

THE TIME OF THE TRANSFERENCE

A SPELLSINGER ADVENTURE

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NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR



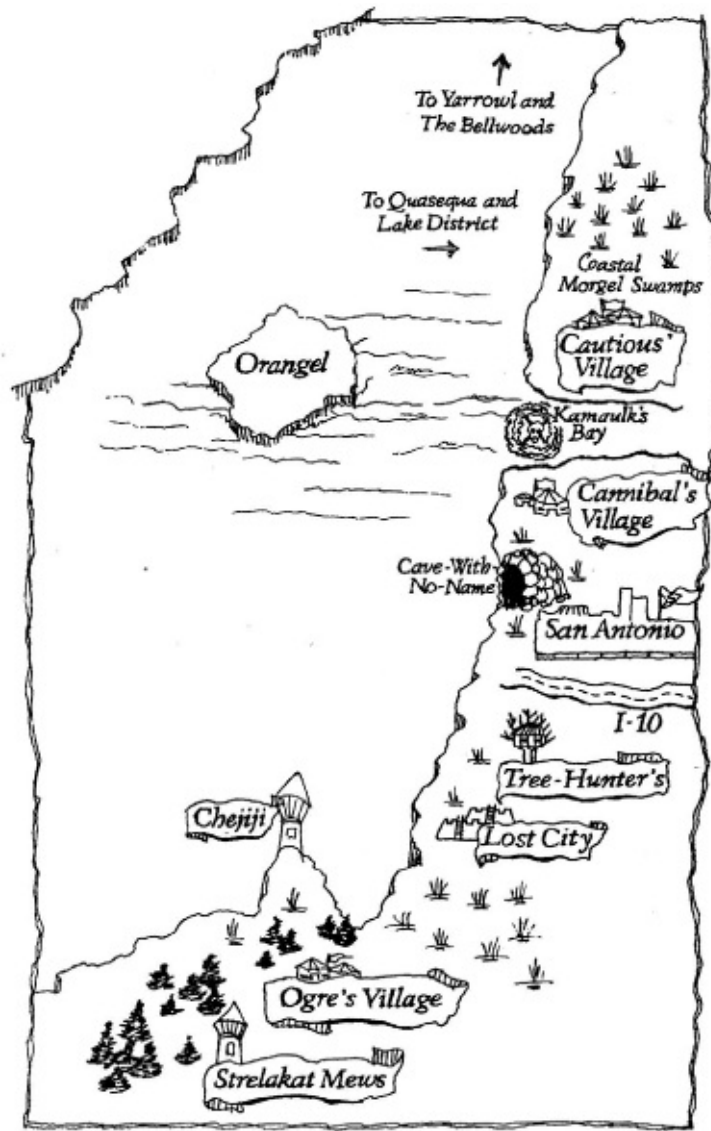
The Time of the Transference

Alan Dean Foster



For Richard and Karen and
Michele and Dawn Hirschhorn,
A small detour down the byways of life.

From cousin A, D, & F



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“JON-TOM, THERE’S SOMEONE in the tree.”

From the abyss of deep rest he replied. “Huh—what?”

Feminine fingers imprinted themselves on the flesh of his shoulder. “I said *there’s someone in the tree.*” The voice was sharp, melodious, familiar, as well it should have been.

Extending himself mightily, he opened one eye. Moonlight gilded the branches of his home and those of the belltrees that surrounded the glade of oaks. Morning was conspicuous by its absence, and there was no indication that the sun intended to put in an appearance any time soon. He listened intently.

“Go back to sleep, Talea.” He turned over slowly. “There’s no one in the tree.”

“Not our tree, idiot!” she whispered huskily. “Old hard-shell’s tree.”

“Of course there’s someone inside Clothahump’s tree.”

He told his mind to go back to sleep. His subconscious laughed at him. “Clothahump and Sorbl.”

“The wizard sleeps the sleep of the dead and I know what Sorbl sounds like when he’s drunk. This is different, Jon-Tom. Trust me, I know sounds in the night.”

He sat up, rubbed his eyes. “From stalking innocent citizens in dark alleys, no doubt.”

She punched him in the ribs. “Don’t be funny. I’ve put those days behind me. I’m serious, Jon-Tom.” She looked toward the window that punctured the tree wall. “I don’t know how you can sleep through that racket anyway. They’ve been screaming and shouting over there for half an hour. Naturally now that you’re awake they’ve stopped.”

In the silence that followed, the sound of breaking crockery and muffled oaths drifted across the flowerbed. Talea’s face whipped ’round to stare at him.

“Don’t tell me you didn’t hear *that.*”

Still half asleep, he frowned and pushed the covers forward. “I won’t, because I did hear it. Sounds like they’re having a party over there or something. Wouldn’t be the first time Clothahump’s entertained out-of-town visitors. Some sorcerors can get pretty wild when they’ve had a few.”

“If it’s a party, why weren’t we invited? You know how old shelldrawers likes to show off your music.”

“So it isn’t a party. What if they’re friends of Clothahump’s from far away and they don’t want to be disturbed?”

“I don’t care if they’re visiting from another planet. I’ve got a busy day tomorrow and I need my beauty sleep.” Angrily she put her fists on her hips. This did wonderful things to the rest of her body. He stared at her, sitting there next to him in bed, the moonlight highlighting the shadows and secret places of her body, and his thoughts drifted from the continuing commotion next door.

“You don’t need any beauty sleep. You’re perfect already.” He reached for her.

“Oh no.” She skittered away from his hands and smiled determinedly at him. “I didn’t wake you up for that. At least, not right now.” Her expression softened. “Can’t you go over there and tell them to keep it down? Even if they are wizards.” Another burst of noise from the turtle’s tree punctuated her request.

He eyed her longingly for another moment, then turned and slipped from beneath the covers. Winter was loosening its grip reluctantly this year, so he stepped into slippers and a heavy robe. While Clothahump could dimensionally expand the interior of a tree to provide its occupants with spacious living quarters, he had yet to figure out a practical way to heat one without burning the tree itself.

the ground.

Walking to the single bedroom window, he gazed across the sleeping flowers toward the immense ancient oak that the wizard called home. He thought he saw lights flickering inside, but that could be an illusion cast by the dimension spell. If it was a torch or glow bulb, it probably meant that Clothahump had caught his famulus in the chemicals again and was chasing him around the tree. He said as much to Talea without turning to face her. If he saw her sitting there naked on the bed he wouldn't be able to concentrate on anything else.

They had been living together for several months. Time enough to discover that she was as adept at making love as she had been at picking pockets, the latter a distressing habit he was having a hard time breaking her from. The dimensionally expanded tree had been a present from Clothahump. Designed, she'd noted sardonically, to make sure Jon-Tom stayed close to his mentor. Clothahump wanted Jon-Tom close at hand in case he had any more potentially lethal errands to be run. But that hadn't been reason enough for her to turn the gift down.

"Clothahump's the world's greatest wizard. It's not my place to tell him how to behave."

She yanked the heavy quilts back up to her neck. "You need an excuse to stand up to him? Okay—tell him that your sweet, demure little Talea badgered you unmercifully until you had no choice but to stumble over and pretty-please ask him to shut his exalted self up. For the rest of the night, at least. As the greatest wizard in the world I'm sure he can decapitate Sorbl silently. And if it's a party, ask him why we weren't invited." She sat up abruptly. "You do think that's all it is, don't you?"

He glanced back out the window. "I don't know. Clothahump's almost three hundred years old. You can make a lot of enemies in three hundred years. I've never known him to be up this late." More breaking sounds drifted across the space between the trees. What if Sorbl's life wasn't the one in danger?

Leaving the window he walked to the rear of the bedroom and opened the large carved armoire that stood there. In addition to clothes, boots and other personal effects it contained a small, seamless ramwood chest. He opened it and removed a curious, double-stringed instrument from the padded interior.

"If you think there's trouble," said Talea, watching him, "why don't you take your fighting staff instead?"

Jon-Tom cradled the duar against his chest, fiddled with the tuning fweeps. "If it's a party I'd look pretty fool barging in with weapons. If Clothahump's just chasing Sorbl maybe I can calm him down. And if it's something else, I'll be better armed with this than the staff."

"Not with *your* voice." She slid down beneath the covers until only her eyes were visible. Her voice was muffled by the blankets. "Hurry back. If you can get them to shut up over there maybe we can make a little noise of our own over here."

"Just stay like that." He was backing toward the doorway. "Don't move a muscle, not an eyebrow. I'll be back before you can blink."

She blinked, murmured teasingly. "What, back already?"

He turned and walked fast for the parlor, wondering if he ought to take a lantern and as quickly deciding against it. He hadn't mastered any fire songs yet and his precious supply of matches was down to four. Besides, he didn't need any more light, not with the moon half full on a clear night.

As he shut the tree door behind him the chill night air scratched his throat. He bundled the robe heavy collar up tight. Based on where the moon was pinned to the sky he thought it was between three and four A.M. An uncivilized time to be awake, much less to be tramping through hibernating flowers clad only in furry slippers and a downy robe. He knew he cut an absurd figure in the moonlight, even

though there were only small nocturnal flying lizards and phosphorescent branch crawlers present observe his passage.

As he neared the wizard's tree he slowed to peer in the front window. The parlor was dark, which strongly suggested that Clothahump was not in a partying mood. The skylight which looked down into the laboratory was equally blank.

Probably nothing more than the usual wizard-apprentice infighting, he grouched silently. Here he roused himself out of a warm bed and away from a warm woman to find out that the combatants had retired for the evening immediately prior to his arrival.

Might as well make a thorough job of it, he told himself, to placate Talea's suspicions if nothing else. He made his way around to the back of the tree. A huge root half the height of man emerged from the flank of the great oak to plunge at a gentle angle down into the earth. Set into the side of the root was a door which led not to a root cellar, but into the rear of the wizard's kitchen. The door was secured with a massive padlock.

A few appropriate notes from his duar sufficed to spring the seal. The magic words the wizard employed would have taken less time, but Jon-Tom always had a hard time remembering them. Pulling the door aside, he peered inward. No light, but this time he thought he could make out the muffled mutter of distant conversation. There was more than one voice and the whole conversation sounded agitated. He thought he recognized Clothahump's solemn tone and Sorbl's high-pitched whine.

But other voices were present.

It was not unknown for wizards to entertain visitors at odd hours, but such meetings were always held in the front parlor, not in the kitchen. He hesitated as he thought about returning home to get his ramwood fighting staff. But having already refused to bring it, such a return would only make him look foolish in Talea's eyes. Anyway, he didn't need the ramwood. He had his duar.

He felt his way down the steps that led into the tree. They led him into the back of the pantry, which was filled with preserved crawfish, river greens, bottles and jars of spices and flavorings and dressings and every other sort of victual that might appeal to the palate of a discriminating two-hundred-and-fifty-year-old turtle.

Carefully he opened the pantry door. A dim glow bulb cast faint light through the kitchen. The voices, much louder now, came from beyond. The lab was to his right down a narrow corridor. The dining room lay straight ahead. Closing the door quietly behind him, he tiptoed past the stove where Sorbl the owl toiled daily and leaned against the kitchen-dining area divider.

It was easy to make out what was being said. The voice that was currently speaking did not sound like that of an invited guest.

"Where is it? I'm getting tired of asking the same question, wizard!"

Jon-Tom clutched the duar close to his chest and slowly nudged the door outward. The glow bulbs in the dining room were running at maximum intensity and he could see clearly. Wings fastened to his side, his clawed feet tied together and his beak taped shut, Sorbl sat bound to a chair. Clothahump had been secured to another chair in the center of the room. The dining table had been shoved to one side.

Three figures confronted the stubborn wizard. None looked to be the sort one would invite to elevate the general level of conversation at a casual soiree. A tall, muscular wolf leaned on the shaft of his battle-axe and picked his teeth. Jon-Tom saw that he had only one eye. The other socket had been filled with a large cabachon citrine which sparkled piss-yellow in the glow-bulb light.

A civet cat lounged against a chair next to him. The cat's sword rested in its sheath and he held a bucket from which rose thick steam. To his right stood the portly individual who had been doing mo

of the talking Jon-Tom had overheard. The guinea pig was not cute. At four feet he had to stretch and lean over the back of the chair to which Clothahump was tied. He wore a suit of thin chain mail which jangled as he hopped up and down in anger and frustration.

Clothahump had retreated completely into his shell. The wizard's hands, feet and head were not visible. The guinea pig was leaning over the opening in the top of the shell and screaming inside. Ug scars showed on his neck where the hair had never grown back.

"Come out of there, damn you! I'm tired of talking to a carapace." He started to reach inside with his paw, thought better of it and did not. Then he stepped back and nodded to the civet cat. To Jon-Tom's horror he saw that the bucket held boiling hot mud, which the cat was preparing to dump down into Clothahump's shell.

The threat was sufficient to induce Clothahump to slowly stick out his head. He squinted in the light, his hexagonal glasses unsteady on his beak. Obviously he and Sorbl had been surprised while sleeping, before either could take any defensive action.

"For the last time, I am telling you to get out while you still have a chance." Clothahump sniffed disdainfully. "I am the world's greatest wizard. Tying me to a chair will not prevent me from turning all of you into walking flagons of pain. I will strip the flesh from your bones, slowly and agonizingly. It is only out of the goodness of my heart and out of sympathy for such blatantly ignorant morons as yourselves that I have not done so already!"

The wolf cast a hesitant glance in the direction of his leader, but the boss of the bandits wasn't fazed in the slightest by the wizard's threat.

"Typical turtle drivel. If you could do anything to us you would have done so already. Without ready access to your potions and powders you're helpless. Empty threats irritate patience already grown thin. For the last time, I say, tell us where your gold is hidden!"

"For the last time," Clothahump replied in an irritated mutter, "I tell you that I have no gold. I have better things to do with my time than spend it amassing a useless fortune. My house is rich in knowledge only, a treasure beyond compare which lies forever beyond the grasp of your soiled fingers. As my servant can attest, I keep on hand only enough money to pay my household expenses which are not exorbitant." At this blatant attempt to deflect the thieves' attention to him, Sorbl squirmed nervously in his chair, his vast yellow eyes wider even than usual.

The guinea pig spat on the clean floor. "Everyone knows that wizards like to keep treasure close about 'em." He cast sharp glances in all directions. "There are riches in this tree. I can smell them." His whiskers quivered as he looked back into Clothahump's eyes.

"The sun will be up soon and I'm tired of talking. I've no time for visiting noseys." He nodded to the civet cat. "Let's see how the old fakir likes having something a little warmer than his shell next to his skin."

The cat grinned and raised the steaming bucket. Clothahump eyed it until the first drop of hot mud began to slide over the rim. "No, wait. I'll tell you."

Holding the bucket in position, the cat glanced to his leader for instructions.

"All right, that's better. What's a little lost gold to the 'greatest wizard in the world'?" The guinea pig shoved his bristly face right up against Clothahump's. "Tell us your secret place, then, and be quick about it."

"A moment, if you please, to catch my breath." The bandit gestured curtly for the civet cat to back off. "I must think—I am very old and have not had the need to check on the condition of my hoard for some time. As your small minds have no doubt already noticed, this tree contains many more rooms than one would think to look upon it from outside."

“I’ve seen dimension-expanding spells at work before.” The guinea pig was tapping his sword sheath impatiently. “Don’t try to impress me with such as that, and don’t think to stall me, either.”

“Please be quiet.” Clothahump closed his eyes, bowed his head forward. “I have to concentrate.”

Heretofore, Clothahump’s reputation had been enough to keep would-be thieves away from his sanctuary. These three were much bolder than the rest—or much stupider. They didn’t know enough to be frightened. That did not lessen the threat they posed to the old sorcerer.

Three common thugs. Well, he could deal with them easily enough.

He took a step back and kicked open the door. It slammed against the dining room wall with a sound like a cannon going off. The civet cat nearly dropped the bucket of hot mud he was threatening Clothahump with while the guinea pig did a complete turn in midair. Raising his battle-axe, the wolf bared his fangs and assumed a defensive pose.

Jon-Tom glared down at the trio of intruders, well aware that he towered over the tallest of them. “It’s too early in the morning for fun and games.” He ignored wolf and civet cat and spoke directly to the guinea pig. “That means it’s time for sensible beings who want to live to see another morning to be in bed. That includes bewhiskered butterballs with bad table manners. The lot of you have fifteen seconds to clear out before I reduce you all to gibbering mush.”

So saying and having already chosen a suitable tune, he plucked out a few chords on the lute. The civet cat jumped away from the noise and tossed the mud bucket aside, splattering the floor. The wolf winced visibly. So did Sorbl for that matter, but not Clothahump.

“My boy, I cannot recall a previous occasion when I had reason to compliment you on your usual atrocious timing, but this makes up for it. Thank you for saving me from an indecorous situation.”

Wary but far from trembling in his sandals, the guinea pig glanced back at the bound wizard. “Who is this singing fool who carries no weapon and challenges us clad in his nightclothes?”

“This is Jon-Tom,” said Clothahump. “Just as I am the greatest of all wizards, so is he the greatest of all spellsingers. And while I do not have access to my magic potions and powders, as you have so carefully noted, you will also note that he carries his instrument of power with him. With a few fragments of song he can spin the world like a top. Or strip the fur from incautious intruders.” He looked past the guinea pig. “Have mercy on them, Jon-Tom. I know your temper, but none have suffered yet.” Now he turned to fix a warning stare on the civet cat.

“You still have a chance, albeit a fast vanishing one, to leave here with your heads still attached to your disreputable necks. Avail yourselves of it or I will not be responsible. I cannot restrain the spellsinger forever.”

The wolf was starting to retreat toward the far door. “Mebbee we better do as he says, Squig.”

“Sure is a strange looking one,” agreed the civet cat in a rasping tone.

Having chanced so much and nearly accomplished all, the guinea pig was not quite ready to concede defeat.

“So you’re a spellsinger, eh?” As he spoke he was drawing a short, thick-bladed knife from his belt. Jon-Tom did his best to ignore this as he glared down at his adversary.

“That’s right, fatso. I’ve defeated demons with powers beyond your comprehension, have freed wandering perambulators to cavort openly between the stars, have battled otherworldly sorcerers and whole armies of plated folk. Now take your weakling minions and begone, lest I loose my wrath on you all!”

As a threat it was magnificently purple, but ineffective. The guinea pig gestured with the knife, twisting the blade through the air.

“How about if I loose the blood in your veins? Since your throat is out of reach, I think I’ll start on

your legs.”

“A short serenade is in order then.” Jon-Tom launched into song. Months of practice in the tre while the world around him lay blanketed in cold and snow had made him proficient. As the first note emerged from the duar there was the taste of magic in the air.

He’d chosen the song carefully. It was designed to turn the intruders’ own weapons against them. This it did. Unfortunately, it did so with the unpredictable selectivity that Jon-Tom had come to know at his peril. There were several weapons for the magic to fasten upon: the battle-axe of the wolf, the knife of the guinea pig, the sword of the civet cat. In addition to his sword, the civet cat also possessed a natural weapon which was much superior to all the other weapons in the room combined. That consisted of the skunk-like glands that flanked its anus. It was this weapon which the spellsong loosed against thieves and innocents alike as the dining room was flooded with the most awful stink imaginable.

Flinging aside his formidable axe, the wolf put both hands over his mouth and raced for the front doorway. Knife raised, the guinea pig halted as though he’d run flat out into a brick wall, bent over and began heaving his dinner all over the floor. Also his lunch, breakfast and the undigested remnant of a previous day’s salad. As the only one in the room capable of standing his own effluvia, the civet cat grabbed his leader by the collar and began dragging him in the wolf’s wake.

Meanwhile Clothahump had retreated back into his shell to take advantage of what little protection it afforded him from this pernicious assault while Sorbl was retching uncontrollably in his bonds. Jon-Tom struggled to segue into a song that sang of sweetness and sugar. He’d defeated the intruders without having to shed a drop of blood, but the victory had proved messy nonetheless.

Civet cat, wolf and guinea pig had fled and he did not think they would soon return. As he saw them away the stink his own stomach quieted.

Eventually Clothahump’s head popped out of his shell. Eyes watering, he gingerly extended hands and feet. His words were woozy but complimentary.

“That was very nicely done, my boy. There are no rules in war, but next time it would be better if you could settle on some alternate method of sending our assailants fleeing in panic.” Indecipherable sounds of internal unpleasantness issued from Sorbl’s vicinity. The owl’s feathers were sodden with vomit. The dining room stank of something long dead and only recently exhumed.

Jon-Tom staggered to his mentor on shaky legs. “Sorry, sir. It wasn’t quite what I had in mind, but with that knife waving at me I didn’t have time to be particular.”

The wizard nodded sagely. “What you have in mind never does seem to be quite what happens. Come, help me with these bindings.” He was struggling to loosen the ropes that bound his shell to the back of the chair, nodded toward a cabinet. “Carving knives in the lower drawer. They will make quicker work of these restraints than my thick fingers.” He glanced back toward the door that led to the hallway and grinned slightly.

“It seems we have seen the last of our robbers. I am sure they will not try to come back.”

“I don’t blame them.” Jon-Tom worked with one hand while holding his nostrils pinched with the fingers of the other. “I’m ready to leave myself.”

Locating the drawer Clothahump had indicated, he chose the largest of the butchering knives with both hands and turned to cut the wizard loose. As he turned around a terrific pain went through his right foot. Neglecting to look where he was stepping, he’d spun right into the upturned blade of the battle-axe the wolf had abandoned in his precipitous flight, with the result that the naked steel had laid open his right foot from his little toe to his heel. The wound was not deep but was exceedingly painful.

Stumbling, he grabbed for the nearest chair for support. The chair overbalanced and he went down.

on top of it. As he fell he tried to stabilize himself, but the pain in his foot prevented him from doing so.

He did not worry about striking the floor, did not concern himself with damaging the chair. What troubled him beyond measure was what found itself caught up between his body, the chair and the unyielding floor. A sickening crunch filled the room as he landed. Even Sorbl, until now preoccupied with his own predicament, let out a cry of shock.

Jon-Tom rolled fast to his right, knowing as he did so that it was a futile gesture. It was already too late. Short of reversing time, the damage could not be undone. Nor could it be wished away. He sat up slowly, ignoring his bleeding foot, and stared.

Then he bent to pick up the shattered splinters of his irreplaceable, priceless, silenced duar.

THE WOODEN NECKS had been broken in several places. The resonating chamber resembled a squashed brown melon. Tiny wires and internal pieces of intricate boxwork had been reduced to toothpicks. It was just short of a total loss, a ludicrous parody of the instrument it had been a moment earlier.

Having finally freed himself, Clothahump climbed down off his chair and waddled over to inspect the ruins.

“You wish the benefit of my wizardly mien and my store of experience in such matters?”

Jon-Tom could only nod, speechless. Clothahump fondled several pieces, twirled loose wires around one finger, then looked up at his tall friend. “You sure broke the shit out of it.”

“I don’t need three hundred years of accumulated wisdom to tell me that,” the spellsinger replied sourly.

“Just underscoring the seriousness of what you’ve done. I never saw a human who could fall so gracefully.”

“As opposed to a turtle?”

“No need to discuss unrelated matters now. I do not believe it was your fault.”

Jon-Tom was too furious at himself to cry. “You were right the first time. I’m a clumsy slob and I deserve this for not watching where I put my big feet.”

“When you two finish exchanging compliments and commiserations, would one of you mind untying me?” Sorbl struggled in his bonds. “I need about half a dozen baths.”

“A truth from the beak of the unwashed, so to speak. Life never ceases to amaze me.” But despite his sarcasm, Clothahump untied the apprentice himself instead of asking Jon-Tom to do it. “Seven baths, I should say. One would think someone accustomed to exotic smells could control his stomach a bit better.”

“I’m sorry I do not have your control, master.” Sorbl slid out of the chair and tried to shake out his wings. “I think I received the full blast of that cat’s rear end.”

“No excuses. Go and get yourself cleaned up. Your odor is exceeded in unpleasantness only by your appearance. Hurry your cleansing. We now face a much more serious problem than the mere intrusion of some simple robbers. We have a broken duar to deal with.”

As Sorbl departed, walking stiffly, the wizard turned to rejoin Jon-Tom as the tall young man lovingly laid the remnants of his instrument on the dining table.

“I almost wish you’d given them the gold, sir,” he murmured disconsolately.

“I could not do that, Jon-Tom. As I told them, I hoard no gold.” He nudged bits and pieces of the duar with a finger, peering at the debris through his thick glasses.

“What now?” Jon-Tom asked him. “Without the duar I can’t make music, and without music I can’t make magic. Can you fix it, sir?”

“I am a wizard, my boy, not a maker of tootles and tweets. I can shatter mountains. Reassembling them or anything else again is a matter for a different sort of expertise. A simple drum or flute I might repair, but this,” and he gestured at the table, “is beyond my skills. I am not ashamed to admit this. Such a task is beyond the ability of but a very few unique craftsmen. To make a duar whole again requires the talent of one who understands how the stars sing to each other. I always did have a tin ear insofar as I have ears at all.”

Jon-Tom could sense what the wizard was leading up to. “It would be too much to hope that someone like that resides in Lynchbany or points nearby, I suppose.”

“Too much by many leagues, I fear. Broken instruments are simple to fix. Broken magic is much more difficult. Something like your duar which combines both is almost impossible to make well again. I know by reputation of only one craftsman who might, I say might, have the mastery to make your instrument whole once more. His name is Couvier Coulb. It is rumored he resides in the town of Strelakat Mews, which lies in the jungle south of far Chejiji.”

“I don’t know where that is.”

“Because you have never traveled that far south, my boy. For that matter, neither have I. It is a long journey.”

Jon-Tom sighed. They’d been through this before. “How did I know you were going to say that?”

“Because you have a good memory, not because you are prescient. Chejiji is a seaport on the upper southern shore of the Glittergeist Sea. If you wish your instrument repaired, that is where you will have to go.”

“I don’t know, sir. I just don’t know.” He sat down in an intact, unvomited-upon chair. “I’ve never gone on a long trip without my duar. How am I going to protect myself?”

“Disconcerting as it seems, it appears you will have to rely upon your fighting skills and your wits. Jon-Tom couldn’t be sure if the wizard was disparaging one talent or both. “If I have done nothing to sharpen the latter this past year then I have failed as a teacher. Be you magician or spellsinger, sorcerer or cardsharp, necromancer or solicitor, in the final analysis one lives or perishes by one’s wits.”

Jon-Tom summoned a weak smile. “You’ve been a good instructor, sir, and I *have* learned a lot. It is just that knowing I’m going to have to find this Couvier Coulb without being able to rely on my spellsinging to help me along the way is pretty scary.”

“It will not be the first time you have faced adversity only to emerge triumphant, my boy. I have confidence in you. Bear in mind that this is not the usual dangerous quest you are about to embark upon but merely a long excursion, as it were. You are simply going to find a repairman to have something fixed. I foresee no dangers lying in wait for you.”

Clothahump’s words cheered him a little. What was he so despondent, so concerned about? He had undertaken long journeys before, often opposed by supernatural forces. There would be none to harass him this time. He was overreacting.

Still, there was one danger he could not avoid, one that would have to be dealt with immediately.

“How the hell am I going to tell Talea that I have to go away again?”

The wizard smiled ruefully. “That is something, my boy, that you will have to do without any magic to back you up.”

“You’re going *where*? No, never mind, I heard you. I don’t understand, but I heard.”

“I have no choice, Talea. Logic says so, Clothahump says so. I don’t want to go, but of what use is a spellsinger without his instrument?”

Watching her stride angrily back and forth in the dimly lit bedroom he found it increasingly difficult to stand up to her. She was wearing the diaphanous gown which had been given to her by the grateful citizens of Ospenspri. It shone like mauve smoke and revealed more of her than it hid. Motif points of crimson light lived in the material and drifted about from place to place like diatoms on the crest of a wave. They tended, for whatever reason, to gravitate to the high points of her body.

She halted in front of the single window. The moonlight enhanced the nearly overpowering effect of the gown and served to unsettle him further.

“Why doesn’t Clothahump go?” she finally whispered.

“Clothahump is the greatest wizard in the world. He doesn’t run errands for students. People run

errands for him.”

“Convenient. Sometimes I think all his moaning about his advanced age is so much rot.” A abruptly as it had bubbled forth her anger vanished and she ran to him, holding him close. “I don’t want you to go, Jonny-Tom! You’ve been through so much since you came here. We’ve hardly had any time together at all and now you want to go running off halfway across the world again.”

“Talea. ...” He put his hands on her cheeks and turned her face up so that he could look into her eyes. “I don’t want to any more than you want me to, but I have to do this. Spell-singing can’t be fake. I have to have that duar repaired.”

“Can’t you try spell-singing with another instrument?”

He shook his head. “I’ve tried. The duar is as much responsible for my success at magic as is my singing. The two are inseparable.”

“Can’t you buy another one, then?”

“There isn’t another one, light of my life. I wish it was that easy. This particular duar has special qualities that, when combined with my singing, allow me to make magic happen. The way the strings weave in and out of reality, the intricate interior of the resonating chamber—it can’t be replaced. Once fixed, and Clothahump can’t fix it. Nor can anyone else in the Bellwoods, or even Polastrindu. I have to find this Couvier Coulb.”

She pressed herself tight against him and the temperature inside the tree rose noticeably. “I don’t want to lose you, Jon-Tom. You stayed inside my mind for almost a year until I found you waiting for me there, and I don’t want to lose you. You’ve gone off on so many of these dangerous journeys that I’m afraid your luck may have run out. Even a retired thief can read the odds, and it’s time for them to turn against you. I *can’t* let you go. I won’t let you go!” She was sobbing uncontrollably now. He didn’t know whether to push her away, try to comfort her with words of reassurance, or simply let her cry out her sorrow on his shoulder.

What should have been an obvious thought finally occurred to him. “Why not come with me, then? You’ve never seen the Glittergeist. We can relax on our ship, make a real vacation out of it no matter how long it takes us to get to Strelakat Mews.”

The tears dried with astonishing speed and she took a step backward, her sorrow changing abruptly to outrage.

“You want me to *what*? Leave here, now, to run off with you on some endless ocean voyage?” She made a sweeping gesture at the bedroom. “This tree isn’t half decorated yet. In two days the curtain-maker will be here from Lynchbany, and then there are the carpets to be seen to and do you think that can be done in a day?”

“Well I. ...”

“Not a chance! Have you ever tried to order carpeting for a tree? Everything’s round and curved. There’s not a decent square corner in the place. If you think I’m going to spend the rest of my life walking on wood shavings like your precious senile old wizard you’ve got another thing coming, Jon-Tom!” She was circling the room now, rather like an eagle homing in on its chosen prey. Jon-Tom harbored no illusions as to which role he occupied in this little domestic play. She was alive with that irrepressible energy which had first attracted him to her. Trouble was, it was now directed at him and not some nameless enemy.

“I’ve got painters coming in a week. We’re going to have to dye some of this wood. I refuse to spend the rest of my life in a house where all the walls are the same color, even if it is an oak tree. And you want me to drop all that so I can run off and carouse with you? You’ve got your nerve, Jon-Tom!”

Was this the same Talea he'd first encountered so many months ago who'd come to him for help in loading one of her mugging victims into the back of a wagon? The same fiery haired, short-tempered little terror who was as quick with her sword as her tongue? His mini-Brunhilde had metamorphosed into a hausfrau.

"Cripes, Talea, you've become domesticated."

She shook an angry finger at him. "Don't you swear at me, Jon-Tom. You're going to run off and leave all the decision making to me." She had him backed against a wall now. "You'll do no such thing. You're going to stay here and help me with the decorating, help me choose colors and patterns and weaves and landscaping."

"Talea, if I don't get the duar repaired I can't spellsing. If I can't spellsing I can't earn a living. And if I don't earn a living you won't have any money to pay painters and carpet makers and landscapers."

Her finger froze in mid-wag, drifted to her lower lip as she considered this new bit of reasoning thoughtfully. "Yes. That's true. Though I could always go back to work to support us. I'm a little out of practice but ..."

Now it was his turn to anger. "You'll do no such thing. You're a respectable woman now."

"I thought I warned you to stop calling me names."

"I'm not going to have you go running off knocking people in the head in dark alleys. How can you think of going back to thievery and robbery?"

"Easy. I did it for years. I'm a thieves' guild member in good standing, I've kept up my dues, and if I get caught you can always come visit me in jail. At least that way you'll be close to me."

"No way." He tried to say it with an air of finality. "You're going to stay here and do all those things you were just talking about. You're going to furnish and decorate this tree exactly the way you want."

"I could just work weekends," she argued in a small voice. "A good thief can make a lot of money on the weekends."

"No, dammit!"

Her voice fell even further. "Just one teensy little mugging a week?"

He sighed in exasperation. "I don't know quite how to explain this, Talea, but I'll try it one more time. Where I come from that kind of business is frowned upon morally as well as legally. It just doesn't sit well with me."

"Nobody has any fun where you come from." She crossed her arms and pouted.

"I admit ethics are a little more, well, liberal in this world, but that's how I feel about it. Besides, I couldn't just sit around and live off my wife's earnings."

"Why not?" She was genuinely surprised. "Most men I know would be glad to."

"I'm not most men. About the best I could do would be to give up spellsinging and magic and try to make a normal living as a musician."

"Not with your voice you couldn't." Seeing the look that came over his face she hastened to comfort him, her anger vanishing as rapidly as it had materialized. "I guess you're right, you and that hard-shelled, hardheaded old fraud. You'll have to go. I'll stay here and keep tree until you return."

He could see she was trying to bolster her own spirits more than she was trying to reassure him. "After all," she continued, "it's not like you're going off to try and save the world this time. You're just running a long errand. Like a vacation, right?"

"Right." He smiled lovingly down at her. "You're sure you won't come? It'll be an adventure."

She grinned up at him. "After my encounter with that wolverine and his perambulator I'm kind of adventured out. I like little, safe adventures, Jon-Tom, not the awesome world-shaking ones you see

to go in for. I think I'll just stay here and enjoy the feeling of being married until you come back. It's still a new sensation for me. That's enough of an adventure for me for now." Suddenly she looked worried. "Or do you think I'm getting old? After all, I'll be twenty-three in three months."

He gave her a light kiss. "I don't think you'll ever get old, Talea. I think you'll still be looking for crack skulls and pick pockets when you turn ninety."

"That's one reason why I love you so much, Jonny-Tom. You know how to say the sweetest things to a girl. Go on, get your duar repaired. Take your time and stay clear of trouble."

"I'll be back in no time, you'll see. I'm just taking a long cruise, that's all. What could happen?" He pulled her to him, lowering his lips toward hers as. ...

A loud *crash* sounded from overhead. She pulled away from him, her mood twitching from affectionate and conciliatory to angry once again.

"And while you're at it, as long as you're going *far* away, take that unspeakable vile water rat with you and see if you can't lose him somewhere in the middle of the ocean!" A second thump followed the first, not quite as loud as its predecessor but still aggravating.

The notion of having an attic in a tree was a radical one. But, he'd argued with Clothahump, if one can have a cellar, why not an attic? The wizard had shrugged and complied. After all, it was a wedding present and one could expand dimensionally upwards as easily as down. It proved a convenient place to store unpacked wedding gifts, extra furniture, household supplies, and those items which one has no use for but which are obviously so useful they cannot be thrown away. Counted among the latter was a grotesque stone sculpture which had been a present from one of Clothahump's friends, a whole collection of arms and armor which Talea cooed over and refused to part with despite Jon-Tom's insistence that they were going to live a normal, peaceful life, and one five-foot-tall, bedraggled, foulmouthed, perpetually hungry otter.

Jon-Tom blinked as wood dust drifted down from the ceiling. "I don't think Mudge is ready to leave."

"You don't make it a question," she snapped. "You make it an order."

"But Mudge is my friend. We've been through a lot, the two of us, and because he helped me on this last trip I feel like I owe him something."

"Any old debts between you have long since been squared. Don't you remember what he said after our wedding? That he'd only stay on here for a few days. That he just wanted a place to kick up his heels and relax for a week. That was months ago, Jon-Tom. He's been freeloading ever since, putting his feet up on my best furniture, tracking mud in every time he goes swimming in the river—and on top of it he stinks and he has rotten table manners."

"All otters have rotten table manners," Jon-Tom mumbled, aware it was a feeble defense. "They're not what you'd call a disciplined bunch."

"Disciplined my ass! The lot of them are crazier than a coterie of cuckoos. I thought maybe Mudge would quiet down after you and I got married, but he's worse than ever. I don't know how many times I've caught him trying to peek at me while I'm taking my bath."

"You ought to feel flattered. Usually Mudge won't waste a glance on anything without fur."

"You think so, do you? He's got you flummoxed too, then, because I happen to know that among the many diseases he's infected with is terminal satyriasis. That otter will screw anything that moves and probably a few things that don't. Sometimes I think he prefers the latter because whatever he's glommed onto can't run away."

"Come on, Talea. Mudge wouldn't lay a paw on you."

"He doesn't have to. All he has to do is look at a female, but I don't expect you to understand that."

Anyway,” she said, raising her voice and not caring if the rest of the Bellwoods overheard, much less the sole occupant of the attic above, “I want him out of my house; fur, claws, filthy teeth and all. You’ve the perfect excuse for it now. Tell him you’re off on another journey and you need him to serve as guide and companion. Isn’t that what you always told him?” She wore a deliciously predatory smile now. “A perfect reason to drag him off with you—and dump him somewhere.”

“Talea, I just can’t. ...”

She spun on her heel and marched over to the other armoire, began rummaging through the contents. Underwear and clothing went flying as she dug. “Where the hell did I put that sword?”

“Talea, we don’t want to do anything foolish.”

“Foolish?” She spoke without looking back at him. “You get that rat out of here in one piece or I’ll have him out in sections. Ah.” She removed her old sword from the bottom drawer, managing to look thoroughly incongruous standing there in the phosphorescent nightgown hefting a shaft of unyielding steel in her right hand. She was as adept with it, he knew, as any soldier.

He leaned back against the wall as he watched her head for the door. “Don’t you think,” he said softly, “that if you’re going to fight that a little more substantial armor would be in order?”

She glanced down at her nearly naked self, suddenly conscious that she was not exactly dressed for traditional battle.

“Don’t worry.” He walked over to where she stood fuming silently and gently removed the sword from her hand, laid it aside. “I promise I’ll take Mudge along, if that’s what you want. He could use the exercise anyway. His current condition is partly your fault. None of us suspected that in addition to knowing how to use a sword and bow and arrows and pike and knives and fighting staff and battle-axe and mace that you could handle a cook pot and stove equally well. He’s gotten fat on your cooking, and have I. As soon as I assure him there’s no danger involved this time and that I’ll be paying all the expenses he’ll be eager to come along. That’s Mudge, always raring to visit new places and explore new lands and cities.”

“Sure he is. He might find a whorehouse he hasn’t visited before. You promise you’ll take him with you?”

“I promise.”

She put her arms around his neck and stood on tiptoes against him. There was nothing between his body and hers save a nightgown and bathrobe, and those hardly counted.

“In that case, why are we standing here wasting the rest of the night talking when we could be over there not talking?” She nodded toward the disheveled bed.

He swallowed. “Don’t you think maybe I ought to start packing as long as we’re already awake?”

She tugged him gently in the direction of the sheets. “You need some rest before starting on such a long journey. I’ll help you pack. The first thing we need to find is your staff, and I know right where it is.”

HE HAD IN MIND to make an early start, but it was mid-morning before Talea finally let him crawl out of the bed. The pale brown sheets were all twisted around her as she lay sprawled in the middle of the mattress, watching him as he dressed. She looked like a vanilla swirl in the middle of a chocolate sundae.

“Maybe I could put off leaving for another week or two.”

She laughed at that as she sat up, shaking out covers and her shoulder-length red hair. “I don’t think so. Another night’s ‘rest’ and neither one of us will be able to walk.”

He slipped on his boots, shaky as he balanced first on one leg, then the other. “You know where my old backpack is?” She nodded. “Give me one change of clothing, plenty of dried jerky for noshing on between towns, and anything else you think I’ll find useful. That and my staff, and I’ll have Mudge ready to go by the time you have everything packed.”

“Pity you can’t leave your staff here.”

“Sorry. I might need it on the trip.” He ducked the pillow she threw at him. “What’s left of the duar’s already packaged for the trek. You can tie it to the top of my pack.” He tested one boot, then the other. “I feel naked going off like this, without that instrument resting against my ribs.”

She put her head down on the remaining pillow. “I wish you weren’t going, Jonny-Tom. But since you are, I’m going to think every day what a safe, relaxing time you’ll be having. You’ll make the best possible ship connections and you’ll be back here weeks early.” She rolled her eyes ceilingward. “Just don’t forget to put out the garbage when you leave.”

He made a face as he left the room.

The spiral staircase was located just off the parlor. As he climbed toward the attic he went over what he was going to say to Mudge. Getting the otter out of the house was going to be harder than pulling a tooth.

“Mudge?” He raised the trap door and peered into the room. “Mudge, you awake yet?” No reply. The sharply slanted roof forced him to stay in the center of the chamber. It was filled with piles of gifts, many of which had been forced on him by the grateful citizens of Ospenspri, the city he and Clothahump had recently rescued from the deleterious effects of the wandering perambulator. Most remained unopened. A single porthole allowed sunlight to enter from outside.

Beneath the glass stood a beautiful brass and turquoise bed which had been a wedding gift from one of Lynchbany’s most prominent citizens, an old friend of Clothahump’s. The reason it reposed in the attic instead of downstairs in the master bedroom was that despite its exquisite workmanship it was impractical, having been built for the shorter humans inhabiting this world. It fit Talea perfectly, but his longer legs hung over the end. They decided to keep it anyway. Some day there might be one or two little spellsingers who’d need a place to sleep. So they’d reassembled it in the attic.

Presently it was occupied by a single furry shape not unlike a large rug in need of washing. Mudge’s head lay beneath the covers facing the foot of the bed. His flexible rear end protruded from the sheet and stuck up in the air, the tail twitching spasmodically like an undersized brown flag in response to the otter’s depraved dreams. Mudge didn’t live quietly and he didn’t sleep quietly, something else Talea held against him. He tended to bounce around in the bed despite the muffling effects of Clothahump’s best silencing spells. Worse, he tended to walk in his sleep. He also talked in his sleep, which led to the discovery that he spouted more obscenities when unconscious than he did when he was awake.

Jon-Tom bent over to regard his somnolent houseguest. "Mudge? Mudgey-Wudgey? Time to get up." He yelled at the buried head. "Wake up, dammit!"

The otter's rear end subsided slowly like a leaky balloon. A head emerged from the bunched sheets near the foot of the bed. Brown eyes blinked sleepily up at him.

"Cor', wot a bloody racket. Wot's up, mate?"

"Me, and now you, and soon business."

The otter frowned, smacking his lips. "Now wot sort o' business might any civilized person be 'avin' so early in the mornin'?"

"Mudge, it's almost lunchtime."

"Lunch?" The otter's eyes snapped all the way open. He was instantly and fully awake, exploding from the bed to slide supplely and with extraordinary speed into his clothes. "Why din' you say so? Missed breakfast already, 'ave I? Well, we'll make up for it some'ow. Tell me then, lad, wot succulent viands 'as the beauteous Talea prepared for us this charmin' midday?"

"Nothing to swallow this morning but a bitter pill, Mudge. A bunch of thugs broke into the wizard's tree earlier and tried to rob him. I woke up, snuck over there, and routed them."

"'Tis a true selfless 'ero you are, mate. 'Aven't I always said so?"

"No, you've always said that I was a prime idiot for sticking my nose into other people's troubles, but that's beside the point. I fell on my duar and broke it."

That gave the otter pause. "Broke the duar, you say? Bad?"

"Reduced it to fragments. Clothahump says it can only be fixed, if it can be fixed at all, by a master craftsman named Couvier Coulb who lives in a town called Strelakat Mews."

The otter sniffed, his whiskers twitching. "Never 'eard of it." He bent over to gaze into a small mirror, preening himself. "Well, we all 'ave our little unexpected errands to run from time to time."

"We sure do. You're coming with me."

"Wot?" Mudge looked up from the mirror, placed his feathered green felt cap on his head between his ears. "Before lunch?"

"No," Jon-Tom replied in exasperation, "we can eat first."

"Well that's all right then." Fully clad, the otter sauntered toward the staircase. "Where is the Strelakat place? Up near Malderpot? Or east over by Polastrindu?"

"Neither. It lies inland from the southern shore of the Glittergeist."

"Wot, down near Yarrowl?" Mudge hesitated, then shrugged. "Well, that's not but a few day's journey by public conveyance. I could use a bit of a change o' scenery. Join me in a quick swim?"

"Mudge, Strelakat Mews lies somewhere in the jungle south of the city of Chejiji, which is clear across the ocean. When I said the southern shore, I meant the *southern* shore."

Mudge cocked a suspicious eye on his friend. "Do you know 'ow far that is, mate?"

"I have an idea."

"Then here's another idea for you to 'ave: count me out. I've 'ad me fill o' travelin' to far distant lands, I 'ave, especially in your company. Nasty things tend to 'appen to folks taggin' along with you, Jon-Tom."

"There'll be no trouble this time. We're just taking a trip to get a duar repaired. We're not marching off to save the world this time."

"Get this straight, mate: we ain't marchin' anywhere. Besides, I ain't got the stomach for another ocean voyage. One with you were enough to last me a lifetime. I'll just stay right 'ere."

"I didn't want to bring this up, Mudge, but you've been staying 'right here' ever since Talea and I got married."

“Right, and don’t think I ’aven’t appreciated the ’ospitality. I’ve enjoyed every day and every meal just as I’ve enjoyed the company.”

“Talea seems to feel otherwise,” he said quietly.

“Ah, that sweet bare-skinned redhead.” Mudge spoke wistfully. “Always was like that, ’idin’ ’er true feelings behind a fake wall o’ temper. That’s just to show the world ’ow tough she is. When she says yes she means no, and when she says no she means yes.”

“She had her sword out a few hours ago. I think that means ‘no.’”

“Wot a sense o’ humor. You’re a lucky male, Jon-Tom.” The otter chuckled.

“I believe,” he continued dryly, “she intended to come up here and cut your heart out.”

The otter shook his head. “Wot a laugh, your Talea!”

Jon-Tom glanced toward the stairway. “In fact, I think I hear her coming up now.”

The otter’s smile vanished instantly and he bounded back behind the bed, the amused expression on his furry face now replaced by one of stark terror.

“Don’t let ’er get me, mate. I’ve seen ’er like this before. She goes crazy. You can’t talk to ’er, not one can, not even you.”

Jon-Tom suppressed a smile. “I think she’s gone back down—for the moment. No promises, but if you agree to accompany me I think I can calm her down long enough for us to slip out of the house without bloodshed.”

Mudge looked uncertain. “Got to cross the ’ole Glittergeist, you say?”

Jon-Tom nodded slowly. “And then an unknown stretch of jungle after we leave the boat.”

The otter considered silently before replying. “I ain’t so sure I wouldn’t be better off just takin’ my chances with Talea’s sword.”

“Don’t tell me you’re afraid of a little bitty gal like Talea?”

“You ’aven’t seen that ‘little bitty’ one fight the way I ’ave. She’s ruthless as a magistrate on a ’angin’ day.”

Jon-Tom turned and started down the stairs. “You coming with me or not?”

“Give me another minute to think it over, mate,” the otter pleaded.

“I can hear her banging around down there with that sword. Sounds like she’s getting herself good and worked up.”

“Okay, okay.” The otter rushed out from behind the bed. “Just keep ’er off me, will you?”

“Let’s go,” Jon-Tom suggested. “It won’t seem so bad on a full stomach, although,” and he glanced down at the bulge that was straining the limits of the otter’s waistband, “you don’t look like you’ve been empty for some time.”

“Right. Always a good idea to eat and then talk. Besides, if she’s wieldin’ a servin’ spoon she can handle a sword.” He was careful to follow his host down the stairs.

“A wonderful meal, luv.” Mudge leaned back in his chair as if to accentuate the compliment, wiping grease and fragments of food from his lips. “All those years you and I were pickin’ pockets and relievin’ undeservin’ citizens o’ their oversized wallets and you never dropped a ’int that you could cook as well as you could cut.”

“We all have hidden talents, Mudge.” Talea was cleaning off the stove as she spoke. Clothahump’s tree-expanding spell hadn’t provided for a separate dining area so the rough-hewn table was located in the middle of the kitchen.

“That we do,” the otter agreed contentedly. “Wot might you suppose mine would be?”

“I think you’d make a fine salesman,” she replied, wiping her hands with a damp rag. “You’ve

always been as fast with your tongue as with your feet.”

“Crikey, that’s wot all the ladies tell me. But, says I, why haul a lot o’ goods around the country to sell when ’tis easier and cleaner to relieve folks o’ their coin without burdenin’ them with shoddy goods in return?”

“Something called morals.” Jon-Tom was finishing the last of his lunch.

The otter’s brows drew together. “Morals, morals—let me see now. I’m sure I’ve ’eard that word somewhere before, lad, but at the moment its meanin’ escapes me. Some sort o’ fruit or something ain’t it? Grows up north somewheres?” Jon-Tom could only shake his head ruefully.

Mudge slipped out of his chair and stretched. “’Tis been a wonderfully relaxing few days, it has, but I know when I’ve overstayed me welcome. No, you needn’t try to talk me out o’ leavin’.” He put up his restraining paw despite the fact that his hosts were not exactly imploring him to change his mind. “For be it from me to strain a friend’s largess. I can see that ’tis time for old Mudge to be movin’ on. There say the opportunities for ungainful employment in Malderpot are ’ot just now. I think I’ll mosey on up that way and check out the scenery, so to speak.”

Jon-Tom put his fork aside. “Just a minute. Aren’t you forgetting something?”

“Forgettin’ somethin’?” The otter mumbled to himself for a moment, then he said brightly, “Course. Don’t worry, mate, I’ll see to me kit and me weapons before I takes me leave. Wouldn’t do for old Mudge to go traipsin’ off without ’is weapons, now would it?”

“Certainly not, considering the length of the journey that lies ahead of us.”

“Us? Long journey? Oh, you mean that brief ocean voyage you were tellin’ me about. I’m sure it’ll do you well, mate. The sea seems to agree with you. When you get back you ’ave to look me up so you can tell me all about it.”

Jon-Tom’s sense of humor was ebbing rapidly. “You’re forgetting something else. You’re comin’ with me, remember? You agreed.”

“Piffle. Surely you didn’t take that serious, lad? Now, if your life were in danger or it were a truly serious situation, why, I wouldn’t ’esitate to tag along to back you up.”

“You don’t think the fact that my duar is shattered is serious?”

Mudge shrugged. “Serious for you maybe; not serious for anybody else. Not my responsibility, ain’t. As I said, if you were off to save the world. ...”

“You’d be so eager to come along you’d be tripping over your own feet, I know,” Jon-Tom said evenly. “Now you listen to me, Mudge. You go upstairs and pack your things, but not for Malderpot. We’re leaving for Yarrowl in half an hour.”

“Yarrowl? I ain’t got no business in Yarrowl, mate.” The otter stared back at him out of steely dark eyes. “I might accompany you for a day or so just so’s to make sure you start off on the right road, but then I promise you mate, I’d just kind o’ slip away quiet-like some night in the woods.”

“You never did anything like that before.”

“Me conscience were never clear about it before. Knowin’ this time that I weren’t abandonin’ you to some ’orrible danger, I wouldn’t have a second thought about it.”

“You’re going to do exactly as Jon-Tom says.” Both of them turned to look at Talea.

“Don’t you o’ all folks go appealin’ to me ethics, redfur.”

“Why would I appeal to the nonexistent?” She walked from the sink to a nearby cabinet that held her household papers, searched through the second drawer until she found several sheets clipped together. As she spoke her eyes traveled down the pages.

“Mudge the otter: Expenses Incurred.” The otter gaped at her, then at Jon-Tom, who wore an equally blank expression. “Room and board; three meals a day, sometimes four; evening snacks

transportation to and from Lynchbany; laundry—want me to read you the totals, or should I just go on with the list?”

“Now wait a bloody minute, luv! I’m your bloomin’ friend from years back, I am. Did I charge you for the times I bailed you out o’ damp jails, or protected your arse against a concealed blade? Wot all this rot about expenses, then?”

She handed him the papers. “Keep that for your records, if you want. I have a copy.”

Mudge’s eyes ran rapidly down the list. “This is bleedin’ outrageous, is wot it is! ’Tis not only illegal and immoral, ’tis outright insultin’. Wot kind o’ friend o’ me youth are you, anyways?”

“A cautious one. That’s one thing *you* taught me. Of course,” and she smiled sweetly at the furious otter, “we can forget the whole bill.”

“You’re bloody right we can.” He ripped the sheets to shreds and with great dignity deposited them in the middle of the table. “That don’t mean snake-pucky. ’Tis fit for nothin’ but wipin’ one’s arse.”

“I’m sure you noted that toilet paper was included on the list,” she replied calmly. “On the contrary that is a perfectly valid contract. Reception of services is sufficient proof of agreement to pay for services received. That’s one thing *Jon-Tom* taught me.”

“Bloody solicitor,” the otter grumbled, glaring up at Jon-Tom. “I made no such arrangements to pay for anythin’ when I came to stay ’ere as your guest.”

“The judge won’t know that. Who do you think he’ll believe, Mudge?” She walked over and stroked the fur on the back of his neck. He jerked away, but not very violently. “The honest, respectable wife of a noted local citizen, or a thoroughly disreputable peculator like yourself?”

“Peculator?” The otter turned on Jon-Tom. “Will you listen to this female, mate? You’re ruinin’ ’er, you are.”

“Oh, I don’t know.” He leaned back in his chair. “She doesn’t look particularly ruined to me.”

“Which’ll it be, Mudge?” She looked at her husband. “You were right. This *is* almost as much fun as carving someone up with a knife.”

“It’s pretty much the same thing where I come from, light of my life.”

Mudge sat down heavily. Talea didn’t let up on him. “Answer me, water rat. Do you ship out or pack up?”

Displaying his unparalleled mastery of the blue funk, the otter stared at the floor for several moments. Finally he squinted up at Jon-Tom. “You promise me this ain’t no ruse? You ain’t tryin’ to trick poor Mudge into takin’ off on another o’ your wild, life-threatenin’ trips to the backside o’ hell?”

Jon-Tom solemnly raised his right hand. “I swear we’re only taking a little ocean voyage to get my duar repaired. I don’t anticipate any trouble and I’m not going to go looking for any.”

“Huh,” the otter grunted. He swiveled his head to look at Talea. “Wot ’appens when we gets back?”

“I tear up all copies of your bill.”

“Bill, that’s a laugh.” He licked his lips and whiskers. “Do I get me room back?”

“Over my dead body.”

“Wot if this don’t turn out to be the picnic Jon-Tom claims it to be?”

“I’ll bury you in the backyard. That far I’ll go. I’ve no objection to having you around so long as you don’t have to feed you, listen to you, or smell you.”

“You always was generous to a fault, luv. Was one o’ the things I liked about you. Almost otterish.” He smiled in spite of himself. It was impossible for Mudge to stay gloomy for long. “Ah well. If one has to be outfoxed, ’ow better than by the sauciest vixen in the ’ole Bellwoods.” He rose to confront Jon-Tom. “I’ll be comin’ along then, mate, but I warn you: If you’re tryin’ to pull a fast one I’ll be away from your side faster than a celibate at a doxy’s convention.”

“No tricks, Mudge. I promise. You and I are going to relax and enjoy a pleasant sea voyage, at the conclusion of which we’ll do a little business with a master craftsman. Then we’ll come home. That’s all. I’ve never been that far south or on an ocean voyage that long. It ought to be educational.”

“Aye, that’s wot worries me. Every trip I’ve accompanied you on ’as been too bloody educational. Spying an unconsumed slice of Talea’s delicious tokla bread, he lunged toward the table and plucked it off its plate. He did not offer to share it with his traveling companion.

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