

# The Swordsman's Place

by John Steakley

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Cri had called to me through my dreams nine nights in a row.

I knew what it meant.

I was going back. . . .

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Some time back something happened to my best buddy, Lanny Weaver, and me. It was the worst thing that could happen to two young bucks with more muscles than sense—we had our wishes granted.

Don't talk to me about dimensions and different planes of reality and magic and all the rest of it, okay? I don't *know* how it worked but somehow he and I were transported to a different . . . Place. A Place described in great detail in the Horseclans novels, our all-time favorite adventure stories.

We were young, understand, like I said. Young and romantic and stupid and convinced that the world—this entire rich and varied Earth—was boring. (I know, I know. I *said* we were young.) And we used to fantasize about living the Horseclans life, about how much more fun it would be to be swaggering around with our swords, etc., etc., and then . . .

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Then we were there and it was just as we had read it was only more so. More beautiful, brighter, more hypnotic. And more bloodstained and more brutal and more piteously savage than any modern war. And if you wonder how I can say that, think of this: A war, even a modern mechanized genocide, ends eventually. In that Place, violence was not due primarily to war, but to life-style. Wanton, slogging anarchy.

You know, freedom.

We told some people there about our world and they were amazed and we told them we liked it there better and they were more amazed and said we were crazy and they were right. Soon, once the fighting started, we agreed with them.

We were awfully glad to be back. Further, we had no desire to return. None. Zero. Only . . . maybe I'd better start with the nightmares. I had a lot of 'em about that Place. But not about what had already happened. Mine were about being back there, being dragged back to the mud and misery.

There was absolutely no reason for these fears. I didn't even understand how I'd gotten there in the first place, so why should I think I'd be forced to return? And Lanny didn't have those nightmares, I knew, because in a drunken moment I'd confessed them to him and he'd told me so. For a time I did manage to convince myself that only I was having the dreams because I had hated the place, had feared the place, so much more.

Wrong.

I did hate it and I did fear being drawn back there to the stumbling peasants and poleaxe justice and chaotic swordplay. It was awful so often and mindless so much more, a terrible place, and as much as I had hated it and had feared it I had also, God help me, loved it. Not all of it. Not even most of it. But enough of it to tell you a lot about me.

I'm big for six feet and 210 pounds and I'm fast and strong as a bull and I can use a sword like you can a tennis racket and I have no excuse for deciding to learn so senselessly hostile a skill. But I did.

So maybe that's why I feared going back. For loving

just enough of it—for being the *kind* of man who could love it at all—that maybe, just maybe, I deserved no better.

So when Cri called out to me in my dreams, I knew what was coming.

Cri (from a family name) Palema was the biggest beauty I had ever seen. Long blond hair, glowing eyes, lustrous features of near-perfect skin, all packed into five feet five inches high and 250 pounds wide.

Fat, you say. Well, yes and no. I thought she was overweight—I like 'em skinny. But she didn't. She knew just what she was doing. She liked her weight, liked the look and the feel of it, and she was by no means alone. How that gal could attract men! Her face and hair were wonderful, of course, but I think it was the way she moved and swirled or maybe it was just the way she had of caressing herself into an easy chair and smiling like the Cheshire Cat. It made a man think of those chubby naked cherubs from ancient wall murals advertising the Eternal Orgy in Paradise. There is something fundamentally carnal in the look of those women. Carnal and, somehow, pure.

Cri had that look. And, therefore, her pick of men.

She had been the only person Lanny and I had told about our experiences. About the Place. About Smada.

Trebora Smada was the main focus of our adventure. He conned us, stole from us (both money and women), outfought us, outthought us, and outdrank us and I never hated anybody so much in my life. Or, I guess, loved, too, and Cri seemed fascinated by our description of him, asking me over and over to try to recall the smallest detail of his appearance. Actually there weren't many small details—Smada was a bigger-than-life type in most ways. But Cri seemed satisfied with what little I had to offer. And she certainly made the most of it. She was an artist in charcoals and one day I jumped about three feet when I saw a dead-on portrait of Smada in her studio.

At the time, of course, I just thought I'd described him so well. Live and learn.

Cri called only my name in the dreams. But I knew more was being said. You see, I owed her one.

Three years back, even before my trip to that Place. A hotel suite in Miami. We were down there for a science fiction convention. We had heard the guy who wrote the Horseclans was going to be there and maybe he was but we never got a chance to see him. Anyway, it was Thursday and the show didn't start until Friday and Cri had conned her current lover (some writer whose name I can't recall) into letting us use his suite for a little seven-card stud. By five in the morning, only six of us were left. Myself, Cri, two guys down for the convention to sell old collectors' comic books, and two Cubans who had just sort of wandered in at midnight and joined the game. We hadn't much minded. They had been losing steadily. But they were a scary pair, believe me.

They got scarier-looking in a hurry when I won the last and biggest pot of the night. They exchanged glances, visibly deciding whether or not to let it go or just start the rumble right then. Looking at them I had the strong feeling that armed robbery was more than just a hypothetical concept to them.

But then they relaxed, sighed, said adios, and split along with everyone else but Cri (who was staying there, of course) and me. I sat happily dragging the winnings against my chest and I noticed Cri was staring oddly at me. Or rather, at my cards. I smiled proudly. I had won with a small diamond flush: the nine, the six, the three, and the two fives.

Huh? *Two* fives? But there they were. I hadn't noticed it before, and neither, thank God, had anyone else.

But Cri had been hip to them all along.

"Why didn't you sing out?" I asked.

"Several reasons, my lad. I'm too tired to care, I know you're not a thief—and I didn't want that Cuban carving you up."

"He had a knife?"

"Matter of opinion. Something big enough to paddle all the way here from Havana can still be considered a knife, I suppose."

I gulped. "Where was it?"

"Inside your standard, everyday, foot-long shoulder holster."

I gulped again. "Thanks, luv. Want some of the pot?"

"I didn't win it."

"Neither did I, apparently."

"Hm. Good point. I'll take . . . that hundred." And she scooped it up off the pile and out of sight down the V of her blouse and scooted me out of there.

"Thanks again," I said as she closed the door. "I owe you one."

It was just one of those things you say. But by the morning it was true.

The Cubans came right through the door twenty minutes later carrying shotguns and had her down on the floor before she could scream. They were very disappointed to find only the hundred in her blouse and demanded to know my name and room number. She knew both but wouldn't tell so they beat her bloody and semiconscious. They hadn't spotted the extra five of diamonds. They weren't there to avenge an injustice. They just wanted their money back, and, being the kind of scum they were, they'd decided to steal it.

For the same reason, no doubt, they took turns raping her until seven a.m., when they heard the writer's wake-up call from the bedroom and ran off.

She was in the hospital three weeks. But when first aroused in intensive care, her only concern was for me. Seems she couldn't remember if she'd told them about me or not.

She hadn't. Quite a broad. I definitely owed her one.

Which only means she had a right to call for my help. It doesn't mean I didn't still hate her for doing it. I did hate her for it.

Because I could tell she was calling to me not from this world, but from that other one. Cri was in that Place.

## 2.

The ninth dream in as many nights ended at three a.m. and I woke up. I stared at the shadowy ceiling a moment, then swung my feet over the bed and turned on the light. I lit a cigarette. My house felt even lonelier than usual. Even the surrounding woods were silent and thoughtful. I was used to the place being empty; I'd been losing what little family I had for three years. My mother was long gone since I was small, but my father and two of my stepsisters (I was adopted) had all died within fourteen months of one another. The third had moved to New England, of all places, with a new husband; he hated my guts and I his. The grandparents were gone even before my mom and that left only a black sheep Uncle Luke doing three to six for mail fraud.

So, alone. No real family and so no real holidays to mark my life and no real job, either. I'd inherited quite a bit I had quickly sold off. I still kept three bookstores in the city (science fiction, of course), but the college kids who ran them could catch those little comic-book shoplifters without my help.

So what did I do? I worked out with my swords in the woods every day until my lungs and muscles were raw, carving up on trees and sometimes myself. And I maintained my swords. Every day. Sometimes I watched television and sometimes I took a bath and changed clothes and sometimes I reread favorite books or went into town for more cigarettes and two or three times a week I drank myself blind and woke up somewhere on the property.

Everyone should have a routine.

Several times a year I would make plans to attend another science fiction convention or SCA (Society for Creative Anachronisms) event but at the last minute I'd get drunk instead. I still loved the things. But those plastic-thonged kids in costume swords are saddening after you've been to the blood and back.

I was semi-engaged for a while but she left me. She took the microwave oven, both dogs, and my pool.

man to Long Beach, California. I thought it was an interesting choice.

Lanny Weaver and I had drifted apart since the Place. My bizarre life-style, or lack of it, depressed him, I suppose. I didn't blame him. Neither did I consider telling him what I knew in my heart was about to happen. The last time Lanny had gone there, he had "died." No point in bringing him along again even if I had wanted to risk him, and I didn't.

This was my punishment. No one else's.

I wrote him a note, though, and addressed it to him and propped it on the broad hearth downstairs. I owed him that much to keep him from wondering.

By then it "felt" like time to go. I can't explain it any better than that. I could just feel the transition coming on to my soul, surrounding and enveloping my sense of myself as part of the space around me. Okay?

Well, it'll have to do.

I smoked another cigarette through and drank a scotch and water. Then I drank another one sitting in the tub. I sat and drank for several minutes. I was trying to come up with a new way to think.

Because this was going to happen. Now. That night. I was going to be there soon. In that Place. And I had to find a way to keep from . . . from what? Panic?

Yeah. Panic the moment my foot touched on those dusty roads. Complete utter panic. Damn. I could see myself throwing my weapons down and running in circles pleading to the heavens to send me back home to . . . to what? To passing out three times a week? To whom? Nobody?

To hell with it, I thought suddenly and with that thought the hairs on the back of my arms stood up. To hell with it. If I was going to die anyway, why not die fighting? Why not go out with a little touch of Style?

I could feel my wide grin forming and I knew it would have been a scary sight to anyone who had seen it. I didn't care. The scotch was helping this bravado a bit. But Style was pulling me the rest of the way.

I rose from the tub, carrying drink and cigarette and grin, and went into the other room to get ready to have at it.

Ten minutes later I was a lethal weapon. Boots, leggings, all my soft armor, the broadsword, the small knife, three daggers—most everything I had that hurt people. Everything "legal," that is. For I knew once I went over my zippers would change to buttons (as before) and anything else I carried which didn't "fit" wouldn't come across with me at all. I carried a leather pouch with goodies in it, metal coins and the like.

At the last moment I got Wishful-Thinking Disease and shoved a pack of cigarettes in.

Then it was time. I stood in front of a full-length mirror wearing my new short life and stared myself as hard as I knew I could be.

"C'mon," I growled sourly, "let's get this done."

There was a flash of sound-light and then subzero ice-cold darkness. I felt myself falling. . . .

## 3

I woke up, sure enough, on another dusty road. The trees on each side of the road spread a rich canopy above me, all but eclipsing the deep blue sky. There was a slow-moving river off to my right, broad and deep, a thick woods to my left, broader and deeper, and, right in front of me, a saber-toothed tiger eyeing me calmly.

At first I thought it was a dream. The sky too blue, the woods too green—that sort of thing. Then I saw it was no dream. Or rather, smelled it. Trust me, a cat that size has a whiff to it. By "that size" I mean . . . well, imagine the biggest fastest motorcycle you've ever seen with teeth the size of the handgrips running around loose looking for fuel.

"Are you the One?" it asked me without speaking, reminding me where I was, the Place, the Horseclans Place, and reminding me also that this was no saber-toothed tiger: It was smart. It was a telepath.

It was a prairiecat.

"Are you the One?" it beamed to me again.

"The way my luck's been running—probably," I replied out loud.

It turned its head this way and that like a housecat. It beamed confusion. But not, thankfully, anger or irritation. It seemed to be intrigued, though. He did, I should say. For it was clearly a male.

"Come with me," he beamed. "I am your Guide and your Shelter."

"My Shelter?"

"Your thoughts cannot be stolen within my closeness."

"I see. Who would wish to steal them?"

"Enemies."

"That's a lot of help."

"You are welcome," he replied.

I laughed shortly. Prairiecats weren't hip to sarcasm, it seemed.

"You are pleased?" he asked, noticing my laughter.

"That depends. Where are you taking me?"

"Lord Smada."

Now, *that* figured. Who else would be in on this but the old con man himself? I thought of objecting but what was the point?

I sighed, nodded, stood up. We started off down the road. We walked for a pleasant hour, the leafy ceiling rolling slowly above us, the great animal padding softly in front. This Place, whatever else it was, was indeed beautiful. And rich and full and wondrous. It was impossible, walking beneath such majesty, taking in that healthy soft air, not to feel more alive.

Even if you had been brought here to kill.

To hell with it! I thought again, even more strongly than before. Whatever happens, happens. There was a touch of righteous anger involved as well. For I hadn't done anything wrong! I had never really hurt anyone except when I had been in this Place, and it was damned unfair to bring me back to do it some more.

Just because I enjoyed doing it was no reason to make me do it.

We turned away from the river road after a while and started cross-country. It wasn't much harder going. The few really thick sections of undergrowth were easily avoided and the grass was luxurious and deep. It made you wonder why anyone would want to use the roads at all if he wasn't with a caravan or something.

Still, I wasn't used to this sort of sustained tramping and asked the cat if I could rest. "Of course, little two-legs," he beamed, and we sat.

Maybe he did have a sense of humor after all, I was thinking, until I felt the cat's disdain come over with his thoughts.

Sitting there I decided to take inventory. As expected, every single aspect of my possessions that did not fit this Place had been altered. Zippers to buttons, plastic shoelace eyes replaced by wooden ones, that sort of thing. There were odd runes and mysterious hieroglyphics instead of American presidents on my coins. My Premium California Red Table Wine had been changed to something like the stuff my aunt used to keep in an uncovered carafe in her formal living room for years at a time. My army-navy store magnesium match was now a couple of hunks of flint.

All my toilet paper was gone.

Incredibly enough, my cigarettes were not. They looked different and tasted awful but there they were, right down to the coarse parchment package with "L&M" on the front.

Weird. But then again, nice to know Someone had a sense of irony in this Place.

We began again a few minutes later. We walked several miles, stopping twice more. And everything was amazingly vibrant and alive and breathtaking and I remembered something Lanny had said when last we were here. He'd said he thought it wasn't really the Horsecians world. It was too perfect. Too much like a movie. It wasn't the world of those books or the world of our birth. It was something in between.

It was something raw and full of purpose.

It was getting almost too dark to see when we spotted the campfire. The cat stopped on a knoll and sat down, its huge tail curling behind it.

"Smada?" I whispered.

"No," he beamed back. "Your comrades-in-arms."

They didn't want me.

They sat or lay sullenly around the fire surrounded by the cracked and broken masonry of what used to be some sort of building and stared hard-eyed in my direction. No one stood up to greet me after the cat told them my name. No one spoke to me or to anyone else. A couple of them exchanged disgusted looks.

There were eight of them, ranging in age from late teens to one old salt who was sixty if he was a day with the thickest gray hair and beard I had ever seen. He would have looked like a hippie had it not been for all those jagged scars on his face and the huge broadsword lying beside him. Oddly enough, his face was the most pleasant of the lot. Well, not his face. But his eyes. Clearly, he was not automatically ready to hate me as the others seemed to be.

But neither had I sold him. He did not return my nod. The cat then made an interesting little statement. He backed away to the edges of the firelight and lay down with his muzzle propped up on his forepaws. Watching.

It looked like audition time.

And you know what? That pissed me off. I hadn't asked to be here. I hadn't asked to be the One. I hadn't asked to be stuck out here in the darkness of Never-Never Land with a bunch of raggedy-ass swordsmen too stupid to know what antiperspirant was, much less know how very badly they needed it. A little dentistry wouldn't have hurt either. Make that a lot of dentistry.

I snorted as loudly as I could, stepped over to the fire, and lit one of my prehistoric cigarettes off one of the embers. Then I plopped loudly down on a stone and blew a smoke ring in the most impudent and irreverent manner I could manage.

To hell with it! Remember?

I don't think they'd ever seen a cigarette before. But "Well, screw you, too, buddy!" translates everywhere.

Their reply came right away. Gruffle was the guy's

name. Long tangled black hair, a tall wiry build, a short wide sword, and a barroom-bully sneer. Did I mention dentistry?

He stood up with an exaggerated groan and raised himself to his full height, which was maybe two or three inches beyond my own. He put his hands on his hips and stared at me for a bit in a way calculated to have me see how unimpressed he was. Then he regarded his fellows.

"For one full day and part of night we have waited for such as this? We were told to await a leader—I see none. We were told to await a man of power—I see none. I see no power. And truly, I see no man."

And with that he took a couple of dramatic steps around the fire and stood staring down at me.

I had to admit it—there was a certain perfection to this crap. Not enough that I'm brought here against my will. Not enough that I'm obviously meant to do a little fighting with these dudes. But no, first I've got to run for office. Well, I've always hated politics.

I stood up slowly, stepped up to him, smiled, and kicked him in the balls. He folded up nicely.

"You say you saw not a leader, a man of wisdom or power . . . you saw not a man at all. Clearly, you are a man of truth." I leaned down and stared into his groaning red face. "For neither did you see my boot."

There was a pause, then a titter from the far side of the campfire. Then another and another and soon all of them, led by the old gray one, were laughing uproariously. They were still laughing when Gruffle finally managed to unwrap himself and climb to his knees. I pointed him toward the spot he was in before. He clambered over and sat down, rubbing himself. I remained standing.

"To be sure," I began, "his words are not without merit. I do not know how I have come to this Place. I do not know why. I do not know what is desired of me. I do know this, however." And with that I strode right into the center of them, just beside the flickering fire so they would be looking up at me. "I do know that I am the One. And if you have need of me, then

you should tell me what you want. And I . . ." I looked directly at the old gray one. "I will tell you what I will do."

The old one met my eyes. I saw a grin begin to form on his mouth and something else, respect, appear in his gaze. He stood and held out his right hand. I gripped his forearm almost to the elbow and he mine.

"We are well met, I believe, Fee . . . ?"

"Felix," I finished for him. "And who might you be?"

He was their daddy. Well, daddy to several of them anyway. He was grampa to the two youngest. I'm not much good at names and I never got all of 'em right, I don't believe. But the old one's name was Orman. His sons were: Gruffe, the tall one. Grussle, the blond one. Temblar, the pretty one (and he really was; folks—pretty enough to be a girl—and, while I'm at it, strong enough to be a Volkswagen). And . . .

Dammit, I just don't remember. There was another black-haired one with a sharp nose, really pointed. And there was one who chanted quietly to himself a lot but almost never spoke. There were five boys altogether and two grandsons. I was bigger than all of them except for old Orman and taller than all of them except Gruffe.

Intros over, I sat down on a rock next to Orman to get the lowdown. The cat came over to "listen." I made it clear from the beginning just how in the dark I really was. Briefly, I related to them my only experience with Smada—which they all found hysterically funny as well as typical of the old smart-ass. Particularly the part about Lanny and me passing out in the hallway outside his room waiting vainly for him to send some of the tavern whores out.

The part about how we—Smada, Lanny, and I—had taken out the Greydon and his dark soldiers impressed the hell out of them. Seems that one was one of those oft-told legends thereabouts. I had the distinct impression from Gruffe's look that he never would have messed with me at all had he known I was *that* Felix.

It didn't seem a good time to tell them how utterly terrified I had been the whole time.

Finally we got down to it.

"Smada," began Orman, "has been taken by the Dead."

"You mean he's dead?" I asked, surprised at my own alarm.

"He may well be," offered Grussle (the blond one).

"I don't dig you."

"What?"

"I don't understand," I translated. "Is he dead or isn't he?"

Orman looked grim. "I know not," he said quietly. "I know only that he has been taken by the Dead."

I sighed. "Okay, let's try again: Who are the Dead?"

They were, it turned out, just that: dead. Corpses, stiffs, old news, etc., etc. Only they didn't know it. They kept walking around. Sometimes they did more than just walk. Sometimes they killed people. And sometimes they ate them afterward.

I was in a zombie movie.

Smada had been nabbed by these critters. He was being taken by them to a place called Keep of the Dead, where their leader, some scumbag named Gor, was going to have what he called his "final revenge." Seems he and Smada had had a little difference of opinion upon occasion.

It was nice to know the old fool had *some* standards.

But hang on, it gets worse.

The entire countryside was infested with these ghouls, stalking blankly around looking for—are you ready?—us. The Orman family, long indebted to Lord Smada, were known to be the only people brave enough or loyal enough to help him out. They were being led, rumor had it, by the One. Or rather, Smada's One. Felix. Me.

Ouch.

It was getting late and we had a long way to travel to try to cut off the procession dragging Smada to the Keep. We decided to turn in. I lay on my back puffing on one of my burlap L&Ms and stared at the most beautiful starry sky imaginable.

Well, except for not wanting to come here in the first place, and then being dragged here against my will and then having to fight damn near the first person I met and being expected to go save the life of a man who delighted in making a fool out of me *plus* being chased around by flesh-eating zombies . . .

Except for all of that, it was great to be back.

I rolled over and dreamed of shopping malls and Saturday-morning cartoons and the Democratic Party—all the things I had always hated and now missed with an almost sexual fervor.

Oh, well. Live and learn. And die.

## 5

The first zombie killed Grussle, the blond one, by ripping half his throat out with black teeth the moment we stepped through the tavern's side door. I had my sword in my hand without recalling having reached for it. Out and at the ready and . . . nothing. I just stood there and stared at the nightmarish sight. They had gray dead skin and black teeth and long black nails and shiny red eyes and they were everywhere, filling the tavern, rushing at us, and they *lusted!* How they *lusted!* Coming at us in a wild frenzied jumble, and I heard someone scream to my side, one of the Orman boys, and I saw poor Grussle trying to scream; oh, how he tried to scream, but he had nothing left to scream with, and then one was on me and I shoved my blade right through its throat with a two-handed perfect lunge and . . .

And it didn't care.

It just kept jamming itself forward at me, *along* my sword through its neck, black blood flying and splattering through the air, and I jerked my blade to the left and free, collapsing one side of its neck, but the other side still wanted me, and I spun all the way around, I spun and brought my blade around like a propeller and beheaded it, but there was another one right behind it leaping through the air at me, black teeth shining dully, red eyes flashing, and I ducked

and it went over my shoulder and down, its awful hiss close and warm against my ear, and I turned and drove my blade through its forehead into the tavern's wooden floor, but only made it hiss and scramble more frantically, and I knew, suddenly, what to do. I popped my blade loose, leaned one step to the side, and brought the full force of my blade down across its clavicle and the head burst free and rolled out of sight into the rest of the battle.

I stood up, mouth open and blowing like a whale, to get my bearings, and felt something grab my leg. It was an arm. Just the arm. And the clutching hand.

I tore it loose and flung it away just as another ghoul came rushing at me from the side. I swung a long powerful backhanded slice for its neck but it ducked underneath or maybe my aim was just off but suddenly it was on me, face to face and hissing those glistening black teeth arched wide and back on its neck to come forward and do to me what had happened to Grussle and I couldn't get the broadsword into position so I just dropped it and grabbed the fiend by the hair to keep those black teeth from my throat and my dagger was in my other hand, my left, and I drove the blade up under its chin and we fell backward to the hard floor.

The smell! That awful deadman stench of decay! I gagged, whimpered, struggled, shoved the dagger in deeper. But it didn't care! It didn't care about the dagger or the wound or the fountain of black blood it was spilling across our faces. All it cared about was my throat, my blood, my flesh, and never had I known such complete, utter terror.

Then there were other hands, human hands, and they had the creature and were lifting him up and Orman held it off the floor by the hair on the top of its head while Gruffle chopped its head off with his short wide blade and it was all over and those of us still alive stood there huffing and puffing for the several seconds it took for the various sections to stop jerking and reaching.

I had thought there were thousands. There were only six.

And I had gotten three. Imagine that. Or two and a half.

While I was still trying to get it together, one of the Ormans released the proprietor and his staff from the locked cellar. Turned out the place was more than just a tavern and more than an inn. It was a Hall. And Markus, the owner, was famous for running the best Hall on the river. He was quite a guy. Small and lean, with a trim beard and elegant manner, he immediately dispatched his staff to clean up the carnage with no more apparent alarm than you'd expect over a dropped tray during the noontime rush.

A small covey of buxom lovelies appeared with warm water and soft cloths to clean off our gore. They also brought ice-cold mugs of ale to give us something to do while they worked on us.

The whole time Markus was watching me out of the corner of his eye. It was beginning to make me a little nervous. He apparently noticed this and came over to our table. I stood warily.

But his manner was completely friendly.

"You are the One," he said with a smile.

It felt right to nod and say: "I am."

Markus's smile was broader. "Lord Smada is my good and dear friend." He just stared at me for a moment, looking pleased and—I dunno—satisfied or something. Then he turned and snapped his fingers in the direction of a middle-aged woman supervising the clean-up. She hurried over bringing her own smile. "His rooms have been prepared for two days. This is Nasus. She is my wife." We nodded at each other. "She will show you the way."

It sounded pretty good. We had been marching cross-country since dawn, and sleep sounded better than sitting there and thinking about what had just happened. I turned to Orman, who looked pale and drained and sad, and I was thinking he was getting too old for this until I realized he had lost his son today. Tonight. Ten minutes ago.

"I am sorry about Grussle."

He nodded, looking vacantly past me. "He was my One."

Ouch. His son *and* his best fighter.

"I'm sorry," I said again.

He looked at me this time. His smile was thin. "It is the Price," he said.

I didn't have an answer to that. I just beheld his Style.

"Sleep," he said to me after a few moments. "Sleep and in the morning we will talk."

Smada must have been some good friend, all right. Or at least a big tipper. His rooms were on the third-story corner, the only rooms on that floor. They looked spacious and wide and elegant and perfectly suited to his orgy-rhythm life-style.

Markus's wife, Nasus, made me nervous. Too respectful, too much bowing. The food and drink, lavish and tasty, made me nervous, too. It felt a lot like I was being fattened up for something.

I drank some ale and smoked a cigarette. Then I drank some more ale. It wasn't much good, but it worked. But nothing would have worked as well as I wanted. I tried for a blank brain and held it awhile, pretending fascination with the way the cigarette smoke spun and whirled. Then I took great interest in noting how these rooms, this entire Markus Hall, was the cleanest place in this Place I had ever seen.

Then I gave up and admitted how well I had fought and how smug I was about it and even the rest of it: how full of shame I was and deserved to be.

The food looked great. Steaming fresh meat and a fresh salad-something. I took my nausea and ale out onto the balcony.

It was a great broad terrace with a wide carved stone railing just even with the treetops. It was an incredibly beautiful night. The moon was full and glowing, the stars shining. The river was there sending gently rippling reflections towards me and with it a lush warm breeze that smelled of affection and reward.

"It is very pure," beamed the cat.

I started, looked around. My Guide and Shelter was sprawled with lazy magnificence on a flat cornice where the railing met the wall.

"How'd you get in?" I blurted rudely.

"Get in? I leapt," he beamed back.

I walked to the railing and looked over. Thirty-five feet if it was an inch and sheer except for a small shack perhaps six feet high. That still left it about a thirty-foot jump straight up.

I grunted. I doubt if I could fall that far.

I turned back to him. "I thought you didn't like being around so many people." At least that had been his reason for not entering the village with us.

"I do not like herds of two-legs, that is true," he replied with a truly gargantuan yawn. "But many nights have your Lord Smada and myself spent thus, he with his ale and I with my moon."

"He's not so much my Lord Smada."

I could have sworn he looked confused. "Are you not his One?"

I thought about it, sighed. "So I hear."

It was quiet for a while.

"It is very pure," he beamed again.

I nodded. "Lovely night."

He turned his great head and eyed me to the core the way only cats can. "No. I mean not the night. I mean the Struggle." He stood, stretched, replaced himself. "The Swordsmen and the Dead. It is very pure. It is very clean."

I knew exactly what he meant but decided to be an ass instead.

"It was pretty messy tonight," I growled and drained the last of the ale.

He didn't respond and I didn't look at him but I could feel him staring at me for what seemed like forever until at last I had had it. I rose, said: "I'm to bed," over my shoulder and headed back inside.

"Felix," he beamed gently to me.

I stopped, turned reluctantly to face him.

"Felix, you hide your fear well."

There were a lot of things I could have said. But . . .

"Thank you," I said at last and went on in and flopped down fully dressed and slept.

I dreamed of my starving-artist phase.

When I was twenty-three I took my years of doodling fighter planes in the back of the classroom to the edges of the ghetto to become a painter. I lived in an old warehouse with several other artists surrounded by lots of worn-out, usually abandoned buildings, a couple of rubble lots, a few bars, a Vietnamese grocer, and some crime.

I was so determined, so hardworking, so pitifully eager that I got some work. Some covers on local magazines. Some caricatures. Some illustration work. That sort of thing. By busting my ass working all day long every day I made just enough money to pay my rent and buy enough food to bust my ass working all day long every day.

I was happy to do almost no thinking at all.

Amber and his wife, Simone (at least black parents try names more original than Bob and John and Pamela), lived in the loft above mine and were the center of our lives. She was always sweet and their place always clean and his work was so damned good it made your heart ache. Everyone loved them and everyone was there the night he unveiled his sketch for a two-story wall mural for the outside of our building. Amber was a tall and handsome young man the color of his name who rarely let his feelings show and when his voice choked up as he described his plan it jolted and inspired and made all of us get misty.

The sketch had already done that to me. It was of a young black couple, sweaty and hard at work. You couldn't tell what they were doing except that you knew it wasn't sex but the point was that in the midst of their work, they were looking up and sharing a private smile of satisfaction and accomplishment. It was all about hope and faith and hard work and pride and it was wonderful.

But Flash Phil thought it wasn't "black enough." Flash Phil was our local crime boss. Every shadow neighborhood, even one as deserted as ours, had a chief pig. Flash Phil was ours. He ran a little dope, a

little stolen merchandise, a few junky hookers. He spent a lot of time driving around in a purple Caddy convertible, stopping occasionally to shove people around. He was a coward and a bully, but also six foot four.

He wore a huge black Abraham Lincoln stovepipe hat with a purple feather in it.

When the word came through that Flash Phil thought the preliminary sketches on the side of the building weren't "black enough," we all knew what he meant. There were lots of other murals in the area, all of them depicting the inevitable misery of blacks and other minorities under the heel of white racism and white money. Poor downtrodden classes with no chance of success no matter what, so if the game is rigged anyway, why not get it while the getting is good? Drop out of school and join Flash Phil and get high and . . .

You get the idea. A coward and a bully, yes. But not stupid. Flash Phil was a crafty and cunning politician.

The first week the penciled outlines were erased; Amber redrew them. A week later they were rubbed out again; Amber redrew them again. A week after that our pitiful scaffolding was trashed and we helped Amber with carpentry.

There were ways Flash Phil could have finished it sooner but he liked once-a-week attacks because they helped draw the whole business out longer. There was a lot of tension in the air and fewer people willing to publicly support the mural and in the middle of it all poor sweet naive Amber, who thought Flash Phil would stop if he could just get enough done between vandalisms to show how pretty it was going to be.

The fourth week Amber spent almost twenty-four hours a day on the scaffolding, painting like mad under Coleman lanterns and sparking jury-rigged spotlights, and managed to complete almost half of it.

It really was lovely—anyone could see that—and when another week went by without trouble it looked like Amber's strategy had worked.

It was getting dark the night I found Flash Phil and his punks laughing and talking on the curb in front of

our building. We nodded to each other as I stepped inside and trotted up the steps. At my door I heard weeping above me and knew, right then, I knew. On the landing above I found a sobbing Simone cradling a very bloody Amber. Not seriously hurt but slapped around plenty.

It was all very strange. I had never been much of what I thought of as a tough guy. In point of fact, I was scared of Flash Phil. But the next thing I knew I was skittering full-speed down the steps. I rocketed out of the building's entrance across the sidewalk and, still holding the sack of groceries I had been carrying, slammed into Flash Phil like a locomotive. He was too smart to carry a gun and he never got near his knife. I broke his nose, blackened and closed his eyes, knocked out some of his teeth. I kicked and butted and bit and gouged and screamed and roared and seconds later I had won.

And when I stood back up with Flash Phil unconscious on the street and his great black hat gray and squashed beneath my boot, I sneered at his punks and twirled his purple feather in my hand, gone completely mad, and asked: "Anybody else?" and just then the streetlamps came on.

They ran.

I knew it wasn't over. So did everyone else, and they told me so. I remained quiet, keeping to myself. I slept with a tire tool, when I could sleep at all, and resolved not to wait for hurt.

When Flash Phil reemerged bandaged and angry three nights later it was in the abandoned lot next to our block's only apartment house. As reported, he was with two new—and larger—goons. I watched from the darkness a few feet away for several moments while they passed around joints and wine and muttered vengeance. Then I stepped forward and bashed the tire tool against the side of Goon #1's neck. Goon #2 got the pointy end through the cheek, and there was Flash Phil, wide-eyed and mouth agape, reaching for a pistol. I broke the reaching wrist and the collarbone above it and his jaw and a lot of the rest of him

and then had some other short vague struggle with one of the goons and then . . .

Then it was over and they were groaning at my feet and above me, high above me, came the sounds of wild cheering and applause from the people in the apartment-building windows and seconds later they were surrounding me and smiling but looking at me kind of funny and some time after that a cop was standing in front of me gently taking the tire tool from my hand and pointing out, just as gently, how it would be better for me to sit down seeing as how there was a knife sticking out of my chest.

Ever the hero, I fainted dead away.

It wasn't that bad a wound, but any chest wound is serious. I was in the hospital three weeks. I had to answer some friendly questions, but there were no charges brought and some of the many people who came to visit were the cops from our beat. Almost everyone else came as well but I think only Simone guessed why I was so quiet.

The mural was finished but covered because they had decided the unveiling should be a joint celebration for Amber and me. There were tables set up with food and wine and claps on the back and then the mural was released into the glare of those shorting spotlights.

The mural was incredibly beautiful and wildly cheered and Amber and I were wildly cheered and people were sweet to me and warm and full of compliments and I stood there and took it. I took every bit of it. I even smiled.

When it was finally over and everyone had gone home and I was sure no one was around I grabbed up all my paints and charcoals and materials and all my sketches and went to the river bridge and threw them off and sat down and cried and cried and cried and still found no relief from the facts.

For the facts were too hard. What I was, was too clear within them. What I was and what I would always be. The mural, Amber's mural, was not simply good, it was better than anything I could ever have hoped to accomplish. Sure, I had made it possible. But Amber had made the mural. And I didn't want to

make murals possible. I wanted to make the murals. But what I could do, I had already done.

I moved out that night and wandered back to my white-semirich-kid life. I got into a little karate and into a little shooting. Then one day, at a Horseclans convention, I saw a sword I liked and I bought it.

## 7

The next night we cracked Smada free.

It was easy, once they told me the rules, and yes, there were rules to the Dead. The Ormans hadn't told me about them because they simply assumed that I, Felix, being Smada's One and therefore his best rough-and-tougher, would already know them. Wrong.

Most of the rules were pretty simple. They even made sense, in a Hollywood sort of way. For one thing, they could only be killed by decapitation, which I had already figured-out the hard-way, or by flame. They were really scared of fire. For another, they could only come out at night—or at least out of direct sunlight.

Like I say, it made a sort of macabre sense, particularly the part about their victims inevitably rising to become one of the Dead themselves unless cremated.

I really was in a zombie movie.

The procession carrying Smada was technically that of the Lady Gor, also on her way to the Keep of the Dead. Her carriage was really just a huge, intricately carved wooden box the size of a motor home drawn by a dozen oxen almost as large. She was in the rear, surrounded by half a dozen mounted swordsmen. At the front of the little parade was the wagon for the Dead. It was huge and flat black, enabling the Dead to be transported during daylight hours.

In between came Smada. In a cage. They had him naked, each wrist leather-thonged-tight to either side of the cage, him sagging limply in between, his great belly crisscrossed with ugly red whip marks and uneven lines of dried blood.

I was hiding in the upper loft of the stable when

they came through into town, and when I saw him I . . . Well, two things. First, I was angry. Furious. Enraged. The sight of what they had done to him and what they were and what they'd probably done to others . . . I was boiling and dangerous and more than a little crazy.

The second thing was the sight of Smada's face. Even like he was, beaten, strapped up and swaying, clearly exhausted, he . . . shone. He shone, radiated some something that normal men just don't have and no one can explain, and I realized that, dammit, I really had missed the old fart and, double dammit, I really was glad to see him again.

But I shoved those thoughts away, and seconds later, we got into it. And when I got into it this time—even though I didn't even see it then—I was in it, all of it, to stay.

It was almost dawn when we hit them, and the Dead were closed up and not a factor. We found out later their theory was that we'd be less likely to attack them inside a village so they had planned to spend the several hours without the Dead in relative safety.

Wrong.

But even without the Dead we were outnumbered. Two riders in front, the two men on the Dead wagon, the two drivers of the flatbed wagon hauling Smada's cage, plus their two riding guards, plus the six riding alongside the Lady Gor's carriage added up to fourteen.

We had seven Ormans, me, and a prairiecat. It wasn't close.

It had to look like an attack on the Lady Gor to give me time to spring Smada. But it wasn't quite dark yet, and the Dead had to be kept inside their box to keep from cluttering things up. Orman had done a little thinking along those lines. He had this weird bulky locking mechanism designed to clamp the wooden bolt on the black box shut and keep it that way. He took his youngest grandson along to help him. At the other end of the train, Gruffle led the other boys in a mounted assault on the Lady's carriage. A beat later, the cat and I were to go for Smada.

It was a good plan and worked well enough, I guess.

Would have worked better if the enemy had cooperated, but isn't that always the way?

Gruffle led them in screaming and hollering, and shouts of alarm went up almost at once. I could just see Orman up ahead move up with his grandson to the lock on the box of the Dead. I turned to my Guide and Shelter to see if he was ready and I could swear he looked at me and nodded but by that time we were already moving. I was sprinting full-speed by the time I reached my particular targets, the driver and, closest to me, the pike-bearing guard sitting beside him. My first step took me up onto the seat beside him just as he was turning toward me. I slammed my hilt into his forehead as hard as I could and he slammed sideways into the driver, who cried out and tried to keep from falling off. From the corner of my eye I saw the cat leap into the air and damn near *through* the two guards sitting atop the cage. Hell, it was only about six hundred pounds traveling at forty miles an hour and when I saw them both flying off in pieces and myself in good position for the already cowering driver, I thought: This is going to be easy.

About then is when the oxen pulling us smelled prairiecat and decided to leave.

I banged my head against the bars of the cage when they vaulted forward. It took me a couple of beats to clear my head, and by that time we were really moving. If they're scared enough, even oxen can rock and roll.

They careened right through the center of the village square, scattering the couple of dozen locals who had come out to gawk and missing the town well by at least three inches, then rolled to the side and headed down a side street large enough for all six of them but not for the wagon, and there was a helluva crash.

And then I was flying through the air into the midst of stomping, rearing, groaning, panicked oxen whose tether had miraculously withstood the impact and half a second later the limp body of the guard crashed in on top of me and knocked me off one of those broad backs and the hooves were cracking sparks on the street tiles around my head and by the time I managed

to right myself there was the driver holding the guard's pike and jabbing it at me. He missed, missed again. I flung out my sword and didn't and he sank like a sack of fireplace ashes. The bellowing of oxen freak-out reverberating between the narrow stone walls and tiled street was lifting the top of my head right off. I clambered back atop what was left of the driver's seat, planted my feet, and brought my sword down on the tether to the rigging. It snapped free, and the oxen bolted forward out of sight into the shadows.

When I turned back to the cage, Smada was looking at me. And for perhaps five seconds I looked back and neither of us moved a muscle and I thought: Who is this man?

Then the cat was there with us and I turned my gaze deliberately away from Smada and set to work on the cage's lock. It was primitive as hell, of course, but also quite strong. There was no sign of a key in the seating compartment, and, hearing increased sounds of fighting from the others' struggles, I was in no humor to go looking for it.

I reached over and grabbed the prairiecat's paw.

He resisted a moment, tensed, and for just a second I was a dead man. Clearly I was taking great liberties, but for some reason or other the great beast let it slide. He relaxed and let me guide a paw the size of my thigh into a position of leverage behind the cage's door.

"Hold still a second," I ordered breathlessly as I leaped off the wagon seat to the ground, and he tensed again but let me live through that little impertinence, too. I fetched up the pike, hopped back aboard, and propped it against the door alongside that great paw and said: "Pull."

I never even got a chance to get my weight into it. If not for that shrieking rasp of crumpling metal, you would never have known the damn cage was locked.

Whew! Nice kitty.

I stepped inside and, still not looking at Smada, used my dagger on his thongs. Then I handed him the robe I had strapped to my back alongside the extra broadsword. I stood there holding the sword for him

while he tied the robe on tight. Then he took the sword, pulled the blade halfway out to check it, and froze.

Me, too. We were both looking down at his bared blade. But, as one, we raised our eyes and peered at one another and a rush of emotion went through us both and I could not tell you to this day if we would have kissed or killed each other if someone hadn't called out at just that moment.

"Lord Smada!" shouted a hoarse Orman.

As I tore my gaze away toward the sound, however, I did notice the prairiecat's fur standing straight up on his back.

Killed each other, I think.

"Lord Smadal!" called Orman again, sounding a little frantic, and *that* tone coming from *that* man had us out of the cage, swords drawn, and beside him in a heartbeat.

His face was smeared with blood not his own. He turned and gestured with his head back toward the village square. "The others!" he gasped. "It's a trap!"

We could already hear the galloping horses approaching through the dusk, but Smada ignored it and instead put an arm on the old man's shoulder.

"Thank you, old friend," said Smada with infinite tenderness. Then with equal affection, he walked the old man over to a stoop in front of some doorway and sat him down. Orman obeyed like a little child.

Neither of us mentioned the body he carried in his arms, a body obviously devoid of life to anyone but a grieving grandfather.

The riders were, of course, the force which trailed ten minutes behind the procession for just such an eventuality. I never got it straight just how many there were because at least some of them were taken out by Orman's other sons, led by Gruffe, who, I understood later, was some ball of fire that night.

Whatever. We faced six, gunning their mounts on either side of the village well just as the light of dawn broke about us.

Smada and I exchanged a quick look—a much different one than before—and backed up to a wall about

a sword's length or so apart and stood there, braced and ready and mean.

They dismounted first, which was a mistake, and then they just sent the first pair at first, which was a bigger mistake. But I think they were trying to prove their bravery or something. And I suppose they did, for they were courageous and . . .

And that's not what I want to tell you. I don't want to tell you about them. I mean, they were fine. They died well. Fought well, too. But that's not what I want to tell you about.

I want to tell you about me. Or rather, about us.

We were goddam fabulous.

I don't think I can explain it to anyone who wasn't there at that time and not one of us, but: Think of absolute clarity and certainty of resolve and a sense of fullness and . . . I dunno, *rightness*. I'm not advocating killing or even fighting, but neither am I going to spend my life feeling sorry for punks who enslave entire peoples and then feed them to the ravenous ghouls they make of the few men around with guts enough to die resisting them.

It was right what we did. Right, and, much more, we did it well. We fought as if we had rehearsed it. We fought as if it was the only fight that had ever been or should have had to be and pity it was not. We fought well and hard and we fought together. And when Smada turned his death's-head grin briefly to ask for a dagger I found that I had *already* noticed he needed one and had it out and was tossing it to him. And later, during my third enemy, when I felt myself getting tired, it was not a source of fear, but rather the distant noticing of just one important fact among many, like glancing down on a trip and realizing it's time to start looking for a Mobil station.

It was incredible. It was so *full*. Full and rich, and something else: It was the only time in my life I had not rolled in shame under my love for this.

That's not just my opinion. When it was over and they were dead and we looked up we saw Gruffle there standing with one of his brothers, the one who chanted, I think, and just staring. Not shocked. Not

frightened. Not too selfish to help. But awed. Awed by what he was seeing.

Then we were shaking off our fugue and exchanging little smiles of satisfaction—it was impossible not to, no matter what we thought of each other. Smada stepped over to Orman and helped him up with the help of Markus, of all people, who had appeared out of nowhere carrying a sword as big as he was.

I noticed a small procession being led by the Orman boys. Three men with their hands tied behind them and an obviously feminine hooded form walking before them, and distantly I realized we'd captured the Lady Gor.

But I didn't care. The results were irrelevant. I headed for the Hall and found the door open and the broad hearth roaring and a mug of ale with my name on it. I drank that one and then another and tried to concentrate on what the others were telling me and finally some of it did sink in.

We had lost every Orman but the old man himself, Gruffle, Temblar (the pretty one), and the one who chanted. We had killed every guard and driver save for those three riding inside with the Lady Gor.

And the next day we were supposed to travel to the Keep of the Dead and kill Gor himself.

That woke me up. I stood up, my head clearing in a flash, and saw Smada leaning against the hearth with a mug in his hand watching me. And back came all my anger and resentment and whatever the hell else it was I felt for him and I said: "First you drag me back when I didn't want to come and then I save your fat ass and now you want me to die killing your enemies? What in *hell* makes you think I'd do all that for you?"

"But you won't be doing it for him, Felix," said a familiar voice, and I turned around to see the Lady Gor pulling back her hood. "You'll be doing it for me."

It was Cri, of course.

I sat back down again. I think my mouth was probably open.

Cri smiled sweetly a smile unique to her. "We'll talk later," she said.

Then she walked over to the stairs and stood meekly at their foot and waited. Smada drained the last of his ale, nodded in a strangely friendly way, and walked over to her. For a second he stood looking down at her and she up at him. Then they embraced the way people do who have had practice with each other.

"Smada?" I blurted dumbly.

She smiled, knowing I wasn't calling to him but asking her.

She smiled, said, "Of course," and together they climbed the stairs.

Another, smaller, room was found for me.

## 8

"I don't understand anything, and I mean *anything*, about *any* of this," I said to her when she came to my room that night to talk.

"I know," she said with understanding. She sat down in the chair across from my bed. "I hear you have cigarettes."

I stared, said, "Uh, yeah," and fetched one for us both.

After they were lit we sat and smoked awhile in silence.

"This is not really the Horseclans world, is it?" I blurted suddenly.

She smiled. "No. It is . . ."

"A Place," I finished for her.

She looked surprised, then smiled again. "Yes. A Place."

"Is it real?"

"Of course. As real as the books."

"But you said this wasn't the Horseclans world."

Her tone was patient. "It isn't. But it is close and somehow . . . connected to the mind of the man who wrote those stories. It is—I'm sure you've seen—a wonderful place, Felix. But it is clogged these days with the grip of horror and darkness. Evil is very real here. Evil and magic and they both work and if you had been here these past few years you would feel it and . . ."

"And what?"

"And it would have felt you, too." She was quiet a moment, looking genuinely scared. "It would have worked its way on you and into you as it has all of us. Let me tell you right now: as brave as the Ormans are, they wouldn't have dared this fight without you. They can tell you haven't been touched by it yet, Felix. We all can. Anyone who sees you can see it."

"Smada has it, too?"

"Everyone has it," she answered without hesitation, and that thought chilled me and raised the hair on the back of my arms.

"So that's why I was brought over?"

"Among other things," she replied and smiled knowingly at me and . . .

And . . . for . . . just . . . one . . . instant . . . I understood something about it all, I knew, I saw.

And then it was lost, fluttering away in my mind like a single mote in a shaft of sunlight.

I couldn't even remember what I'd seen. And suddenly I didn't want to remember.

"How come you're Lady Gor?" I asked too loudly.

She studied me, chose to answer. "It was the only way to get Smada free *and* have someone inside the Keep."

Knowing I was being unfair, knowing that, I still said: "So you're whoring for Smada, too, is that it?"

She bristled, held her breath, answered calmly, "We all use what tools we have. Do you like killing people?"

Ouch!

"Touché," I said with a sort of smile.

"And let me tell you something else, little man," she said, rising. "I'd rather kill them than have to sleep with them."

And with that she was gone out the door.

Touché again.

What was that Orman had said? About the Price?

Yeah. Quite a broad.

They bought Cri's story about the attack.

But I'll be damned if I know why. She was about as believable as Richard Nixon saying "I am not a crook." Her voice faltered and her eyes rolled and sweat appeared on her upper lip and none of it mattered one single bit. While I was sitting there on the front of the carriage by the "driver," Gruffle, looking around for a place to run, the guard at the gates to the Keep was just nodding and waving us on through.

Cri's story had been so unconvincing I thought the guy was joking. But he wasn't. The gates opened, Gruffle gave the oxen the giddyup and we were in.

It was weird. The guard at the gate looked and sounded just as frightened as Cri did. And so did the little dude that supervised the parking of the carriage and so did the toadies who rushed out to carry the Lady Gor's things. And so did everyone else.

And I mean *everyone* else. And that included Smada. It had started about five miles from the Keep, I guess. There were just the four of us: Cri, Smada, Gruffle, and me, all riding on the front seat of the carriage (which was huge) for the air. The plan was pretty simple. When we got to the gate, Smada was to literally hide under the bed inside the carriage, Gruffle was supposed to play driver—which was easy, his uniform almost covered his face—Cri was supposed to spin her little tale of how she had been attacked, and I was to be the mysterious traveler who had come to her aid at the last moment when she was fleeing Smada's loyalists.

Smada was supposed to have been killed during the fight.

It was a garbage story—nobody should have bought it. But the other three were utterly convinced it would play, and they were right. That was pretty weird, too, but all part of the same dim weight we'd been carrying since, like I say, about five miles from the Keep.

It started—no fooling—with a buzzing in the ears. Look, I know, I *know* how that sounds, but it's a fact. It felt to me like there were gnats or something.

At one point I actually slapped the side of my head trying to swat one.

Cri had given me a thin smile and said, "It is the Cloak of Dead," and the other two had just nodded.

Which didn't explain a thing to me and I said so, and they tried to explain some more and they did, eventually. But it wasn't any better. Seems it had to do with—are you ready?—a magic spell.

The Cloak of Dead was the deal Gor had made to give him power over the land, power over the Zombies, power over the fears of everyone around him. I mean everyone, which explained why so few people were willing to help Smada and why none of them were willing unless an outsider, me, who hadn't had a chance to be influenced, was coming along.

By "influenced" I mean scared. Really scared. Deeply scared. *Always* scared. It infused their thinking and their movements. It filled their dreams with gut-wrenching, tortured nightmares every night. The people were off balance and cowed and always, always, exhausted by this never-ending fear and the buzzing I heard meant we were approaching the source.

I, personally, just found it irritating. But so had everyone else when it had first started. It took a while, apparently, for it to creep down into your marrow and suck you small.

It had been long enough for my companions. They were uniformly pale and their breathing was too quick and they had a tendency to jump about a foot at every sudden sound, their eyes darting this way and that all the time like trapped fawns.

It was sickening at first. Particularly Smada. I still didn't know how I felt about him but I knew damn well I didn't like seeing him sitting there *trembling!* That's right, trembling. Actually shaking, quivering, from terror and I wanted to reach over and slap the sumbitch for shaming himself so.

Which was not only insensitive, I realized later, but outright stupid. Later I thought about how I would have acted feeling such fear. How any normal mortal would have acted.

I decided I'd have probably run away. But would I

have hatched some crazy plan through chattering teeth and then, so bloody scared I could barely control my bowels, tried sneaking into the most dangerous and awful place in this Place to fight the most horrible monster alive?

Like I said, I'd have run away. But they didn't; they fought. Petrified, pale, and, yes, trembling, they had fought back. Not your average folk.

But I wasn't thinking that at the time. I was being an ass again. I was letting my disgust with them show, snorting and deliberately ignoring them.

Nice guy, huh?

The Keep was huge and perched atop a rock crag high over the river and it was dead flat black from its outer walls to its tallest turrel, where Gor lived. Absolutely black. And dusty, as if made out of coal. The inner courtyard was filled with the dust as some flunky passed us through into the interior of the main Keep. There was another flunky waiting there for us who led us up a couple of stories to still another flunky who wanted to hear Cri's story again.

He was a slimy little rat, and the idea of squashing him was so sweet a thought I almost forgot about the plan, about Gruffle and Smada waiting down at the carriage to sneak up later, about Cri at my side—about anything else but hearing him squeal.

But I cooled it. He bought Cri's story, too, and we were sent climbing once again. The third-level scum bought the bit, too, but he was a little tougher. He actually sneered when Cri started explaining about how I had appeared, a mercenary, and offered to help and her voice really skittered out of her mouth when she was talking to him. I thought sure she was going to blow it, so I interrupted his sneering inquisition, stood right up and over his face, held out my palm and pointed to it.

"Do I get my coins or do I not, little toad?"

For just a second he and I met eyes and I really and truly wanted him to make some smart-ass remark—fear affects everyone differently—so I could shove it slowly back in with my gloved thumb.

But he got smart and shut up, except to nod.

We went through three more levels of stooges before we got to the audience room. Apparently word had spread ahead about the foul-tempered mercenary. The squid were actually bowing to me by the time we reached the chamber.

This was shiny black. Looked like marble and maybe it was. There was a huge black throne with a carved black inverted pyramid behind it and on either side there were tall thin oil lamps sending flickering yellow flames twelve feet into the air.

Lined up around the throne but a level down were half a dozen priest types and a couple of scythe-wielding guards and one old fat bald man with a pregnant paunch and a hook nose who beat three times on a black drum. He was naked and sweating and he smiled the most repulsive gap-toothed smile imaginable in my direction. I sneered at him. He just laughed and spit flew and he pounded the drum three more times.

Gor entered. He was tall with jet-black hair and long flowing robes trimmed with red satin curlicues, and never in my life had I ever seen anyone whose every motion so totally exhibited control. This was his little universe and he damn sure knew it.

So did everyone else. They visibly shivered at his appearance. And these were his friends!

He had red eyes. And they glowed when they were pointed at you.

Cri managed a little extra something from somewhere and started off on her spiel once more. But it was clearly too much for her. Gor would smile patronizingly and interrupt her and she would panic and start all over again and I expected the guards to start hacking away with their scythes any moment.

When my turn came I ignored the red eyes and went into my mercenary improvisation. I was pretty good. Snarling, stomping, scratching, demanding my payment about every third paragraph, I gave a decent show. The tension in the room dropped steadily as I got into my little fable, embellishing this part and that and all the time being sure to remain aggressive about demanding my bread up front.

I was damn good and I knew it and so did Cri and

when it was over I sat down, unasked, knowing I had pulled it off.

Gor smiled, unconcerned with my breach of protocol. Instead he sat down on his throne and propped his shin on long thin fingers with long thin shiny-black nails and said:

"So, you are Smada's One."

## 10

So I killed him.

I was up out of my seat with my sword drawn and he raised his right arm up to stop me and I blocked it with my left and grabbed his black shiny hair with those same fingers and I drove my blade through his chest and bright red gas came from his throat with his laugh and he fell dead at my feet but . . .

But it didn't help much.

There was a flash and great booming thunderclap, the sound rocketing around the stone room. One of the guards screamed and dropped his scythe and clutched his hands around his throat and his features—his neck, his arms, his wrists, his *forehead*—began to swell outward, ugly, misshapen, grotesque, and he tried to scream again but his ballooning throat clogged the sound and his eyes, bugging and panicked and beseeching to all of us, started squeezing themselves out of his sockets and . . .

And there was another flash and some smoke and I heard the laughter once more and the smoke cleared and there stood Gor where the guard had been, black robe and shining red eyes, spinning that great huge scythe in his hands like a cheerleader's baton.

I was too scared to do anything but run—either forward or back. I chose forward and as I closed the distance between us all I could think of, oddly, was that Smada and I hadn't exchanged a word during the entire dusty ride up in that carriage; just sat there with Cri between us, swaying and bouncing and not talking and . . .

And Gor was laughing again and rushing right at me and as he laughed more red light flashed from his eyes

and more red gas from his mouth and I jumped to my right to avoid the scythe and brought my sword across in front of me to block it and there was a loud clang as the two weapons met and a burst of sparks and then I was down and rolling and then back up to my feet just as the scythe's handle slammed me full in the left temple. I saw stars and felt the back of my head thud against the floor.

There was more laughter, but it was distant now along with the rest of the room. It was hard to focus on the black robes, hard to get my legs up under me and balanced. I was hurt bad and I knew it—a concussion at the very least. I was swaying as I rose and so totally out of whack that I tried to block not an actual lunge, but merely a feint from the scythe, and that took me off-balance so far I fell to my knees.

The laughter increased as the shadowy form approached and stood over me. I could only see him in spurts before my eyes would cloud over, so I was constantly blinking, and this made Gor laugh all the more.

"Die, little one!" he said and grabbed the hair on the top of my head with his left hand and swung the great scythe back with his right, swung it back high over his head, and he smiled bright red light at me and started his head-chopping motion and I stuck blindly out and clamped my left hand onto his Adam's apple and jerked him toward me and my sword, which pierced cleanly through his lower abdomen before cracking through the spine three inches out his back.

He screamed as he fell the rest of the way forward across me and there was more red gas and a bone-numbing rush of cold air. I held on frantically, jerking the sword deeper and deeper into him and farther and farther out his other side, and he thrashed and warped above me like a burning insect for what seemed like a very long time.

Then all was still and quiet for a few seconds. I lumbered about and managed to shove his body off just as the second thunderclap shook the room.

It was the bald sweating gap-toothed drooling pig at the drum who now approached me with shining red eyes. The laughter was of a different tone coming

from this creature, this repulsive naked ogre with his foul smell and round wet belly and crimped genitals swaying. His bare feet slapped wetly as he danced around me, darting in and out. I was still zonked and confused and tired and I could not understand why he didn't just rush me and be done with it and then, when he darted in closer than before, I met that deformed gaze and saw his fear.

And I understood it all, suddenly. I understood his power. It was not power at all, but the spell of fear. It was why all shook in his presence but would not come forward to help him. He didn't control them. He simply ruled their paralysis.

And I knew something else, instinctively. This gross body was his last. This gross body was his own.

I was still thinking this when he leaped forward and clamped his gnarled hands about my throat. We rolled over and over on that shining black floor and my own hands went up to meet his but his grip was too strong and his smell too foul—I couldn't breathe, I couldn't think, I couldn't seem to bring the last of my strength into my hands. He was too awful and too close and too strong, and I was losing, I knew it, sinking down as my face went red from the pressure and my throat began to collapse under those gnarled hands, and we stopped rolling with him on top and his eyes lasered red and his breath red gas and spittle and his laughter began once more.

I was going under for good when Gor screamed and let go. It took a couple of seconds before I could make out anything at all, before I could discern the beast writhing in front of me to pull the dagger from his back or the frozen figure of Cri still posed in the position from which she had delivered the stabbing. It was incredible. She was *still* so frightened she couldn't move, and how she had managed to force herself forward to deliver that dagger I will never, ever, know.

Quite a woman, indeed.

The beast had finally grasped the hilt and had actually managed to drag it halfway out before I could clamber over and slam my own dagger into its chest.

Its eyes went wide and it stared at me and shrieked

an ungodly sound and exploded into a nightmare burst of flesh and red gas and arctic cold and this time came not only a thunderclap, but the lightning as well, sizzling up from Gor's forehead to ricochet insanely about the black walls of the chamber before turning bright, dazzling crimson, and then . . .

Then it was gone. I got up and grabbed hold of Cri and hugged her and she hugged me back, gasping and smiling. We stood like that for several seconds, and around us stood Gor's people, blank-eyed and staring, awake from a coma or nightmare, and I thought: It's over! We've made it! just as the great black doors to the chamber burst inward and the Dead came jamming through to feed.

I managed to get my sword loose and up but was too weak to hold it steady. Cri, beside me, was no better. Even free from the spell she was spent—that saving thrust had been all she had.

What saved us at first was the people in the chamber between us and the ghouls. If we had been closer to the door, we would've been eaten in the first ten seconds. But there were others there to feed upon, and the Dead did just that and the chamber was filled with a mind-melting cacophony of screams and blood and ripping black teeth. People were running wildly about, falling and shrieking and dying, and the Dead just lurched at them, outnumbering them, out-eviling them. Eating them alive.

We had managed to stumble over to the throne toward where I figured Gor's own exit had been when the first half-dozen zombies reached us. I raised up my sword to fend one off, but my legs were wobbly and my wrists shook with fatigue, and I yelled: "Run, Cri!" and shoved her away just as a strong hand grabbed my collar from behind and threw me backward out of range of the clutching black talons.

Smada, of course, saving my butt once more. Gruffle was there with him, his sword already red and flashing in the air. It was Gruffle who gathered Cri and me together and got us to the exit, stopping twice to behead ghouls grasping at us. It was Gruffle who got us through the exit and who led the two of us, now

numbed and wasted and following like children, down the long dark passage and out of the Keep.

But it was Smada who saved our lives. I was worthless, standing there swaying and staring. But even though I could do nothing to help, I knew what I was seeing. Never in my life had I imagined, much less seen, such a spectacular display of power swordsmanship. I lost count of the number of ghouls he carved up, and after the first three or four I watched only him, his movement, his sureness, his balance. It was the first dozen or so to reach us that would have gotten us. Gruffle got two of those. But Smada, standing astride that shiny black platform in front of the throne like a colossus, saved the day. Even in my dazed state, I knew what I was seeing.

And then I'd been dragged out of sight through the exit and down the passage. The night air was cool and made me shiver. From the Keep came more screams from the upper floors and especially from the inner courtyard wall. The feeding frenzy was just beginning.

We were in a wagon and about to move before Smada appeared beside us. Old Orman, whom I hadn't even noticed, helped him aboard. We rode perhaps three miles before stopping to camp and tend our wounds. When the river breeze was just right, we could still hear faint echoes of massacre.

I hadn't realized I was asleep until someone bandaging my temple woke me up. It was Cri, smiling down at me. I smiled back and rolled out of her lap into a sitting position.

"I wouldn't try to stand just yet, lad," said a voice.

I looked over. It was Smada, sitting across the campfire from me looking concerned. I stared at him a moment, then nodded.

Around me Orman and his boys were lounging about or, in Gruffle's case, worrying over wounds. Temblar was cooking something sweet-smelling and looking worried.

It seemed he was worried about the Dead in the Keep coming out again tomorrow night. But that was foolish, and I told him so. The Dead would, come morning without Gor, be really dead at last.

Temblar wanted to know how I knew that, and I started to answer before I realized I didn't *know* how I knew. I looked at Cri, who tried smiling at me again. But it didn't help. I felt a stab of fear and vertigo.

I stood up, knowing what was coming. I backed away from the campfire, the people there seeming menacing all of a sudden. Then I just stood, staring, feeling panic starting to swell from within.

"Do not fear, my two-leg friend," beamed the prairiecat I hadn't noticed from his spot on the ground at Smada's feet.

Curiously, his thoughts calmed me down a bit. But when Cri approached me a few seconds later, it was good she did so slowly.

When she was but a foot away, it burst from my mouth at last:

"I know this about the Dead . . . I feel this, because . . . because I am from this Place. I was born here. Wasn't I?"

Cri nodded sympathetically. "There was much danger when you were born. You were sent Over to spare your life."

I knew she was telling the truth. I could feel it. I could feel much more as well.

"I was brought back because I had to return," I said aloud. "Isn't that so?"

Cri nodded again.

"Who sent me?" I asked, and during the moment she hesitated, the answer came to me. "Smada!" I cried out angrily.

"Yes." She nodded gently to me. "He—"

"Why?" I demanded, still mysteriously furious somehow. "Why did he do this to me? *Why?*"

"Because," said a gentle deep voice from behind me, "I could not bear to lose my wife *and* my only child."

I spun around and stared at him, and I knew but still I blurted my confusion. "What . . . what do you . . . ?"

And then his great hands were on my shoulders and he said:

"One means Firstborn."

Goodbye, Earth.

Goodbye, forever.

I am home.