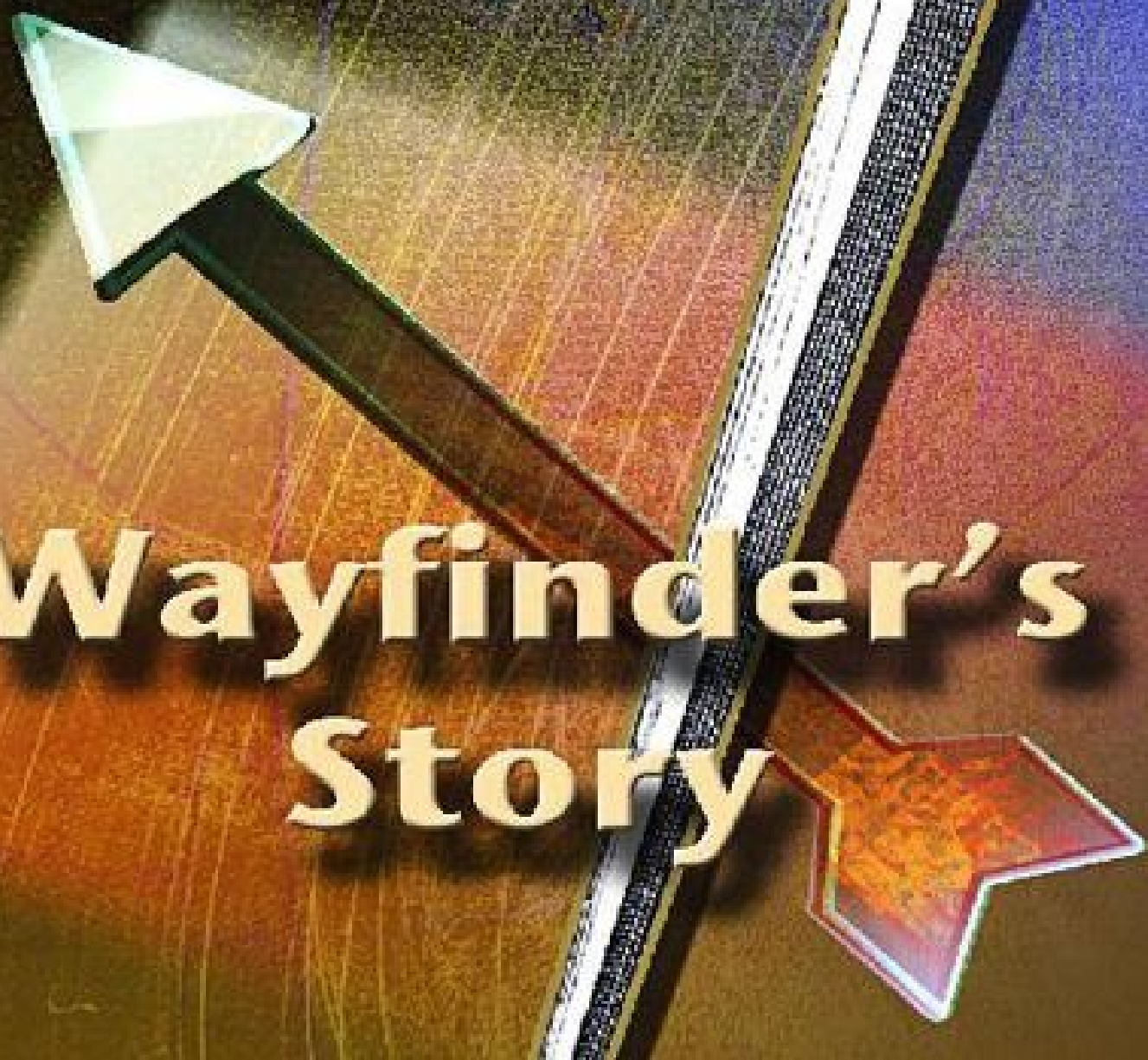


The Seventh Book
of
LOST SWORDS

Fred
Saberhagen

**Wayfinder's
Story**



The Seventh Book Of Lost Swords

Wayfinder's Story

By

Fred Saberhagen

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His huge, work-roughened hands shaking with excitement, young Valdemar turned up the sleeve of his farmer's shirt. Squatting on the earth floor of his solitary hut, peering intently by firelight and fading daylight, he reached for the long, heavy bundle that lay near the fire and began very gradually to undo its wrappings of gray cloth. The bundle was neatly made, tied with strong cord. As Valdemar worked to undo the knots, he did his best to keep himself from thinking of what he might expect to find within. He told himself he had no right to expect anything at all. But it was as if he wished to shield himself from an enormous disappointment...

The wrappings loosened and began to fall away. As soon as an area of unrelieved blackness came into view, unmistakably part of the hilt of an edged weapon, the young man's fingers ceased to move. Like many other people, he had a sensitivity to the presence of powerful magic, and he was already beginning to realize just what kind of weapon he had been given.

Valdemar thought that he could feel the blood drain from his face. Leaning his enormous weight back on his heels, he did his unpracticed best to formulate a prayer to beneficent Ardneh.

Whatever prayer he at last managed to say went up in silence. Outside, spring wind howled fiercely, shoving against the rough stone walls of his lonely hut, rattling the crude, ill-fitting door. Spattering rain through the hole in the roof that served as chimney, so that the small fire, fueled mostly by last year's dried vines, hissed as if in pain.

He had a serious mystery to contemplate.

An unknown visitor, working alone in pursuit of some unguessable purpose, who had come and gone before Valdemar had been able to catch more than a glimpse of him—or her—had just made the young grape-grower a present of one of the Twelve Swords. The recipient felt overwhelmed by the discovery. And yet—even in this tremendous moment when Valdemar first glimpsed the ebon hilt, he found himself thinking that he ought to be more surprised at the nature of this gift than he really was.

He had the strange feeling that he had always known, had never doubted, that something like this—something truly great—was fated to happen to him sooner or later.

Well, here it was. And whatever unconscious anticipation might be keeping him from being properly astonished, he was certainly beginning to be afraid.

* * *

Scant minutes ago, the unexpected shadow and the silent form of the mysterious caller had moved almost simultaneously, and with a swiftness almost magical, past the door of Valdemar's isolated dwelling, interrupting the young man in the midst of preparing his evening meal. The door had been left slightly ajar for more light, and to let the smoke-hole draw.

Until that moment, Valdemar had had no suspicion that any other human being was anywhere within a couple of kilometers. By the time he had jumped up and run outdoors, the figure of his anonymous visitor was already almost out of sight in mist and rain. Valdemar had caught only a single glimpse of a human shape, so muffled in gray garments that it might have been either man or woman.

The gigantic youth had started in pursuit, swiftly bounding up one, two, three of the narrow cultivated terraces that rose above his hut. But by the time he had reached the third terrace, his call had already disappeared into the wet twilight shrouding the domesticated vines, the scant wild bushes, and the granite outcroppings of the lonely mountainside.

Shouting for his vanished visitor to stop, Valdemar had continued the chase a little farther, almost to the boundary of his cultivated land, but without success. Returning to his hut a couple of minutes later, the young man had picked up the bundle which had been so mysteriously deposited at his door. He had paused to reassure himself that at least it was not alive (he had heard stories of babies being left at the doors of lonely huts) and carried it in by the fire. After closing the ill-fitting door again, and shaking his garments dry as best he could, Valdemar had hesitantly begun to unwrap his present—a process which came, moments later, to a shocked halt.

Though he was scarcely past the age of twenty, and for most of the past year had dwelt in this lonely place, Valdemar could not claim complete innocence or ignorance regarding the affairs of the great world.

Like every other thinking person, he knew something of the history of the Twelve Swords, magical weapons created almost forty years ago by the gods themselves. Valdemar knew also that two of the Swords had been destroyed not long after they were made. This black hilt partially visible before him, if it were genuine, might belong to any of the remaining Ten. And though like most people he had never seen, much less handled, any of the Twelve, Valdemar could not doubt the authenticity of the one. A heavy elegance of magic flowed into his fingertips the instant they brushed against it; and the magic he was not a total stranger.

It was common knowledge in the world that four Swords—Shieldbreaker, Dragonslicer, Stonecutter, and Sightblinder—had for some years been gathered in the royal armory of Tasavalt under control of that realm's powerful and unfortunate Prince Mark. Among the six others now lost to public knowledge were the two Valdemar considered the most abominable of the god-forged weapons, Soulcutter and the Mindsword.

No one, as he understood the case, could ever be sure of the whereabouts of Coinspinner, a trick blade given to randomly moving itself about. Nor was there any way to guess the whereabouts of Farslayer, Wayfinder, or Woundhealer. That last was the only one of the surviving ten that Valdemar would have rejoiced to find in his own possession.

* * *

Crouching near the fire, alone with his mysterious gift, the youth hesitated for a long time before continuing the process of unwrapping. His irresolution was grounded in the fact that he feared certain of the gods' Swords more than others, and at this point it was still at least theoretically possible for him to refuse the knowledge of which one he had been given. At this point he would still be able, if he chose, to tie up the gray cloth again, carry the whole still-mysterious bundle back out into the rain, and drop it, lose it, deep in some rocky crevice among the nearby crags, hoping that no one else would ever discover the presence of the thing of power, or be able to come near it.

For what seemed to Valdemar a long time he sat there on his heels. The wind battering at his door seemed to mock his fearful hesitancy, while outside the clouded daylight slowly faded. Still, enough light remained inside the hut, around his dying fire, for him to see whatever white mark might be emblazoned on the Sword's hilt, when his next tug at the gray cloth should reveal it.

Of course, one Sword had no white symbol at all. If that was what he found, it would mean fate had put into his hands Soulcutter, the Tyrant's Blade.

The young giant's eyes closed briefly. His strong, almost-handsome face was troubled. Awkwardly he uttered words aloud: "Ardneh, let it not be that one. I do not want the responsibility of trying to hide that demon's Blade. Or of trying to destroy it." He understood full well that breaking any Sword

or otherwise rendering it ineffective, would be far beyond his powers.

~~“Therefore let it be any of them, except Soulcutter, or...”~~

Valdemar’s prayer stumbled to a halt, as he realized that for him the second most fearful of the Blades would probably not, after all, be that called the Mindsword. Given that one, he could simply refrain from drawing it; for him, he thought, the power to bend others to his will would pose no great temptation. Farslayer would be far more likely to be his downfall. There were certain people in the world, oppressors of humanity, for whom—though he had never met them—the youth felt a dislike that threatened always to spill over into personal hatred; and if the life of one of those persons wherever they might be, should be so helplessly delivered into his hands, Valdemar feared his own latent capacity for violence.

Yes, it would be better if he got rid of this unknown Sword at once, not tempting himself by looking for the symbol, which it must bear upon the hilt...

Valdemar’s hands quivered. Because he might, for all he knew, be holding Woundhealer, the Sword of Mercy. That glorious possibility was enough to eliminate any thought of plunging the mysterious gift into a crevasse before he had identified it.

After minutes of immobility, the youth with a sudden jerk stripped back the gray cloth completely from the black hilt.

A small white arrow-symbol, pointing upward to the pommel, leapt into view. Neither the best nor the worst of possibilities had been realized. The weapon in Valdemar’s hands was Wayfinder. The Sword of Wisdom, it was also called—Ardneh grant it bring him that!

Valdemar breathed somewhat more easily. Toward Wayfinder he felt timidity and awe, but not overwhelming fear. Gently he peeled away the remaining wrappings, exposing a plain leather sheath. Without pausing for further thought, he clasped the hilt and drew forth a full meter of incomparable double-edged Blade. The faint light of fading day and dying fire gleamed softly on steel smoother and sharper than any human armorer had ever crafted, at least since the lost civilization of the Old World. Beneath the surface of the metal a lovely mottled pattern was perceptible.

Valdemar ran a tremulous finger along the flat side of the tremendous Blade. No, despite his youth, he was no stranger to the touch of magic. But he had never in his life felt anything the like of this.

A happy thought struck suddenly. Some of the new strain and worry vanished from his youthful face.

“Powers who rule this Sword,” he said, self-consciously—then paused for a deep breath, and started over. “Powers of this Sword, whoever or whatever you may be—I understand that giving guidance is your function. Guide me, therefore—guide me to the person—to her—to the woman I have—I have almost despaired of ever finding. The one who is most fit, most suitable, to share my life.”

Though he was utterly alone, the young man could feel his cheeks warming. Frowning suddenly he quickly amended: “Let all be done in accordance with the will of Ardneh.”

Having concluded this awkward speech, Valdemar arose, gripping the black hilt firmly in both of his great hands, fingers overlapping. Tentatively he moved the great Blade in a horizontal circle. One direction alone, almost straight east, set the Sword’s tip quivering. At the surge of magic he cried out wordlessly. For just a moment the movement had become so violent that the weapon had almost leaped free of his grip.

* * *

~~On a warm spring afternoon, seven days after the day when Valdemar had unwrapped the Swor~~ and more than a hundred kilometers distant from his hut, two pilgrims were making their way across heavily wooded hillside that formed one flank of a deep ravine.

The first of these gray-clad travelers was a woman, apparently about sixty years of age, but still vigorous and hearty. There was nothing feeble in the way she moved across the steep slope, among the thickly-spaced, narrow trunks. Her silver hair was long, but bound up closely. The strains of a long life showed in the woman's face, but no burden that seemed too much for her present determination. Like many other female pilgrims or travelers, she wore boots, trousers and a loose jacket, and was armed for self-defense with a short sword.

The crowded tree trunks made it all but impossible for two to travel side by side. The woman's companion, who walked three or four paces behind her and carried a similarly serviceable but somewhat more impressive weapon at his belt, was a man in his early twenties, sturdily built, of average size. The young man's appearance, like the woman's suggested both the weariness of long travel and a remaining capacity to deal with formidable difficulties.

The woman halted suddenly. She frowned and squinted at the sun, which shone brightly from beyond the canopy of the tall trees' small spring leaves. Then she inspected the terrain, as well as she could in the midst of a forest.

"This hill curves round," she announced to her fellow traveler at last. "And I see no end to the curve ahead. It carries us farther and farther to the east."

"And that, my lady, is not the direction in which we want to go," the young man responded. "Well then. Shall we try climbing to the top of the ridge again? Or going down into the ravine?"

The lady sighed. "Zoltan, we are well and truly lost. No reason to think the bottom of this ravine will be more hospitable than any of the others we've struggled through during the past two days." In those dark gorges, the ubiquitous thin-trunked trees had grown more closely and ever more close together, until it became impossible for adult humans to force a passage anywhere between them. An army of men with axes would have earned their pay clearing a road.

"And no reason either," replied Zoltan, "to suppose that the leather-wings are going to let us along this time if we come out of the trees up on the hilltop." He rubbed at his left arm, which was still bandaged—though fortunately not disabled—from their last encounter with flying reptiles, two days ago.

"I suppose we might risk trying the hilltop just before sunset," the woman said thoughtfully. "If we were able to see far enough to get our bearing—" She broke off abruptly, holding herself motionless. Above the high canopy of leaves a silent, broad-winged form drifted; a half-intelligent enemy, cruel-clawed and implacably hostile.

When the wind-borne reptile had drifted out of sight and hearing, Zoltan spoke again, his voice cautiously low. "Anyway, we're soon going to need water." Each was carrying a single small canteen. "We'll have to go down into the ravines for that, of course. This one may be dry, but the next—" He fell silent at the woman's imperious gesture. Her face had abruptly turned away from him, and she was listening intently for the repetition of a small sound just detected from ahead.

In a moment Zoltan, looking over his companion's shoulder, could see a tall human shape, garbed in dull colors, moving among the dun-colored trunks, still fifty meters off, approaching along the hillside.

Both travelers watched in ready silence, hands on swordhilts. The single figure approaching seemed to be making no effort at stealth. The towering, broad-shouldered man was clad in wh

appeared to be a farmer's rough shirt and trousers and woolen vest. In both hands he gripped a long bladed sword with which he steadily swept the air before him. Zoltan, watching, felt the hair stir on the back of his neck. This could be a Sword indeed!

The stranger continued moving along the slope directly toward the pilgrim pair, though as yet he had given no indication that he was aware of their presence.

Zoltan, staring at the approaching figure with intense, frowning concentration, whispered: "Is that —?"

"Shh. We'll see."

Amid the dun trunks the seeker so superbly armed had approached within ten meters of the two motionless travelers in dull gray before he saw them. When he did, he stopped in his tracks, startled, continuing to hold the Sword leveled in their direction. Then, looking somewhat flustered, he grounded the bright point.

For a long moment all three remained silent.

At last the young farmer—for so his clothing made him appear to be—said: "Greetings." His voice was soft, but the pair who heard him got the impression that only a conscious effort made it so. "Greetings, in Ardneh's name." He was peering closely at the lady, and appeared to be trying to conceal growing disappointment and confusion.

"And to you," replied the lady. "May you find peace and truth." Zoltan at her elbow murmured similar sentiments.

"My object is entirely peaceful," the other assured them, gesturing with an enormous hand. He seemed now to be recovering from his initial shock, whatever might have been its cause. He was head taller than most men, and of massive build, his body carrying a minimum of fat. His clothing, particularly his boots, gave evidence of an extended journey. He carried pack and canteen, as any traveler most likely would. A long, plain, leather sheath belted at his waist, of a size to hold his Sword, looked vaguely as if it should belong to someone else.

He added: "I am called Valdemar."

"I am Yambu," the woman told him simply. "This is Zoltan, who has chosen to travel with me. We are both pilgrims, of a sort."

The young farmer nodded and smiled, acknowledging the information. His hair was dark and curly, his blue eyes mild, flanking an interestingly bent nose. The more one looked at him, the bigger and stronger he appeared.

"Yambu," he repeated. "Yes, ma'am." His eyes moved on. "And you are Zoltan." Then some memory visibly caught at Valdemar, so that his gaze went back to the silver-haired woman. "An unusual name, ma'am," he remarked.

"Mine? Oh yes. And an unusual weapon that you are carrying today, young sir."

Perhaps Valdemar flushed slightly; in his weathered face it was hard to be sure. "Lady, in my hands I hope this Sword is something other than a weapon. It has guided me here—to you. You pardon, lady, if I aim the blade at you again; I promise you I mean no harm."

Taking care to remain at a distance well out of thrusting range, Valdemar lifted his Sword's point again. All three could see distinctly how the fine blade quivered when it was leveled straight toward Yambu.

The lady did not seem much surprised. "And what desire of yours," she asked, "does Wayfinder expect me to satisfy?"

This time there was no doubt that Valdemar was blushing. "I see you know this Sword's name. So I suppose you know what it is. That should—that ought to—make it easier for me to explain. As I said

my goal is peaceful. I..."

"Yes?"

"I am a farmer, lady. Actually I have a vineyard, which I have left untended. And I am looking for a wife."

There was a pause.

"Ah," said Yambu at last. A thin smile curved her lips. "And you confided this wish to the Sword of Wisdom?"

"Yes ma'am."

"And the Sword has brought you to me."

"Yes ma'am."

"And I am not quite the bride you have been imagining. Well, rest easy in your mind, young man. Were you to make me a proposal of marriage, I would not accept it."

"Yes ma'am," repeated Valdemar. He looked partly relieved and partly chagrined.

"We must discuss this," said the lady, "but just now my companion and I face problems of great urgency. Have you experienced any particular difficulty along the way, in the last day or two of your journey?"

Valdemar blinked at her. "Difficulty? No. What sort of difficulty? Oh, do you mean bandits?" The young giant smiled faintly. "I never worry much about that sort of thing. And if there were any who saw me, no doubt they kept clear when they saw how I was armed."

Zoltan cleared his throat. "No trouble in finding your way through this forest, perhaps? Or dealing with flying reptiles?"

Valdemar looked up, concerned; at the moment the sky was free of drifting shadows. "No trouble finding my way; I simply walked the way Wayfinder told me to go. And no reptiles of any kind; I've never seen one that could fly."

"Any kind of trouble?"

"None. Well, several times, for no good cause that I could see, the Sword counseled me to change direction. And once, when I saw no reason not to move on, it kept me walking in a tight circle for an hour, so in effect I was held in one location. But nothing that I would call trouble. Why?"

"Then would you now ask your Sword," put in Yambu gently, "to put aside for the moment the matter of your bride-to-be, and lead us all three safely out of this damned wildwood?"

Openmouthed, Valdemar gazed at her for a long moment. Then he nodded.

* * *

Less than an hour later all three travelers were resting comfortably at the bottom of another ravine where a spring of clear water bubbled gently out of a crevice between rocks, and the trees grew just closely enough together to keep all sizable airborne creatures at a safe distance. Yambu and Zoltan had already satisfied their thirst at the spring, and were now refilling their canteens. Valdemar meanwhile had sheathed his elegant weapon and was bringing out generous portions of dried meat and hard bread from his pack.

Far upslope, too far to be of immediate concern, an ominous, silent shadow drifted overhead above the canopy of leaves; drifted and came back and went away again, as if it were no longer certain of where its prey might be.

"Those creatures hunt us, young man," said Yambu, almost in a whisper. "Leather-wings—and sometimes worse than that. You say you have never seen them before?"

“I know them only by reputation.” The youthful giant looked vaguely horrified, and at the same time fascinated. But not particularly afraid. “Why do they hunt you?”

“I believe they are in the service of some much more formidable enemy. Serving as his scout. Then, too, it is my belief that any of the Twelve Swords tends to draw trouble to itself. And that of you are carrying in particular.”

“And yet I have asked this Sword only to help me find a bride. And now to guide all three of us to safety.” Valdemar seemed more disappointed, and gently puzzled, than alarmed by Yambu’s reading of their situation.

“You’ve heard the Song of Swords? You remember how the verse about this one goes?” Zoltan asked him, and without waiting for an answer proceeded to recite in a low voice:

*“Who holds Wayfinder finds good roads
Its master’s step is brisk.
The Sword of Wisdom lightens loads—”*

“—but adds unto their risk,” Valdemar concluded. “Yes, I’ve heard that song since I was a child. Never thinking...”

The gigantic youth let the matter drop. Then he looked at the silver-haired woman again. His gaze was timid, but resolute. “I can remember hearing, long ago,” he remarked, “of a lady named Yambu who was once known as the Silver Queen.”

She who bore that name ignored the invitation to discuss her past. Having finished filling her canteen, she sat at ease on the mossy bank beside the spring.

“Zoltan and I thank you for your help, young man,” she said graciously. “Where will you ask your Sword to point you next? And may I ask you just where and how Wayfinder came into your possession?”

Valdemar looked up at the treetops. “I still seek a wife,” he declared stubbornly. “Why this Sword has led me to you, lady, I confess I do not understand.”

“There may be an easy explanation. When the object sought is otherwise impossible, or very difficult, to obtain directly, Wayfinder leads its master first to the necessary means to bring the goal within reach. You may be sure the Sword of Wisdom is not suggesting that you propose marriage to me, who could be your grandmother. At least let us hope not. Sword or no, that would be far from wise. Besides, I have no wish to spend my last years growing grapes.”

“Why, then, has Wayfinder brought me to you?”

Yambu shook her head. “It would seem that, somehow—I do not know how—I can help you to achieve your goal.”

Valdemar sighed. More to himself than to the others he murmured: “I will now repeat my first request. I want this Sword to lead me to the woman, of all the women on earth, who will be the perfect, the ideal wife for me. Nothing more and nothing less.”

And he drew Wayfinder from its sheath and held it out again in his great hands.

Once more the point reacted, quivering, only when it was aimed precisely at the lady.

Without comment the young giant re-sheathed the Sword of Wisdom at his waist. Giving up the puzzle for the moment, he recounted to his new companions the story of his enigmatic visitor, several days past.

He concluded with a question. “Has either of you any idea who my strange caller might have been? It was someone who wore gray, even as you do. That’s all I could really see.”

Zoltan and Yambu looked at each other. Zoltan shrugged. The lady said: “A number of ideas; but no reason to take any of them seriously.”

Her young companion nodded. “Certainly it was neither of us, if you are thinking that. A week ago we were nowhere near the region where you say you live. As for wearing gray, uncountable thousands of folk do that. Your own garments have acquired something of that tinge from travel.”

The bigger young man nodded ruefully. “Then can either of you guess why this Sword should have led me to you?”

Zoltan only shook his head.

“I think,” Yambu told Valdemar, “you will have to be patient if you want an answer to that question. It may be that the answer will never become clear, even if you do find your wife.”

Valdemar took thought, running long fingers through his dark curly hair. A sparse beard was beginning to sprout on his youthful cheeks. Then almost shyly he inquired: “Might it have anything to do with the fact that...as I said before, a lady with your name was once the Silver Queen? But I had thought...”

Yambu nodded impatiently. “Very well, my history is no great secret. That was once my title. But I don’t know why my past, good or bad, should have anything much to do with a young man who raises grapes and seeks a bride. You would have expected the Silver Queen to be a somewhat younger woman? Hold Soulcutter in your hands, my friend, throughout a day of battle, and you will be fortunate indeed if you do not look worse than I do.”

Now young Valdemar indeed looked awed. “I apologize, my lady, for what must seem unwarranted curiosity.”

“No apology is necessary.”

The peasant-looking youth frowned for a while at the weapon hanging from his belt. Then he said: “Perhaps I must take the Sword’s bringing me to you to mean that I should stay with you until it tells me otherwise. Perhaps it even means that I should turn over Wayfinder and its powers to you.”

Yambu was frowning too.

Impulsively Valdemar said: “Let us try that!” In a moment he had unbelted his Sword, and was gallantly proffering the black hilt in her direction, the sheathed Blade balanced flat across his forearm.

Quietly she responded: “I do not know that you have hit on the right interpretation, young man. But...on the other hand, why should I fear this Sword?”

Her lips moved again, almost silently. Only Zoltan, who was close beside her, could hear her very low whisper: “Yet I do.”

A moment later, she was reaching out to firmly grasp Wayfinder’s hilt.

Having accepted the weapon, and drawn it from its sheath, Yambu stood up straight, her voice becoming a little louder. “It is a long time since I have felt the power of any Sword in my hands. Welcome, Sword of Wisdom, here you are, and here am I. If you can read my heart, show me the way which I must go to satisfy it.”

The Silver Queen held out the blade in a strong two-handed grip, then swept it around the horizon in unconscious imitation of Valdemar’s first gesticulation with the weapon, seven days ago.

In her hands, Wayfinder’s keen point quivered at one point of the compass only—almost straight east.

Yambu let the tip of the heavy blade sag to the earth. She said to Valdemar: “I am favored with a definite reply. Now, do you want me to give you this weapon back?”

To the surprise of both the others, the giant youth put both his hands behind him, as if to make things difficult for anyone who meant to thrust the black hilt back into his possession. He said: “M

lady, I wonder..."

"Yes?"

"Might the Sword's response to me mean that I am to stay with you, at least for a time? Travel with you?"

Yambu thought about it. "It brought you all this way to me. I suppose it might mean something of the sort," she conceded at length, as if reluctantly.

"And just now, in your hands, Wayfinder pointed east. Do you know what lies in that direction?"

Yambu smiled. "Half of the world," she said.

Zoltan, with his head tipped back, was leaning alternately to right and left, trying to peer upward through the canopy of leaves. He said: "Some days ago, we two were discussing the question of our destination, the true object of our pilgrimage, in philosophical terms. Then we began to be hunted. Being hunted limits one's time for philosophical discussion. In the process of trying to escape from the reptiles we became lost. Valdemar, you've helped us now to temporary safety. But as a practical matter, I must say that our next goal, whether east or west, ought to be some place of greater security. Somewhere completely out of the ken of those whose creatures stalk and harry us."

Valdemar looked from one to the other of his new companions, trying to assess the situation. There was no doubting the reality of those drifting shadows that kept reappearing no very great distance up the hill.

"And who might your enemies be?" he asked with concern.

"There are a number of possibilities," said Yambu drily. Again she took up the Sword in both hands. "But let us not become obsessed with safety. We are going east."

“Hurled to the ends of the earth, you say. Astride a demon?” The speaker, a startlingly handsome and apparently very youthful man, gave every indication that he found the prospect hugely amusing.

“Yes, to the ends of the earth, or farther for all I know. That was months ago, of course, and neither the Dark King nor his demonic steed have been heard from since.” The youthful-looking man, an informant, a short, blond woman or girl who appeared even younger than he, flashed a bright grin at her own. “Is it not entertaining, Master Wood?”

The two who spoke with such apparent carelessness of sorcerer’s and demon’s fate were standing casually just outside the massive outer wall of the world headquarters of the Blue Temple. The man was actually leaning against the building’s stones. Squat granite columns, each thicker than the length of a man’s body, and broad stone steps leading up to doors worthy of a fortress made the establishment an archetype of the substantial, or perhaps even a parody of such. The two appeared to be waiting for something; but what that might be, or why they had chosen this spot to hold their talk was not immediately obvious.

The handsome young man nodded. His large, athletic-looking body was well dressed in tunic and cloak of rich fabric, though of no outstanding elegance. He might have been a prosperous merchant, perhaps a physician. Surely not a warrior, for no trace of any material weapon was visible about his person.

He said: “Entertaining, yes. The demon was hurled away, I suppose, by the Emperor’s name in the mouth of the Emperor’s bastard, and that poor pretender of a magician, who likes to ride on demon, was whisked away helplessly with his mount—”

The young man laughed again, louder than before, and this time his companion laughed with him. She was garbed in a tight-fitting outfit of silver and blue that showed off her fine figure to advantage; the clothing suggested an expensive courtesan. The heads of passers-by turned in their direction; such merriment was uncommon here in the Blue Temple precincts.

Both parties to the conversation ignored the passers-by, even as they appeared to be ignoring the Blue Temple itself. But he who had been addressed as Master Wood soon sobered from his laughter. He stroked his chin in thought.

Almost wistfully he said: “And yet, Tigris—an alliance with Vilkata might well have been to our benefit.”

Tigris had already assumed a more thoughtful expression too. She responded: “He may be able to return, Master, sooner or later. Or, if he cannot come back unaided, we might help him. That may still be possible. Yet, I fear that the Dark King was—or is—something of a bungler. Considerable skill in handling demons, one must admit that.”

“Considerable. But finally insufficient,” amended the other.

“Yes, Master, as I say—finally insufficient.” The shapely young woman nodded soberly. “And one of the Swords went with Vilkata.”

“Yes, Master. The Mindsword, as you well know.”

Wood allowed his displeasure at that accident to show. He had particularly coveted that weapon for his own. Then he brightened slightly. “Well, none of that can be helped now. Today we face other problems, quite sufficient to claim our full attention for a time.”

“As you so accurately say, my lord.”

In the bustle of the populous city, even a pair of such striking appearance did not draw a great deal

of attention. Once or twice a beggar started to approach them, then, as if warned by some instinct, veered away.

Once a sedan chair, guarded on both sides by a file of mounted men, passed very close to them, entering the Blue Temple headquarters through a nearby gate.

The man called Wood appeared equally indifferent to potentate and mendicants. "So," he mused, "our erstwhile rival Vilkata, the Dark King, is probably not going to be available in the foreseeable future to discuss alliances. Nor is the demon who bore him away into—ought we to say into eternity? Nor, I suppose, can we hope to recruit any other demons from the Dark King's retinue." Wood's voice became abstracted. "That's all right, though—I can summon powers enough of my own whenever there's a need."

"Yes, Master, certainly you can." Impish little Tigris nodded violently.

Squinting at her, her master thought to himself that she was almost certain to prove something of a distraction in the staid Blue Temple offices, into which he planned to bring her very soon. Very likely, Wood considered, he would have to dismiss Tigris—or else effect a drastic though temporary change in her appearance—before the conference got very far. But that decision did not have to be made now.

The girl began to fidget, as if rendered uncomfortable by an overabundance of energy. She moved a step away, and with a dancing glide came back again. "If it is permitted to ask, Master, why are we waiting? Are those moneybags in the Blue Temple expecting us at a particular time?"

The young man grinned. He was not really a young man, for even now his eyes looked very old. "My dear Tigris, they are not expecting us at all. I expect that an unannounced arrival will produce a more co-operative attitude on their part, once they have recovered from their initial ... yes?"

This last word was not addressed to Tigris, but to a sudden blurring of the atmosphere approximately a meter above her blond head. Out of this miniature aerial vortex proceeded a tiny, inhuman voice, speaking to Wood in squeaky, deferential tones:

"The man Hyrcanus is now alone, Master, inside his private office. Do you wish me to accompany you inside the building?"

"Yes, but see that you remain invisible and impalpable in there. Unless, of course, you hear me suggest otherwise." Wood was standing erect now, the air of indolence having fallen from him like a shed cloak. "Tigris?"

The disturbance was already gone from the air above her head. "Ready, as always, Master."

Wood gestured, and their two human bodies instantaneously disappeared.

* * *

The locus of their reappearance a moment later was a tall, narrow, dimly lighted chamber deep in the bowels of Blue Temple headquarters. Though the room was obviously only an anteroom of some sort, the visitors found it elegantly furnished, with a thick carpet underfoot. The walls were paneled with exotic wood, subtly lighted by Old World lamps that burned inside their glassy shells with a cold and practically inexhaustible secret fire.

Wood and Tigris came into existence standing side by side and almost hand in hand, before a cluttered desk behind which a male clerk or secretary looked up in petrification at their unanticipated presence.

The thin man in a tunic of blue and gold stared at them uncomprehendingly, his eyes watering as if from long perusal of crabbed handwriting and columned numbers. Even now, in what must have been a state of shock, the words that fell from his lips were trite; perhaps it had been a long, long time since

he had spoken any words that were not.

Clearing his throat, the clerk said in a cracked voice: “Er—you have an appointment?”

Wood smiled impishly. “I have just made one, yes.”

“Er—the name, sir? Er—madam?”

“I’m hardly that.” And Tigris giggled.

The assured, undeniable presence of the pair seemed to place them beyond the scope of any fundamental challenge.

“I will see ... I will ... er ...” Almost choking in confusion, the clerk bowed himself away through a door leading to an inner office.

The two visitors exchanged looks of amusement. A few moments later the thin man was back, ushering Wood and Tigris into the next room. There they confronted the Chairman of the Blue Temple himself, a man known to the world by the single name of Hyrcanus.

Here, in the inner sanctum of power, the furnishings were more sumptuous, though still restrained; their every detail tastefully thought out. Wood had expected nothing more or less, but Tigris was somewhat surprised.

“I thought to see more gold and jewels,” she murmured. Wood shook his head slightly. He understood that splendor here would have been out of place; the finest appointments could have done no more than hint at the immensity of the temple’s wealth.

The Chairman was small, rubicund, and bald, with a round ageless face and a jovial expression belied by his ice-blue eyes. He was seated, flanked by ivory statues of Midas and Croesus, behind an enormous desk, engaged in counting up some kind of tiles or tokens. A large abacus, of colored wood in several shades, stood at the Chairman’s elbow. The walls of the chamber were lined with account books and other records, some of them visibly dusty. Spiders had established themselves in at least two of the room’s upper corners. The windows were barred, and were so high and dark that it was impossible for ordinary human eyes to see outside.

Raising his gaze from his desk, Hyrcanus stared at Wood in utter blankness for a long moment. His eyebrows rose when he looked at Tigris. Then he snapped irritably at his visitors: “Who are you? What are you doing here? I have made no appointment for this hour.”

“But I,” Wood retorted, “have made one to see you.” Such a response, from an utter stranger, evidently could not be made to fit into the Chairman’s view of life’s possibilities. Hyrcanus fixed a stern gaze upon his shaken underling, the thin clerk who still hovered near. “What possessed you to schedule an appointment at this time?”

The man’s fingers fumbled with imaginary knots in the air before him. “Sir, I—I have scheduled no appointment. I thought perhaps that you had done so privately. I have no idea who these people are.”

“My name is Wood,” said the male visitor in a languid voice, speaking directly to Hyrcanus. “You should think it almost impossible that you have not heard of me.”

The name took a moment to sink in. Then, with a slight movement of one foot beneath his desk, a gesture quite imperceptible to ordinary visitors (but noted at once by these two callers, and dismissed as harmless), the Chairman sent a signal.

Wood made a generous, open-handed gesture. “By all means,” he encouraged, with a slight nod. “Summon whatever help will make you feel secure.” Tigris, at her master’s elbow, giggled. It was a small sound, almost shy.

In response to the Chairman’s urgent signal, there ensued a subtle interplay of powers within the chamber’s dusty air, much of it beyond the reach of the Chairman’s senses, or those of his secretary.

Powers charged with the magical defense of this room and edifice clashed briefly, trying immaterial lances, with the invisible escort of the two human visitors. The trial was brief but quite conclusive: the defenders of the Temple retreated, cowed.

Moments later came sounds of hurried human movement in an adjoining room. A door, not the one through which the callers had come in, opened quietly, and another bald man, this one obviously elderly, looked in with a wary expression.

“I assume,” Tigris said to him, smiling brightly, “that you must be the Director of Security?” Sha almost curtsied.

The newcomer glanced at her, frowned, and kept silent, looking to his chief for orders.

“I would like to know,” Hyrcanus grated at him, “how these two got in here.”

The man in the doorway cleared his throat. “Sir, I recognize this man as the well-known wizard Wood. The woman with him—”

“He has already told me his *name*,” Hyrcanus interrupted. “What I want to know is how —”

“And someday perhaps I will tell you how we got in,” said Wood, interrupting the interrupter. “But there are other matters I wish to discuss first.”

The Director of Security, seemingly unimpressed, stared at his fellow magician. “I know your name, and I warn you that you had better leave. At once.”

“You? *Warn me?*”

The elder nodded impressively. His face had become lugubrious. “I am indeed the Director of Security here. We here do not fear your powers.”

Wood’s eyes were twinkling dangerously. “Only because you do not comprehend them.”

“I believe,” the Director remarked drily, “that you are the same Wood who about two years ago visited Sha’s Casino, a Red Temple establishment in the city of Bihari.” “And so?”

“On that occasion—correct me, sir, if I am wrong—you encountered certain enemies and were forced to make a swift retreat. It has further come to my attention that you entered Sha’s Casino armed with the Sword Shieldbreaker, and that you left without that weapon—and lacking any compensation for it.” The elderly man in the doorway smirked faintly.

Tigris, looking at her master, paled a trifle.

Wood put his fists on his hips. His voice was ice. “On that occasion, my man, I was opposed by forces well beyond your ability—let alone that of your money-grubbing masters here—to understand much less to deal with.”

A moment of silence followed. It was plain from their expressions that Wood’s current hearers—except for Tigris, of course—remained unconvinced.

The wizard nodded briskly. “Very well, then. I see that a demonstration will be necessary.”

The Director’s expression became uncertain. Hyrcanus behind his desk started to say something then remained quiet.

Silence held for a long moment.

Wood’s eyes closed. His left hand extended slightly in front of him, palm upward. The long fingers quivered. Then the hand moved, and the forearm, slowly, made a gentle lifting gesture. Near the high ceiling an almost imperceptible turmoil in the air grew briefly, lightly sharper.

In moments this gentle disturbance was answered by a much heavier vibration. An inhuman groaning and thudding seemed to start in the roots of the huge building and progress slowly upward. Soon distant frightened yells could be heard, rising from somewhere below the thickly carpeted office floor.

Tigris was smiling faintly now, watching the Blue Temple men for their reaction. Neither of them

had moved, though the eyes of the Chairman seemed about to pop.

~~Wood's face, his eyes still closed, had hardened into an implacable mask.~~

The door to the secretary's anteroom burst open, to frame the large form of an armed guard officer. "Sir! The gold—" The man had trouble finishing his sentence.

Hyrcanus snapped: "What of the gold?"

The guard turned halfway round, gesturing over one beefy shoulder. "It's—coming—up the stairs—"

The Chairman leapt up from his chair, trying to see out past him.

The deepest rumbling, which had begun down around the massive, vaulted foundations of the Mother Temple, was now gradually shaping itself into a heavy, metallic rhythm. It sounded like a company, perhaps a regiment, of heavy infantry, clad in armor, marching upstairs in close formation.

There were continued cries of alarm, and more security people came pressing up behind the officer in the doorway.

Hyrcanus started to come around from behind his desk, and then went back.

The guards now crowding the doorway were pushed aside. But not by human force.

Bursting past them, into the Chairman's private office, came moving gold, coins and bars and works of art, all moving as if alive. The yellow treasure had somehow been conglomerated, magically held together, into the shape of a huge and heavy many-legged creature, a gigantic centipede. At intervals this animation broke apart into separate marching figures, all headless, some in the shape of men and some of beasts. Whether in the form of many bodies or only one, the gold tramped upward and forward, the several shapes enlivened by Wood's magic all glowing dull yellow in this chamber's parsimonious light.

The Director of Security, jabbering incantations, avoided the score of trampling golden legs. Gesturing, he intensified his magical efforts to undo what Wood was doing.

But it was obvious to all that the Director's attempted counterspells were failing miserably. Losing his temper, he rushed at his rival.

That was a serious mistake.

Halfway toward the object of his wrath, the Director slowed, then staggered to a halt. It was as if he had forgotten where he was going. Worse than that, it was as if he had almost forgotten how to walk.

Turning now to Hyrcanus, and then to all the others in the room, a smile of infantile imbecility, the Director of Security sank slowly into the nearest chair. Simpering vacuously at nothing, he appeared ready to be entertained by whatever might happen next.

His eyes lighted on the inexorably marching metal. "Gold," the old man whispered, obviously delighted. "Pretty, pretty."

Meanwhile Wood, his arms folded, had turned away from the Director and sat down on the edge of Hyrcanus's desk. He was watching the proceedings with an abstracted look, as if he were not personally very much involved. Tigris, taking her cue from her master, was now seated also, in a leather chair. From a purse that had appeared as if from nowhere she had actually brought out some knitting, with which she appeared to be fully occupied.

With the intrusion of the marching gold, and the ruthless disabling of his first assistant, Hyrcanus abandoned all pretense of calm control.

He jumped up onto his desk. With screams he rebuked his Security forces. Then he turned to Wood, pleading: "Put the gold back! Send it back at once!"

"And you will listen to me if I do?"

“Of course, of course. And this fool here” —the Chairman indicated his chief aide, now smiling as he counted up his fingers— “can you restore him to what ordinarily serves him as his right mind?”

“If you will listen.”

“I will. I swear it, by Croesus and Midas. What was it you wanted to discuss?”

Accepting this surrender graciously, Wood slid off the desk and with a few gestures quickly restored Blue Temple headquarters more or less to normality. The weird upward progress of long-hidden treasure ceased. The marching golden centipede and all its fragments, immediately obedient to Wood’s most subtle command, reversed direction, and headed docilely downstairs. And at the same time the Director lost his carefree interest in his own fingers; his eyes closed and his head sank slumberously upon his chest.

Within moments after the tramping treasure had retreated, the building ceased to vibrate. Inside the Chairman’s office only the shouts of guards, somewhere in the middle distance remained as evidence that something remarkable had occurred.

Slowly, shakily, Chairman Hyrcanus resumed his seat behind his desk. He wiped his brow. With a gesture and a few muttered words, he offered Wood and Tigris chairs. The three were now alone.

With the opposition satisfactorily crushed, Wood was calm and reassuring. He glanced at the Director, who was snoring faintly. “He will regain his wits—such as they were.” Then Wood focused an intense look on the Chairman. “Hyrcanus, understand me. Your wealth is safe, for the time being—safe from me, at least. Every coin is now back where it was. I do not crave Blue Temple gold, or any other treasure you may possess.”

Hyrcanus, smiling glassily, murmured an excuse. Then, turning away momentarily, he beckoned the clerk to him from the next room, and dispatched the man with orders to take a complete inventory of the wealth down below.

Wood shook his head impatiently at this interruption. “Depend upon it, Hyrcanus, not a gram of your metal will be missing. I am not your enemy. Rather we have enemies in common, and therefore should be allies.”

The Chairman brightened a trifle. “Yes. Enemies in common. Certainly we do.”

Tigris had put aside her knitting, and was now sitting with folded hands, paying close attention to the men.

Her master said to Hyrcanus: “I am thinking in particular of Prince Mark of Tasavalt. I suppose you may rejoice almost as much as I do over his recent misfortunes.”

The Chairman, relaxing just a little, nodded heartily.

His formidable visitor said: “I am told that Mark is making every possible effort—so far to no avail—to heal his wife of the injuries she sustained last year.”

“A pity,” said Hyrcanus, and uttered a dry sound intended for a laugh.

“Indeed. My agents assure me that Princess Kristin is hopelessly crippled, and in continual pain. The only real hope of ever helping her lies in the Sword Woundhealer.”

Mention of the Sword concentrated the attention of the red-faced man behind the desk. “Ah. And where is Woundhealer now?”

Wood’s eyes twinkled again. “Your question brings us to the very point of my visit. The best hope of anyone’s getting Woundhealer in hand lies in the Sword Wayfinder—would you not agree?”

Hyrcanus responded cautiously. “It is said that Wayfinder can guide its holder to any goal he wishes.”

“Even, as has happened at least once in the past, into the deepest Blue Temple vaults of all ... but I have no wish to remind you and your associates of past sufferings and embarrassments. Hyrcanus,

have come here to offer you a partnership.”

“What sort of partnership?”

“The details can be worked out later, if you will agree with me now in principle. You were already Chairman of the Blue Temple nineteen years ago, at the time of the great robbery. I believe I am correct in thinking that you and other insiders still consider that the worst disaster that your Temple has ever suffered?”

The Chairman’s face grew somewhat redder. “Let us say, for the sake of argument, that you are right—what then?”

Wood put on a sympathetic expression. “And Ben of Purkinje, the wretch who was chiefly responsible for that calamity, still lives and prospers, as the right-hand man of our mutual enemy Mark of Tasavalta.”

The Chairman nodded gloomily. Ever since Mark had become Prince of that generally prosperous domain, there had been no new Blue Temple installations at all in Tasavalta—the organization maintained in that land only a single banking facility, relatively unprofitable, in the capital city of Sarykam.

Tigris so far had been maintaining a demure demeanor, so it had not become necessary for Wood to banish her, or take any steps to alter her appearance. Brightly and alertly she continued to pay attention to everything that was said and done between her master and their reluctant hosts.

Genial-sounding Wood now inquired after the health of legendary Old Benambra, founder an age ago of the Blue Temple.

Hyrcanus assured his guests that the Founder (“our Chairman Emeritus, in retirement”) was still very much alive—more or less alive, by most people’s standards, since he was now turned completely into a Whitehands, and lived underground somewhere, jealously counting up the bulk of his remaining treasure. Then the current Chairman, supremely stingy unless he made an effort not to be, belatedly ordered some refreshment to be served.

Presently—while the Director of Security by stirrings and mumblings gave indications that he might soon awaken—Wood smoothly returned to the subject of the Sword of Wisdom. “You, the Blue Temple authorities, have certainly known for a long time that Wayfinder was used by those daring thieves to despoil your hoard.”

“Well ... yes.”

“For years you have been keeping a jealous watch for that Sword in every quarter of the world, ready to try to seize it as soon as it should appear again.”

The Director of Security, had by now risen and stretched and finally re-settled himself in a chair a little distance, much chastened in his manner. Whether he was aware of what had just happened to him or not, he was evidently grimly determined to keep an eye on Wood as long as the intruder remained.

Now the Director said: “Wayfinder’s vanishing, as you probably know, was utterly mysterious. The only report we have—admittedly unconfirmed—says that the Sword of Wisdom was stolen, by some unknown agent, from the belt of the God Hermes, after he had been struck down by Farslayer.”

Everyone in the room was silent for a moment, no doubt meditating on that unlikely-sounding but undeniable event.

“Yes. I know,” Wood answered patiently. Though he had not been personally present at the fall of Hermes, he stood ready to accept that story as confirmed.

The slight jowls of the Chairman of the Blue Temple were quivering. “The treasure we lost at that time, including three Swords, has never been recovered.”

“I know that too.” The handsome, youthful-looking Wood was now doing his best to soothe his hosts. Tigris looked sympathetic too. Wood continued: “How unjust, how odious, that the robbers should have been able to prosper as they have.”

“Odious is an inadequate word,” said Hyrcanus fervently. “But let us get down to business.”

Wood, with a smile and gesture, indicated that he was perfectly ready to do just that.

The official inquired: “What exactly do you want from the Blue Temple, that you have taken these uh, drastic steps to bring about this conference?”

Wood smiled. His answer was straightforward, or at least it seemed to be: “I want no more than I have already indicated. A chance to use Wayfinder for my own purposes, which will in no way conflict with yours. A league of mutual assistance against Tasavalta. And against the Emperor.”

Blank looks on the faces of the Blue Temple functionaries greeted Wood’s last assertion. He was silently contemptuous of their ignorance, but not really surprised. The Blue Temple evidently knew little about the Emperor, and seemed to care less. Or perhaps their lack of interest was only feigned. Like the Ancient One himself, they must be aware of certain recurrent rumors, concerning the enormous treasure that potentate was reported to have stashed away.

But the problems posed by the Emperor could wait. Spelling out his proposal in a straightforward way, the wizard confirmed that he wanted to be informed as soon as any of the Blue Temple people had any knowledge, or even a clue, concerning the whereabouts of the Sword of Wisdom.

“I am aware that you have had your people on the alert, everywhere around the world, or at least across this continent, for years now, for any evidence concerning that Sword. No matter what kind of defences you devise for your vast remaining treasure, Wayfinder can probably find a way to locate another bold and clever robber in.”

Hyrcanus groaned audibly.

* * *

Less than half an hour later the meeting concluded, with Wood and Hyrcanus shaking hands, while their respective aides looked on watchfully. Both leaders pronounced their satisfaction with the agreement they had reached.

Outside Blue Temple Headquarters again, their removal having been effected without the use of any mundane door, Wood and Tigris strolled the streets in silence, until they were rejoined by the demon Dactylartha.

“Noble masters!” hissed the tiny voice, coming out of the barely visible disturbance in the air. “Was my performance satisfactory?”

“At least you will not be punished for it.” Wood spoke abstractedly, his main thought already elsewhere.

“Madam Tigris!” Dactylartha pleaded softly. “Did I not do well?”

“As our Master has said,” she responded curtly. “Did your old rulers recognize you, do you suppose, Dactylartha?”

This terrible creature, she remembered, had once been Blue Temple property, involved in the famous robbery, on which occasion the demon had failed as dismally as all the other layers of defence of the main hoard. That did not mean, of course, that Dactylartha was weak or ineffective. Against any one of the Swords, only failure could generally be expected—unless, of course, one was armed with another Sword.

A dangerous being to recruit; Tigris, though her own skills in enchantment were great, was not

sure she could have controlled the thing without her Master's help.

~~Wood, now giving the thing its new orders, curtly dismissed it, and in a moment it was gone.~~

"What are you thinking about, my dear?" the Ancient One inquired. "You look pensive."

"About demons, Master."

"Ah yes—demons. Well, as a rule, one kills them, or has some firm means of control—or is as nice to them as possible. That is about all there is to know on the subject." And Wood laughed, a hissing sound that might have come from the throat of one of the very creatures he was contemplating.

Tigris changed the subject. "Which of the Twelve Swords would you most like to possess, Master?"

"Ah. Now that—that—is indeed a question." The Ancient One mused in silence for a few paces. Then he said to Tigris: "There's Soulcutter, of course. I certainly wouldn't want to draw that little toy with my own hands—having heard what has happened to others—the trick of course would be to get someone else to draw it, under the proper circumstances."

"I understand perfectly, my lord."

"Do you? Good. As for the Sword of Wisdom, I confess to you, my dear, that I nourish a certain hope—that on coming into possession of that weapon I will be able to use it to lead me to the Emperor."

Tigris wondered briefly whether she ought to pretend to be surprised. In the end she decided not to do so. She asked, instead: "What Swords does the Emperor have?"

"None, that I can determine with any certainty."

Tigris, flattering: "Then of the two greatest magicians in the world, neither now has any Sword."

It was true that her Master, Wood, at the moment had not a single Sword to call his own—which Prince Mark of Tasavalta, gallingly, had no less than four.

Tigris was taking great care not to remind her Master directly of this latter fact.

He grunted something, for the moment sounding completely human—a mode of existence he did not always appear to favor.

"Where to now, Master?"

"To a place where I trust we will not be interrupted, Tigris. We have work to do."

Morning had arrived, and Ben of Purkinje was enduring an enormous headache.

He sat up slowly, further tormented by a fierce itching. Particles of the hay in which he had been sleeping had worked their way into his clothing. According to the feeling in his head, the hour ought not to be much past midnight, but the exterior world ruthlessly assured him that a new day had indeed begun. The cavernous interior of the barn in which he had sought shelter was now becoming faintly visible, venerable roughhewn beams and gray wall planks bathed in an illumination that could only be that of dawn. Intermittent crowing noises now issuing from the adjacent barnyard offered confirming evidence.

The noises were there, but Ben was reasonably sure that they had not awakened him; they were completely routine, and he had been too deeply asleep to be roused by anything so ordinary.

Too deeply asleep indeed. Unconscious, he thought, would be a better word for it. Recalling some of last night's adventures in the local tavern, he wondered if the second or third girl to sit on his lap might have put something unfriendly in his ale. The first, as Ben recalled, had been almost unconscious herself at the time, and he thought he could exclude her from the list of suspects.

He doubted that any of last night's girls would have played a dirty trick like that on her own accord. Someone would have put her up to it.

Ben clenched his eyelids shut again. His memories of last night were somewhat hazed. He was prowling through that fog, in search of his newly-met drinking companions. They had been three or four youngish men, who had had the look of bandits—or, if not bandits, of people who had no higher moral standard than they found absolutely necessary for survival. A couple of them, perhaps not realizing what a formidable opponent they had encountered, had challenged Ben to a drinking contest. Before that had been carried to a conclusion, the tavern girls had taken a notion to sit on his lap, first in sequence, then together ... or had that been his own suggestion?

...but of course nothing could be done about any of that now. If in fact someone had tried to drug his drink, he had survived the effort. This was morning, and at least it wasn't raining—he would have heard that on the barn roof. Trouble was, the first subtle indications of this fine spring morning were that things were not going to go well today for Ben of Purkinje, known in recent years as Ben Sarykam. Right now he feared that his headache might be the least of today's problems, because certain sounds outside this borrowed barn were like those of no ordinary farmyard in the early morning. These were the noises, he now felt sure, which had awakened him.

These ominous mutterings and footfalls evoked for Ben the presence of a number of men, maybe half a dozen or even more, clumsily exchanging low-voiced words with undertones of urgency. Muttering, and then separating, spreading out, moving quickly but quietly as if they meant to get the barn surrounded.

That was not at all a reassuring image.

Getting off to a bad start as he seemed to be this morning, Ben hoped that no one today was going to call him by any name that mentioned either Purkinje or Sarykam. As soon as anyone did that, he would know that the false identity under which he was currently traveling had been penetrated. Nonetheless, that he had much hope for the false identity anyway. It had been a resort of desperation, conceived on the spur of the moment several days ago, when other plans had at last gone desperately and completely wrong. A man who weighed close to a hundred and forty kilos, and looked capable—and was—when twisting a riding-beast's iron shoe into scrap with his bare hands, tended to attract attention. For such

a man, ordinary disguises were seldom of much avail.

~~Ben's worst suspicions were presently nourished by new evidence. If he had been in the lead~~ danger of drifting back to sleep—and with a start he realized that he just might have been—that peril was destroyed by a loud call in a hoarse male voice, coming from somewhere not far outside the barn. The words were meant for him. The man outside was threatening to fire the wooden structure if he didn't immediately come out and surrender.

The bass roar was almost instantly repeated: “Ben of Purkinje! We know yer in there!”

Despite the besieged man's huge size, he came up to his feet softly and promptly amid the hay, the wooden floor of the hayloft creaking under the shift of weight. At the same time he took a quick inventory of assets. Through recent misfortunes his personal weaponry, apart from his own mind and body, had been reduced to one middle-sized dagger. Leaving the dagger at his belt, he caught sight of a pitchfork not far away, and swiftly and softly took possession of it.

A certain urgency within his bladder next demanded his attention, all the more so with impending combat probable. Relieving himself quietly into the hay, regretting the lack of heroic capacity that might have served to put out a fire, Ben listened for more shouts but for the moment could hear only the throbbing of his aching head.

Doing his best to give the situation careful thought, he decided that allowing or encouraging the barn to burn down around him would be a waste of time for all concerned, and a waste of some perhaps innocent farmer's property as well. Ben had no real idea how many of last night's companions and their friends might be outside. What sounded like the clumsy muttering of six or eight might instead be a much cleverer attempt by two or three men to suggest greater numbers.

Well, he would soon find out how many men were outside, and whether they were bluffing. He would go out and see. But he would do so without announcing his real intention first.

Ready for action now, he bellowed a defiant challenge, to the effect that if they wanted him, they were going to have to come in and get him.

Then, as quietly as possible, he slid down the ladder from the hayloft to the dirt floor of the barn. And then, pitchfork in hand, he came out fighting.

Ben's youth was behind him, but he could still run faster than anyone would be likely to expect from a man of his size. He went out, moving fast and hard, through a small door in what he would have called the rear of the barn. The suggestion of numbers, he saw with a sinking feeling, had been no bluff. At least five armed men were waiting for him among the manure piles in the back, but at first they recoiled from him and his pitchfork, yelling.

The bass voice that had commanded Ben to give up now shouted orders meant for other ears, screaming hoarsely that if they wanted to survive this day themselves, they had better take this fellow alive. These commands and threats were issuing from a squat oaken hogshead of a man, somewhat shorter than Ben himself, but apparently little if any lighter. Not one of last night's tavern companions. Ben would have remembered this one.

Ben now had his back against the barn wall, hemmed in by a semicircle of lesser men, most of them fierce-looking enough to inspire some measure of respect. They kept him at bay, turning this way and that. While feints came at Ben from right and left at the same time, one of them got almost behind him with a clever rope. A moment later Ben's pitchfork had been lassoed, and a few moments after that several strong hands had fastened on him, and his dagger was plucked from his belt.

“We got him, Sarge!”

But in the next instant Ben proved to those who grasped his arms and legs that they really hadn't. Not quite, not yet. He used his arms to crack a pair of heads together with great energy.

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