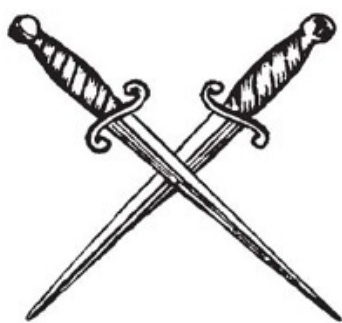


# THE ANVIL OF THE WORLD

KAGE BAKER



THE  
ANVIL  
OF THE  
WORLD



Kage Baker



A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK  
NEW YORK

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To LINN PRENTIS

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Without whom my first novel would have been thrown off the front porch into Pismo Creek, to the edification of none but a transient population of mallards.



# Contents

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**TROON**, the golden city, sat within high walls on a plain a thousand miles wide. The plain was golden with barley.

The granaries of Troon were immense, towering over the city like giants, taller even than its endlessly revolving windmills. Dust sifted down into its streets and filled its air in the Month of the Red Moon and in every other month, for that matter, but most especially in that month, when the harvest was brought in from the plain in long lines of creaking carts, raising more dust, which lay like a fine powder of gold on every dome and spire and harvester's hut.

All the people of Troon suffered from chronic emphysema.

Priding itself as it did, however, on being the world's breadbasket, Troon put up with the emphysema. Wheezing was considered refined, and the social event of the year was the Festival of Respiratory Masks.



On the fifth day of the Month of Chaff Storms, as a cold wind scoured the walls of Troon with stubble and husks, a man in a fish mask sat at a table in the Civic Ballroom and wished he were anywhere else.

He belonged to that race called the Children of the Sun, and, like others of his kind, he had skin and hair the color of a sunrise. They were an energetic, sanguine, and mechanically minded people, tracing their lineage back to a liaison between a smith god and a fire goddess somewhere in the deeps of time. They were consequently given to sins of an ecological nature (the slag heaps from their smelters were mountainous), and they were also quarrelsome (their blood feuds were legendary).

It was a particularly nasty blood feud that had sent the man in the fish mask fleeing to distant Troon, and he now sat alone at a table, watching the masked dancers as he glumly sipped beer through a long straw. It wasn't his kind of party, but his cousin (to whom he had fled) insisted he attend. The masked ball was held on the final night of a week of breathless celebration, and everyone of distinction in Troon society was there.

"Er—Smith?"

The man in the mask turned his head, peering through the domed lenses of his fish eyes. The name *Smith* was an alias, only the latest of many the man had used. He got awkwardly to his feet as he saw his cousin approaching. His cousin's costume was fine and elaborate, robes of red-gold brocade and a fire efrin mask. No less elaborate was the costume of the lady his cousin had in tow: butterfly wings of green and purple foil and a butterfly mask of the same material.

"This, madam, is Smith. My caravan master," explained his cousin. "A most experienced veteran of transport. A man in whose expert hands you may trust the rarest of commodities."

This was not exactly true. Smith had never led a caravan in his life, but his cousin's freight and passenger service had lost its former master to a vendetta on the day of Smith's sudden arrival in Troon, so Smith was learning the business.

"How nice to meet you," said the woman in the mask, and shot out a black and curling tongue. Smith started, but the tongue was merely a feature of the mask, for it was hollow, and she poked it now into a tall glass of punch.

"Honor on your house, lady," Smith murmured.

His cousin coughed, and said, "Smith, this is Lady Seven Butterflies of Seven Butterflies Studio"



You will be privileged to transport her celebrated creations!”

“I’m delighted,” said Smith, bowing. “Rely on me, lady.”

But Lady Seven Butterflies had lost interest in him and fluttered off to the punch bowl. His cousin leaned close and grabbed him by the shoulder. They bumped papier-mâché faces as he hissed, “Very important client! Almost ready to sign a contract granting us exclusive transport rights! Used to go with Stone and Son until they broke goods in transit. Vital we catch the ball, cousin!”

Smith nodded sagely. “Right. What are we shipping for her?”

“One gross of glass butterflies, what else?” said his cousin impatiently, and turned to pursue the lady. Smith sat down again. It was a good thing his new job would require him to be on the open road a lot. He didn’t think people in Troon got enough oxygen.

He watched the dancers awhile in their stately pavaues, watched the symmetrical patterns their trailing brocades left in the rich layer of floor dust, and brooded on the sequence of events that had brought him here, beginning with an innocent walk to the corner for an order of fried eel.

That he had reached that time in life when really good fried eel was at least as interesting as romance made his subsequent misadventure all the more unexpected. Nor was he especially attractive. Even the girl’s brothers had to admit there must have been a mistake on somebody’s part, though they weren’t about to retract their vow to see Smith’s head on a pike, since without benefit of hot-blooded youth or personal beauty, he had nevertheless sent three of their kinsmen to the morgue.

He sighed now, swirling his beer and noting in disgust the fine sediment of dirt at the bottom of the glass. He thought of waving for a waiter, but his cousin came bustling up again with somebody new in tow.

“...with complete confidence, my lord. The man is a seasoned veteran of the roads. Er—Smith! I have the *great* honor of commending to your care the very noble Lord Ermenwyr of the House Kingfisher.”

“Honor to your house, lord,” said Smith, rising to his feet though he’d never heard of the House Kingfisher.

Lord Ermenwyr was doubled over in a coughing fit. When he straightened up, dabbing at his lip with an embroidered handkerchief, Smith beheld a slender young man. A pomaded and spangled beard was visible below his half mask, which was that of a unicorn’s head. He had extended the unicorn theme to an elaborate codpiece, from which a silver horn spiraled up suggestively. The eyes behind the mask had the glitter of fever.

“Hello,” he croaked. “So you’re the fellow taking me to Salesh-by-the-Sea? I hope you’ve had some training as a psychopomp too. I expect to die en route.”

“His lordship is pleased to be humorous,” said Smith’s cousin, wringing his hands. “His lord father has paid a great deal for his passage to the health resort at Salesh, and I have written to assure him in the strongest terms that Lord Ermenwyr will arrive there safely.”

“Really?” said Lord Ermenwyr. “Watch this, then.” He reached out with the toe of his boot and drew a bull’s-eye in the dust. Stepping back several paces, he hawked and spat in a neat arc, hitting the center of the target with a gob of blood.

“You see?” he said brightly, as Smith and his cousin stared. “Utterly moribund. Don’t worry, though; I’ve got embalming spices in my luggage, and Daddy won’t mind my early demise much, whatever he may have written.”

Smith’s cousin closed his mouth, then said hastily, “It’s simply the inconvenience of our local weather, my lord. I myself coughed up a little blood not an hour ago. It passes with the first winter rains!”

“I’ll be in Hell or Salesh by the time they start, I devoutly hope,” snarled the young man. He turned a gimlet eye on Smith. “Well, caravan master, I suppose we’re starting at some ungodly hour

the morning? If I'm still moaning on my painful couch at cockcrow, you'll leave without me, no doubt?"

"The caravan departs from the central staging area by the West Gate an hour before dawn, my lord," said Smith's cousin helpfully.

"Fine," said Lord Ermenwyr, and turned unsteadily on his heel. "I'm going to go get laid while I'm still among the living, then." He staggered off into the crowd, hitching up his spangled tights, and Smith looked at his cousin.

"Does he have anything catching?" he demanded.

"No! No! Delicate lungs, that's all," chattered his cousin. "I believe his lord father's apt phrase was—" From the depths of his brocade he drew out a heavy, folded parchment to which was affixed a ponderous seal of black wax. "Here we are. *'Hothouse lily.'* In any case the young lord will be traveling with a private nurse and ample store of physic, so your sole concern will be conveying him in one piece to Salesh-by-the-Sea."

"And what if he dies?" asked Smith.

His cousin shivered and, looking quickly at the letter as though it might overhear him, folded it again and thrust it out of sight. "That would be very unfortunate indeed. His lord father is a powerful man, cousin. He's paid a great deal for this passage."

Smith sighed.

"The lad'll be in a palanquin the whole way," added his cousin, as though that answered everything. "You'll have him there in no time. A routine trip. Your first of many, I'm certain, to the continued honor and glory of our house. Ah! You'll excuse me—I must go speak to..." He turned and fled into the crowd, in pursuit of some other bedizened customer.

Smith sat down, and took another sip of his beer before he remembered the mud at the bottom of the glass.



The gonging of the cistern clock in Smith's apartment warren woke him, and he was up and pulling on his coat in very little time. He paused before arming himself, considering his stock of hand weapons. He settled for a pair of boot knives and a machete; nothing more would be needed, surely, for a routine trip to the coast.

He was, accordingly, surprised when his cousin met him at the West Gate in the predawn gloom with a pair of pistolbows and a bolt bandoleer.

"You've used these before?" his cousin asked, draping the bandoleer over Smith's shoulder and buckling it in place.

"Yes, but—you said—"

"Yes, I know, it's all routine, easiest road there is, but just consider this as insurance. Eh? And it makes a man look dangerous and competent, and that's what the passengers want to see in a caravan master," explained his cousin. "There you are! The picture of menace. Now, here's the cargo and passenger manifest." He thrust an open scroll at Smith. Smith took it and read, as his cousin ran off to shriek orders at the porters, who were loading what looked like immense violet eggs into one of the transport carts.

There was, indeed, a gross of glass butterflies, being shipped from Seven Butterflies studio to the Lady Katmile of Silver Anvil House in Port Ward'b. To Be Handled With Exquisite Care.

There were twenty sacks of superfine cake flour from Old Troon Mills, destined for a bakery in Lesser Salesh. There were thirty boxes of mineral pigments from the strip mines in Outer Troon, to be delivered to Starfire Studio in Salesh Hills. No eggs, though, violet or otherwise.

The passengers were listed as Lytan and Demara Smith and Family, custom jewelry designers, of Sales Hills; Parradan Smith, courier, of Mount Flame City; Lord Ermenwyr of the House Kingfisher and Servant. All Children of the Sun.

Also listed was one Ronrishim Flowering Reed, herbalist, of Sales-by-the-Sea. From his name he was probably a Yendri, one of the forest people who occasionally fought guerrilla wars with the Children of the Sun over what they felt was excessive logging.

Smith looked out at the boarding area and spotted the Yendri, taller than the other passengers, wearing fewer clothes, and standing a little apart with an aloof expression. The Yendri people had skin that ranged in color from a gently olive complexion to outright damn *green*, and were willowy and graceful and everything you'd expect in a forest-dwelling race. They were thought by the Children of the Sun to be arrogant, uncivilized, untrustworthy, and sexually insatiable (when not perversely effeminate). They said exactly the same things about the Children of the Sun.

The other passengers were equally easy to identify. The Smiths were clearly the young couple huddled with a screaming baby, waving a sugar stick and stuffed toy at him while their other little ones ran back and forth merrily and got in the way of the sweating porters. Parradan Smith must be the well-dressed man leaning against a news kiosk, reading a broadside sheet. Lord Ermenwyr, who had evidently not died in the night, sat a little apart from the others on one of many expensive-looking trunks piled beside a curtained palanquin.

He had changed his unicorn costume for a black tailcoat and top boots, and combed the spangles out of his beard and mustache. It failed to make him look less like the pasty-faced boy he was, though his features were even and handsome. His eyes were unnervingly sharp, fixed on the screaming infant with perfectly astonishing malevolence. He glanced up, spotted Smith, and leaped to his feet.

"You! Caravan Master. Is that damned brat going to squall the whole trip? Is it?" he demanded, folding his arms as Smith approached him.

"I don't think so," said Smith, staring down at Lord Ermenwyr's eyes. His pupils were like pinpoints, perhaps because of whatever drug the lordling was smoking in the long jade tube he presently had clenched between his teeth. It produced trailing purple clouds, vaguely sweet-scented. "Should you really be—"

"Smoking? It's my medication, damn you! If that child isn't silenced at once, I'll not be answerable for the consequences. I'm a sick man—"

"Master, you're raving again," said a silken voice from behind the curtains of the palanquin. "Stop that at once."

"—And if I'm harried to an early grave, or should I say an earlier grave, *well* then, Caravan Master, you'll pay for it in ways you can't even begin to—"

"Nursie warned you," said the voice, and an arm flashed between the curtains and caught Lord Ermenwyr around the knees. He vanished backward into the depths of the palanquin with a yelp, and there were sounds of a violent struggle as the palanquin rocked on its base. Smith stepped quickly away.

"Er—Smith!" cried his cousin. "I'd like you to meet your subordinates."

Smith turned to see a crowd of caravaneers who clearly disliked being described as his subordinates. They gave him a unanimous resentful stare as he approached.

"May I present the esteemed keymen? Keyman Crucible, Keyman Smith, Keyman Bellows, Keyman Pinion, Keyman Smith."

They were, as all keymen, compact fellows with tremendously developed arms and muscle-bulging legs, and so alike they might have been quintuplets.

"Nice meeting you," said Smith. They grunted at him.

"This is your runner." His cousin placed his hands on the shoulders of a very young, very skinny

girl. She wore the red uniform and carried the brass trumpet of her profession, but she was far from the curvaceous gymnast Smith fantasized about when he fantasized about runners. She glowered up at Smith's cousin.

"Take your hands off me or you'll hear from my mother house," she said. Smith's cousin withdrew his hands as though she were a live coal.

"Young Burnbright hasn't earned her full certification, yet, but she's hoping to do so in our service," he said delicately. "If all goes well, that is. And here, Smith, is our culinary artist! May I present the two-time winner of the Troon Municipal Bakeoff? Mrs. Smith."

Mrs. Smith was large and not particularly young, though she had a certain majesty of bearing. She looked sourly on Smith.

"Do you do fried eel?" Smith asked hopefully.

"Perhaps," she said. "If I'm properly motivated. If I have the proper *pans*." She spat out the last word with bewildering venom, turning her glare on Smith's cousin.

He wrung his hands. "Now, dear Mrs. Smith—I'm sure you'll manage without the extra utensils this one time. It was necessary."

"Leaving half my kitchen behind for those bloody things?" Mrs. Smith demanded, pointing at the carts laden with giant eggs. "They take up three times the room of an ordinary shipment! What was wrong with regular crates, I'd like to know?"

"In addition to her other talents, Lady Seven Butterflies is a genius at innovative packing and insulation," said Smith's cousin earnestly. "She had the inspiration from Nature itself, you see. What after all, is the perfect protective shape devised by Nature? The egg, of course—"

"Balls," said Mrs. Smith.

"—with its ovoid shape, elegantly simple yet strong, a holistic solution providing plenty of insulating space for the most fragile creations—"

"How am I going to feed my boys, let alone serve up the gourmet experience for passengers so grandiloquently advertised on your handbills, you imbecile man?" shouted Mrs. Smith.

"We'll work something out," said Smith, stepping between them. "Look, I'm traveling pretty light. Maybe we can take some of your pans in the lead cart?"

Mrs. Smith considered him, one eyebrow raised. "An intelligent suggestion," she said, mollified as Pinion and Crucible seized up a vast crate marked KITCHEN and hurried with it to Smith's cart. "We may get on, young Smith."

"Of course you will," said Smith's cousin, and fled.

It was nearly light. Those whose duty it was came yawning and shivering to the West Gate, bending to the spokes of the great windlass. The gate rose slowly in its grooves, and a cold wind swept in off the plain and sent spirals of dust into the pink air. A trumpeter mounted the turret by the gate and announced by his blast that another day of commerce had begun, for better or worse, and Burnbright answered with a fanfare to let the passengers know that it was time to board.

The keymen mounted to their posts and began cranking the mighty assemblage of gears and springs in each lead cart. The passengers took their seats, with the Smiths' baby still crying dismally as the last of the luggage was loaded by the porters. There was a moment of dithering with Lord Ermenwyr's palanquin until it was lifted and lashed in place atop his trunks. Purple fumes escaped between the fluttering curtains, so it was evident he was still alive in there, if preserving a sullen silence.

Mrs. Smith mounted to a seat beside Crucible, pulled a pair of dust goggles over her eyes, and with unhurried majesty drew out a smoking tube and packed it with a particularly pungent blend of amberleaf. She held a clever little device of flicking flint and steel to its tip, shielding it from the wind as she attempted to ignite the amberleaf.

Burnbright sprinted to the front of the line, backing out through the gate and calling directions to the porters as they wrestled the wheels of the lead cart into the grooves in the red road, worn deep by time and utility. Smith's cousin clasped his hands and prayed, as he always did at this point; and Smith, realizing belatedly that he was supposed to be in the lead cart beside Pinion, ran for it and vaulted into his seat, or attempted to, because the crate marked KITCHEN occupied that space.

Pinion just looked at him, poised over the tight-wound coil. Smith, determined to show he was game, climbed up and perched awkwardly atop the crate. He looked forward at Burnbright and waved.

She lifted her trumpet and blew the staccato call for departure. Then she turned and ran forward as swift as flight; for behind her the keymen threw the release pins, and the caravan lurched rumbling on through the gate, late as usual, a dozen linked carts impelled by gear-and-spring engines, following the grooved stone, bearing their disparate cargo.

Mrs. Smith got her tube going at last and leaned back, holding it elegantly between the first two fingers of her left hand, blowing a plume of smoke like a banner. In the cart behind her, the Yendri coughed and waved fumes away, cursing. The rising sun struck flame on the flare of Burnbright's trumpet.

They were off.



"This is pretty easy," remarked Smith after the first hour of travel. Troon was a distant clutch of towers behind them. Before them and to all sides spread the wide yellow fields, unrelieved but for the occasional bump of a distant harvest village. The red road stretched ahead, two grooved lanes running west to the infinite horizon, two parallels running east, and Burnbright had slowed to an easy mile-devouring lope a few hundred yards in front.

"You think it's easy, do you?" said Pinion, giving the key a gentle pump to bring the next spring into play. Once the initial winding had got them going, the keymen maintained forward momentum by steadily cranking.

"Well, yes," said Smith. "Look at it! Flat as a board. No place for a bandit to hide as far as the eye can see. Nobody's at war, so we don't have to worry about any armies sweeping down on us. Nothing to do but chug along, eh?"

"Unless a dust storm comes up," Pinion told him. "Which they tend to do, now the harvest's in. I've seen some cyclones in my day, I can tell you. Even the regular prevailing wind'll fill the channels in the road with dust, and if the little girl up there doesn't spot it in time, we might all rattle off the road into a field, or hit a block at top speed and strip all our gears—that's lovely fun."

"Oh," said Smith. "Does that happen often?"

"Often enough," said Pinion, pumping the key again.

"At least it doesn't sound like I'll need these," said Smith, looking down at his pistolbows.

"Probably not," conceded Pinion. "Until we reach the Greenlands."

"What's in the Greenlands?"

Pinion was silent a moment.

"You're a city boy, aren't you?" he said at last.

"I have been," said Smith, shifting on top of the kitchen crate. "Come on, what's in the Greenlands? Besides a lot of Yendri," he added, glancing back at their sole Yendri passenger, who had wrapped a scarf about his nose and mouth and sat ignoring the others.

"To begin with, that's where you've got your real bandits," Pinion said. "And not your run-along-by-the-side-of-the-road-and-yip-threateningly bandits either, I'm talking about your bury-the-road-in-a-landslide-and-dig-out-the-loot bandits. See? And then there's greenies like that one," he went on,

jerking a thumb in the direction of the Yendri. “They may say they’re for nonviolence, but they’re liable to pile rocks and branches and all kinds of crap on the road if they’re miffed about us cutting down one of their damn groves to build a way station or something.”

“Huh.” Smith looked back at the Yendri uneasily.

“Of course, they’re not the worst,” added Pinion.

“I guess they wouldn’t be.”

“There’s beasts, of course.”

“They’re everywhere, though.”

“Not like in the Greenlands. And even they’re nothing to the demons.”

“All right,” said Smith, “you’re trying to scare me, aren’t you? Is this some kind of initiation?”

“No,” said Pinion in a surly voice, though in fact he had been trying to scare Smith. “Just setting you straight on a few things, Caravan Master. I’d hate to see you so full of self-confidence you get us all killed your first day on the job.”

“Thanks a lot,” said Smith. The caravan went rumbling on, the featureless fields flew by, and after a moment Smith looked down at Pinion again.

“I did hear a story about the Greenlands, now that I come to think about it,” he said. “In a bar in Chadravac Beach, about six months ago. Something about a demon-lord. He’s supposed to be called the Master of the Mountain?”

Pinion blanched, but did not change expression. He shook his head, pedaling away stolidly.

“Don’t know anything about that,” he said firmly, and fell silent.



All that day they traveled across the yellow land. With no companion but the sun, they came at evening to the way station, marked out by a ring of white stones.

It was a wide circular area by the side of the road, with grooves for carts running off and groove for running back on. There was a tiny stone hut surmounted by a windwheel pump, enclosing a basin where a trickle of water flowed, drawn up from deep beneath the plain. The moment they had rolled off the road and into the circle, the Yendri was out of his cart and staggering for the pump house. He monopolized it for the next quarter hour, to the great annoyance of the other passengers, who lined up behind the hut and made ethnically insulting remarks as they waited.

At least the diversion kept most of them occupied as Smith oversaw making camp for the night. He didn’t really have much to do; the keymen, long practiced in this art, had quickly trundled the cart in a snaked circle and set to erecting tent accommodations inside it. Burnbright and Mrs. Smith were busily setting up the kitchen pavilion, and politely implied that he’d only get in their way if he lent a hand there.

Smith noticed that Lord Ermenwyr was not among the carpers at the water pump, and he wondered whether he ought not to see if the lordling had died after all. As he approached the palanquin, the curtains parted and a woman slid out with all the grace of a serpent and dropped lightly to the ground.

Smith caught his breath.

That she was beautiful was almost beside the point. She had a *presence*. Her body was lush, tall, perfect, powerful. Her mouth was full and red, and her sloe-black eyes ought to have been sullen but glinted instead with lazy good humor as she saw Smith gaping at her.

“Good evening, Caravan Master,” she said, and the voice matched the body: sultry, yet with an indefinable accent of education and good breeding.

Smith just nodded, and collected himself enough to say, “I was coming to inquire after the lord”

health.”

“How nice. His lordship is still with us, I’m happy to say.” She tilted her head to one side and occupied herself a moment with loosely braiding her hair, which was black and thick as a bolt of silk. Having pulled it up into an elegant chignon, she drew from her bosom what appeared to be a pair of stilettos of needlelike fineness and thrust them through the glossy coils.

“I...uh...I’m very happy to hear that. We’re just setting up the tents now, if he’d like to rest,” said Smith.

“That’s very thoughtful of you, but my lord has his own pavilion,” the woman replied, opening one of the trunks and drawing out a bundle of black cloth patterned all over with little silver skulls.

“I’d be happy to help you, miss—”

“Balnshik,” said the woman, smiling. “Thank you so much, Caravan Master.”

*What an exotic name*, Smith thought dizzily, accepting the load of tent material while Balnshik bent over the trunk to rummage for poles. Something about the name suggested flint knives and attar of roses, and perhaps black leather...though she was modestly attired in white linen, and he dragged his attention back to the fact that she was a nurse, after all. She drew out a tent pole now and gave it a quick twist. In her deft hands it shot up and expanded to twice its length, spring-loaded.

“I’m—Smith,” he said.

“Of course you are, dear,” she told him. “Just spread that out on the ground, won’t you?”

He helped her assemble the pavilion, which was quite a large and sumptuous one, and then there was a lot of collapsible furniture to be set up, so it was a while before Smith remembered to inform her, “We’ll be serving gourmet cuisine shortly, as advertised. We can offer his lordship—”

“Oh, don’t worry about him; the little beast can’t keep down anything solid,” said Balnshik serenely, tossing a handful of incense onto a brazier.

“I can hear every word you’re saying, you know.” Lord Ermenwyr’s voice floated from the palanquin. He sounded peevish.

“What about some clear broth, darling?”

“No. I’m still motion sick and, anyway, it’ll probably be poisoned.”

Balnshik’s eyes flashed, and she turned to Smith with a charming smile in which there were a great many white and gleaming teeth. “Will you excuse us, please? I must attend to my lord.”

So saying, she vaulted into the palanquin, vanishing behind the curtains, and Smith heard the unmistakable sound of a ringing slap, and the palanquin began to rock and thump in place once more. It seemed like a good idea to leave.

He wandered over to the kitchen pavilion, where Mrs. Smith had lit a fire and set saucepans bubbling at magical speed, and was now busily dabbing caviar on little crackers.

“Can you prepare an order of clear broth?” he asked.

“What, for the greenie?” She glared across at Ronrishim Flowering Reed, who had finally relinquished the hut and was now seated in front of a tent, apparently meditating. “Bloody vegetarian. I hate cooking for those people. ‘Oh, please, I’ll just have a dish of rainwater at precisely air temperature with an ounce of mother’s milk on the side, and if it’s not too much trouble, could you float a couple of violets on it?’ Faugh!”

“No, actually, it’s for Lord Ermenwyr.” Smith looked over his shoulder at the palanquin, which was motionless now.

“Oh. The invalid?” Mrs. Smith turned to peer at the pavilion. “Heavens, what a grand tent. He’s a nasty-looking little piece of goods, I must say, but as he’s dying I suppose we must make the effort. A good rich capon stock with wine, I think.”

“Parradan Smith’s a gangster,” Burnbright informed them, coming close and appropriating a cracker.

“Get away from those, child. What do you mean?”

“~~I peeked when he was washing himself, and he’s got secret society tattoos all over,~~” said Burnbright, retreating beyond the reach of Mrs. Smith’s carving knife. “And he’s got an instrument case he never lets go of almost. And knives.”

“How do you know they’re secret society tattoos?” Smith was troubled.

“Because he’s from Mount Flame City, and I’m from there too, and I know what the Bloodfires insignia look like,” said Burnbright matter-of-factly. “Their deadly enemies are the House Copperhammer. When they’ve got a war on, you find body parts in the strangest places. All over town.”

“Lovely,” grunted Mrs. Smith.

“He’s listed on the manifest as a courier,” said Smith, looking out at the man in question, who sat just inside the door of a tent, polishing his boots. Burnbright nodded sagely.

“Couriering somebody’s loot somewhere, see. I’ll bet he’s got a fortune in that instrument case. Unless it’s a disguise, and he’s accepted a contract on one of the other passengers and he’s biding his time before he kills them!” she added, her little face alight.

“Wretched creatures. He’d better leave *me* alone; I never travel unarmed,” said Mrs. Smith, handing her the tray of hors d’oeuvres. “Go set that on the buffet and inform the guests that the main course will be served in half an hour. Grilled quail glazed with acacia honey, stuffed with wild plums.”



It was as good as it sounded. Even the Smith’s infant stopped crying for a while, given a leg bone with sauce to suck on.

When twilight had fallen Balnshik emerged from the palanquin, carrying Lord Ermenwyr in her arms like a limp rag doll, and settled him in the splendid pavilion before coming out for a plate for herself and a bowl of broth for her lord. She made as profound an impression on the other males in the party as she’d made on Smith. Even the Smiths’ two little boys stopped chewing, and with round eyes watched her progress across the camp.

She seemed not to notice the attention she drew, was courteous and formal. Smith thought he saw her glance side-long at the Yendri, once, with a glitter of amused contempt in her eyes, before there came a querulous feeble cry from the pavilion, and she turned to hurry back to Lord Ermenwyr.

“Clearly she doesn’t think much of Mr. Flowering Reed,” pronounced Mrs. Smith, and had a drink at her smoking tube. She was sitting at her ease with a drink beside the fire, as the keymen cleared away the dinner things for her.

“Except I hear the Yendri are supposed to have really big, um, you know,” said Burnbright. Mrs. Smith shrugged.

“It depends upon what you mean by big, dear.”

“I think we made pretty good time today,” said Smith. “No disasters or anything. Don’t you think it went well?”

“Tolerably well,” said Mrs. Smith. “At least there weren’t any breakdowns this time. Can’t count the hours I’ve wasted at the side of the road waiting for replacement gears.”

“Have you been with the caravan long?” Smith asked her.

“Twenty years, next spring,” she replied.

“Traveled much through the Greenlands?”

“Far too often. What about you? Have you a first name, Smith, by the way?”

Smith glanced over at Pinion, who was scouring out a pot with sand, and lowered his voice when



he spoke. "I've been here and there. And yes, I have a first name. But..."

~~Mrs. Smith arched her eyebrows. "It's like that, is it? Lovely impersonal name, *Smith*. Rather fond of it, myself. So, where were all your questions leading?"~~

"Have you ever heard of somebody, a demon or something, called the Master of the Mountain?"

Mrs. Smith gave him a sharp look, and Burnbright cringed and made a gesture to ward off evil. "Clearly," said Mrs. Smith, "you're not from the interior. You're from the islands, I'd bet, or you'd know about him."

Smith wasn't anxious that anyone should know where he'd been born, so he just said, "Is he in the Greenlands? Is he a demon?"

Mrs. Smith waved her drink at the Yendri, who was just retiring into his tent. "That one could probably tell you more, though I doubt he would, however nicely you asked. You haven't heard of the Master of the Mountain? Half demon and half something else, or so the story goes. Yendri, possibly, though you wouldn't know it from the way they hate him. Mind you, he's given them enough reasons."

"What reasons?" Smith drew closer, because she was lowering her voice. She hitched her folding chair a little nearer to him and pointed off into the night, toward the northwest.

"You'll be able to see it, in a week or so, poking up out of the horizon: a black mountain like a shark's tooth, perfectly immense. That's his stronghold, and he can look down from up there on every inch of the Greenlands, and you can bet he'll be watching us as we creep past on our tiny road. If we're very fortunate, he won't trouble himself to come down to say how d'ye do.

"I don't know how long he's been up there; a couple of generations, at least. There's talk he used to be a mercenary. Certainly he's some sort of powerful mage. Demon-armies at his beck and call, spies in every city, all that sort of thing. These days he contents himself with swooping down and raiding our caravans now and again. But there was a time when he singled out *them* for the worst of his plundering." Mrs. Smith pointed at the Yendri's tent.

"No idea why. You wouldn't think they'd have anything worth stealing, would you, in those funny little brushwood villages of theirs? Something personal, seemingly.

"In any case—you're aware they used to be slaves, the Yendri? No, not to us—that's one thing they can't blame us for, at least. It was somewhere else, and somebody else enslaved them, until they overthrew their masters and escaped. There was some kind of miracle child whose birth sparked the slave rebellion. One of their greenie prophets carried her before them like a figurehead, and they all emigrated here. When she grew up she became their Saint. Heals the sick, raises the dead, most beautiful woman in the world, et cetera. You haven't heard of the Green Saint either?

"Well. So the Yendri settled down as a free people then, with no troubles except the Master of the Mountain raiding their villages with dreadful glee, which I understand he did on very nearly a weekly basis. And then, oh horrors! He captured the Green Saint herself.

"Though I have heard she went and offered herself to him, if he'd stop being so terribly evil," Mrs. Smith added parenthetically, and drew on her smoke again. "However it happened—she moved in with him on his mountain, and while she didn't exactly convert him to a virtuous life, he did stop burning the poor greenies' wigwams about their ears. Not that they were grateful. They were furious, in fact, especially when he and she proceeded to have a vast brood of very mixed children. Said it was sacrilege."

"A demon and a saint having kids?" Smith pondered it. "Funny."

"Not to the Yendri, it isn't," said Mrs. Smith.

"Let's talk about something else," begged Burnbright.

So the subject was changed. Not long afterward the fire was banked, and everyone retired for the night, with the exception of the Smiths' baby, who cried for a good hour.

The next day, once camp was broken, proceeded in much the same way as the previous one had. Endless hours they rumbled across the empty fields, and though Smith watched the horizon, he saw no threatening darkness there, not that day nor on the next few to follow. The Smiths' infant cried, the Yendri kept himself aloof, Parradan Smith killed no one, and Lord Ermenwyr did not die, though he remained in his palanquin as they traveled and the purple fume of his irritation streamed backward in the wind.

"Mama!" shrieked the Smiths' younger boy, pointing behind them. "Dragons!"

It was the fifth day out, and the Smith children were reaching critical mass for boredom.

"Don't be silly, dearest," his mother told him wearily, jogging the screaming baby on her shoulder.

"I'm not! They're flying up behind us and they're going to get us! Look!"

Nobody bothered to look except Smith, who turned on his high crate to glance over his shoulder. To his astonishment, he saw some five or six winged forms in the air behind them, at a distance of no more than a mile or two. He turned completely around, bracing his feet on the edge of the cart, and shaded his eyes for a good look.

"The dragons will get us!" chorused the Smiths' other children, beginning to wail and cry.

"No, no, they won't," Smith shouted helpfully, looking down into their cart. "Dragons won't hurt you. And anyway, I don't think—"

"The lord in the black tent says they do," protested the little boy. "I went in when the big lady came out to eat so I could see if he was really a vampire like the runner said, and he told me he wasn't only he'd been bit by a dragon when he was a little boy for making too much noise and it made him half-dead forever but he was lucky 'cause most dragons just eat children that make too much noise, they fly overhead on big wings and just catch them and eat them up like bugs!"

"Now, Wolkin—" said his father.

"I told you not to bother that man!" said his mother.

"Well, that just isn't true," yelled Smith, mentally damning Lord Ermenwyr. "Dragons don't do that kind of thing, all right, son? They're too small. I've seen 'em. All they do is fly over the water and catch fish. They build nests in cliffs. People make umbrellas out of their wings. No, what we've got here are gliders." He pointed up at the winged figures, who were much nearer now.

"Yes, Wolkin, you see? Perfectly harmless," said his father.

"Just people with big wings strapped on," explained Smith. "Sort of. They carry letters sometimes."

"And they have, er, flying clubs and competitions," added his father. "Nothing to be afraid of at all."

"Of course not," Smith agreed. "Look, here they come. Let's all wave."

The children waved doubtfully.

"Look," said the Smiths' little girl. "They've got pistolbows just like you have, Caravan Master."

"What?" said Smith, as a bolt thunked into his left thigh.

The gliders were raking the caravan with boltfire. The result was screaming confusion and an answering barrage of shot from the caravans. Smith, firing both his weapons, glimpsed Parradan Smith standing, snarling, balancing as he sent boltfire from an apparently inexhaustible magazine into the nearest gliders. He saw Balnshik hanging out the side of the palanquin, bracing her feet on an

immense old hunting weapon, and firing with deadly accuracy.

~~It was over in seconds. The closest of the gliders veered off, dropped something beside the road,~~ and went down in a tangle of snapping struts and collapsing green fabric. The others wheeled. They lifted and floated off to the east, rapidly vanishing. The thing that had been dropped coughed, spurting dust, and exploded, throwing liquid flame in all directions. Fortunately the carts were well clear by the time it went off.

“Stop,” gasped Smith, but the keymen were already applying the brakes. The carts shuddered to stop, their iron wheels grinding in the stone ruts and sending up a flare of sparks the whole length of the caravan. He jumped from his high seat and fell, clutching his wounded leg. Scrambling up painfully he saw Parradan Smith already out and running for the fallen glider, holding a freshly cocked weapon upright over his head as he ran. Burnbright had turned and was racing back toward them, looking terrified.

“Anybody hurt?” Smith shouted, leaning against the cart as he tried to stanch the flow of blood down his leg.

It was some moments before he could get a coherent answer. Luckily, he had been the only one to sustain a wound. One of the Keymen Smiths had been slightly stunned by a bolt striking his steel pot helmet, deflected by its wide brim; another shot had ricocheted and hit Keyman Crucible sidelong on his upper arm, leaving a welted bruise the size of a handball. Lord Ermenwyr was unharmed, but his luggage was struck through with a dozen bolts at least, and he had leaped from the palanquin and was screaming threats, in surprisingly full voice, at the remaining gliders, now only distant specks on the horizon.

“So much for his being a vampire,” Smith muttered to himself. He was binding up his leg with a rag when Parradan Smith approached him, his face stony.

“You’d better come see this,” he said.

“Is he dead?” Smith inquired, limping forward. The other man just nodded.

The glider was certainly dead. His neck had been snapped when his aircraft crashed, and lay at a distinctly unnatural angle; but it was obvious he’d been dead well before the impact. His quilted flight suit was torn and bloody in a dozen places.

“Damn,” said Smith.

“Those are my bolts,” said Parradan Smith, pointing out a scatter of small black-centered wounds. “Custom-made. Those two would be yours, probably.”

“You’re a lucky, lucky man,” Lord Ermenwyr told the corpse, coming up to stare at it balefully. “If you were still alive, after what you’ve done to my best shirts—well, I wouldn’t want to be you, that’s all.” He prodded the body with his boot. “No weapons. I suppose he was the one designated to drop the incendiary device.”

“Probably.”

“Good job Nursie nailed him before he managed it.” He poked at the man’s left arm, from which a big barbed steel projectile protruded.

“So these are hers too?” Parradan Smith pointed at two others, one in the dead man’s right leg and one between his ribs.

“Yes. They’re designed to take down elk.”

“And these are mine, and these are Caravan Master’s, so—” Parradan Smith stooped and pulled three feathered darts from the body. “Who the hell fired these?”

Lord Ermenwyr’s eyes widened, seemed, in fact, at the point of starting out of his face.

“I’d be careful with those, if I were you,” he said faintly.

They were little tubes of cane, tipped with what appeared to be thorns and fletched with small curling green feathers.

“Poisoned?” inquired Smith.

“Aren’t all darts that mysteriously appear out of nowhere smeared with deadly poison?” said Lord Ermenwyr. Parradan Smith tossed them away.

“Do you know who fired them?”

“No!”

“Well, somebody fired them,” said Smith. “What I’d like to know is, what was this one trying to do? He and his friends?”

“Trying to kill me, obviously,” said Lord Ermenwyr.

“Have you enemies, my lord?”

“Dozens of them,” Lord Ermenwyr replied. “And they’re nothing to Daddy’s enemies. In fact, I wouldn’t put this past Daddy. He’s never been fond of me.” His rage had burned quickly down to ash and he was pale, beginning to shake.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Master,” said Balnshik, appearing behind them suddenly. She looked over the battered corpse with a cold eye. “You know perfectly well that if your lord father had wanted you dead, you’d be dead by now.” She stooped and pulled her steel points from the body. Some of the clothing tore as she retrieved the last one, and Smith leaned forward with an exclamation.

“Look, he’s got a tattoo!”

“So he has.” Balnshik glanced down at it. “One of those nasty little assassins’ gangs, isn’t it? There you are, Master, you see? Nothing to worry about.”

“Nothing to worry about?” cried Lord Ermenwyr, his eyes bugging out again. “When I might have been riddled with boltfire and burned into the bargain? By the Nine Hells, what do you think’s worth worrying about?” His voice rose to a scream. “You’re going to let me die in this horrible featureless wilderness and I’ll have no tomb, not even a proper funeral—”

He broke off with an *oof* as Balnshik seized him and threw him over one shoulder.

“You’ll have to excuse his lordship,” she said. “It’s time for his fix. Come along, darling.” She turned and strode back to the caravan.

Smith stared after her; then his attention was drawn back to the corpse, as Parradan Smith bent and methodically dug his bolts from the wounds.

“Is that an assassins’ tattoo?” he asked.

“How should I know?” said Parradan Smith tonelessly, not looking up.



They scraped out a grave in the dry ground and covered the body with a thin layer of earth and stones. The green wings were laid over all.

Speed once they’d started up again was limited because Keyman Crucible’s arm became swollen and painful. It was well after dark by the time they were able to make camp; by then Smith’s leg was throbbing and fairly swollen too. As the fires were lit, as the tents were being set up, he limped slowly to the hut and waited for Ronrishim Flowering Reed to emerge.

“You’re an herbalist, aren’t you?” he said, when the Yendri came out.

Flowering Reed looked him up and down with distaste.

“Are you going to ask me for healing?” he asked.

“Yes, if you can help me.”

“In the name of the Unsullied Daughter, then,” he said, “I will require clean water. Have your minions fetch it.”

The only person available to be a minion was Burnbright, who obligingly fetched a bucket of water from the pump and stayed to watch as Smith reclined before Flowering Reed’s tent and

submitted to having his trouser leg sliced open.

—“Aren’t you going to cauterize it with something?” she inquired, wincing as Smith’s wound was probed. Smith grunted and turned his face away.

“Do you use a sword to cut through flowers?” replied the Yendri, extracting the bolt and regarding it critically. “Ah, but I forget; you people do. It may surprise you to learn that the most violent solution to a difficulty is not always the best one.”

“I was just asking, for goodness sake!” said Burnbright, and stormed away.

“Got anything for pain?” Smith asked through clenched teeth. Flowering Reed shook his head.

“I do not keep opiates for my personal use,” he said. “I believe it is better to learn to bear with inevitable suffering.”

“I see,” said Smith.

“When you and all your people learn to see, there will be rejoicing and astonishment through the worlds,” said Flowering Reed.

Smith endured in silence as his wound was cleaned, and the Yendri took a pungent-smelling ointment from his pack and anointed the wound. As Smith shifted so the bandage could be wound about his leg, he looked over at Flowering Reed.

“What do you make of the attack today?” he inquired.

Flowering Reed shrugged again. “One of your people’s interminable quarrels. Filth slew filth, and so filth lusted after vengeance.”

Smith decided there was no point attempting to defend the blood feud as part of his cultural heritage. “But who do you think they were after?”

“I have no idea, nor any interest in the matter,” said Flowering Reed. “Though if I cared to speculate on such a thing, I might begin by observing who defended himself most viciously.”

He tied off the bandage, and Smith sat up awkwardly. “Parradan Smith?”

“Perhaps. On the other hand, your people are always ready to unleash violence upon others. He may simply have been the best prepared.”

“Nice to get an unbiased opinion,” said Smith, getting to his feet.

“Leave me now. I must pray and cleanse myself.”

“Go ahead.” Smith limped away, and Burnbright came running to lend her shoulder for support.

“Isn’t he awful?” she hissed. “Now he’ll put his nose in the air and meditate on how much better he is than anybody else.”

“At least he was willing to fix my leg,” Smith said.

“Only because you asked him. They have to if they’re asked; it’s part of their religion or something. Don’t think for a minute he’d have offered on his own.”

“You don’t like the Yendri very much, do you?”

“They’re always raping runners,” Burnbright informed him. “Not so much caravan runners like me, but the solos, the long-distance messengers, all the time.”

“That’s what I’d always heard, but I thought it was just stories,” said Smith. “Since they’re supposed to be so nonviolent.”

Burnbright shook her head grimly.

“They say it’s an act of love, not violence, and their girls take it as a compliment, so why shouldn’t we? Self-righteous bastards. We learned all sorts of defenses against them at the mother house.”

“Nice to know,” said Smith. “How’s Crucible’s arm?”

“It’s huge, and it’s turning all sorts of colors,” she said. “I don’t think he’ll be able to crank tomorrow. That means you’ll have to take his place on the key. That’s what Caravan Masters do.”

“Oh,” said Smith, who had been looking forward to a day of riding stretched out on the shipmen

of flour from Old Troon Mills.

“Funny about the dead glider,” Burnbright said.

“What was funny about him?”

“He was from Troon.” She helped him to a seat beside the fire. “I recognized him. He used to hang out at the Burning Wheel. That’s the bar where all the gamblers go.”

“You think Lord Ermenwyr’s a gambler as well as a vampire?” Smith asked her wryly.

She flushed. “Well? I never saw him any other time but after dark until today, did you? And he never eats anything, and he looks just terrible! But he’s not a gambler. He’s somebody’s ambassador was what I heard, and he’s been called off the job because he’s sick so they’re sending him to the spa. What, you think the gliders were after *him*?” She looked surprised.

“He thinks so.”

“Hmmm.” Her face was bright with speculation. Just then Mrs. Smith called for her, and she ran off to the kitchen pavilion.



No one slept particularly well that night. The Smith’s baby screamed for two hours instead of the usual one. Smith divided watches with the keymen, taking the first shift, so he was up late anyway, getting stiffer and more chilled before Keyman Bellows took his place. Just as Smith had got himself drunk enough to pretend his wounded leg belonged to somebody else so he could doze off, he found himself sitting up, his heart pounding. He turned his head, staring into the west beyond the ring of carts. The faintest of touches on his face, a trace of moisture in the air, a scent as powerful and distinct as the sea’s but certainly not the sea.

Across the fire from him, Mrs. Smith leaned up on one elbow in her bedroll.

“Wind’s shifted,” she muttered. “That’s the Greenlands. We’ll see it, tomorrow.”

Smith lay back, wondering what she meant, and then he remembered the dark mountain.



He had forgotten it next morning, in the haze of his hangover and the confusion of breaking camp. He took Keyman Crucible’s place on the key, crowding beside him as Crucible pedaled, and the effort of winding for the push-off alone was enough to make Smith’s biceps twinge. By the time they were three hours on their way he had mentally crossed *keyman* off the list of possible careers for himself.

Busy with all this, Smith did not glance up at the horizon until the noon meal was handed along the line, and then he saw it: a rise of forested land to the northwest, and above it a black jagged cone. It didn’t seem very big until his mind grappled with a calculation of the distance. Then his eyes wouldn’t accept how immense it must be.

He put it out of his mind and attempted to unwrap his lunch with one hand. It was a pocket roll stuffed with highly spiced meat. He chewed methodically, looking back along the line of cars, and wondered again what the purpose of the glider attack had been. Robbery seemed unlikely, at least of the cargo. The most valuable thing they were carrying was Lady Seven Butterflies’s holistic eggs, and the mental image of a corps of gliders attempting to fly, bearing between them perhaps a cargo net full of big violet eggs, was enough to make him grin involuntarily.

What if one of the passengers had something they wanted? The fact that the dead man had an assassin’s tattoo didn’t necessarily mean he wasn’t also a thief. One man may in his time take many professions, as Smith knew too well.

He looked forward at the cart where the Smiths rode. They were jewelers; were they carrying an

of their wares?

~~He turned back to look at the cart that Parradan Smith and the Yendri shared. They rode in mutual silence. Parradan Smith watched the eastern horizon. Flowering Reed's uneasy stare was fixed on the black mountain to the northwest. Smith ruled out the Yendri, who was carrying very little luggage and had no trunks at all. His race disdained personal possessions and produced nothing anyone would want, traded in nothing but medicinal herbs and the occasional freshwater pearl.~~

Parradan Smith, on the other hand, was couriering something. What? The instrument case he carried didn't seem heavy enough to be loaded with gold, as Burnbright had speculated.

Which left Lord Ermenwyr. Drugs, money, jewelry: The Lordling undoubtedly had plenty that would interest a thief.

Smith cranked again on the key, scanned the sky. No wings, at least.

But the black mountain grew larger as the hours went by; and after the following day, when they came to the divide and took the northern track, it loomed directly ahead of them.



“Smith.”

He opened his eyes blearily. It seemed to him he had only just closed them; but the east was getting light. He turned and looked at Mrs. Smith, who was crouching beside him.

“We'd a visitor in the night, Smith, or so it seems. Still with us. I'd appreciate your assistance in removing it.”

“What?” He sat up and stared, scratching his stubble.

She pointed with her smoking tube. He followed with his eyes and saw a mass of something on the ground in the center of camp, dimly lit by the breakfast cookfire.

“What the hell—?” Smith crawled out and stood with effort, peering at the thing. It didn't invite close inspection, somehow, but he lurched nearer and had a good look. Then he threw up.

If you took a gray-striped cat, and gave it the general size and limb configuration of a man, and then flayed it alive and scattered its flayed fur in long strips all over the corpse—you'd have something approximating what Smith saw in the pale light of dawn. You'd need to find a cat with green ichor in its veins, too, and remarkably big claws and teeth.

It was a demon, one of the original inhabitants of the world. Or so they themselves said, claiming to have been born of the primeval confusion at the beginning of time; for all Smith had ever been able to learn, it might be the truth. Certainly they had wild powers, and were thought to be able to take whatever solid forms they chose. This had both advantages and disadvantages. They might experience mortal pleasures, might even beget children. They might also die.

Smith reeled back, wiping his mouth. The thing's eyes were like beryls, still fixed in a glare of rage, but it was definitely dead.

“Oh, this is bad,” he groaned.

“Could be worse,” said Mrs. Smith, putting on the teakettle. “Could be you lying there with your liver torn out.”

“Is its liver torn out?” Smith averted his eyes.

“Liver and heart, from the look of it. Doesn't seem to have got any of us, though. I didn't hear a thing, did you?” said Mrs. Smith quietly. Smith shook his head.

“But what is it? Is that a demon?”

“Well, there aren't any tribes of cat-headed men listed in the regional guidebooks,” Mrs. Smith replied. “The principal thing with which we ought to concern ourselves just now is getting the bloody body out of sight before the guests see it, wouldn't you agree?”

“Right,” said Smith, and limped away to the carts to get rope.

~~He made a halter, and together they dragged the body away from the camp, out onto the plain.~~ There wasn't much there to hide it. They returned, and Smith found a shovel, and was going back to dig a grave when he saw the body convulse where it lay. He halted, ready to run for his life, game leg notwithstanding. The body flared green, bursting into unclean flame. It became too bright to bear looking at, throwing out a shower of green sparks, then something brilliant rose screaming from the fire and shot upward, streaking west as though it were a comet seeking to hide itself in the last rags and shadows of the night.

The flames died away and left nothing but black ashes blowing across the plain in the dawn wind.

“That was definitely a demon,” Mrs. Smith informed him when he returned, leaning on his shovel. “Going off like a Duke's Day squib that way. They do that, you see.” She handed him a tin cup of tea.

“But what was it doing here?” Smith accepted the cup and warmed his hands.

“I'm damned if I know. One doesn't usually see them this far out on the plain,” said Mrs. Smith spooning flatcake batter onto a griddle. “One can assume it came here to rend and ravage some or all of our company. One can only wonder at why it didn't succeed.”

“Or who killed it,” Smith added dazedly. “Or how.”

“Indeed.”

“Well well well, what a lovely almost-morning,” said Lord Ermenwyr, emerging from his pavilion and pacing rapidly toward them. He looked slightly paler than usual and was puffing out enough smoke to obscure his features. “Really ought to rise at this hour more often. What's for breakfast?”

“Rice-and-almond-flour flatcakes with rose-apricot syrup,” Mrs. Smith informed him.

“Really,” he said, staring around at the circle of tents. “How delightful. I, er, don't suppose you're serving any meat as well?”

“I could fry up sausages, my lord,” said Mrs. Smith.

“Sausages?... Yes, I'd like that. Lots of them? Blood rare?”

“Sausages only come one way, my lord.”

“Oh. They do? But what about blood sausage?”

“Even blood sausages come well-done,” Mrs. Smith explained. “Not much juice in a sausage.”

“Oh.” For a moment Lord Ermenwyr looked for all the world as though he were going to cry.

“Well—have you got any blood sausage anyway?”

“I've got some imported duck blood sausage,” said Mrs. Smith.

“Duck blood?” Lord Ermenwyr seemed horrified. “All right, then—I'll have all the duck blood sausage you've got. And one of those flatcakes with lots and lots of syrup, please. And tea.”

Mrs. Smith gave him a sidelong look, but murmured, “Right away, my lord.”

“You didn't notice anything unusual in the night, did you, my lord?” asked Smith, who had been watching him as he sipped his tea. Lord Ermenwyr turned sharply.

“Who? Me? What? No! Slept like a baby,” he cried. “Why? Did something unusual happen?”

“There was a bit of unpleasantness,” said Smith. “Something came lurking around.”

“Horrors, what an idea! I suppose there's no way of increasing our speed so we'll be off this plain any quicker?”

“Not with one of our keymen down, I'm afraid,” Smith replied.

“We'll just have to be on our guard, then, won't we?” said Lord Ermenwyr.

“You know, my lord,” said Mrs. Smith as she laid out sausages on the griddle, “you needn't starve and wait for your breakfast. You can send out your nurse to fetch it for you when it's ready.”

“Oh, I feel like getting my own breakfast this morning, thank you.” Lord Ermenwyr flinched and



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