

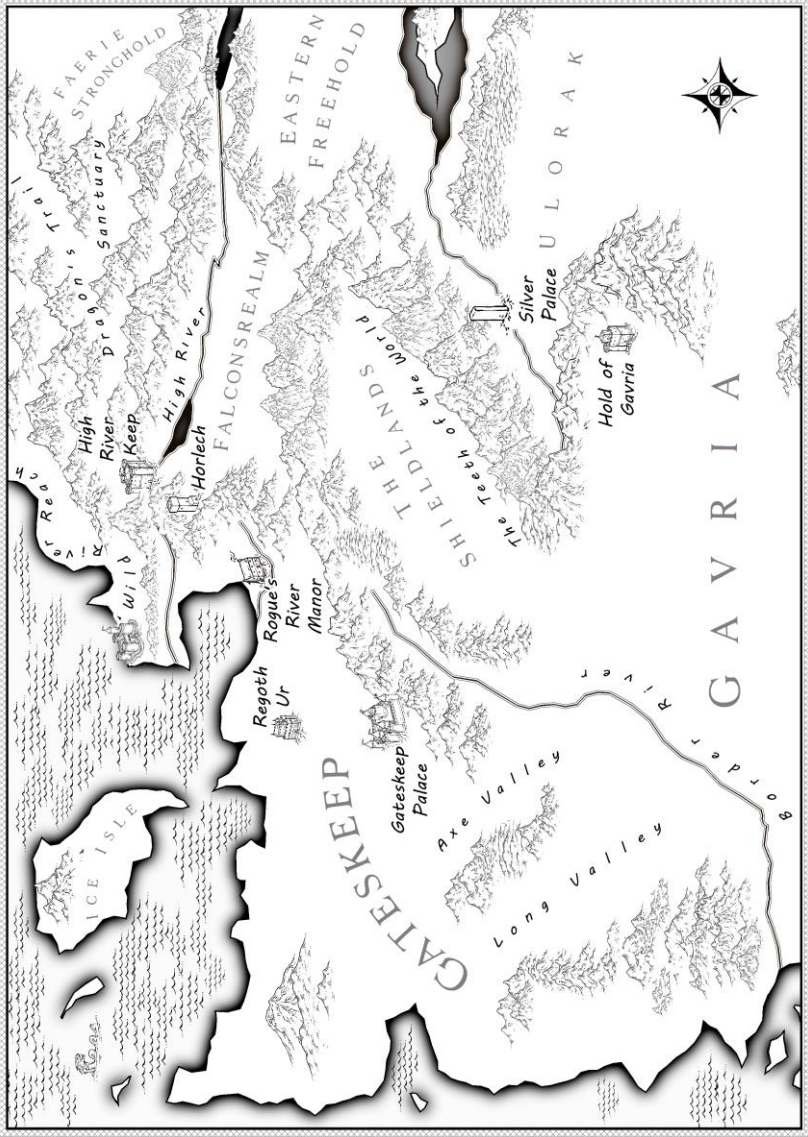
DRAGON'S TRAIL

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PREVIEW SAMPLE – NOT FOR COMMERCIAL SALE

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PRELUDE

"The history of the sword is the history of humanity."

– Sir Richard F. Burton, 1884

In eastern Gateskeep, bordering the principality of Falconsrealm, the Tower of Horlech stands against all seeming odds, sagging and nearly fallen. From the top floors, the rift-strewn wildwoods and misty cliffs of Falconsrealm stretch out of sight in three directions.

Known to locals as Edwin's Folly, the Tower of Horlech slouches to the northeast atop a knob of rock and scrub, looking for all the world like a helm's crest bent by a debilitating blow. Year after year, Edwin's Folly stands; year after year, the townsfolk of Horlech wager that it won't. On the first day of summer, the town holds its Tower Day celebration, in which the previous year's losers pay their good-natured debts and wagers begin anew.

Inside the sagging walls of Horlech, on the eve of the celebrations a few years ago, a young sorcerer named Crius Lotavaugus advised the war council of Gateskeep.



A spindly shamble of a man, Crius Lotavaugus's tangles of hair and tight dark beard made his age indeterminate, but it was widely held that he was the youngest to ever hold the office of Lord High Sorcerer of Gateskeep.

He stood at the head of the great stone table in comfortable, if drab, attire: a long leather jerkin, a pair of silver necklaces, unremarkable trousers, and well-worn boots burnished with deliberation and care.

"War?" Crius asked. "And I'm only now hearing of this?"
Glances and convictions collided in the silence.

"A war is coming." Ravaroth Anganor, informally called Lord Rav, sat on Crius's right, rocking back in his chair. He wore his dark beard in fine braids in the manner of men of the Wild River Reach, and his clothes were rich with spring colors inlaid with silver across his prominent chest, which sported a general's brooch.

"Coming," Crius stressed. "War is always coming. But that's no reason to provoke one."

"The bloodline of the wizard Sabbaghian," said Lord Rav, "banished all these years, now walks the halls of the Hold of Gavria. They have put him on their war council."

Duke Edwin Hillwhite, who owned the crooked tower, was a gangly man with a mop of black hair and a broad jaw. He addressed the others at the table. "The Gavrians are buying up all our grain, and trading us gold, not iron, for it. What else could they be doing with grain and iron? They're building an army."

"And you raise your prices for iron just as we have to start equipping a larger force," said Lord Rav. "How convenient."

Edwin shrugged. "Demand is demand, General. I don't set the prices. The mines set the prices."

Lord Rav laughed to the others at the table, who joined him, before he turned back to Edwin. "They're your mines, boy! You're telling me you don't control them?"

"Not alone," said Edwin. His tone soured. "And don't call me

'boy,' again."

"You would do well to remain silent," Crius told the duke. "In fact, I'm not quite sure why you're in this meeting."

Edwin stammered, "This is my castle!"

"Granted to you in the hopes that you'd repair it," reminded Crius, "as you are the only man in the kingdom who can afford to." He made a show of looking into the corners and ceiling. "How's that going, anyway?"

Edwin fumed. "Do you know what's required to stanchion this place?"

"Indeed," said Crius. "I'm impressed that the knocking of your headboard hasn't collapsed the place entirely."

"No need to get sore just because I'm twice the man of any of you," said Edwin, folding his arms and straightening.

"If that were true," said Rav, "you wouldn't need your men to enforce it."

Edwin's arms unfolded. "Meaning what?"

"This is a garrison town," said Rav. "Those are soldiers' daughters your boys drag in here."

Edwin twitched. "You have no idea what I go through."

"Two or three a week, I'd imagine," said Crius. "You'd think this tower would stand straight of its own accord."

Edwin lunged at Crius across the table. It took three men to hold him back.

Lord Rav refilled his and Crius's goblets from a decanter of something reddish-purple and mercifully strong.

Edwin, still fuming, shook the others off and sat. "I should pummel you, you little bastard," he told Crius.

"And I should turn you into a titmouse until this matter is concluded," Crius said. "You could still flap around and tweet all you want, and perhaps we'll finally find it endearing. But I'll refrain if you will."

"Is that what this is about?" Edwin asked the table. "The council

called us here to discuss what I do in my bed, with my subjects?"

"No," said Rav. "But don't make us have to come back here to discuss it further. You will like that conversation even less than this one."

The room fell silent.

"Which brings us back to the matter at hand," said another general, named Lord Erlac, whose graying beard grew in patches across an array of scars that he stroked out of habit. "We hear rumors of an insurgency brewing in Falconsrealm."

"Finally, we get to it," said Prince Damon. Damon was a dark-haired noodle of a boy in fine clothing that was mostly white, including a white fur cape despite the sun outside. He was the prince of the distant Ice Isle, though it would be ruled by a regency council for a few years, yet. The Snow Prince, they were calling him.

"Let's discuss this," Damon said. "And what, Duke Edwin, did your brother find so important in Falconsrealm that neither he nor my sister could be here?"

"Prince Albar—" began Edwin, only to be interrupted by the Snow Prince.

"Albar," Damon hissed, pointing at Edwin, "is not a prince yet. My sister rules Falconsrealm. He never will. Those are points you'd be well-advised to remember."

"We've seen attacks on our border outposts in the Shieldlands," Erlac continued. "Supply trains raided, a ship burned along the Border River. And if you ask me," he turned to Edwin, "they're getting a pass from your brother, that power-starved, quivering milksop—"

"My brother is the heir presumptive!" Edwin shouted, rising. "He'll. . ."

"Go on!" Erlac yelled. "Finish that statement! I beg you. We would love to know what the Hillwhites plan to do once you've finally married into royalty. Enlighten us."

Crius gestured to Edwin that the table was his.

Edwin took his seat.

The scarred general continued, this time more quietly. "We know the forces at Gavria are sending liaisons to the court at High River." High River Keep was the princess's seat at Falconsrealm. "We don't know why."

Eyes turned to Edwin for a long moment.

Someone finally grunted.

"I've not heard of this," said Edwin.

A knight, clean-shaven and young in contrast to the others at the table, denoted by his gold horsehead pin as being a rider in the king's personal order, summarized the council's concern.

"All this aside, Gavria is building her armies," he said. "If Sabbaghian is their Lord High Sorcerer, then Gavria's next campaign may well be engineered by a foreign mastermind. We will have no references to this man's strategies, and no parallels to his experiences. We will need advisers. Not heroes, not warriors. Chancellors. For the duration of the war. If there is a war."

Crius took a moment to pinch off the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger. "What you're asking, sire—" his reasoning felt as unsure as the skewed walls around him, "— is to bring you demons. Demons to whom you will hand over your power, and trust to lead your armies against another."

Another young knight, still in his mail-and-leather riding gear, stood and slammed his fist on the marble inlay. "We said nothing of demons!"

Crius looked to the ceiling. "Careful, or you'll bring this place down." After a moment watching the timbers and listening for creaks, he let out his breath. "Sabbaghian's son, this King Ulo Sabbaghian, was raised in the demon world. Brought here as a demon. Conjured, as any demon. That he is human is of little consequence. He is a demon. And he is not to be trifled with."

"You're scared of him?" asked Lord Rav.

Crius nodded. "As you all should be."

"What we want is what they have," said Lord Erlac, stroking his scars absently. "Only more of it."

"Master Crius," Prince Damon's voice was gentle. "Yes, this is what we're asking. I understand the dangers inherent in this course."

"Respectfully, Highness, I don't think you do," said Crius.

"I do," insisted Damon. "The true danger is the fears these men, these demons, would arouse. We will not speak of this outside this room. We'll treat them as we would any other adviser."

"The true danger is far greater than people's fears, highness," said Crius.

Damon blinked once, and, in a voice that belied his age, said, "Perhaps. But that's why we're entrusting the Lord High Sorcerer with this."

Crius looked to Edwin, who grinned. "Oh, if I could but slam the door behind you," said Edwin.

Crius's gaze roved the eyes of the others. None shied from him. "You'd already decided this. You had decided this before we even called this meeting."

"No one else can do this," said Damon. "If it's to be done, you'll do it."

Crius smiled, looked down at his hands, and nodded, tight-lipped. "Very well, Highness," he said. "I will travel, and I will bring you demons."

All agreed, and the council broke with murmurs of conversation and the bangs and scrapes of benches.

Prince Damon wove his way over to Crius, shaking hands and clapping shoulders. Damon kept his voice low as he spoke to Crius away from the others. "What's this danger that we don't see?"

"The killing blow is so often the one that looks harmless," said Crius. "You won't know what the danger is, and neither will I, until it has us by the throat. This will not solve your problem with Sabbaghian, or with Gavria. This will complicate it."

"This will level the field," said Damon.

"It won't," said Crius.

"The war council says it will," said Damon.

"The war council hopes it will," said Crius. "If Gavria marches, demons won't matter. We'll need to rely on the same things we've used against them from time immemorial: iron and blood. Swords win wars, Highness."

Damon clasped Crius's folded hands in his own. "Then bring us demons with swords."

I

OVERTURE

“Fighting was fun; this was the thing. Fighting was tremendous fun.”

– Ewart Oakeshott

The Middle Ages had come to Camille Bay. It was a rainy Memorial Day weekend. Spring seemed to have been and gone without a single hour of sunshine, and the coming summer held no promises.

Camille Bay, Maine, is a tiny Birkenstock town known for its artistic population and a never-ending slew of obscure exhibitions. Camille Bay is host to fantasy conventions, an occasional movie set, and the region’s most prestigious glass-blowing school. She boasts several successful authors among her quiet inhabitants.

The particular way Camille Bay had chosen to draw the immediate world’s attention today entailed a re-creation of a medieval fair in the market square, courtesy of several large Renaissance troupes.

Everyone in the town participated; participation is the town creed. The costumes ranged from casual passers-by in Robin Hood hats, to axe-bearing Norsemen and lace-ruffled Elizabethans. Woe,

indeed, to the unwitting tourist, reluctantly handing over his Mobil card to a bearded Norseman in a bearskin cape and a leather jockstrap.

Crius's vision unclouded in an alley of Camille Bay.

With a fleeting sweat of terror he realized that this was not a world he'd expected and certainly not the world he'd visualized moments ago, standing an ocean of space distant in his chambers at Horlech with the Tower Day celebrations rampaging in the distance.

A granite sky spat mist over a fitful, intense gridwork, a hornets' nest as garish and searing as the sun even in the intense cold of the day. Everywhere he looked, the world seemed to explode with its own sprinting pulse; every color and edge exquisite in its squarishness and order. He smelled fish and seawater. An unsourced thrum slashed at him from nowhere.

He climbed to his feet on a hard black road. A fine road.

Roads were roads.

Roads hadn't changed.

There he stood on the road, crumpled, hands on his knees, awestruck at a piece of trash more bright and polished than anything he'd ever seen, a massive facet of a jewel blowing along the slate of the yard fences and the blacktop of the alley.

He watched it go, and the world tunneled into place in its wake.

Square homes built shoulder to shoulder sprawled up the hills away from the sea. At the end of the alley the road led up the hill, and also down to a calm harbor brimming with boats.

Away from the water, the town was bursting. He knew a festival when he saw one.

Festivals hadn't changed.

He pulled his hood up and struck out uphill, thrilled with the quality of the road beneath his boots. The noise grew and his pulse quickened.

What a world! What an intense, bright, loud, fast world!

He stopped at a barrier and reached to warm his hand by its

flashing lamp; he found light, but no heat. He touched it. He rested his hand on it. He giggled.

He took a slow look across the multitudes. Warriors in piecemeal armor, commoners in simple dress, well-outfitted courtiers.

Many things, it seemed, had not changed. More than he'd expected.

A mechanical animal, albeit an unkempt and mangy one, butted its way through the street, forcing noblewoman and barbarian alike to leap aside.

He found a space beneath an awning and watched the people pass. An occasional townsman tipped his hat, someone clapped him on the back, and once a man dressed like a northern tribesman, ridiculously muscled, bumped into him, muttering in a language that was guttural, ancient, and simple.

Across the road, under the eaves, berserker donned hunting hat and woodsman donned horned helmet, and the two laughed at each other.

Two women in court dress emerged from a shop behind him, then threw bright rain jackets over their dresses.

Costumes. Nostalgia. Idealism.

He headed for the center of town, which bustled with demons with swords.



In the late afternoon, away from the noise and the rabble, Crius topped a range of sand and gravel mounds near the sea. He tripped, slid, and came to a rest at the feet of eight men and one woman, all clad in the local garb, not costumes.

Three men pulled the sorcerer to his feet.

"Let him go," snarled another voice, rife with the crack of authority.

Crius shook his clothes straight and took a look across the nine faces—or eleven, now, he saw—for there were two more men about to duel beyond the line of onlookers.

The woman, though, was the first to hold his attention. She was striking, petite but strong with black hair and eyes and olive-skinned. He laughed inwardly. She looked northern Gavrian. She was not one to bring before the Gateskeep High Council.

Beyond her, the young man with the sharp voice was bare-chested to the sting of the sea air.

With a ponytail and goatee the color of the wet sand behind him, he was on the small side of medium-sized, but his proportions were exaggerated with slabs of long muscle, cat-like. The most wondrous wicked scar, a mark of great pain and courage, graced the knotted muscles of his stomach. He stabbed his rapier into the sand, dropped into a full split, and leaped up again.

Crius knew the type.

He liked this type.

The other man was much larger, much stronger, red-cheeked and thick-bearded in a ruddy shirt and a black jacket. He whipped the jacket off and tossed it to one of his cronies.

Remorseless jaw. Fierce eyes. A warrior to be reckoned with.

But it was the young swordsman whose grin, brilliant as the moon, had snared Crius's eye.

Here, Crius thought, was a hero: this young rake flipping his rapier from one hand to the other, tossing it behind his back and over his head with a juggler's ease, all the while bowing smugly.

The grin faded, however, as his opponent was handed a much heavier sword than his own and began limbering up.

Within a moment, both struck an *en garde*, and so began the challenges.

This was a grudge match. Unofficial, unsponsored, prohibited by a myriad of local statutes, and held well away from the main bustle.

The younger man spoke first. "I, Jarrod Torrealday of Knightsbridge, do accuse you, Harold Reynolds of Torrington, of the crime of rape. The victim, Lady Siriana, is present to substantiate the charges." With his weapon he offered her a salute that snapped through the air, and returned his attention to his opponent. Jarrod's voice became rocky and dropped an octave, and his happy-go-lucky countenance melted into an unforgiving glare. "How will you plead?"

The tip of his rapier was as steady as a star.

Crius was impressed by his professionalism. This was a champion's champion. This was the man he wanted. And left-handed, he noted. Rare, indeed.

"I protest my innocence," Harold replied tiredly, and spat on the ground toward Jarrod in punctuation. "And that, on you. I'll leave you with a story to tell."

"Well, then," Jarrod answered, "May God guide the true blade, sir. To the first blood?" Out went the right hand for balance, the right leg a bit behind, weight shifting to and fro.

Harold nodded, his mouth a tight line behind the beard. "So be it. First blood."

"Get him, Jarrod!" yelled one man from the sidelines.

"Kick his ass, Jarrod!" added another.

They crossed blades. Neither moved for the longest moment.

Harold lunged.

Jarrold exploded forward in a whirl of flashing steel, and Harold crumpled and spilled into a knee-deep puddle, pleading his surrender as Jarrod stomped and beat him.

The blood-thirstier onlookers were disappointed. Though Harold's nose was smashed, his eye swollen and his beard dripping blood, the duel had lasted only seconds.

Jarrold disarmed him with a kick, his face quivering in fury.

Harold sloshed to his knees to find Jarrod's rapier pricking him not-so-lightly in the eyebrow.

"Give me your hand," said Jarrod.

"My h—"

"Your *hand!*" he screamed, his face reddening.

"Careful, Jarrod!" someone shouted.

Jarrod tossed his rapier well aside, took Harold's hand in both his, and twisted it. He pried Harold's ring finger back until it nearly disjointed.

"Tell me to stop," Jarrod growled. He bent it back further, and Harold yelped again. "Tell me to *stop!*"

"Ah, st—! Hey!"

"What?"

"Stop!"

Jarrod's lip curled over his teeth. "*Beg me to stop.*"

Harold was breathing in panicked gasps, "*Stop!*"

He snapped the finger back. Harold shrieked. Stomachs wrenched. The Lady Siriana, whom Jarrod had been championing, covered her ears and spun away.

"Now, the next time someone tells *you* to stop," Jarrod snarled, "you just remember how *that* felt, you bastard. And you," he panted, "Will. *Stop!*" and he broke another one.

He shoved Harold back into the water with a foot on his chest and waded ashore.

He toe-flipped his rapier up into his hand, snatched his shirt from an onlooker, and left at a trot that in five steps turned into a sprint.

Siriana attempted to run after him, but one of Jarrod's supporters took her arm and held her back.

"Don't," was all he said.

"No, I gotta—" she attempted to push past him, but to no avail. "Lemme go!"

He put his hand on her shoulder. "Please, don't," he emphasized. "He doesn't want to see anybody right now."



Late into the night, Jarrod Torrealday lay awake in bed, unjumbling his thoughts.

Cars slashed by, the headlights making nightmares of the room's shadows. He turned on his side and listened to his pulse like so many marching feet.

His rapier hung from the doorknob. Headlights roamed over it again and again.

He wished he smoked.

The lights brought flashes: Harold's acceptance of the duel, Siri begging Jarrod not to hurt him, the conflict and the hatred in her face. The absurdity of crossing swords for a woman he'd met exactly once. Watching Harold warming up, the sloppy footwork and heavy lunges, the beer bottle he'd cast aside. The relief and the frustration of knowing deep inside there was no true danger. Sizing Harold up as drunk, and fat, and clumsy.

And being right.

He'd taken Harold apart in five seconds.

Harold and that ridiculous mammoth blade. Way too much sword for you. Compensating for a deficiency in your . . . character?

Touching blades; thoughts of Harold, and others, of Siri drunk and held down on a feasting table like part of the goddamn buffet.

And you still can't do anything right.

He picked up his phone, but his hand trembled too hard to read it, much less use it.

The morning's breath in his throat, dry and ugly; a grip in his gut as a solid year of hell—still so fresh he could smell it if he lay still long enough—stampeded across the darkness. A delusional ex-champion with a rapier. Endless months of crying coaches and shouting lawyers. A kaleidoscope of TV cameras and microphones, a magnificent life vanished like sand through his fingers, and a girl,

achingly beautiful, who might as well be a ghost now. All of it an utter screw-up.

And now this.

Crawling out, one Harold at a time.

He took a pull from the bottle of Lagavulin beside the clock, acidic and hot.

His own voice startled him. "What were you gonna do?" he asked the shadows. "Kill him, too?"

He flipped through pictures, finding a block-script quote by Rostand in *Cyrano de Bergerac*: "I feel too strong to war with mere mortals—*bring me giants!*"

He took another drink, longer.

It was time to move on.



Carter Sorenson traveled Renaissance festivals giving demonstrations on the history and tactics of the greatsword.

Nearly seven feet tall and so immensely muscled as to appear capable of pulling locomotives with his teeth, his head and goatee were shorn equally close and flecked with gray. He had played three years as a defensive end for the Patriots, and later had done quite well on the professional mixed martial arts circuit—facts that were well known throughout the Faire.

He regularly drew quite a crowd.

Carter was looking for Jarrod in the post-fair gala. Sunday mornings provided the last chance for browsing the artisans' tents. By noon the majority would be packing up in preparation for a return to whatever, in their lives, passed for normalcy.

While he didn't spy Jarrod, he did see Renaldo Salazar, one of Harold's cronies. Carter had heard that Jarrod and Harold had had a—what did they call it?—a *trial* the day before, which had ended

with Harold in the hospital.

Renaldo wasn't a serious Renaissance enthusiast, but a fringie who liked to flaunt his physique in fur loincloths and matching boots. He was, however, exceptional with a longsword, and had given Carter a run for his money at several historic European martial arts tournaments.

Worse, though; after Jarrod became famous for killing a guy in a swordfight in Paris a couple of years ago, hordes of macho half-wits and dilettante sword geeks had formed illegal underground dueling clubs around the world. In these circles, Renaldo had made a name for himself. And it was no secret that he wanted a piece of Jarrod.

This, Carter thought, could be an interesting day.

Renaldo was pushing at a small young woman with olive skin and dark hair.

"Siri." He looked hung-over, or possibly still drunk. "I need to talk to you."

Carter started easing his way through the crowd, quietly, hands on shoulders.

Renaldo reached out to touch the small woman. She shrugged away from him. "Huh?" he persisted. "Look, let's talk about this."

Carter recognized her, now: the one all the fuss had been about. Word had it that Harold and his buddies had raped her at a feast a few months ago in Manchester, which, he figured, was why Jarrod had kicked Harold's ass. And good on him.

"I'll kill you." She shoved him in return. "I mean it."

Carter moved faster. "Lemme through. Move."

"You?" Renaldo countered. "You mean Jarrod. You bring him to me."

Her eyes were savage. "I will. I hope he cuts your eyes out. Get away from me."

"You tell him I said to find me. Anytime. You got that? I'm not Harold. I'll be ready."

She looked him up and down, pausing for a moment on his

loincloth before shaking her head. "Where do you keep your wallet?"

"Bitch!" he shouted as she walked away.

Carter finished pushing his way through the crowd to Renaldo, and stood before him, eclipsing the sun.

Renaldo Salazar was big. Striking, chiseled, corded with muscle.

Carter was leviathan. Tanned biceps the size of footballs shoved at the rolled-up sleeves of his T-shirt, a vast expanse of black across which faux bloodstains marred the stencil GET UP.

A broad voice, freakish in its depth, sprang up through Carter's throat. "Is there a problem, here?"

Renaldo stepped back as Carter stepped forward. "My problem is not with you."

Carter grinned the merry grin of a Norseman cutting tulips with his favorite axe on a spring afternoon. "It is now."

The smile widened, its menace amplified by a gold canine tooth, its predecessor rumored to still be embedded in the skull of an actual ninja.

Renaldo's voice rattled from the hollows of his soul. "Find Jarrod. Tell him to come find me. And bring his blade," he swallowed the last part of the sentence, and repeated it for good measure.

Carter cleared his throat. "Get out of here before I make what happens next look like an accident."

Renaldo obliged and, in a moment, had vanished into the crowd.

Jarrod shoved his way through to Carter a moment later. "Did I hear my name taken in vain?" He was dressed in a leather jerkin and tights, the gleaming swept hilt of a heavy rapier adorning his side.

"Hullo, friend," Carter said to Jarrod with a slight bow. "Renaldo Salazar was just looking for you."

"I wonder whatever for? A pleasant day to you, my lord," Jarrod returned. "A thousand thanks."

Carter waved it off with a wide smile. "I enjoyed that so immensely, I should be thanking you."

"Carter Sorenson," said Jarrod, "may I introduce—"

"Siriana." Carter kissed her hand, bowing quite far to do so. "We've met."

"I thank you, as well, sire," she curtsied.

Carter dropped out of medieval vernacular as the crowd dissipated. "The fringies are out in force."

Jarrood shrugged. "Inviting the whole town doesn't help." Behind him, the Tin Man of Oz pedaled past on a unicycle. "I could do with less of this."

"It's going to be a long summer," Carter agreed. "You two headin' back today?"

Jarrood looked at Siri, whose nod told him it was about time to get going. "Yeah, I think so, in a bit. Why do you ask?"

"I'd maybe like to meet you for lunch," the giant offered. "We haven't talked in ages. You're still the fight coordinator over at North Coast, right? The Vikings-and-Indians thing?"

"That's on hold until next season." Jarrood's tone was dejected. "They haven't picked up my option yet."

"So what are you doing these days?"

"Jumped out of a building for FOX a couple of times."

"Jumped?" asked Carter. "Geez, I'd figure they'd just throw you."

"Funny guy," said Jarrood. "I did just finish a month of private lessons for Isabella Barnes."

"Isa . . . bella . . . Barnes?" Carter stammered. "Isabella freakin' Barnes. 'Disney's Izzy?' *Playboy*? Her?"

"Paramount is planning a Zorro spinoff. She'd be playing his daughter, the heir to Zorro's . . . whatever. Swordsman—uh—ism. Hero-ship."

Carter wiped his forehead. "Christ. I hate you so much right now."

"I only saw the initial concept," Jarrood assured him. "It may not go through."

Carter's tone was incredulous. "Can she fence?"

"She can, now. She has great wrists."

Siri rolled her eyes.

"I gotta say, sometimes I feel guilty getting paid," Jarrod admitted. "How's your gym?"

"Just sold it."

"Hey, I'm sorry."

"I'm not."

"What are you doing now?"

"Absolutely nothing," said Carter. "Taking the summer off. I was hoping to talk to you about the Viking thing, frankly."

"Interesting you should ask. I've got a slot for an assistant coming up this fall—assuming they pick me up."

"I'm looking for work," Carter admitted.

"How's the knee?"

"It's good."

"You're going to get knocked around a bit," Jarrod warned. "It's cold, muddy, long days, lots of bruises. But the money's good. They're shooting in Iceland in September. You'd love it. Ever have *Brennivín*?"

Carter grinned. "A course of antibiotics cleared it right up."

"So you're good to travel. Fantastic. You know Pete's Chowder House?"

"Down at the harbor, right?"

"Yeah. Meet you there, say, one o'clock?"

"'Twill be done, my lord." Carter bowed again, back in character despite his modern garb. "And my lady."

Jarrod's bow was much more composed: haughty, sharp, and arrogant, as was the medieval persona he chose to portray at these sorts of things.

"Indeed," he said, "I look forward to it. My lady?" he extended his arm, and the two of them vanished into the milling crowd.



In his motel room on the edge of town, Jarrod changed out of his medieval getup.

He picked up his new rapier. It needed to be swung. Thrusted with. Parried. Shoved into a hanging side of beef. Or Renaldo, whichever was more convenient.

This was a custom job, to his own specifications. Heavier than most rapiers, nearly a medieval knight's sword with a cage for counterbalance, the blade afforded more powerful attacks and better control in *prise de fer*, plus the ability to chop bone, always a bonus.

He swung it around the room, slashed the air.

Amazing weapon. Kinetically majestic, with the gleaming branches and rings above the handle. A strong swordsman's fencing blade. Not an Olympic blade.

He stood before the mirror in his boxers, struck an en garde, and flexed.

Fuckin' Olympics.

More shadowy figures yelled at him in his head.

How close were you? Five matches away? Three?

Lookin' good, though. Gettin' it back.

He unflexed at a knock on the door.

Jarrod stood before the door and paused. The knock returned. With the rapier behind his back, he unlatched, braced, and then carefully opened the door.

Jarrod recognized Crius from earlier, but it took him a moment. It nagged at him that he'd been tailed.

"Excuse me, sire." Crius coughed into a handkerchief. "I must have a word with you."

"If this is about the fight, I don't really want to talk about it."

"Understandable," the man admitted, "but I need a champion, and quickly."

Invisible fanfares rang over Jarrod's shoulder. "A champion, huh?"

"Yes." He tucked his handkerchief away. "The compensation would be, at the least—"

The horns fizzled, and Jarrod bit his tongue and shook his head. "Uh-uh. Forget it, pal. 'The art of fencing is not a harlot to suffer itself to be sold.' I teach for money. I don't fight for money." And with a grimace, he started to close the door. "Ah—goodbye?" was his way of warning Crius to get his foot out of the door, or he stood to lose the better part of it. "Nice boots."

"Thank you. Please, may I speak with you?"

"You are speaking with me." Jarrod's fingers drummed on the rapier's grip as he earmarked a troubling list of attributes: the shaky hands and foreign mannerisms, the intricate design of his staff or for that matter of his boots (and who logs that many miles in period boots, he had to wonder), the odd cut of his doublet, and the ornate necklaces in plain view. This guy carried the authenticity kick way too far, and Jarrod took him for one of the fringe elements who lived in their garb.

"I'd like to come in," Crius said.

"Maybe, in a moment," Jarrod promised.

"Please, sir. We need a champion."

"We?" *We* stuck in Jarrod's head. "You were 'I' just a moment ago. Or is that a royal 'we?'"

"Well, in a way, I suppose," Crius admitted, stroking his goatee and looking away in thought.

"Yeah? We're done, here." And at that, Jarrod closed the door and threw the bolt.

He donned black drawstring hemp trousers, and was lacing up his hiking boots when the knock at the door returned, much louder this time.

Sighing, he snapped the door open. "Look, friend—"

Pain burst through the left half of Jarrod's head and the world

dissolved in neon tangles.

Renaldo Salazar stepped into the room, and drove an elbow into Jarrod's throat, following it with what should have been a world-ending kick in the nuts that Jarrod sidestepped out of muscle memory.

A lifetime of fighting exploded through Jarrod and he spun on his heel with a handful of Renaldo's jacket, hurling him onto the credenza and collapsing it.

He couldn't breathe, his throat cramping, and he started to shake.

Windpipe. Windpipe.

Jarrod picked up the phone, watching Renaldo over his shoulder.

He felt pain, but it was miles away. It felt like the point of the boot had torn his hamstring. The concern was the tightening in his throat.

He punched buttons. 9— 1—

His eyes traced the letters below the keypad. They became words.

**FOR AN OUTSIDE LINE: DIAL "9"
THEN "0" + THE NUMBER.
FOR LONG-DISTANCE, PLEASE DIAL "0"
AND AN OPERATOR WILL ASSIST YOU.**

Jarrod slapped down the contacts on the cradle.

Focus.

His brain refused to comprehend anything except the flares that were now going up, screaming for air. Panic was setting in; he knew he had only moments before things started shutting down. And then, God help him.

9 — No, wait. . .

0?

9?

Renaldo was getting up.

Jarrold met Renaldo's skull with the phone, hurling it into the back of his head and shattering the plastic case, and fell back against the wall, wheezing. Melting.

Renaldo grabbed the corner of the bed, heaved, and righted himself like a tall ship in a storm.

And it was then that Jarrod saw the sword at Renaldo's side. A longsword, with about a foot of handle, and the same ornate, branched guard as his new rapier.

Renaldo began sliding the sword—and there was a lot of it—out of the scabbard. "Let's go. You and me."

"Yeah, real fair," rasped Jarrod.

As he lunged for his rapier, all the way across the room, something blew through the door. Something brown, holding something red.

The brown thing knocked Renaldo out with the red thing.

Jarrold stared emptily through the haze that was his eyesight as Renaldo lay sprawled on the floor, on his side, arms askew.

Crius harrumphed, and tossed a fire extinguisher on the bed. "Such foresight to keep these in every hallway."

"On my swordbelt," Jarrod squeaked. "Med kit. There's a . . ." he fought panic at the sound of his voice, ". . . trache tube. You gotta cut me." The neon wrigglers were coming back, purple and orange, crawling through the edges of his vision as he found himself on his knees. "Oh, fuck. Cut me, man. Trache me."

Crius stared at him in incomprehension. "I'll talk you through it," Jarrod rasped. "Get my med kit. Hurry. Oh, fuck. Oh, f—"

The room flared white and faded.



Carter awaited Jarrod and Siri in the coffee shop of Pete's Chowder House, just up the street from the weekend's madness.

He heard sirens, thought nothing of it, and sipped his coffee.

Carter remembered long conversations and many demonstrations with a young Jarrod, even ten years ago, when Jarrod Torrealday was a smirking little slip of a boy, still in high school but an A-grade fencer with a solid grounding in Judo.

Back when Carter had sparred with the young Jarrod, he'd felt like he was standing on ice. Everything he hated about fighting a *judoka* in the octagon, coming back to haunt him in thirty pounds of mail with a blade that flashed like thought. Terrifying. Not just swords, either. Spear, axe, knife. Immense talent. With something sharp and a suit of armor Jarrod could, quite literally, whip anybody in the world.

When the rules were off.

The strict regulations for historical armored combat had frustrated Jarrod, and he hadn't placed well in tournaments. He'd dropped out of the medieval re-enactor scene and went on to win a junior World Cup championship in saber. Saber rules, he could do.

A few years later, as an undergrad at Duke, Jarrod had attracted attention by insisting that medieval armored combat and Eastern martial arts shared common ground. This was now common knowledge, but at the time, it had been heresy.

His blog posts and videos—Judo-flipping and leg-sweeping in full 15th-Century field harnesses with swords—had snared the attention of a director in Hollywood who flew Jarrod out to advise for a television series whose fight sequences, once produced, had raised the ire of pretty much every professional fight choreographer in the world simultaneously before becoming the new standard.

The years that followed brought magazine interviews and movie consults, capped with a History Channel special and a move up to 16th in the world in saber.

To say Jarrod had a gift was an understatement. Hailed as the

Bruce Lee of medieval combat, he was, more than any other man, responsible for the recent revival in historical European martial arts. The cover of *Sports Illustrated* had called him *The Deadliest Man Alive*.

Then, the kid's fall from grace: Jarrod's dismissal from the International Fencing Federation on his way to the U.S. Olympic team amidst world-rocking scandal. A rivalry in Paris—a stupid thing, an argument over a girl—had escalated into a duel and left a world-class *sabreur* dead in the cold rain of the Latin Quarter.

The trial, the acquittal; nonstop coverage. *The Jarrod Torrealday Story* ran twenty-four seven. Young, handsome, promising, lethal. The media loved hating him. Rumor had it he'd even been offered his own reality show as the underground dueling clubs cropped up across the world.

Jarrold had resurfaced in Greece a year later, consulting for a sword and sorcery film with a laughable budget. A TV tabloid found him at a nearby bar, raving drunk. The resulting interview still spawned memes for a man at rock bottom.

Fifteen years older, Carter could imagine what Jarrod had gone through. Jarrod had hit his peak at age twenty-six, and then tripped over it and fell off the far side. Long goddamned way down, too.

But good on him for the Isabella Barnes thing.

Carter knew Jarrod would rise again, and it would be entertaining to see how.

He himself had had several peaks. College ball at Penn, then three years with the Patriots, and a blown knee in the playoffs at about Jarrod's age. A Master's in medieval history and a private school teaching job, coaching varsity through his years of rehab, and then a pretty good tour in MMA until the knee went out again. He'd walked—well, limped—away from teaching to chase a TV career that never quite materialized—a few neo-gladiatorial TV shows, even a short professional wrestling stint—before cashing in and starting his gym.

And selling it. What a pain in the ass that whole thing had

become. So much hard sell, so little training.

And now he had a small nest egg, a trusty diesel pickup, and renters in the house. Time to figure out the Next Thing.

Maybe Iceland with Jarrod Torrealday. Why the hell not?

He checked his watch. One-ten. *C'mon. Punctuality.*

More sirens. Something big was happening up the coast. He checked out the window, saw no smoke, and finished his coffee.

At one-twelve there was a tap on his shoulder.

"Parking trouble? Oh, uh," he stammered, realizing that it wasn't the person he thought it would be. "Hi."

It was one of the Renaissance guys, leaning on a staff. He needed a shower.

Carter eyed Crius up and down clinically, then guessed. "Dave Grohl stars as the moody young Gascon?"

Crius stared in incomprehension.

Carter made the metal horns with one hand. "Dude."

Crius returned the sign feebly, staring at his own hand for a moment, first. "Doo-ood," he answered.

"Exactly," Carter said. "What's up?"

"Jarrod," said Crius.

"He'll be here in a minute," said Carter.

Crius grunted once, politely begging to differ. "No, he won't."

His tone had unaccountably melted into something Carter couldn't quite nail down as malice, but a stern, out-of-place, grave-sort-of-something Carter instinctively knew he shouldn't like. He shifted his weight uneasily around the booth.

"Why—uh—hmm. What makes you say that?" he leaned back a bit in feigned curiosity.

"Jarrod needs your help," said Crius, telepathically driving it home with such emphasis that Carter stood and pulled on his battered Patriots jacket before he even knew why he was getting upset.

Carter unfolded a fiver and left it on the table. "What is it?"

Renaldo?"

"Yes. Hurry."

Carter cracked his knuckles and his neck, shook life into his head. His voice was alive, his hands itching. "Let's go." He was already heading for the door.

Crius followed, having to move quickly to keep up with Carter's broad stride, and grabbed Carter's hand.

"Hey, none of that," Carter pulled his hand away and pushed the door open.

There was a moment of distress when his hand didn't find the door, punctuated by a heavy blow to the crown of his skull.

"Ow! Ffff—!" He doubled over, holding his head with both hands and swearing. "What the hell?"

From between his forearms, he could see that he had stepped out of Pete's Chowder house into a tiny, stone room, with a large desk. Thick timbers crisscrossed the ceiling, vanishing into darkness above him. He'd hit his head on one. "What the *hell*?" he re-iterated.

A fire glowed in a fireplace, though it was daytime outside a nearby window. With a flick of Crius's hand, it grew into a blaze of white flames.

Carter's mind scrabbled for an explanation as his heart sledgehammered against his chest. The throbbing in his head was Thor's hammer, hurled at him from way down his family tree. He slammed air into his lungs, looking about for something to hit.

The door behind them opened, and a soldier in a long shirt of black mail with a short spear entered the room. He babbled in a language Carter didn't understand, looking back and forth between them as he spoke. He aimed the spear at Carter.

Carter stepped up to him, hands in the air, fingers spread, and then he grabbed the spear, twisted it free, and wrapped the guy up as it flipped away and clattered. They grappled, Carter noting that the man must have been built out of bricks under the mail, quick and solid, until Carter tripped him backwards and ran him back six steps,

full-speed into the wall.

Carter stepped back and left the soldier on the floor, groaning. Yeah, I bet that hurt.

Carter drove a deep breath out through the thumping in his skull. He did this again, and his hands stopped shaking, at which point he picked up the spear and took a step back.

The wood in his hands was dense, smooth, and dark. The head was triangular instead of flat, ensuring a slow-healing wound. Gorgeous work. "All right," he growled to Crius, "Explain."

"You're going to feel disoriented," said Crius. "You've just made quite a journey."

Carter glanced around again. "Oh, ya think? What is this?"

"There's no need to harm anyone."

"I'll decide that. Start talking." The guard stirred, and Carter threatened him with the spear. "Don't fucking move." He'd ripped a fingernail on the mail and it throbbed.

Crius continued, "You feel threatened, and I understand. I brought you here the way I did because you wouldn't have believed any of this otherwise."

Carter looked around the room, at the stone walls and timber beams, the raging fire, this grunge-rock wizard's insane sincerity, and the groaning guy on the floor. Who, to be fair, had given him a better fight than he'd expect from any LARP-er.

And this spear, he thought, looking at it again. Sweet Jesus.

Across the room, a glassless window showed an expanse of sky, cloudless, with a gentle magenta tint that he unconsciously tried to blink away. The sun beyond was far brighter, the breeze through the window far colder, than Maine had been.

Carter stared out the window, squinting at the odd light. A black-armored warrior on a black pegasus glided into view maybe a hundred yards out, wheeled, and leaped away again. He moved closer for another look.

It was—blinking again—definitely a pegasus.

The rider was out there doing steeplechase in the air, just playing around, in what appeared to be the winged-horse equivalent of burning donuts in the parking lot. Past the rider he saw a long, low castle wall with fat, squat towers, and an ocean of wide plains beyond.

A horn sounded in the distance.

Carter leaned the spear against the wall, then walked over and gave the soldier a hand up to his feet. "Apologize to him for me," he told Crius.

The soldier grumbled something as Carter brushed him off and clapped him on the upper arm in the universal sign for *good game*.

Behind the helmet, the soldier—or knight, or whatever he was—smiled and shook his head, saying something that Carter accepted as a compliment. Carter put out a hand, and the man shook it, his gloved hand around Carter's forearm.

"He says his name is Sir Dar, he's a knight, and he hopes that I brought you here to teach his men," said Crius.

Carter turned to Crius. "Well, funny you should mention it. I'm a pretty good coach and I'm looking for work."

"Yes. I saw you with your big sword, yesterday, teaching. We would like to extend an offer of employment to you."

With those words, Carter realized that he wasn't hearing in his ears what he was hearing in his head, but rather, it was as if the scruffy kid was playing a subtitled movie in his mind as he talked. He only noticed now that this had been going on since Pete's Chowder House.

It seemed there was going to be a lot to take in.

Carter pulled out the chair in front of Crius's desk, antique, soft leather, immensely comfortable, and settled in before the fire. Sir Dar took his spear, put his fist over his heart and bowed to Carter, and showed himself out.

"Let's talk," Carter said to Crius, "but slowly."

II

MINUET

"Never give a sword to a man who can't dance."

– Confucius

Jarrold awoke to a chill.

He smelled candle smoke, with an underpinning of wet concrete and cedar. A basement smell. A woodshop smell. And distant incense.

It was cold.

Swearing silently through a yawn, he opened his eyes. A turn of his head yielded surprisingly less discomfort than he'd expected.

Jarrold looked up into the candlelit crags of a face, stubbly, the lines engraved with concern.

It took him a moment. It was a face he recognized, but certainly not one he'd expected. Carter's face.

"You awake?" the voice seemed to seep from all corners of the room.

Jarrold closed his eyes again, tried to speak. Someone had stolen his tongue and replaced it with a hunk of steel wool.

Carter handed him a ceramic chalice of cold water. Jarrold sat up a bit and nursed it.

The room was generous, lit by wide candles in stone sconces and done in early—very early, he noted—medieval decor. Rough stone walls, bare timbers overhead, and a stack of split fat logs and a pile of dried cow flop beside a glowing fireplace. A wooden floor that looked splintery. A wolfskin spread-eagled on the wall, replete with dried, eyeless head. Rustic and simple, yet somehow rich: beams and boards were well cared-for, the bedsheets were soft and the furs covering him were real and thick, and the lone tapestry—green with a gold skeleton key superimposed along a white square tower in its center—was fine silk, heavy and bright, that seemed to glow of its own accord.

It was quiet. Wind rustled the skin on the wall. The fire snapped occasionally. If he concentrated, he could hear the burbling of a brook over stones.

“You all right?” asked Carter.

Jarrold tried to sit up further. Carter helped him.

“Good Lord,” Jarrold groaned, stretching with great effort and *ow-ing* repeatedly under his breath. “How long was I out?” *Days? Weeks?* No bedsores.

“Beats me,” said Carter. “You were out when I got here.”

He yawned again. “How long have you been here?”

Carter sipped at a ceramic stein of something foamy he’d had near his feet. “Three days.”

Jarrold stretched his neck and leaned forward to grab his toes beneath the furs. His flexibility wasn’t greatly compromised. He’d been well taken care of. “Bastard Renaldo,” he griped. “Beat the shit out of me. Could’ve sworn he collapsed my windpipe. Did they cut me?” He reached his hand to his throat, expecting bandages, and finding none.

Carter’s tone was resigned. “I don’t know.”

“Where’s Siri?”

“I don’t know. Not here.”

“We’ve got to find her—Renaldo—”

Carter cut him off. "Forget Renaldo. This is you and me."

"O-o-okay," Jarrod blew out a long breath. "Where are we?"

Carter stood, went to the far wall, untied one leg of the wolfskin, and pulled it back to reveal a deep arrowslit set in a stone wall two feet thick.

Jarrod moved to the edge of the bed for a better look.

It was raining lightly against the outermost lip of the arrowslit, smudging any details of the curtain wall a hundred yards further and a hundred feet below.

They were very high in the tower.

Past the curtain wall, the skies were dark with rain above a hundred wooden roofs that sprawled down the hillside, oozing smoke from their chimneys. The outer wall of the town stood at the base of the hill, its towers, vaguely round, reduced to blurs in the mist.

The quiet was infectious, the rain a blanket on the world.

"Wow."

"The Castle of Regoth Ur," said Carter, "in Northern Gateskeep."

"Do we have cell service out here?"

"I doubt it."

"Help me up. Wow, it's cold."

Carter handed Jarrod a folded black shirt from the end of the bed, and helped him to his feet.

It was then that Jarrod noticed Carter's outfit, which consisted of a gray cable-knit sweater with laces at the neck; a black cape trimmed with dense silver fur he couldn't immediately identify; molasses-colored trousers that appeared to be suede, hand-stitched and stiff; and fine knee boots that laced up the front, the tops turned out to show a fur lining that matched his cape. Atop the sweater peeped the stiff, silver-embroidered collar of a black undertunic that looked to be either velvet or heavy silk, quite expensive, he guessed.

He hadn't given the getup much thought at first, because nearly

every time he'd seen Carter had been at a Renaissance fair, Guild event, or movie set. He was acclimated to seeing Carter dressed like he'd just stepped out of formation with Hengist and Horsa.

Perhaps most intriguingly, over the sweater Carter wore a sword and matching dagger on an authentic baldric, the sword's scabbard in a silver-embossed frog that matched the piping on his collar.

The frog, essentially a sheath for a sheath, was one of the telling signs that an actor, re-enactor, or consultant knew what the hell he or she was doing.

A scabbard tucked under a belt holds a sword handle at an awkward angle and renders it nearly impossible to draw. A proper frog is adjustable and angles the weapon's handle forward exactly at hand height. It was a small detail, and Jarrod was a details guy.

Jarrod was *the* details guy.

He stood with some effort—he was disoriented and hungry but he felt strong, all things considered—and pulled on the long shirt over the undertunic. The long shirt was black and either rough silk or soft hemp, and several sizes too large. It sported the same embroidered-silver collar as Carter's undershirt. He began rolling up the sleeves from below his fingertips. "Nice sword."

The sword was wide and he could tell it was heavy even in the scabbard, maybe thirty inches of blade with just enough leather-wrapped handle for two hands. "Where'd you get that?"

Carter grinned an unstable grin. "You wouldn't believe it, man. We are *through* the looking glass."

"How so?"

Carter leaned against the wall. Jarrod rubbed his muscles all over, partially to limber up, partially to warm himself. The more he moved, the less he hurt.

The giant sipped at his beer. "Welcome to Gateskeep."

"What the hell is Gateskeep?" Jarrod asked, not kindly. A bunch of Burning Man rejects have built a feudal-era commune in northern Maine. They'll probably make me king.

"As far as I can tell, it's the northwestern country of a small continent. They call this their world, but the map I've seen looks like a continent. We're in the castle of Regoth Ur, a short ride from the northern sea and a half-day's ride from the palace, to hear them tell it." Jarrod stared at Carter from hands on knees, and caught a pair of woolen trousers, coarse and gray, as they were tossed to him. "Pump your brakes. Start again."

Carter's voice was inattentive. "I dunno. It's another world. I don't know how. Maybe you'll get it."

"Another world, huh? Wow, these are scratchy," Jarrod commented, turning the trousers over. "And long. Jesus. Are there any breeches or hose over there?"

Carter tossed him a set of silk breeches. "Candy-ass."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. I need a belt."

Carter rifled through the pile of clothes and tossed him a padded leather belt. The tooling was intricate, the clasp silver, the lining velvet, and the best Jarrod could figure, it looked expensive. It all did.

Jarrod cast a sidelong, wary glance out the window as he cinched the pants tight. There were no belt loops, but a braided rawhide drawstring. He tied the strings and secured the belt around his waist, then rolled up the cuffs. "So, I have to ask," he started.

"Go ahead," said Carter.

Jarrod slowed in his motions as he tucked and buckled the belt over the tunic. "Is this a reality show?"

"Not as far as I know."

"Yeah, bullshit."

"No bullshit."

"Bull," he repeated, "shit." The words sounded strange off his tongue.

"Hey, look, I'm sorry. But what I'm told is that there's another — ah, Earthling — here. I don't know . . ."

As Carter's voice roved on, something tugged at the edges of Jarrod's perception, the shimmer of reality that signals the ruin of the

dream of a lifetime.

"I don't understand a lot of it, but he's on their side. The other side. There's a war. Or there's going to be. They're asking for our enlistment."

"In a reality show."

"No."

"Seriously. Because I've got lawyers. Good ones."

"Jarrod," warned Carter.

"Okay, fine. Enlistment. What'd you say?"

"I said hell, yes."

Jarrod rubbed the bedpost with his thumb. "If you accepted, then there's got to be more." Carter wasn't stupid.

And there was the nagging ache, again. The more Carter spoke, the more things seemed to shimmer.

"There's a lot more. They'll explain. But look, would I miss this for anything? I'm forty-three years old and I still have roommates. They're paying us for this."

"How much?"

"A lot. They're paying in gold."

Jarrod drummed his fingers. "Ooh."

"Yeah. I mean, shit," Carter said. "Amy's long gone—"

"I didn't know that," Jarrod interrupted. "I'm sorry."

"It's fine," said Carter. "But I have nothing going on. Me, you, Iceland. Why not here?"

Jarrod looked around, again. "Where the fuck is here, exactly?"

"Gateskeep," said Carter again.

"Yeah, you said that. So, chamber pot? Garderobe? What do we piss in in 'Gateskeep?'"

"Ah, no. There's a trapdoor beside that barrel. There's an aqueduct that feeds the tower."

The trapdoor opened with an ornate iron handle, and from beneath came the sound of the stream he'd been hearing.

Jarrod didn't know anybody in Hollywood smart enough to

think of an aqueduct system, much less build it into a castle floor by floor. He turned his back to Carter and relieved himself as he formulated his next question.

"I'm only going to ask this once, and I want your best answer:
"Is this for real?" they chorused.

The giant nodded his head sternly. "As real as it has to be."

Jarrold sighed. "That doesn't help."

"I'm not being flippant. The last few days it's been clear." Carter pointed at the ceiling. "They have three moons. One big one, pink and purple, with a *ring*. It's like a dinner plate up there. You can see it in the daytime."

"Aliens?"

"Technically, I guess, but not that you'd know it. Humans, horses—they have pegasi cavalry, and I've heard that they have dragons, ogres, goblins, elves, the whole . . . you know."

"You're shitting me."

"No."

"Come on. You're bullshitting me. This is a reality show. It's got to be." He craned his neck around the room. "Goddamn pinhole cameras around here somewhere. Come on. I'll play along. Just tell me what we're getting paid for this. Where's my agent? *Saul!*" he yelled. "Hey, Saul!"

"It's not."

"You're smiling," said Jarrold.

"Of course I'm smiling," Carter grinned. "You will, too."

"I swear to God," said Jarrold, "I will kick your ass. Somehow."

"I've been here three days, and I've had a pretty good look around. This is a working castle. It houses probably a hundred people. And everything works. I mean, the way it should. The nobles don't do the dishes. There is not a cigarette butt, or a beer can, anywhere." He ticked off on his fingers, "No canned food. No sugar. No plastic. No stainless steel. Everything in this castle is built by hand."

Jarrold looked out at the rooftops stretching into the mist. "What's with the city out there?"

"I don't know if I'd call it a city," said Carter. "But there's a good-sized village right outside the castle walls. These guys have a working feudal system. A whole country—a couple of 'em."

A thin layer of ice caked the surface of the water in a barrel next to the trapdoor. Jarrold broke it with the heel of his fist and washed his hands, then leaned close and drenched his face and hair and scrubbed vigorously, shivering and groaning at the cold. He pulled the shirt from his trousers and wiped his face with the tails.

"Countries," he grumbled, tucking the shirt in again. "Feudal constitutionalism, or are we still grinding along under privatized rule?"

"They're a lot more civilized about it than we were," Carter admitted. "Administration, standing armies, but there's a lot of friction between the crown and the estates, mostly a communication issue, the way I see it. Castles, petty lords. There's a king and a bloodline hierarchy, but the big decisions are made by guys appointed by the local lords to various councils that advise the royals. They have a War Council, a Trade Council, a Farms Council. You get the idea."

"Okay. Does it work?"

"Hell if I know. What I see is a pair of rudimentary nation-states, vastly overextended from their seats of power and with no hard borders. They're on the ragged edge of administrative collapse, and the outlying lands are in chaos."

"Big fun. Is there a church in all this?"

"I don't think so. Probably not, which would explain why it's so factious. Keep in mind," Carter said, sipping at his beer, "I've only been here a few days. The beer's good, though."

"That'll help," muttered Jarrold. "Though I doubt I'm up to date on all my shots."

"These guys are pretty clean," Carter assured him. "Not

fastidious, but they bathe. Most of them, daily. They clip their nails, cut their hair, brush their teeth. The dogs are housebroken."

"That's handy."

"They seem to live pretty long, too. There are some seriously old dudes around here. Some of them have got to be pushing eighty. Maybe a hundred and eighty. Who knows?"

"We should be so lucky," Jarrod sighed. "I assume, from your trappings—" he motioned, "—they gave you some sort of honorary rank? A social standing?"

"Yeah. Chancellor."

"Which is?"

"As best I can gather, it's equivalent to a knight, more or less. It's not a martial rank, though. Non-landholding nobility. They call it a 'palace lord.' Not sure if that's a good thing or a bad thing, yet."

Jarrod grunted, and fought his way into a thick gray sweater-tunic like Carter's that was woven tightly and scratched his neck. He pulled the collar of the undertunic through it. "Nobility," he echoed. "So there's a class system? Caste system?"

"They have a robust working class," Carter said. "There's no mass production, so it's all artisans. The merchant class is better off than they are. There's a trade society, too, and some of them are rich enough to buy their own nobility. A couple of the merchant families have as much power as the royalty. Think of the Medicis, the Welsers. Patricians."

"Interesting."

"Very. You, they may knight," Carter supposed. "All you'd have to do is show 'em what you got. I bet they'd knight you in a minute."

Jarrod grinned inwardly at the praise, but tried to remain as stern and businesslike as he could manage. "And this is not a reality show?"

Carter wiped his forehead. "Jarrod."

"Okay, fine. Did they bring my rapier?"

"Yes."

"Where is it?"

"I don't know. I'm sure it's safe. We'll get it."

"Let me see that," Jarrod motioned to the sword at Carter's side.

Carter cleared the blade from its scabbard and handed it to Jarrod. "Everyone carries these in the castle. It's a standard design, but they're still not mass-produced."

Jarrod could see the weld lines in the firelight, the spine made from twisted iron bands hammered into a herringbone pattern with steel edges. Gorgeous.

Heavy damned sword, though.

"Armor?"

Carter spent the next few minutes running down the weaponry and armors he'd seen about. Jarrod winced at Carter's estimation of the technology as comparable to the Late Dark Ages in Europe: axes, spears, and mail armor augmented with iron and leather seemed the outfit of the typical soldier. The officers were better-equipped and the knights, better still. Distinct from medieval *chevaliers* in grandeur and function, and observedly distant from the concept of chivalry as Carter knew it, the knights of the royal orders were an elite contingent proficient in weapons and field tactics, trained-from-birth killers who pledged their lives to the king. Carter had mixed it up with one on his first day, wooden weapons and leather helmets, and was quite impressed.

"You didn't try him with your greatsword," Jarrod assumed.

"Ah, no."

Jarrod tried a few cuts through the air with the sword and flipped it around in his hand a few times. The piece, while functional and well-balanced, was heavy for its size and not entirely historically accurate. The wide blade shouldered out at the crossguard, with a deep fuller for half its length that lent it considerable forward momentum. It was a hack-and-smasher, built to break armor, or break a man inside his armor.

"Yeah, that's a beast, all right. What about shields?"

"I'm seeing center-held roundshields and some teardrops, great big ones. Not a lot of finesse, either. They're real crash and bashers. The swords are secondary. They mainly use spears and axes. The knights use swords, but they've had a lot more training than the grunts."

Jarrold stood five feet seven inches tall, and in fighting trim weighed in at just under a hundred and fifty pounds. "Yeah, how big are these guys?"

"Big," Carter admitted. "The knights, especially. I'd guess that the nobility has more meat in their diets. I'm seeing knights six feet, six-two. Big, wide guys. Lots of power. Some of the women in the lists are about your size, but, ah . . . I mean . . ."

"Women?"

Carter nodded slowly, quietly.

Jarrold looked up from the sword at the sudden silence. "Women fighters?"

The giant only smiled. A slow, broad smile.

It was infectious. "Oh, man, sign me up," Jarrold begged.

"Sign yourself up. Here," Carter handed Jarrold his boots.

Jarrold was thankful that someone had taken the care to bring not only his blade, but his boots, which were sturdy, leather-and Gore-Tex hikers. There was a practicality to the choice, a horse-sense that, to Jarrold, resonated with a medieval mind-set and further cemented the reality he was finding around him. "C'mon," said Carter. "I'm starving."

"Yeah, me, too." He rolled the words off his tongue. *Me, too. Me, too . . .*

It jarred Jarrold like few things ever had. A revelation that slammed him on the head nearly hard enough to knock his fillings out. The room spun.

Carter steadied him. "You okay?"

Jarrold stammered with a few awkward phrases, quietly, at first. What he was hearing in his skull were clicks and pops and nasal,

alien vowels. His tongue was doing backflips in his head.

"Jarrod?" Carter asked again, looking into his eyes with considerable concern. "You okay?"

Jarrod shook his head, tangled hair falling from his hands in incomprehension. "Carter—"

"Yes?"

Only it wasn't 'yes'. Not quite. A terse word, an acknowledgment. But what Jarrod heard was sure as hell not, 'Yes.'

"We're not speaking English."



The Lords' Hall was nearly empty. It was between mealtimes, and Carter assumed the time by his best guess to be about two in the afternoon.

Quick math brought Jarrod an answer of fourteen stone tables, each capable of seating probably a dozen people if they refrained from wild gesticulation. An old man in fine purple and black clothes sat at the end of a table alone, reading a letter and slurping soup from a wooden bowl and spoon. A boy in dirty clothes and two girls in simple dresses and aprons cleaned tables, and a pair of even dirtier boys stacked logs with some commotion by a wall-length fire pit. Coals glowed like a forge, blasting welcome warmth halfway across the room.

Carter led him back to the kitchens.

"Is it cool to just go back there?" Jarrod asked. The word he'd unwittingly substituted for *cool* didn't quite have the connotation he'd wanted, becoming instead more of an *allowed*, but his usage had less of a stern inflection, and a bit more spark to it. A raw language, brimming with barked profanities and innuendo.

The cook was a round woman of indeterminate age, in an unremarkable dress with a long blonde braid and a kerchief to hold

her hair back. She had a cheerful smile, and greeted Carter with a curtsy. He bowed, as did Jarrod.

"Back again, eh?" she giggled. "I'll have some dandy ready in a moment. You know where the food is," she assumed, and went about grinding what Jarrod swore were coffee beans. They certainly smelled like coffee beans.

"Where did she get coffee beans?" he asked under his breath. Carter sliced and gutted a large yellow potato thing and ladled it full of gloriously thick stew. He handed it to Jarrod, along with an ornate wooden spoon, licking his fingers.

"Mmm, damn, that's good."

"You're not afraid of that?" Jarrod asked.

"I once ate a sandwich I found in a drawer."

Jarrod stuck his finger in the stew, wondering how long it had been sitting out, whether the meat was tainted, and what else was in there. There wasn't a refrigerator in sight, and he'd come down with strange things around the world by accepting food on the advice of his stomach instead of his brain.

The stew was hot enough to likely be sterile and smelled of alien spices and garlic. Lots of garlic. "Carter . . . the coffee?"

Carter made a point of stopping everything else he was doing. "I don't know. I didn't ask."

"Okay, I'll ask."

"Don't ask."

"Why?"

"Because it's rude. And you'll draw attention to yourself."

"Carter, there is no coffee anyplace this cold. Coffee doesn't grow in places this cold. Chicory, I'd believe."

"Dandelions," the cook replied from behind them. Though plump, she had a nimble footstep. "Roasted dandelion root," she admitted. "We call it dandy. Do you like it?"

"It smells . . . like something from our homeland that I'm very fond of," said Jarrod.

She smiled again, all dimples and motherly manners. "I took it you two were foreigners."

Jarrold rubbed his stubbly chin. "Ah, you could say that, yes. Forgive us our mannerisms, my lady."

Carter made himself a potato-bowl of stew similar to Jarrod's, and they took a seat at a near table.

Jarrold tore at the potato, which was sweet and slightly carrot-y. Carter could see the younger man's hands shaking, and put his own hand on Jarrod's wrist to steady it.

"I'm scared," Jarrod told his stew.

"It's okay, man. Hell, I *freaked*."

"Why us?"

Carter again made a point of stopping what he was doing.

"Why not you? What I've been asking myself for the past few days is, why *me*?"

Jarrold attacked his food, which was hot, oily, and heady with thyme and garlic and something he couldn't remember the name of that reminded him of Turkish coffee. The meat was stringy with a slight organ flavor—venison of some type. He was halfway through when the cook brought him a plate piled high with fried vegetable nests drizzled in butter and honey, and a cup of the dandelion-root tea. When his food was gone, Jarrod drained his tea—which was so like coffee that it could have been coffee, replete with cream and sweetener—and picked grounds from his teeth.

"You better?" asked Carter.

"I'll make it," Jarrod pushed himself away from the table.

"You want a beer? You've got to try the beer. They'll put a brewer in jail here for making bad beer."

"Good," said Jarrod. "But no beer, yet. I want to go talk to somebody and I want to be sober."

"Yeah, okay." Carter whistled, waking three large brindle bulldogs near the firepit. He set their plates on the floor, and one of the dogs lumbered up and trotted over. They left as the dogs took to

their job.

Jarrold stood in the doorway, watching as the dogs mopped up the mess, and Carter clapped Jarrold on the back. "It's gonna be okay. I think you're gonna love this."



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