When the fifth star in the Crown appeared, Shizz and Fliipi lowered the basket while Chum and Teo kept watch for activity in the camp.

“This deep in night, the foresters be asleep,” Fliipi suggested. “They don’t speck we be

coming out, so they not be eyeballing so careful.”

“A man needn’t be looking for something,” Chum warned him, “in order to find it.”

Finally, the tug came on the rope: two yanks, then one—and Shizz and Fliipi spat on their hands and began hauling steadily hand over fist.

It proved to contain a dozen or so rabbits and squirrels and a deer carcass already butchered and dressed. It also contained several bundles of sticks suitable for arrows. A note from Valoa reported that they had found a vale partway around the shoulder of East Mountain, and they had set up a trap line and snares. No forestmen ranged there, so “the game was afoot” and not yet shy of hunters.

* * *

They were hauling up the second night’s delivery when Chorchi hushed them with an up-raised fist. Fliipi and Shizz halted with the basket half raised, but it swung a little and a shadow down below stepped a little closer to the half-heard creak of the rope. His head craned upward and Teo saw the moonlight reflected in his eyes; but before he could raise an alarm, a second shadow emerged and, with a swift motion across the throat, dropped the forester to the rocks.

Dawn revealed no sign of the body. Sammi and the others must have carried it off with them. Teo decided he would inspect the next meat delivery carefully.

* * *

There was no delivery the third night, and Shizz reported activity near the pylon. When Chorchi took the watch, he smeared on rock dust and tucked shrubs in his clothing and sat near the mouth as still as if he were stone himself. If a man held himself still and his colors and outline matched his surroundings, he could go unnoticed even under a direct gaze.

He reported later at the council fire that the Scalplocks may have found blood or footprints, because one of them went to all fours and circled the area. He found a bush near the base of the hill where a branch had been broken and called his fellows’ attention to it. The search party peered into the foliage on the hillside.

Only after the forestmen had given up and returned to their camp did Chorchi himself notice some of the foliage elsewhere on the hillside withdraw farther up the slope.

“A man sees what he expects to see,” Chorchi concluded, “Them forestmen probably think that cliff is unclimbable, so they didn’t look for no one to be climbing it.”

“Best place to hide,” Teo agreed, “is inside someone else’s head.”

“Me, I don’t see how yer little buddy does it,” Chorchi went on. “You sure his mama weren’t no mountain goat?”

“Nah,” said Teo. “He’d be hairier an’ have a beard was that the case.”

Chum said, “We’re still eating more than what Sammi and them can deliver. If we plan on doing something, it better be soon, because rations will be getting mighty slim.”

“Coons strung tripwires and such,” said Chorchi, “but Sammi saw where they put ’em. Sumbitch *waved* at me before he went back up the mountain.”

* * *

“The Scalplocks probably think they caught the interest of a mountain clan,” Furd suggested, “and they ain’t sure how powerful these new folks are.” It didn’t matter that they were wrong, because the watch they now maintained on the east side of their camp blocked Sammi from making further deliveries. Chum began to measure out the daily food allotment.

When Teo once more pressed the urgency of food supplies on Guardian, that Voice assured them that supply *terrains* from “Shennar”—apparently Spokewheel—would resume now that Phanklar was finally restaffed. “Although food supplies are not within my purview.”

Commissary was gone, but Teo and Naldo informed the other Voices of the increasingly desperate conditions in the city. The one called *Sparks* expressed sympathy; but asked insistently for the list of districts lacking power, which Sinna Bob’s people were supposedly preparing. *Pleetcha* chided them on a dozen ordinances the expedition had violated. It knew nothing of Guardian’s authorization and when informed of the besieging forestmen, said only that trespassers would be prosecuted.

Curiously, only *Armory*, who was mad, showed any awareness of the approaching crisis.

“Thou wilt need arms to repel boarders,” it said. “Please submit proper requisitions. I wish I could release weapons, but without authorization, I cannot do so. Oh, *red tape raj* will strangle us all. Book count matches not the physical inventory, and there may be no weapons to be had. The situation is desperate and I will be blamed.”

“Guardian will not lower his screens to allow us to sortie,” Teo told the avatar.

“Guardian functions still? Hast thou told me so before? I think so. Guardian and I have not spoken since our unity was shattered. Oh, he was a staunch defender.”

Teo longed for Jamly ghost. The master of Shuttle Starbright-17 had been in full control of her faculties; and even her long, solitary vigil had not driven her mad.

* * *

A sleet of fire

The sentry by the pylon had barely taken his post in the deep end of the night when an arrow from the woody hill pierced his throat, so he could not even cry out before he fell. It would be a fist of time before anyone came to relieve him. Shizzelback Koh, who held that portion of the night watch at the tunnel mouth, whistled up Chum and Fliipi, and they lowered the basket.

Sammi and Henerik filled it with three deer carcasses and several days of small game and tugged the rope before hustling soundlessly toward the mountainside.

But Sammi had said the luck would run out eventually, and might have marveled that it had held as long as it had. Another forestman raised a shout, watchfires were ignited, casting Sammi and Henerik into stark relief. An arrow skewered Henerik in the calf.

But the fires highlighted the forestmen, too. Tiny and Ten-point, who had been standing by in the woods, sent some return shafts from among the trees. Sammi took Henerik’s arm over his shoulder, and they ran a three-legged race for the shelter of the nighttime woods.

The racket had aroused others among the besiegers, and they too rushed to that side of the camp and began loosing arrows into the darkness. But they could not possibly have marked targets among the shadows, and all four men in the away team were experts at stealth.

Shizzleback Koh decided this was the reason he stood watch at the tunnel mouth and seized one of his spiraled muskets and fired at a forester who fancied himself out of reach of the archers in the woods. The ball knocked his head to the side even before the sound of the report reached the ears of his fellows.

Unaccustomed to such weapons, neither the Scalplocks nor the Raccoons associated the small thunder that echoed in the cleft with the “slingshot” that felled their companion. Instead, a voice out of the woods cried out in *tzhadta*, “Tall Pines, rally!”

It was Bigger Bull, and if he meant to spook the Coons, it worked. Already half-convinced that some unknown northeastern clan was trying to raid their camp, they pulled back to a defensive position behind their wooden wall.

Teo reached the tunnel mouth in time to stop Chorchi from loosing an arrow.

“They don’t know where the musket shot come from,” he told his fellow plainsman, “but they can judge the direction of an arrow. Hold off as long as you can before you give our position away.”

Chorchi relaxed his pull. “Yah, But the fat’s in the fire now,” he prophesied.

* * *

The Raccoons knew better than to rush into strange forest at night, but as dawn spilled over the crest of the mountain, the Scalplocks organized a reconnaissance. Sammi’s people had left no sign at the edge of the woods, but deeper in they could not have been as careful. It would not take the forestmen long to track the away team to their vale.

Teo took his own bow to the tunnel mouth, and he and Chorchi and Shizz and his loader began to pick away at the edges of the commando, taking their targets as far off as they dared to confuse the forestmen. About half the force pulled back behind their wall, but the others made it into the woods, where Teo and his people could not reach them.

But in consequence, the besiegers had discovered the tunnel mouth. Loosing uphill was notoriously unreliable, but their return archery did lead the three snipers to expose themselves less

liberally.

Sinna Bob hollered up from the ground floor of the city. "D'you want me to take away their wall now?"

Teo swung down the rope ladder and told him to do as much damage to the wall as he was able. To Naldo, he said, "If Bob can knock down part of the wall, can you guys lay fire into the Coons behind it?"

In answer, the Lar's squire cried out, "Powder!"

The Gay Companions kneeling behind the balustrade reached for the charging funnels at their waists. They pushed them against the muzzles, and a measured amount of powder was dispensed into the barrels.

"Stone balls!" said Naldo. "Handle your balls!" The Companions dropped the smack balls they had fashioned down their barrels. They primed their pans, cocked, and pulled back on their first trigger and knelt facing right with their muskets straight up.

"Alright, Bob," said Teo. "Yer on." To Naldo he added, "Yuh think he got the *lesar* loose enough?"

"Hate to charge muskets," the squire said, "and get nothing to shoot at."

"Setting aim manually," the archeologist said. "Guardian, await my command."

Teo wondered if Sinna Bob had found the relevant commands in the Guardian's memories. He heard a creak from the bunker, then a series of clacks. Sinna Bob and his assistant traded inaudible words. Then, more loudly, the archeologist called out, "Guardian of Phanklar Noi, fire as she bears!"

There was no crack like the muskets made, nor even the twang of a bow. Perhaps a slight hiss below the threshold of hearing announced the incineration of dust particles in the beam's path. Above, Shizz's spiral arm went off with a crack at the enemy's unprotected flank.

The right side of the Coon wall burst into flames, and the forestmen sheltering behind it cried out. A line of flame traveled down the stockade wall as Sinna Bob adjusted his aim. "More *power*," he told the Guardian.

The star weapon began to hum: the makeshift logs flew apart into fiery flinders and splinters, leaving the forestmen exposed.

"Odds, present!" cried Naldo; and half the Companions rose to their feet with their muskets aimed at the broken part of the wall. "Fire! Evens present!"

And the remaining Companions likewise released their loads while the odd numbers reloaded.

The smack balls passed through Guardian's Screen and dropped a half dozen Coons and Scalplocks. The remainder hastily ran behind the shelter of the remaining wall.

"Reload!"

"Deflect to the left," Sinna Bob said. "Further, further!" The remaining stockade began to crackle and fly apart. "Further!"

"Blast shields!" said Guardian. "Safety margin . . ."

The *lesar bunker* slammed shut and an intense light streamed through the edges of the door. The sound of thunder, seeming somehow far distant, shook the redoubt.

"Guardian!" Teo cried. "What happened?"

One of the Companions said, "Oi! Th' Screen's gone!"

The forestmen, too, noticed that the flickering curtain had vanished. A few rose to their feet and, when no further fire rained upon them, called to their fellows who cowered in the dirt covering their eyes and ears. They stood in confusion until the Scalp lock leaders shouted them forward in a wave, crying out: "Verimithoo! Verimithoo!"

The Coons faltered at the sixth step, but a few stumbled beyond it, and when no harm came to them, they pressed their rush.

"Present all!" Naldo ordered, and the Companions arose.

"Fire!" and a hail of stone balls mowed down the close-packed attackers, stopping them momentarily. Teo aimed his arrows at those who gave orders.

"Bayonets!" cried Naldo, and the Companions pulled the weapons from their waists and fixed

them on the muzzles of their weapons.

“Charge!” The eight surviving Companions should have made little difference in a clash with dozens of foes, but they were charging downhill, and they were greenies, and the forestmen were more than a little afraid of them. A dozen coastalmen, bearing pikes charged with them on their flanks, screaming like the demons from the seven hells of Addicaddy.

Impetus. Lar Feddy had once explained, is a combination of weight and speed. A small group moving faster could shift a larger body moving more slowly. Bayonets thrust and withdrew; forestmen fell.

When the press became too tight, some of the Companions slung their muskets behind them and drew their singlesticks and began braining their opponents with well-placed blows to their pates.

It proved too much. Someone in the forestman rear raised a cry, and the Scalplocks disengaged. So did most of the Coons, though others caught up in a battle-frenzy stayed and died.

The Scalplocks did not wait but began raining arrows on the sally before all the Coons were disengaged. Friendly fire, Teo had heard it called, but it did not seem all that companionable to him. He told Shizz to stay at his post and snipe what he could reach from there, but he called Chorchi to the front to add his bow to the fight. Furad had a musket of his own and added his shot to the rest.

The Companions scrambled back to their defenses at the balustrade. Two of them lay pin-cushioned with arrows on the lower steps alongside three of the coastal diggers. Chorchi pointed to the dead coastals and their bloodstained pikes.

“Nobody can expect them to cringe back in New Cuffy as if this never happened.”

“How many arrows yuh got left, Ptarm?”

Chorchi did not bother counting. “Five,” he said. “You?”

“Seven.”

Chorchi studied the forestmen, who were massing for another assault. “Leaves some left over. How much powder your green buddies got?”

“Two more volleys. I think Shizz is down to his last few rounds.”

The Ptarm nodded. “Still not enough.”

“I got a sword.”

“Good for you.”

“Just saying.”

“Too bad about Tiny and Sammi and them.”

“I expect they’ll slip away. Sammi worships a god he calls Number One. He’s always looking out for him. They wouldn’t add much to this fight, anyhow.”

“Well, best get ready. I think *they* are.”

The Coons were advancing with the Scalplocks right behind them prodding them forward. But it was a more hesitant attack.

“Hold fire,” said Naldo, “until you see their eyes. Then aim for their bellies.”

Teo drew his bow and marked his target: a tall Scalp lock in the rear who seemed inclined to give orders. “Let’s not waste arrows loosing on the same guy. Dibs on the redhead.”

“Easy shot,” said Chorchi. “I got the left. You take the right.”

“I don’t think we’re gonna run outta targets.”

Chum and some of his camp people had been placing paving stones along the floor to the head of one of the ramps. Chorchi watched them.

“What’s he up to?” he asked Teo.

“Beats me.” He turned and saw the statue of Gran-Capt. Niyamakkarar Komesh-Xhamilton lying prone while the coastals swabbed the paving with grease from the rendered meat. Westadam took the last bucket and emptied it down the ramp. Dugyahet and Govinhend emptied two more buckets down the steps in front of the Companions. A Coon arrow caught Govinhend in the belly when he straightened up, but two of the Companions pulled him back behind the balustrade.

Chorchi said, “They’re barefoot, right? The Coons? Or deerskin moccasins?”

“Hoi!” Teo hollered to everyone. “Throw sharp crap down on the steps for them to step on!” But Chum had been ahead of him, and Lay Apkael and Lay Thevra and their people ran forward with aprons full of masonry shards and scrap metal, which they unloaded, on the steps.

Chum, Dugyahet, and other coastals began pushing the statue along the pavers, building speed until reaching the head of the ramp. Assisted by the grease, it slid down into the right flank of the massing forestmen. Those not swift enough to dodge out of the way, or who slipped on the grease themselves, were crushed by mighty Niyamakkarar, who thereby accomplished one last feat of heroism for Phanklar Noi.

Those foresters on Teo’s right, however, clambered up the stairs, screaming and waving their sax knives and throwing axes. The archers in their rear put up their bows when they could no longer loose without hitting their own cousins and joined the attack.

Chorchi and Teo expended the last of their arrows and drew their swords. Chorchi had a short plains sword—a “gladiola”—while Teo carried a steel longsword he had gotten from House Tiger. The sword was called “Lifesaver,” and Teo hoped the name was apt.

The companions had reloaded with lead balls and their last powder and unleashed a final volley; then the forestmen were upon them.

Both Chorchi and Teo had the reach over the sax knives. The best time to slay an enemy, Sammi had once told him, was before he got close enough to return the favor.

Thinking of his hillman companion added an extra ferocity to Teo’s sword dance. He hacked and slashed and stabbed as he switched from Batter’s stance to Plow to Bull, pirouetted and went two-handed. Forestmen chopped with their sax knives only to find Teo had twisted aside—and then to find their knife-hand fleeing from their arm.

The forestman attack faltered around Teo, and a space formed within which no foe ventured.

He risked a glance and saw Shizz, his ammunition exhausted, sliding down the rope ladder from the sniper perch brandishing a war hammer in his right hand and lofting a large stone with his left. Lay Apkael had led an attack on the far right by the kitchen women using their cutlery. She herself swung a cleaver to some effect before a throwing axe got her in the shoulder, and she went down.

Furad Jonson was beating some Scalplocks locks senseless with a singlestick when he was swarmed. Westadam died when a forestman pushed his way between the pikes and chopped him in the neck.

Then a voice like doom itself bellowed from within the cavern of Phanklar Noi. It spoke, improbably, in the forest tongue, and was unmistakably the mad ghost that haunted the Armory.

“Mutineers trespassing! Improper authorization. All star-weapons to be used on invaders!”

Teo’s people, accustomed as they were to the ineffectual ghosts that haunted the city, pulled up startled; but the forestmen were thrown into a panic—by the Voice itself and by the promise of more fire-weapons about to be deployed. They scrambled back down the stairs seeking shelter.

But when nothing followed the threat, they began, under the shouts and blows of the Scalplocks to nerve themselves for a third attack. A few Coons had had enough and turned instead on their bosses, hacking some before the men in the halfarmor struck them down in turn.

A rattling pop came from the rear of the enemy ranks, and the Scalplocks there went down. That was enough for the Raccoons, who had stayed only under duress, and they began to run for the bridge.

And up the slope from the forest below, in measured tread and firing by rank, marched the troops of the Eighteenth Regiment, “New Cuffy’s Own.”

On their left flank, galloped the Figa Anya Goregovona Herpstonesdoor shrieking the battle cry of House Tiger and with her, her long hunters with their crossbows. They intercepted the fleeing Raccoons when they bunched up by the bridge.

* * *

Nearly all Scalplocks fought to the end, but most of the Raccoons surrendered. When the last had laid down his weapons, Anya rode up to the stairs leading to the city and swung down from her saddle crying, “Chum!” until the campmaster pushed his way through the press, and the

two embraced as if they really had been husband and wife.

The leader of the regiment was Henloofer *kemal*, and when Lar Feddy emerged from the city, the *kemal* walked his horse forward and swept an imaginary big hat off his head as he bowed.

"Hails, O Governor!" he called out.

* * *

The story, as Teodorq heard later, was that the lar's secretary had gone back to Old Cuffy with a confidential report that led to the removal of the former governor and his replacement with Feddy himself.

"The price one pays for complaining," the lar was heard to mutter.

Foragers from the Eighteenth found the away team behind a bulwark made of felled trees unapproachable save from directly in front up a sharp cliff. Before the bulwark lay a dozen Scalplocks. Behind it was the body of "Deerstalker" Valoa and the badly wounded Ten-point Buck. Tiny and Sammi were a bit the worse for wear but otherwise whole.

"I don't get it," Teo said when he and Sammi had been reunited with Chum and Anya. "I thought the regiments worked for the governor."

"They work for the *office* of the governor," the princess said, "not the man who holds it. The men say, 'We serve the black, and not the red or white.'"

"After the Raccoons gave up chasing us," she continued, "we tracked your progress up on the cliffs, but found no way to join you."

"Just as well," Teo said. "We wasn't having much fun."

"Speak for self," Sammi said.

"They had an ambush laid for you if you came down the slope from the cave," the princess said. "But I reckon you knew that. They thought for sure you'd be a-feared to enter the cave. But they got tired o' waitin' and went up to join the Coons. I sent my hunters to sort of mosey around, and they found the Eighteenth a-looking for you. The *kemal* knew approximately where the lar had gone and taken the company out to search for him. So we guided him here."

Chum laid his arm around her shoulders. "And it's glad I am you did. It woulda been a bummer to die not knowing you still lived."

For some reason, Anya took that as the most endearing profession, and she kissed the swamper. Sammi rolled his eyes. "Better luck next time," he sighed.

* * *

Lar Feddy summoned Teo to his side and had him give the *kemal* an account of the expedition, though he added *soto voce*, "There is no need to recount all the famous *stunts*." Teo thought this made the report less entertaining, but he complied with the bare bones of the events.

"And the lar himself," Teo concluded, "played a crucial role when he told the Arsenal ghost what to shout to frighten back the invaders."

"We shall have to do something about House Moose," the lar said to the *kemal*. "Perhaps a punitive expedition come Little Spring." The militia commander grunted and said he would meet with the commander of the Royals and begin planning the expedition.

Anya smiled when she heard this. She might get her revenge after all.

* * *

While the remaining diggers organized themselves under Chum's direction, Teo reentered Phanklar Noi, where he found Tiny standing by the wrapped corpse of Furad Jonson and reciting something under his breath. He looked up when Teo approached.

"Wish I'd been here," he said. "Furad was okay for a fade."

"You shouldn't call him a 'fade.'"

"Ah, he ain't gonna complain. Hell, Teddy, he was my brother. What we seen and done together, that made him my brother." He looked around. "Ain't that right, Shizz?"

Teo saw that the ex-soldier had come to join them. They clasped their cut hands, on which they had pledged their mutual oaths. "Yeah, what a crew we were," said Shizz. "A greenie out of blacks, a fade, a forestman, and a savage from the wild west. Yet I never worked with finer men. You should've seen it, Tiny. Needed five of those bastards to take him down, and I swear three

of 'em never got back up." He took a skin from his belt and raised it.

"Here's to ya, Furad Jonson. We'll never see yer like again."

Each of them took a swig from the skin, which proved to contain a wine provided unwittingly by the Eighteenth.

"Others, too," Teo suggested, and his strong-arms nodded.

"Yeah, got no aches on any of 'em. It was a good crew. I'd even lift my glass to Fallawan and the other coastals. That's *if* I got a glass to lift."

Shizz took the hint and passed the skin back to Tiny. "We should drink a hail to that Sinna Bob, too," he said. "He done laid down his life to save us."

"I don't think that was his plan," said Teo.

Shizz took a swig. "Don't matter," he said.

Lar Feddy had also come into the cave and stood now by the "*bunker*" where the *lesar* cannon had been. Teo nodded his lieutenants out and went to speak with his employer.

The door to the bunker had sprung open after the explosion, revealing no trace of the cannon, nor of Sinna Bob and his assistants. Neither, even, so far as that went, an echo of the Guardian. The walls were covered with a thin paste, which the lar touched with a tentative finger.

"Yuh think that's him?" said Teo.

Feddy turned about as if he had not heard Teo come up behind him.

"I never did quite get him," Teo continued, "but he fought well at the end."

"And that," said the Lar, "is what you will never quite get. Sinna Bob was renowned in *yunis* by a different breed of man than yours. An aristocracy of the mind, and in that aristocracy, he was a knight. You have fought against Raccoons and Moose and who knows what else. But Sinna Bob fought a greater enemy. He fought the darkness. I like to think he drove it back a bit."

Teo said nothing but reached into the bunker himself and took some of the paste on his fingers. This he painted in a broad swath across his forehead. "May his spirit guide my thoughts," he said.

* * *

A dock in the bay

Teodorq sunna Nagarajan the Ironhand looked forward to the voyage to Old Cuffy as an opportunity to learn the skills of shiphandling. In the meantime, the *gapitan* had asked him kindly, but unmistakably, to get the hell out of the way while his crew made the ship ready. And so Teo sat on a piling on the dock and watched the bustle.

"Lar Feddy—or I guess I should say Governor Feddy—is a different man," he said to Anya and Chum, who had come to see him off.

"A sadder man," said Anya. "He'd rather be rooting in ruins than governing a province; but not even cousins can gainsay a king."

Eiskwy Naldo—who was now Sah Naldo, courtesy of the governor—garbed in big hat and brocaded jacket, strode up the gangplank with two escorts. He paused to say farewell to Chum and Anya, adding to Chum, "You'll not reconsider the governor's offer?"

Chum shook his head. "The frogs are croaking," he answered. "Back to the swamps for me."

Naldo did not argue the point but clasped arms with the pair. "Teo, we'll go over your commission after we set sail."

Teddy nodded and touched his temple with his fingertips.

"So you're are gonna be a *kemal*," said Chum. "Gonna wear a big hat?"

Teo snorted. "On a cold day."

"Organize a regiment of 'savage archers' for the *roy's* army, like the Horse Bows for Tiger."

"Yah. I get to wear eagles on my sleeves instead of three red stripes." But the thought of the eagles saddened him, and his hand strayed involuntarily to the chevrons sewn to his coveralls. He was a subadar of scouts for the mother-loving Commonwealth of Suns. Everything else was less than that.

Carjent Jestapul came aboard in blacks. He paused and gave Anya a courtesy salute, nodded to Chum, then studied Teo up and down as if inspecting a side of beef that had gone a little off. He

touched the red chevrons. “Red on gold,” he murmured. “There are legends . . .” He smiled grimly. “You and I,” he said, “have much to discuss. If a savage is to be made a *kemal*, he must learn to act like a *kemal*.”

The *carjent* brushed at the black chevrons on his own uniform and proceeded up the gangplank. Teo wondered if the planned discussions included the battle in the Nobeshtinny Valley at which they had previously crossed paths.

“There’s something I don’t understand,” Teo said to Anya. “I know forestmen will attack strangers for no reason but sport; but House Moose brokered the whole thing. I know the mooseheads resent the greens, but why attack Lar Feddy and a harmless bunch of pot-diggers?”

The princess had already considered the matter. “The Cuffs are a contentious lot,” she suggested. “Craddos and Wangos will fight each other at the drop of a hat—and drop the hat themselves. The governor failed to provide an escort for the expedition, even though Lar Feddy is a cousin of the king. If Feddy had been killed—on the docks or in the woods—the Wangos would have blamed the governor. There might even have been civil war in New Cuffy. Moose wanted chaos in the colony, to give themselves an opportunity, or at least a respite.”

Teo looked at Chum, who shrugged. “Not my pay grade.”

Anya said, “In the northlands, we cut our teeth on plots more subtle than that.” She looked down the length of the dock.

“Sammi not coming?” said Chum.

Teo shrugged. “Ain’t seen him. He don’t like going over the water. But the ruins of Iabran lie under Yavalprawns, and I have to suppose that Varucciyamen is somewhere off that way, too.”

“You were such close friends.”

“He’s a hillman; I’m a plainsman. Not fighting each other isn’t quite the same thing. But, yah, I’ll miss the little guy.”

Chum clasped his hand. “Good luck finding them places.”

“And good luck to youse finding Yar Yoodavig.”

“Rumor says he’s hiding in the swamps.”

“And the frogs are croaking . . . Yuh got enough info to grind up the you-know-what?”

Chum took a quick look around. “Enough for trial and error.”

“It’d be the errors what concerned me.”

“When Lar Feddy marches on Moose Hold,” said Anya, “we want Tiger to be on the field, and on something like equal standing.”

The ship’s bell clanged repeatedly, and the bosun hollered, “All ashore or all aboard!”

Teo rose, and he too studied the length of the dock before, sighing, he climbed the gangplank. Crossing the Unquiet Sea, everyone told him, was never a certain thing until it was done, but the sailors seemed to get about their duties with quiet competence. Teo found a place at the rail below the main mast and waved to Chum and Anya. Shizz and Tiny had come as well, and he gave them a salute, too. But of Sammi there was no sign. It seemed the hillman would go out of his life as quietly as he had come into it.

The longshoremen cast the hawsers loose, and the master on the quarterdeck called out an order. A suit of sails dropped from the foremast, and *Agile Antelope* shied away from the dock.

Teo stood in silence while the land receded. Then, still seeing nothing, he turned away.

The voice came from the mast behind him, from high above.

“Stupid plainsman.”

Teodorq smiled.