

# Quarry

by Peter S. Beagle

This story was born of my inability to stay away from the world I created as the back-drop for my personal favorite among my novels, *The Innkeeper's Song*. The immediate provocation came during a phone conversation, when the party of the second part asked me just how two of the characters from that novel—the wandering mercenary Soukyan and his shapeshifting fox companion—ever met. I had absolutely no idea, so I wrote "Quarry" to find out.

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I never went back to my room that night. I knew I had an hour at most before they would have guards on the door. What was on my back, at my belt, and in my pockets was all I took—that, and all the *tilgit* the cook could scrape together and cram into my pouch. We had been friends since the day I arrived at *that place*, a scrawny, stubborn child, ready to die rather than ever admit my terror and my pain. "So," she said, as I burst into her kitchen. "Running you came to me, twenty years gone, blood all over you, and running you leave. Tell me nothing, just drink this." I have no idea what was in that bottle she fetched from under her skirts and made me empty on the spot, but it kept me warm on my way all that night, and the *tilgit*—disgusting dried marshweed as it is—lasted me three days.

Looking back, I shiver to think how little I understood, not only the peril I was in, but the true extent of the power I fled. I did know better than to make for Sumildene, where a stranger stands out like a sailor in a convent; but if I had had the brains of a bedbug, I'd never have tried to cut through the marshes toward the Queen's Road. In the first place, that grand highway is laced with toll bridges, manned by toll collectors, every four or five miles; in the second, the Queen's Road is so well-banked and pruned and well-maintained that should you be caught out there by day-light, there's no cover, nowhere to run—no rutted smuggler's alley to duck into, not so much as a proper tree to climb. But I didn't know that then, among other things.

What I did understand, beyond doubt, was that they could not afford to let me leave. I do not say *escape*, because they would never have thought of it in such a way. To their minds, they had offered me their greatest honor, never before granted one so young, and I had not only rejected it, but lied in their clever, clever faces, accepting so humbly, falteringly tell-ing them again and again of my bewildered gratitude, unworthy peas-ant that I was. And even then I did know that they were not deceived for a single moment, and they knew I knew, and blessed me, one after the other, to let me know. I dream that twilight chamber still—the tall chairs, the cold stone table, the tiny green *tintan* birds murmuring themselves to sleep in the vines outside the window, those smiling, wise, gentle eyes on me—and each time I wake between sweated sheets, my mouth wrenched with pleas

for my life. Old as I am, and still.

If I were to leave, and it became known that I had done so, and without any retribution, others would go too, in time. Not very many—there were as yet only a few who shared my disquiet and my growing suspicions—but even one unpunished deserter was more than they could afford to tolerate.

I had no doubt at all that they would grieve my death. They were not unkind people, for monsters.

The cook hid me in the scullery, covering me with aprons and dish-rags. It was not yet full dark when I left, but she felt it risky for me to wait longer. When we said farewell, she shoved one of her paring knives into my belt, gave me a swift, light buffet on the ear, said, "So. On your way then," pushed me out of a hidden half-door into the dusk, and slapped it shut behind me. I felt lonelier in that moment, blinking around me with the crickets chirping and the breeze turning chill, and that great house filling half the evening sky, than I ever have again.

As I say, I made straight for the marshes, not only meaning to strike the Queen's Road, but confident that the boggy ground would hide my footprints. It might indeed have concealed them from the eyes of ordinary trackers, but not from those who were after me within another hour. I knew little of them, the Hunters, though over twenty years I had occasionally heard this whisper or that behind this or that slightly trembling hand. Just once, not long after I came to *that place*, I was sent to the woods to gather kindling, and there I did glimpse two small brown-clad persons in a tree. They must have seen me, but they moved neither foot nor finger, nor turned their heads, but kept sitting there like a pair of dull brown birds, half-curved, half-crouched, gazing back toward the great house, waiting for something, waiting for someone. I never saw them again, nor any like them; not until they came for me.

Not those two, of course—or maybe they were the same ones; it is hard to be sure of any Hunter's age or face or identity. For all I know, they do not truly exist most of the time, but bide in their nowhere until *that place* summons them into being to pursue some runaway like me. What I do know, better than most, is that they never give up. You have to kill them.

I had killed once before—in my ignorance, I supposed the cook was the only one who knew—but I had no skill in it, and no weapon with me but the cook's little knife: nothing to daunt those who now followed. I knew the small start I had was meaningless, and I went plunging through the marshes, increasingly indifferent to how much noise I made, or to the animals and undergrowth I disturbed. Strong I was, yes, and swift enough, but also brainless with panic and hamstrung by inexperience. A child could have tracked me, let alone a Hunter.

That I was not taken that first night had nothing to do with any craft or wiliness of mine. What happened was that I slipped on a straggling *tilgit* frond (wild, the stuff is as slimy-slick as any snail-road), took a shattering tumble down a slope I never saw, and finished by cracking my head open against a mossy, jagged rock. Amazingly, I did not lose consciousness

then, but managed to crawl off into a sort of shallow half-bur-row at the base of the hill. There I scraped every bit of rotting vegetation within reach over myself, having a dazed notion of smothering my scent. I vaguely recall packing handfuls of leaves and spiderwebs against my bleeding wound, and making some sort of effort to cover the betraying stains, before I fainted away.

I woke in the late afternoon of the next day, frantically hungry, but so weak and sick that I could not manage so much as a mouthful of the *tilgit*. The bleeding had stopped—though I dared not remove my ragged, mushy poultice for another full day—and after a time I was able to stand up and stay on my feet, just barely. I lurched from my earthen shroud and stood for some while, lightheaded yet, but steadily more lucid, sniffing and staring for any sign of my shadows. Not that I was in the best shape to spy them out—giddy as I was, they could likely have walked straight up to me and disemboweled me with their empty hands, as they can do. But they were nowhere to be seen or sensed.

I drank from a mucky trickle I found slipping by under the leaves, then grubbed my way back into my poor nest again and slept until nightfall. For all my panicky blundering, I knew by the stars that I was headed in the general direction of the Queen's Road, which I continued to believe meant sanctuary and the start of my new and blessedly ordinary life among ordinary folk.

I covered more distance than I expected that night, for all my lingering faintness and my new prudence, trying now to make as little noise as possible, and leave as little trace of my passage. I met no one, and when I went to ground at dawn in a riverbank cave—some *sheknath's* winter lair, by the smell of it—there was still no more indication of anyone trailing me than there had been since I began my flight. But I was not fool enough to suppose myself clear of pursuit, not quite. I merely hoped, which was just as bad.

The Queen's Road was further away than I had supposed: for all the terrible and tempting knowledge that I and others like me acquired in *that place*, practical geography was unheard of. I kept moving, trailing after the hard stars through the marshes as intently as the Hunters were surely trailing me. More than once, the bog sucked both shoes off my feet, taking them down so deeply that I would waste a good half-hour fishing for them; again and again, a sudden screen of burly *jukli* vines or some sticky nameless creepers barred my passage, so I must either lower my head and bull on through, or else blunder somehow around the obstacle and pray not to lose the way, which I most often did.

Nearing dawn of the fourth day, I heard the rumble of cartwheels, like a faraway storm, and the piercing squawk, unmistakable, of their *pashidi* drivers' clan-whistles along with them, and realized that I was nearing the Queen's Road.

If the Hunters were following as closely as I feared, was this to be the end of the game—were they poised to cut me down as I raced wildly, recklessly, toward imaginary safety? Did they expect me to abandon all caution and

charge forward into daylight and the open, whooping with joy and triumph? They had excellent reason to do so, as idiotic a target as I must have made for them a dozen times over. But even idiots—even terrified young idiots—may learn one or two things in four days of being pursued through a quagmire by silent, invisible hounds. I waited that day out under a leech-bush: few trackers will ever investigate one of those closely; and if you lie very still, there is a fairish chance that the serrated, brittle-seeming leaves will not come seeking your blood. At moon-set I started on.

Just as the ground began to feel somewhat more solid, just as the first lights of the Queen's Road began to glimmer through the thinning vegetation ... there they were, there they were, both of them, each standing away at an angle, making me the third point of a murderous triangle. They simply *appeared*—can you understand?—assembling themselves out of the marsh dawn: weaponless both, their arms hanging at their sides, loose and unthreatening. One was smiling; one was not—there was no other way to tell them apart. In the dimness, I saw laughter in their eyes, and a weariness such as even I have never imagined, and death.

They let me by. They turned their backs to me and let me pass, fading so completely into the gray sunrise that I was almost willing to believe them visions, savage mirages born of my own fear and exhaustion. But with that combination came a weary understanding of my own. They were playing with me, taking pleasure in allowing me to run loose for a bit, but letting me know that whenever they tired of the game I was theirs, in the dark marshes or on the wide white highway, and not a thing I could do about it. At my age, I am entitled to forget what I forget—terror and triumph alike, grief and the wildest joy alike—and so I have, and well rid of every one of them I am. But that instant, that particular recognition, remains indelible. Some memories do come to live with you for good and all, like wives or husbands.

I went forward. There was nothing else to do. The marshes fell away around me, rapidly giving place to nondescript country, half-ragged, half-way domesticated to give a sort of shoulder to the road. Farmers were already opening their fruit and vegetable stands along that border; merchants' boys from towns further along were bawling their employers' wares to the carters and wagoners; and as I stumbled up, a *shukri*-trainer passed in front of me, holding his arms out, like a scarecrow, for folk to see his sharp-toothed pets scurrying up and down his body, and more of them pouring from each pocket as he strode along. Ragged, scabbed and filthy as I was, not one traveler turned his head as I slipped onto the Queen's Road.

On the one hand, I blessed their unconcern; on the other, that same indifference told me clearly that none of them would raise a finger if they saw me taken, snatched back before their eyes to *that place* and whatever doom might await me there. Only the collectors at their tollgates might be at all likely to mourn the fate of a potential contributor—and I had nothing for them anyway, which was going to be another problem in a couple of miles. But right then was problem enough for me: friendless on a strange road, utterly vulnerable, utterly without resources, flying—well, trudging—from the only home I had known since the age of nine, and from

the small, satisfied assassins it had sent after me. And out of *tilgit* as well.

The Queen's Road runs straight all the way from Bitava to Fors na' Shachim, but in those days there was a curious sort of elbow: unleveled, anciently furrowed, a last untamed remnant of the original wagon-road, beginning just before the first tollgate I was to reach. I could see it from a good distance, and made up my mind to dodge away onto it—without any notion of where the path might come out, but with some mad fancy of at once eluding both the killers and the collectors. Sometimes, in those nights when the dreams and memories I cannot always tell apart any-more keep me awake, I try to imagine what my life would have been if I had actually carried my plan through. Different, most likely. Shorter, surely.

Even this early, the road was steadily growing more crowded with traffic, wheeled and afoot, slowing my pace to that of my closest neighbor—which, in this case, happened to be a bullock-cart loaded higher than my head with *jejebhai* manure. Absolutely the only thing the creatures are good for; we had a pair on the farm where I was a boy—if I ever was, if any of that ever happened. Ignoring the smell, I kept as close to the cart as I could, hoping that it would hide me from the toll-collectors' sight when I struck off onto that odd little bend. My legs were tensing for the first swift, desperate stride, when I heard the voice at my ear, saying only one word, "No."

A slightly muffled voice, but distinctive—there was a sharpness to it, and a hint of a strange cold amusement, all in a single word. I whirled, saw nothing but the manure cart, determined that I had misheard a driver's grunt, or even a wheel-squeak, and set myself a second time to make my move.

Once again the voice, more insistent now, almost a bark: "No, fool!"

It was not the driver; he never looked at me. I was being addressed—commanded—by the manure pile.

It shifted slightly as I gaped, and I saw the eyes then. They were gray and very bright, with a suggestion of pale yellow far under the grayness. All I could make out of the face in which they were set was a thick white mustache below and brows nearly as heavy above. The man—for it was a human face, I was practically sure—was burrowed as deeply into the *jejebhai* dung as though he were lolling under the most luxurious of quilts and bolsters on a winter's night. He beckoned me to join him.

I stopped where I was, letting the cart jolt past me. The sharp voice from the manure was clearer this time, and that much more annoyed with me. "Boy, if you have any visions of a life beyond the next five minutes, you will do as I tell you. Now." The last word was no louder than the others, but it brought me scrambling into that cartload of muck faster than ever I have since lunged into a warm bed, with a woman waiting. The man made room for me with a low, harsh chuckle.

"Lie still, so," he told me. "Lie still, make no smallest row, and we will pass the gate like royalty. And those who follow will watch you pass, and never

take your scent. Thank me later—" I had opened my mouth to speak, but he put a rough palm over it, shaking his white head. "Down, down," he whispered, and to my disgust he pushed himself even further into the manure pile, all but vanishing into the darkness and the stench. And I did the same.

He saved my life, in every likelihood, for we left that gate and half a dozen like it behind as we continued our malodorous excursion, while the driver, all unwitting, paid our toll each time. Only with the last barrier safely past did we slide from the cart, tumble to the roadside and such cover as there was, and rise to face each other in daylight. We reeked beyond the telling of it—in honesty, almost beyond the smelling of it, so inured to the odor had our nostrils become. We stank beyond anything but laughter, and that was what we did then, grimacing and howling and falling down on the dry grass, pointing helplessly at each other and going off again into great, ridiculous whoops of mirth and relief, until we wore ourselves out and could barely breathe, let alone laugh. The old man's laughter was as shrill and cold as the mating cries of *shukris*, but it was laughter even so.

He was old indeed, now I saw him in daylight, even under a crust of filth and all that still stuck to the filth—straw, twigs, dead spiders, bull-ock-hair. His own hair and brows were as white as his mustache, and the gray eyes streaked with rheum; yet his cheeks were absurdly pink, like a young girl's cheeks, and he carried himself as straight as any young man. Young as I was myself, and unwise as I was, when I first looked into his eyes, I already knew far better than to trust him. And nonetheless, knowing, I wanted to. He can do that.

"I think we bathe," he said to me. "Before anything else, I do think we bathe."

"I think so too," I said. "Yes." He jerked his white head, and we walked away from the Queen's Road, off back into the wild woods.

"I am Soukryan," I offered, but to that he made no response. He clearly knew the country, for he led me directly to a fast-flowing stream, and then to a pool lower down, where the water gathered and swirled. We cleaned ourselves there, though it took us a long time, so mucky we were; and afterward, naked-new as raw carrots, we lay in the sun and talked for a while. I told truth, for the most part, leaving out only some minor details of *that place*—things I had good reason not to think about just then—and he ... ah, well, what he told me of his life, of how he came to hail me from that dungheap, was such a stew of lies and the odd honesty that I've never studied out the right of it yet, no more than I have ever learned his own name. The truth is not in him, and I would be dearly disappointed if it should show its poor face now. He was there—leave it at that. He was there at the particular moment when I needed a friend, however fraudulent. It has happened so since.

"So," he said at last, stretching himself in the sun. "And what's to be done with you now?"—for all the world as though he had all the disposing of me and my future. "If you fancy that your followers have forsaken you, merely because we once stank our way past them, I'd greatly enjoy to have the

writing of your will. They will run behind you until you die—they will never return to their masters without you, or whatever's left of you. On that you have my word."

"I know that well enough," said I, trying my best to appear as knowledgeable as he. "But perhaps I am not to be taken so easily." The old man snorted with as much contempt as I have ever heard in a single exhalation of breath, and rolled to his feet, deceptively, alarmingly graceful. He crouched naked on his haunches, facing me, studying me, smiling with pointed teeth.

"Without me, you die," he said, quite quietly. "You know it and I know it. Say it back to me." I only stared, and he snapped, "*Say it back*. Without me?"

And I said it, because I knew it was true. "Without you, I would be dead." The old man nodded approvingly. The yellow glint was stronger in the gray eyes.

"Now," he said. "I have my own purposes, my own small annoyance to manage. I could deal with it myself, as I've done many a time—never think otherwise—but it suits me to share roads with you for a little. It suits me." He was studying me as closely as I have ever been considered, even by those at *that place*, and I could not guess what he saw. "It suits me," he said for a third time. "We may yet prove of some use to each other."

"We may, or we may not," I said, more than a bit sharply, for I was annoyed at the condescension in his glance. "I may seem a gormless boy to you, but I know this country, and I know how to handle myself." The first claim was a lie; of the second, all I can say is that I believed it then. I went on, probably more belligerent for my fear: "Indeed, I may well owe you my life, and I will repay you as I can, my word on it. But as to whether we should ally ourselves ... sir, I hope only to put the width of the world between myself and those who seek me—I have no plans beyond that. Of what your own plans, your own desires may be, you will have to inform me, for I have no notion at all."

He seemed to approve my boldness; at any rate, he laughed that short, yapping laugh of his and said, "For the moment, my plans run with yours. We're dried enough—dress yourself, so, and we'll be off and gone while our little friends are still puzzling over how we could have slipped their grasp. They'll riddle it out quickly enough, but we'll have the heels of them a while yet." And I could not help finding comfort in noticing that "your followers" had now become "our little friends."

So we ourselves were allies of a sort, united by common interests, whatever they were. Having no goal, nor any vision of a life beyond flight, I had no real choice but to go where he led, since on my own the only question would have been whether I should be caught before I stumbled into a swamp and got eaten by a *lourijakh*. For all his age, he marched along with an air of absolute serenity, no matter if we were beating our way through some near-impenetrable thornwood or crossing high barrens in the deepest night. Wherever he was bound—which was only one of the

things he did not share with me—we encountered few other travelers on our way to it. An old lone wizard making his *lamisetha*; a couple of deserters from someone's army, who wanted to sell us their uniforms; a little band of prospectors, too busy quarreling over the exact location of a legendary hidden *drast* mine to pay overmuch attention to us. I think there was a water witch as well, but at this reach it is hard to be entirely sure.

By now I would not have trusted my woodcraft for half a minute, but it was obvious from our first day together that my new friend had enough of that for the pair of us. Every night, before we slept—turn and turn about, always one on watch—and every morning, before anything at all, he prowled the area in a wide, constantly shifting radius, clearly going by his nose as much as his sight and hearing. Most of the time he was out of my view, but on occasion I would hear a kind of whuffling snort, usually followed by a low, disdainful grunt. In his own time he'd come trotting jauntily up from the brushy hollow or the dry ravine, shaking his dusty white hair in the moonlight, to say, "Two weeks, near enough, and not up with us yet? Not taking advantage of my years and your inexperience to pounce on us in the dark hours and pull us apart like a couple of boiled chickens? Indeed, I begin to lose respect for our legendary entourage—as stupid as the rest, they are, after all." And what he meant by *the rest*, I could not imagine then.

Respect the Hunters or no, he never slackened our pace, nor ever grew careless in covering our tracks. We were angling eastward, into the first folds of the Skagats—the Burnt Hills, your people call them, I believe. At the time I had no name at all for them, nor for any other feature of this new landscape. For all the teachings I had absorbed at *that place*, for all the sly secret knowledge that was the true foundation of the great house, for all the wicked wisdom that I would shed even today, if I could, as a snake scours itself free of its skin against a stone ... nevertheless, then I knew next to nothing of the actual world in which that knowledge moved. We were deliberately kept quite ignorant, you see, in certain ways.

He ridiculed me constantly about that. I see him still, cross-legged across the night's fire from me, jabbing out with a longnailed forefinger, demanding, "And you mean to sit there and tell me that you've never heard of the Mildasi people, or the Achali? You know the lineage, the lovers, and the true fate of every queen who ever ruled in Fors—you know the deep cause of the Fishermen's Rebellion, and what really came of it—you know the entire history of the Old Arrangement, which cannot be written—but you have absolutely no inkling where Byrnarik Bay's to be found, nor the Northern Barrens, nor can you so much as guess at the course of the Susathi. Well, you've had such an education as never was, that's all I can say. And it's worthless to us, all of it worthless, nothing but a waste of head-space, taking up room that could have been better occupied if you'd been taught to read track, steal a horse or shoot a bow. *Worthless.*"

"I can shoot a bow," I told him once. "My father taught me."

"Oh, indeed? I must remember to stand behind you when you loose off." There was a deal more of that as we journeyed on. I found it tedious most often, and sometimes hurtful; but there was a benefit, too, because he



began taking it on himself to instruct me in the nature and fabric of this new world—and this new life, as well—as though I were visiting from the most foreign of far-off lands. Which, in ways even he could not have known, I was.

One thing I did understand from the first day was that he was plainly a fugitive himself, no whit different from me, for all his conceit. Why else would he have been hiding in a dung-cart, eager to commandeer the company of such a bumpkin as I? Kindly concern for my survival in a dangerous world might be part of it, but he was hardly combing our back-trail every night on my behalf. I knew that much from the way he slept—when he slept—most often on his back, his arms and legs curled close and scrabbling in the air, running and running behind his closed eyes, just as a hound will do. I knew it from the way he would cry out, not in any tongue I knew, but in strange yelps and whimpers and near-growls that seemed sometimes to border on language, so close to real words that I was sure I almost caught them, and that if he only kept on a bit longer, or if I dared bend a bit closer, I'd understand who—or what—was pursuing him through his dreams. Once he woke, and saw me there, studying him; and though his entire body tensed like a crossbow, he never moved.

The gray eyes had gone full yellow, the pupils slitted almost to invisibility. They held me until he closed them again, and I crept away to my blanket. In the morning, he made no mention of my spying on his sleep, but I never imagined that he had forgotten.

So young I was then, all that way back, and so much I knew, and he was quite right—none of it was to prove the smallest use in the world I entered on our journey. That nameless, tireless, endlessly scornful old man showed me the way to prepare and cook *aidallah*, which looks like a dungball itself, is more nourishing than *tilgit* and tastes far better, and which is poisonous if you don't strip every last bit of the inner rind. He taught me to carry my silly little knife out of sight in a secret place; he taught me how to sense a *sheknath's* presence a good mile before winding it, and—when we were sneaking through green, steamy Taritaj a country—how to avoid the mantraps those cannibal folk set for travelers. (I was on my way over the lip of two of them before he snatched me back, danc-ing with scorn, laughing his yap-laugh and informing me that no one would ever eat my brain to gain wisdom.) And, in spite of all my efforts, I cannot imagine forgetting my first introduction to the sandslugs of the Oriskany plains. There isn't a wound they can't clean out, nor an infection they can't digest; but it is not a comfortable process, and I prefer not to speak of it any further. Nevertheless, more than once I have come a very long way to find them again.

But cunning and knowing as that old man was, even he could detect no sign of the Hunters from the moment when we joined fortunes on the Queen's Road. Today I'd have the wit to be frightened more every day by their absence; but then I was for once too interested in puzzling out the cause of my companion's night terrors, and the identity of his pursuers to be much concerned with my own. And on the twentieth twilight that we shared, dropping down from the Skagats into high desert country, I finally caught sight of it for a single instant: the cause.

It stalked out of a light evening haze on long bird legs—three of them. The third appeared to be more tail than leg—the creature leaned back on it briefly, regarding us—but it definitely had long toes or claws of its own. As for the head and upper body, I had only a dazed impression of something approaching the human, and more fearsome for that. In another moment, it was gone, soundless for all its size; and the old man was up out of a doze, teeth bared, crouching to launch himself in any direction. When he turned to me, I'd no idea whether I should have seen what I had, or whether it would be wisest to feign distraction. But he never gave me the chance to choose.

I cannot say that I actually saw the change. I never do, not really. Never any more than a sort of sway in the air—you could not even call it a ripple—and there he is: there, like that first time: red-brown mask, the body a deeper red, throat and chest and tail-tip white-gold, bright yellow eyes seeing me—me, lost young Soukryan, always the same—seeing me truly and terribly, all the way down. Always. The fox.

One wild glare before he sprang away into the mist, and I did not see him again for a day and another night. Nor the great bird-legged thing either, though I sat up both nights, expecting its return. It was plainly seeking him, not me—whatever it might be, it was no Hunter—but what if it saw me as his partner, his henchman, as liable as he for whatever wrong it might be avenging? And what if I *had* become a shapeshifter's partner, unaware? Not all alliances are written, or spoken, or signed. Oh, I had no trouble staying awake those two nights. I thought it quite likely that I might never sleep again.

Or eat again, either, come to that. As I have told you, I never went back to my room at *that place*, which meant leaving my bow there. I wished now that I had chanced fetching it: not only because I had killed a man with that bow when I was barely tall enough to aim and draw, but because without it, on my own, I was bound to go very hungry indeed. I stayed close to our camp—what point in wandering off into unknown country in search of a half-mad, half-sinister old man?—and merely waited, making do with such scraps and stores as we had, drinking from a nearby waterhole, little more than a muddy footprint. Once, in that second night, something large and silent crossed the moon; but when I challenged it there was no response, and nothing to see. I sat down again and threw more wood on my fire.

He came back in human form, almost out of nowhere, but not quite—I never saw that change, either, but I did see, far behind him, coming around a thicket beyond the waterhole, the two sets of footprints, man and animal, and the exact place where one supplanted the other. Plainly, he did not care whether I saw it or not. He sat down across from me, as always, took a quick glance at our depleted larder, and said irritably, "You ate every last one of the *sushal* eggs. Greedy."

"Yes. I did." Formal, careful, both of us, just as though we had never shared a dung-cart. We stared at each other in silence for some while, and then I asked him, most politely, "What are you?"

"What I need to be," he answered. "Now this, now that, as necessary. As are we all."

I was surprised by my own sudden fury at his blandly philosophical air. "We do not *all* turn into foxes," I said. "We do not *all* abandon our friends—" I remember that I hesitated over the word, but then came out with it strongly—"leaving them to face monsters alone. Nor do we *all* lie to them from sunup to sundown, as you have done to me. I have no use for you, and we have no future together. Come tomorrow, I go alone."

"Well, now, that would be an extremely foolish mistake, and most probably fatal as well." He was as calmly judicial as any human could have been, but he was *not* human, *not* human. He said, "Consider—did I not keep you from your enemies, when they were as close on your heels as your own dirty skin? Have I not counseled you well during this journey you and I have made together? That *monster*, as you call it, did you no harm—nor even properly frightened you, am I right? Say honestly." I had no fitting answer, though I opened my mouth half a dozen times, while he sat there and smiled at me. "So. Now. Sit still, and I will tell you every-thing you wish to know."

Which, of course, he did not.

This is what he did tell me:

"What you saw—that was no monster, but something far worse. That was a Goro." He waited only a moment for me to show that I knew the name; quite rightly not expecting this, he went on. "The Goro are the bravest, fiercest folk who walk the earth. To be killed by a Goro is considered a great honor, for they deign to slay only the bravest and fiercest of their enemies—merely to make an enemy of a Goro is an honor as well. However short-lived."

"Which is what you have done," I said, when he paused. He looked not at all guilty or ashamed, but distinctly embarrassed.

"You could say that, I suppose," he replied. "In a way. It was a mis-take—I made a serious mistake, and I'm not too proud to admit it, even to you." I had never heard him sound as he did then: half-defiant, yet very nearly mumbling, like a child caught out in a lie. He said, "I stole a Goro's dream."

I looked at him. I did not laugh—I don't recall that I said anything—but he sneered at me anyway. His eyes were entirely gray now, narrow with disdain, and somewhat more angled than I had noticed before. "Mock me, then—why should you not? Your notion of dreams will have them all gossamer, all insubstantial film and gauze and wispy vapors. I tell you now that the dream of a Goro is as real and solid as your imbecile self, and each one takes solid form in our world, no matter if we recognize it or not for what it is. Understand me, fool!" He had grown notably heated, and there was a long silence between us before he spoke again.

"Understand me. Your life may well depend on it." For just that moment,

the eyes were almost pleading. "It happened that I was among the Goro some time ago, traveling in ... that *shape* you have seen." In all the time that we have known each other, he has never spoken the word *fox*, not to me. He said, "A Goro's dream, once dreamed, will manifest itself to us as it chooses—a grassblade or a jewel, a weed or a log of wood, who knows why? In my case ... in my case—pure chance, mind you—it turned out to be a shiny stone. The *shape* likes shiny things." His voice trailed away, again a guilty child's voice.

"So you took it," I said. "Blame the shape, if you like—no matter to me—but it was you did the stealing. I may be only a fool, but I can follow you that far."

"It is not so simple!" he began angrily, but he caught himself then, and went on more calmly. "Well, well, your morality's no matter to me either, What should matter to you is that a stolen dream cries out to its begetter. No Goro will ever rest until his dream is safe home again, and the thief gathered to his ancestors in very small pieces. Most often, some of the pieces are lacking." He smiled at me.

"A grassblade?" I demanded. "A stone—a stick of wood? To pursue and kill for a discarded stick, no use to anyone? You neglected to mention that your brave, fierce Goro are also quite mad."

The old man sighed, a long and elaborately despairing sigh. "They are no more mad than yourself—a good deal less so, more than likely. And a Goro's dream is of considerable use—to a Goro, no one else. They keep them all, can you follow *that*? A Goro will hoard every physical manifestation of every dream he dreams in his life, even if at the end it seems only to amount to a heap of dead twigs and dried flower petals. Because he is bound to present the whole unsightly clutter to his gods, when he goes to them. And if even one is missing—one single feather, candle-end, teacup, seashell fragment—then the Goro will suffer bitterly after death. So they believe, and they take poorly to having it named nonsense. Which I am very nearly sure it is."

When he was not railing directly at me, his arrogance trickled away swiftly, leaving him plainly uneasy, shapeshifter or no. I found this rather shamefully enjoyable. I said, "So. This one wants his shiny stone back, and it has called him all this way on your trail. It does seem to me—"

"That I might simply return it to him? Apologies—some small token gift, perhaps—and no harm done?" This time his short laugh sounded like a branch snapping in a storm. "Indeed, nothing would suit me better. It is only a useless pebble, as you say—the *shape* lost all interest in it long ago. Unfortunately, for such an offense against a Goro—such a sin, if you like—vengeance is required." Speaking those words silenced him again for a long moment: his eyes flicked constantly past and beyond me, and his whole body had grown so taut that I half-expected him to turn back into a fox as we sat together. For the first time in our acquaintance, I pitied him.

"Vengeance is required," he repeated presently. "It is a true sacrament among the Goro, much more than a matter of settling tribal scores."

Something to do with evening all things out, restoring the proper balance of the world. Smoothing the rumples, you might say. Very philosophical, the Goro, when they have a moment." He was doing his best to appear composed, you see, though he must have known I knew better. He does that.

"All as may be," I said. "What's clear to me is that we now have two different sets of assassins to deal with, each lot unstoppable—"

"The Goro are *not* assassins," he interrupted me. "They are a civilized and honorable people, according to their lights." He was genuinely indignant.

"Splendid," I said. "Then by all means, you must stay where you are and allow yourself to be honorably slaughtered, so as to right the balance of things. For myself, I'll give them a run, in any case," and I was on my feet and groping for my belongings. Wonderful, what weeks of flight can do for a naturally mild temper.

He rose with me, nodding warningly, if such a thing can be. "Aye, we'd best be moving. I can't speak for your lot, but the day's coming on hot, and our Goro will sleep out the worst of it, if I know them at all. Pack and follow."

That brusquely—*pack and follow*. And so I did, for there was no more choice in the matter than there ever had been. The old man set a fierce pace that day, not only demanding greater speed from me than ever, but also doubling back, zigzagging like a hare with a *shukri* one jump behind: then inexplicably going to ground for half an hour at a time, absolutely motionless and silent until we abruptly started on again, with no more explanation than before. During those stretches he often slipped out of sight, each time hissing me to stillness, and I knew that he would take the fox-shape (or would it take him? which was real?) to scout back along the way we had come. But whether we were a trifle safer, or whether death was a little closer on our heels, I could never be sure. He never once said.

The country continued high desert, simmering with murages, but there were moments in the ever-colder nights when I could smell fresh water: or perhaps I felt its presence in the water composing my own body. The old man did finally reveal that in less than a week, at our current rate we should strike the Nai, the greatest river in this part of the country which actually begins in the Skagats. There are always boats, he assured me—scows and barges and little schooners, going up and down with dried fish for this settlement, nails and harness for that one, a full load of lumber for the new town building back of the old port. Paying passengers were quite common on the Nai, as well as the non-paying sort—and here he winked elaborately at me, looking enough like the grandfather I still think I almost remember that I had to look away for a moment. Increasingly, as the years pass, I prefer the fox-shape.

"Not that this will lose our Goro friend," he said, "not for a moment. They're seagoing people—a river is a city street to the Goro. But they dislike rivers, exactly as a countryman dislikes the city, and the further they are from the sea, the more tense and uneasy they become. Now the Nai will take us all the way to Druchank, which is a hellpit, unless it has changed greatly since

I was last there. But from Druchank it's a long long journey to the smell of salt, yet no more than two days to..."

And here he stopped. It was not a pause for breath or memory, not an instant's halt to find words—no interruption, but an end, as though he had never intended to say more. He only looked at me, not with his usual mockery, nor with any expression that I could read. But he clearly would not speak again until I did, and I had a strong sense that I did not want to ask what I had to ask, and get an answer. I said, at last, "Two days to where?"

"To the place of our stand." The voice had no laughter in it, but no fear either. "To the place where we turn and meet them all. Yours and mine."

It was long ago, that moment. I am reasonably certain that I did not say anything bold or heroic in answer, as I can be fairly sure that I did not shame myself. Beyond that ... beyond that, I can only recall a sense that all the skin of my face had suddenly grown too tight for my head. The rest is stories. *He* might remember exactly how it was, but he lies.

I do recollect his response to whatever I finally said. "Yes, it *will* come to that, and we will not be able to avoid facing them. I thought we might, but I always look circumstance in the eye." (And would try to steal both eyes, and then charge poor blind circumstance for his time, but never mind.) He said, "Your Hunters and my Goro—" no more sharing of shad-ows, apparently—"there's no shaking them, none of them. I would know if there were a way." I didn't doubt that. "The best we can do is to choose the ground on which we make our stand, and I have long since chosen the Mihanachakali." I blinked at him. That I remember, blinking so stu-pidly, nothing to say.

The Mihanachakali was deep delta once—rich, bountiful farmland, until the Nai changed course, over a century ago. The word means *black river valley*—I suppose because the Nai used to carry so much sweet silt to the region when it flooded every year or two. You wouldn't know that now, nor could I believe it at the time, trudging away from Druchank (which was just as foul a hole as he remembered, and remains so), into country grown so parched, so entirely dried out, that the soil had for-gotten how to hold even the little mist that the river provided now and again. We met no one, but every turn in the road brought us past one more abandoned house, one more ruin of a shed or a byre; eventually the road became one more desiccated furrow crumbling away to the flat, pale horizon. The desert had never been anything but what it was; this waste was far wilder, far lonelier, because of the ghosts. Because of the ghosts that I could feel, even if I couldn't see them—the people who had lived here, tried to live here, who had dug in and hung on as long as they could while the earth itself turned ghost under their feet, under their splintery wooden ploughs and spades. I hated it as instinctively and deeply and sadly as I have ever hated a place on earth, but the old man tramped on without ever looking back for me. And as I stumbled after him over the cold, wrinkled land, he talked constantly to himself, so that I could not help but overhear.

"Near, near—they never move, once they ... twice before, twice, and then that other time ... listen for it, smell it out, find it, find it, so close ... no

mistake, it cannot have moved, I *will* not be mistaken, listen for it, reach for it, find it, find it, *find it!*" He crouched lower and lower as we plodded on, until he might as well have taken the fox-form, so increasingly taut, elongated and pointed had his shadow become. To me during those two days crossing the Mihanachakali, he spoke not at all.

Then, nearing sundown on the second day, he abruptly broke off the long mumbled conversation with himself. Between one stride and the next, he froze in place, one foot poised off the ground, exactly as I have seen a stalking fox do when the chosen kill suddenly raises its head and sniffs the air. "Here," he said quietly, and it seemed not so much a word but a single breath that had chosen shape on its own, like a Goro's dream. "Here," he said again. "Here it was. I remembered. I *knew*."

We had halted in what appeared to me to be the exact middle of any-where. River off *that* way, give or take; a few shriveled hills lumping up *that* way; no-color evening sky baking above ... I could never have imagined surroundings less suitable for a gallant last stand. It wouldn't have taken a Goro and two Hunters to pick us off as we stood there with the sunset at our backs: two small, weary figures, weaponless, exposed to attack on all sides, our only possible shelter a burned-out farmhouse, nothing but four walls, a caved-in roof, a crumbling chimney, and what looked to be a root cellar. A shepherd with a sling could have potted us like sparrows.

"I knew," he repeated, looking much more like his former superior self. "Not whether it would *be* here, but that it would be *here*." It made no sense, and I told him so, and the yap-laugh sounded more elated than I had yet heard it. "Think for once, idiot! No, no—*don't* think, forget about thinking! Try remembering, try to remember something, anything you didn't learn at that bloody asylum of yours. Something your mother told you about such places—something the old people used to say, something children would whisper in their beds to frighten each other. Something even a fool just might already know—remember! Remember?"

And I did. I remembered half-finished stories of houses that were not quite ... that were not there all the time ... rumors, quickly hushed by par-ents, of house-things blooming now and then from haunted soil, spring-ing up like mushrooms in moonlight ... I remembered an uncle's absently-mumbled account of a friend, journeying, who took advantage of what appeared to be a shepherd's mountain hut and was not seen again—no more than the hut itself—and someone else's tale of bachelor cousins who settled into an empty cottage no one seemed to want, lived there comfortably enough for some years, and then ... I did remember.

"Those are fables," I said. "Legends, nothing more. If you mean that over there, I see nothing but a gutted hovel that was most likely greatly improved by a proper fire. Let it appear, let it vanish—either way, we are both going to die. Of course, I may once again have missed something."

He could not have been more delighted. "Excellent. I must tell you, I might have felt a trifle anxious if you had actually grasped my plan." The pale yellow glow was rising in his eyes. "The true nature of that house is not

important, and in any case would take too long to explain to an oaf. What matters is that if once our pursuers pass its door, they will not ever emerge again—therefore, we two must become bait and deadfall together, luring them on to disaster." Everything obviously depended on our pursuers running us to this earth at the same time; if they fell upon each other in their lust to slaughter us, so much the better, but he was plainly not counting on this. "Once we've cozened them into that corner," and he gestured toward the thing that looked so like a ruinous farm-house, "why, then, our troubles are over, and no burying to plague us, either." He kicked disdainfully at the stone-hard soil, and the laugh was far more fox than human.

I said, as calmly and carefully as I could, "This is not going to work. There are too many unknowns, too many possibilities. What if they do not arrive together? What if, instead of clashing, they cooperate to hunt us down? Much too likely that we will be the ones trapped in your—your corner—with no way out, helpless and doomed. This is absurd."

Oh, but he was furious then! Totally enraged, how he stamped back and forth, glaring at me, even his mustache crouched to spring, every white hair abristle. If he had been in the fox-shape—well, who knows?—perhaps he might indeed have leaped at my throat. "Ignorant, igno-rant! *Unknowns, possibilities*—you know nothing, you are *fit* for nothing but my bidding." He stamped a few more times, and then turned to stalk away toward the farmhouse—toward the thing that looked like a farm-house. When I made to follow, he waved me back without turning his head. "Stay!" he ordered, as you command a dog. "Keep watch, call when they come in sight. You can do that much."

"And what then?" I shouted after him, as angry as he by now. "Have you any further instructions for the help? When I call to you, what then?"

Still walking, still not looking back, he answered, "Then you run, imbecile! Toward the house—*toward*, but not *into*! Do try to remember that." On the last words, he vanished into the shadow of the farmhouse. And I ... why, I took up my ridiculous guard, stolidly patrolling the dead fields in the twilight, just as though I understood what I was to expect, and exactly what I would do when it turned up. The wind was turning steadily colder, and I kept tripping on the ruts and tussocks I paced, even falling on my face once. I am almost certain that he could not have seen me.

In an hour, or two hours, the half-moon rose: the shape of a broken button, the color of a knife. I am grateful for it still; without it, I would surely never have seen the pair of them flitting across the dark toward me from different directions, dodging my glance, constantly dropping flat themselves, taking advantage of every dimness, every little swell of ground. The sight of them froze me, froze the tongue in my mouth. I could no more have cried out warning than I could have flown up to that moon by flapping my arms. They knew it, too. I could see their smiles slicing through the moonlight.

I was not altogether without defenses. They had taught us somehwai of *kuj'mai*—the north-coast style—in *that place*, and I was confident that I could take passable care of myself in most situations. But not here, not in



this situation, not for a minute, not against those two. My mind wanted to run away, and my body wanted to wet and befoul itself. Somehow I did neither, no more than I made a sound.

The worst moment—my stomach remembers it exactly, if my mind blurs details—was when I suddenly realized that I had lost sight of them, moon or no. Then panic took me entirely, and I turned and fled toward the farmhouse-thing, as instructed, my eyes clenched almost shut, fully expecting to be effortlessly overtaken at any moment, as a *sheknath* drags down its victim from behind. They would be laughing—were laughing already, I knew it, even if I couldn't hear them. I could feel their laugh-ter pulling me down.

When the first hand clutched at my neck, I did turn to fight them. I like to remember that. I did shriek in terror—yes, I admit that without shame—but only once; then I whirled in that grasp, as I had been taught, and struck out with right hand and left foot, in proper *kuj'mai* style, aim-ing at once to shatter a kidney and paralyze a breathing center. I connected with neither, but found myself dangling in the air, screaming defiance into a face like no face I knew. It had a lizard's scales, almost purple in color, the round black eyes of some predatory bird—but glaring with a savage philosophy that never burdened the brain of any bird—a nose somewhere between a snout and a beak, and a long narrow muzzle fringed with a great many small, shy fangs. The Goro.

"Where is he?" it demanded in the Common Tongue. Its voice was higher than I had imagined, sounding as though it had scales on it as well, and it spoke with a peculiar near-lisp which would likely have been funny if I had not been hearing it with a set of three-inch talons very nearly meeting in my throat. The Goro said again, almost whispering, "Where is he? You have exactly three *daks* to tell me."

What measure of time a *dak* might be, I cannot tell you to this day, but it still sounds short. What I can say is that all that kept me from betraying the old man on the instant was the fact that I could barely make a sound, once I had heard that voice and the hissing, murderous wisdom in that voice. I managed to croak out, "Sir, I do not know, honestly"—I did say *sir*, I am sure of that anyway—but the Goro only gripped me the tighter, until I felt my tongue and eyes and even my teeth about to explode from my head. It wanted the shapeshifter's life, not mine; but to the wrath in that clench, what difference. In another moment I would be just as dead as if it had been I who stole a dream. The pure injustice of it would have made me weep, if I could have.

Then the Hunters hit him (or her, I never knew), one from either side. The Goro was so intent on strangling information out of me that it never sensed or saw them until they were upon it. It uttered a kind of soft, wheezing roar, hurled me away into a dry ditch, and turned on them, slashing out with claws at one, striking at the other's throat, all fangs bared to the yellow gums. But they were quicker: they spun away like dancers, lashing back with their weaponless hands—and, amazingly, hurting the creature. Its own attacks drew blood from exposed flesh, but theirs brought grunts of surprised pain from deep in the Goro's belly; and after that first skirmish it

halted abruptly, standing quite still to take their measure properly. Still struggling for each breath, I found myself absurdly sympathetic. It knew nothing of Hunters, after all, while I knew a little.

But then again, they had plainly never encountered such an opponent. They seemed no more eager to charge a second time than it was to come at them. One took a few cautious steps forward, pausing immediately when the Goro growled. The Hunter's tone was blithe and merry, as I had always been told their voices were. "We have no dispute with you, friend," and he pointed one deadly forefinger at me as I cowered behind the creature who had so nearly killed me a moment before. The Hunter said, "We seek *him*."

"Do you so." Those three slow words, in the Goro's voice, would have made me reconsider the path to paradise. The reply was implicit before the Goro spoke again. "He is mine. I need what he knows."

"Ah, but so do we, you see." The Hunter might have been lightly debating some dainty point of poetry or religion with a fine lady, such as drifted smokily now and then through the chill halls of *that place*. He continued, "What we need will come back to where it belongs. He will ... stay here."

"Ah," said the Goro in turn, and the little sigh, coming from such a great creature, seemed oddly gentle, even wistful. The Goro said, "I also have no wish to kill you. You should go away now."

"We cannot." The other Hunter spoke for the first time, sounding almost apologetic. "There it is, unfortunately."

I had at that point climbed halfway out of the ditch, moving as cautiously and—I hoped—as inconspicuously as I possibly could, when the Goro turned and saw me. It uttered that same chilling wheeze, feinted a charge, which sent me diving back down to bang my head on stony mud, and then wheeled faster than anything that big should have been able to move, swinging its clawed tail to knock the nearer Hunter a good twenty feet away. He regained his feet swiftly enough, but he was obviously stunned, and only stood shaking his head as the Goro came at him again. The second Hunter leaped on its back, chopping and jabbing at it with those hands that could break bones and lay open flesh, but the Goro paid no more heed than if the Hunter had been pelting it with flowers. It simply shook him off and struck his dazed partner so hard—this time with a paw—that I heard his neck snap from where I stood. It does not, by the way, sound like a dry twig, as some say. Not at all.

I scrambled all the way out of the ditch on my second try, and poised low on the edge, ready to bolt this way or that, according to what the Goro did next. Vaguely I recalled that the old man had ordered me to run for the house once I had gained the attention of all parties; but, what with the situation having altered, I thought that perhaps I might not move much for some while—possibly a year, or even two. The surviving Hunter, mortally bound to avenge his comrade, let out a howl of purest grief and fury and sprang wildly at the Goro—who, amazingly, backed away so fast that the Hunter literally fell short, and very nearly sprawled at the Goro's feet, still

crying vengeance. The Goro could have killed him simply by stepping on him, or with a quick slash of its tail, but it did no such thing. Rather, it backed further, allowing him to rise without any hindrance, and the two of them faced each other under the half-moon, the Hunter crouched and panting, the Goro studying him thoughtfully out of lidless black eyes.

The Hunter said, his voice still lightly amused, "I am not afraid of you. We have killed—" he caught himself then, and for a single moment, a splinter of a moment, I saw real, rending pain in his own pitiless eyes—"I have killed a score greater than you, and each time walked away unscathed. You will not live to say the same."

"Perhaps not," said the Goro, and nothing more than that. It continued to stand where it was, motionless as a long-legged *gantiya* waiting in the marshes for a minnow, while the Hunter, just as immobile, seemed to vibrate with bursting, famished energy. I began to ease away from the ditch, one slow-sliding foot at a time, freezing for what seemed hours between steps and wishing desperately now for the moon to sink or cloud over. There came no sound or signal from the farmhouse-thing; for all I knew, the old man had taken full advantage of the Goro's distraction to abandon me to its mercy, and that of my own pursuer. Neither of them had yet paid any further heed to me, but each waited with a terrible patience for the other's eyes to make the first move. At the last, the eyes are all you have.

Gradually gaining an idiotic confidence in my chances of slipping off unnoticed, I forgot completely how I had earlier tripped in a rut and sprawled on my face, until I did it again. I made no sound, for all my certainty that I had broken my nose, but they heard me. The Hunter gave a sudden short laugh, far more terrifying than the Goro's strange, strangled roar, and came bounding at me, flying over those same fur-rows like a dolphin taking the sunset waves. I was paralyzed—I have no memory of reacting, until I found myself on my back, curled into a half-ball, as a *shukri* brought to bay will do, biting and clawing madly at an assailant too vast for the malodorous little beast even to conceive of. The Hunter was over me like nightfall: still perfectly efficient, for all his fury, contemptuously ignoring my flailing attempts at both attack and defense, while seeking the one place for the one blow he would ever need to strike. He found it.

He found it perhaps half a second after I found the cook's paring knife in the place where the old man had scornfully insisted that I carry it. Thought was not involved—the frantic, scrabbling thing at the end of my arm clutched the worn wooden handle and lunged blindly upward, slanting the blade along the Hunter's rib cage, which turned it like a melting candle. I felt the warm, slow trickle—*ah, they could bleed, then!*—but the Hunter's face never changed; if anything, he smiled with a kind of taunting triumph. *Yes, I can bleed, but that will not help you. Nothing will help you.* Nevertheless, he missed his strike, and I somehow rolled away, momentarily out of range and still, still alive.

The Hunter's hands were open, empty, hanging at his sides. The brown tunic was dark under his left arm, but he never stopped smiling. He said clearly, "There is no hope. No hope for you, no escape. You must know

that."

"Yes," I said. "Yes, I know." And I did know, utterly, beyond any delusion. I said, "Come ahead, then."

To do myself some justice, he moved in rather more deliberately this time, as though I might have given him something to consider. I caught a moment's glimpse of the Goro standing off a little way, apparently waiting for us to destroy each other, as the old man had hoped it and the Hunters would do. The Hunter eased toward me, sideways-on, giving my paring knife the smallest target possible, which was certainly a compliment of a sort. I feinted a couple of times, left and right, as I had seen it done. He laughed, saying, "Good—very good. Really." A curious way to hear one's death sentence spoken.

Suddenly I had had enough of being quarry: the one pursued, the one hunted down, dragged down, the one helplessly watching his derisive executioner approach, himself unable to stir hand or foot. Without anything resembling a strategy, let alone a hope, I flung myself at the Hunter like a stone tumbling downhill. He stepped nimbly aside, but surprise slowed him just a trifle, and I hurtled into him, bringing us down together for a second time, and jarring the wind out of his laughter.

For a moment I was actually on top, clutching at the Hunter's throat with one hand, brandishing my little knife over him with the other. Then he smiled teasingly at me, like a father pretending to let a child pin him at wrestling, and he took the knife away from me and snapped it between his fingers. His face and clothes were splotched with blood now, but he seemed no whit weaker as he shrugged me aside and kneeled on my arms. He said kindly, "You gave us a better run than we expected. I will be quick."

Then he made a mistake.

Under the chuckling benignity, contempt, always, for every living soul but Hunters. Under the gracious amusement, contempt, utter sneering contempt. They cannot help it, it is what they are, and it is their only weakness. He tossed the broken handle of the paring knife—with its one remaining jag of blade—lightly into my face, and raised a hand for the killing blow. When he did that, his body weight shifted—only the least bit, but his right knee shifted with it, and slipped in a smear of blood. My half-numb left arm pulled free.

There was no stabbing possible with that fraction of a knife—literally no point to it, as you might say. I thought only to mark him, to make him know that he had not killed a pitiful child, but a man grown. One last time I slashed feebly at his smiling face, but he turned his head slightly, and I missed my target completely, raking the side of his neck. I remember my disappointment—*well, failed at that, too, my last act in this world.* I remember.

It was no dribble this time, no ooze, but a fierce leap like a living animal over my hand—even Hunters have an artery there—followed immediately by a lover's triumphant blurt of breath into my face. The Hunter's eyes

widened, and he started to say something, and he died in my arms.

I might have lain there for a little while—I don't know. It cannot have been long, because the body was abruptly snatched off mine and flung back and away, like a snug blanket on a winter's morning, when your mother wants you out feeding the *jejebhais*. The Goro hauled me to my feet.

"*Him*," it said, and nothing more. It made no menacing gesture, uttered no horrifying threat; none of that was necessary. Now here is where the foolishness comes in. I had every hysterical intention of crying, "Lord, lord, please, do not slay me, and I will lead you straight to where he hides, only spare my wretched life." I meant to, I find no disgrace in telling you this, especially since what I actually heard myself say—quite politely, as I recall—was, "You will have to kill me, sir." For that miserable, lying, insulting, shapeshifting old man, I did that, and he jeered at me for it, later on. Ah, well, we begin as we are meant to continue, I suppose.

The Goro regarded me out of those eyes that could neither blink (though I saw a sort of pinkish membrane flick across them from time to time) nor reveal the slightest feeling. It said, "That would serve no useful purpose. You will take me to him."

As I have said, it raised no deadly paw, showed no more teeth than the long muzzle normally showed. But I *felt* the command, and the implacable will behind the command—I *felt* the Goro in my mind and my belly, and to disobey was not possible. Not possible ... I can tell you nothing more. Except, perhaps, that I was young. Today, withered relic that I am become, I might yet perhaps hold that will at bay. It was not possible then.

"Yes," I said. "Yes." The Goro came up to me, moving with a curious shuffling grace, if one can say that, wrapping that tail around its haunches as daintily as a lace shawl. It gripped me between neck and shoulder and turned me. I said nothing further, but started slowly toward the farmhouse that was not a farmhouse—or perhaps it was? What did I know of anything's reality anymore? My ribs were so badly bruised that I could not draw a full breath, and there was something wrong with the arm that had killed the Hunter. The half-moon was setting now, silvering the shadows and filling the hard ruts with shivering, deceiving light and it was cold, and I was a child in a man's body, wishing I were safe back in *that place*.

Nearing the farmhouse, the Goro halted, tightening its clutch on my shoulder. Weary and bewildered as I was—no, more than bewildered half-mad, surely—I studied the house, *looked* at it for the first time, and could not imagine anyone ever having taken it for anybody's home. The dark waiting beyond the sagging door sprang out to greet us with a stench far beyond stench: not the smell that anciently abandoned places have, of wood rotted into black slush, blankets moldering on the skeleton of a bed, but of an unhuman awareness having nothing to do with our notions of life or shelter, or even ordinary fear. The thing's camouflage—how long in evolving? how can it have begun to pass itself off as something belonging to this world?—might serve well enough from a distance, on a dark night, but surely close to...? Then I glanced back at the Goro.

The Goro had forgotten me completely, though its paw remembered. Its eyes continued to tell me nothing, but it was staring at the farmhouse-thing with an intensity that would have been rapture in a human expression. It lisped, much more to itself than to me, "He is in there. I have run him to earth at last."

"No," I said, once more to my own astonishment. "No. It is a trap. Believe me."

"I honor your loyalty," the Goro said. It bent its awful head and made a curious gesture with its free paw which I have never seen again, and which may have meant blessing, or merely a compliment. I try not to think about it. It said, "But you cannot know him as I do. He is here because what he stole from me is here. Because his honor demands that he face me to keep it, as mine demands that he pay the price of a stolen dream. We understand each other, we two."

"Nonsense," I said. I felt oddly lightheaded, and even bold, in the midst of my leg-caving, bladder-squeezing terror. "He has no honor, and he cares nothing for your dream, or for anything but his continual false-hearted existence. And that is no house, but a horror from somewhere more alien to you than you are to me. Please—I am trying to save you, not him. Believe me, please."

The Goro looked at me. I have no more idea now than I did then of what it can have been thinking, nor of what it made of my warning. Did it take me seriously and begin silently altering its plans? Had it assumed from the first that, as some sort of partner of its old enemy, nothing I said must ever be trusted for a moment? All I know is what happened—which is that out of the side of my eye I saw the fox burst from the shadows that the farmhouse was real enough to cast in this world, under this moon, and come racing straight toward the Goro and me. In the moonlight, he shone red as the Hunter's blood.

He halted halfway, cocking his head to one side and grinning to show the small stone held in his jaws. I did not notice it immediately: it was barely more than a pebble, less bright than the sharp teeth that gripped it, or the mocking yellow eyes above it. The Goro's crystallized dream, the cause of the unending flight and pursuit that had called to me from a wagonload of manure. The fox tilted his head back, tossed the stone up at the sinking moon, and caught it again.

And the Goro went mad. Nothing I had seen of its raging power, even when it was battling the two Hunters, could possibly have prepared me for what I saw in the next moment. The eyes, the lidless eyes that I had thought could never express any emotion ... I was in a midnight fire at sea once, off Cape Dylee, when the waves themselves seemed alight to the horizon, all leaping and dancing with an air of blazing delight at our doom. The Goro's eyes were like that as it lunged forward, not shambling at all now, but charging like a rock-*targ*, full-speed with the second stride. It was making a sound that it had not made before: if an avalanche had breath, if an entire forest were to fall at once, you might hear something—*something*—like what I heard then. Not a roar, not a bellow, not a howl—no word in any

language I know will suit that sound. Flesh never made that sound; it came through the Goro out of the tortured earth, and that is all there is to that. That is what I believe.

The fox wheeled and raced away, his red brush joyously, insultingly high, and the Goro went after him. I stumbled forward, shouting, "No!"—but I might as well have been crying out to a forest or an avalanche. Distraught, battered, uncertain of anything at all, it may be that I was deceived, but it seemed to me that the shadow of the farmhouse-thing reared up as they neared it, spreading out to shapelessness and *reaching* ... I knew the fox well enough to anticipate his swerving away at the last possible minute, but I miscalculated, and so did he. The shadow's long long arms cut off his escape on three sides, taking him in mid-leap, as a frog laps a fly out of the air. I thought I heard him utter a single small puppyish yelp, not like a fox at all.

The Goro went straight in after him, never trying to elude the shadow's grasp—I doubt it saw anything but the little dull pebble in the fox's jaws. It vanished as instantly and completely as he had, without a sound.

Telling you this tale, I notice that I am constantly pausing to marvel at my own stupidity. Each time I offer the same defense: I was young, I was inexperienced, I had been reared in a stranger place than any scoffer can possibly have known ... all of it true, and none of it resembling an explanation for what I did next. Which was to plunge my naked hands into the devouring shadow, fumbling to rescue *anything* from its grip—the fox, the Goro, some poor creature consumed before we three ever came within its notice, within range of its desire. Today I can only say that I pit-ied the Goro, and that the old man—the fox, as you will—was my guide, occasionally my mentor, and somehow nearly my friend, may the gods pity *me*. Have to do, won't it?

Where was I? Yes, I remember—groping blindly in the shadow on the chance of dragging one or the other of them back into the moon-light of this world. My arms vanished to the wrists, the forearms, past the elbows, into ... into the flame of the stars? Into the eternal, unimagi-nable cold of the gulfs between them? I do not know to this day; for that, you must study my scarred old flesh and form your own opinion. What I know is that my hands closed on something they could not feel, and in turn I hauled them back, though I could not connect them, even in my mind, with a human body, mine or anyone else's. I screamed all the time, of course, but the pain had nothing to do with me—it was far too terrible, too *grand*, to belong to one person alone. I felt almost guilty keep-ing it for myself.

The shadow fought me. Whatever I had seized between my burning, frozen hands—and I could not tell whether it was as small a thing as the fox or as great as the Goro—the shadow wanted it back, and very nearly took it from me. And why I did not, *would* not, allow that to happen, I cannot put into words for you. I think it was the hands' decision, surely not my own. They were the ones who suffered, they were the ones enti-tled to choose—*yes, no, hang on, let go* ... I was standing far—oh, very far indeed—to one side, looking on.

Did I pull what I held free by means of my pure heart and failing strength, or did the shadow finally give in, for its own reasons? I know what I believe, but none of that matters. What does matter is that when my hands came back to me, they held the fox between them. A seemingly lifeless fox, certainly; a fox without a breath or a heartbeat that I could detect; a fox beyond bedraggled, looking half his normal size, with most of his fur gone, the rest staring limply, and his proud brush as naked as a rat's tail. Indeed, the only indication that he still lived was the fact that he was unconsciously trying to shapeshift in my hands. The shiver of the air around him, the sudden slight smudging of his outline ... I jumped back as I had not recoiled from the house-thing's shadow, letting him fall to the ground.

He landed without the least thump, so insubstantial he was. The transformation simply faded and failed; though whether that means that the fox-shape is his natural form and the other nothing but a garment he was too weak to assume, I have never known. The moon was down, and with the approach of false dawn, the shadow was retreating, the house-thing itself withering absurdly, like an overripe vegetable, its sides slumping inwards while its insides—or whatever they might have been—seemed to ooze palely into the rising day, out to where the shadow had lain in wait for prey. Only for a moment ... then the whole creature collapsed and vanished before my eyes, and the one trace of its passage was a dusty hole in the ground. A small hole, the sort of hole that remains when you have pulled a plant up by its roots. Or think you have.

There was no sign of the Goro. When I looked back at the fox, he was actually shaking himself and trying to get to his feet. It took him some while, for his legs kept splaying out from under him, and even when he managed to balance more or less firmly on all four of them, his yellow eyes were obviously not seeing me, nor much else. Once the fox-shape was finally under control, he promptly abandoned it for that of the old man, who looked just as much of a disaster, if not even more so. The white mustache appeared to have been chewed nearly away; one burly white eyebrow was altogether gone, as were patches of the white mane, and the skin of his face and neck might have been through fire or frost-bite. But he turned to stare toward the place where the house that was not a house had stood, and he grinned like a skull.

"Exactly as I planned it," he pronounced. "Rid of the lot of them, we are, for good and all, thanks to my foresight. I *knew* it was surely time for the beast to return to that spot, and I *knew* the Goro would care for nothing else, once it caught sight of me and that stone." Amazingly, he patted my shoulder with a still-shaky hand. "And you dealt with your little friends remarkably well—far better than I expected, truth be told. I may have misjudged you somewhat."

"As you misjudged the thing's reach," I said, and he had the grace to look discomfited. I said, "Before you thank me—" which he had shown no sign of doing—"you should know that I was simply trying to save whomever I could catch hold of. I would have been just as relieved to see the Goro standing where you are."

"Not for long," he replied with that supremely superior air that I have never



seen matched in all these years. "The Goro consider needing any sort of assistance—let alone having to be *rescued*—to be dishonorable in its very nature. He'd have quickly removed a witness to his sin, likely enough." I suspected that to be a lie—which it is, for the most part—but said nothing, only watching as he gradually recovered his swagger, if not his mustache. It was fascinating to observe, rather like seeing a new-born butterfly's wings slowly plumping in the sun. He said then—oddly quietly, I remember—"You are much better off with me. Whatever you think of me."

When he said that, just for that moment, he looked like no crafty shapeshifter but such a senile clown as one sees in the wayside pup-pet plays where the young wife always runs off with a soldier. He studied my hands and arms, which by now were hurting so much that in a way they did not hurt at all, if you can understand that. "I know some-thing that will help those," he said. "It will not help enough, but you will be glad of it."

Not yet true dawn, and I could feel how hot the day would be in that barren, utterly used-up land that is called the Mihanachakali. There was dust on my lips already, and sweat beginning to rise on my scalp. A few scrawny *rukshi* birds were beginning to circle high over the Hunters' bodies. I turned away and began to walk—inevitably back the way we had come, there being no other real road in any direction. The old man kept pace with me, pattering brightly at my side, cheerfully informing me, "The coast's what we want—salt water always straightens the mind and clears the spirit. We'll have to go back to Druchank—no help for that, alas—but three days further down the Nai—"

I halted then and stood facing him. "Listen to me," I said. "Listen closely. I am bound as far from Goros and Hunters, from foxes that are not foxes and houses that are not houses as a young fool can get. I want nothing to do with the lot of you, or with anything that is like you. There must be a human life I am fit to lead, and I will find it out, wherever it hides from me. I will find my life."

"Rather like our recent companions seeking after us," he murmured, and now he sounded like his old taunting self, but somehow subdued also. "Well, so. I will bid you good luck and goodbye in advance, then, for all that we do appear to be traveling the same road—"

"We are *not*," I said, loud enough to make my poor head ache and my battered ribs cringe. I began walking again, and he followed. I said, "Whichever road you take, land or water, I will go some other way. If I have to climb back into a manure wagon a second time, I will be shut of you."

"I have indeed misjudged you," he continued, as though I had never spoken. "There is promising stuff to you, and with time and tutelage you may blossom into adequacy yet. It will be interesting to observe."

"I will write you a letter," I said through my teeth. There would plainly be no ridding myself of him until Druchank, but I was determined not to speak further word with him again. And I did not, not until the second night, when we had made early camp close enough to Druchank to smell its foulness on a dank little breeze. Hungry and weary, I weakened enough to

ask him abruptly, "That house—whatever it was—you called it *the beast*. It was alive, then? Some sort of animal?"

"Say *vegetable*, and you may hit nearer the mark," he answered me. "They come and go, those things—never many, but always where they grew before, and always in the exact guise they wore the last time. I have seen one that you would take for a grand, shady *keema* tree without any question, and another that looks like a sweet little dance pavilion in the woods that no one seems to remember building. I cannot say where they are from, nor what exactly becomes of their victims—only that it is a short blooming season, and if they take no prey they rot and die back before your eyes. As that one did." He yawned as the fox yawned, showing all his teeth, and added, "A pity, really. I have ... made use of that one before."

"And you led me there," I said. "You told me nothing, and you led me there."

He shrugged cheerfully. "I tried to tell you—a little, anyway—but you did not care to hear. My fault?" I did not answer him. A breeze had come up, carrying with it the smell of the Nai—somewhat fresher than that of the town—and the bray of a boat horn.

"It had already taken the Goro," I said finally, "and still it died."

"Ah, well, a Goro's not to everybody's taste." He yawned again, and suddenly barked with laughter. "Probably gave the poor old thing a belly-ache—no wonder!" He literally fell over on his back at the thought, laughing, waving his arms and legs in the air, purely delighted at the image, and more so with himself for creating it. I watched him from where I lay, feeling a curious mixture of ironic admiration, genuine revulsion, and something uncomfortably like affection, which shocked me when I made myself name it to myself. As it occasionally does even now.

"I tried to stop the Goro," I said. "I told him that it was a trick, that you were deceiving him. I begged him not to fall into your trap."

The old man did not seem even slightly perturbed. "Didn't listen, did he? They never do. That's the nature of a Goro. Just as not wanting to know things is the nature of humans."

"And your nature?" I challenged him. "What is the nature of whatever you are?" He considered this for some time, still lying on his back with his arms folded on his chest in the formal manner of a corpse. But his eyes were wide open, and in the twilight they were more gray than fox-yellow just then.

"Deceptive," he offered at last. "That's fair enough—deceptive. Misleading, too, and altogether unreliable." But he seemed not quite satisfied with any of the words, and thought about it for a while longer. At last he said, "Illusory. Good as any, *illusory*. That will do."

I lay long awake that night, reflecting on all that I had passed through—and all that had passed through and over me—since I fled across

another night from *that place*, with the Hunters behind me. Deceptive, misleading, illusory, even so he had done me no real ill, when you thought about it. Led me into peril, true, but preserved me from it more than once. And he had certainly taught me much that I needed to know, if I were to make my way forward to wherever I was making my way to in this world. I could have had worse counselors, and doubtless would yet, on my journey.

My hands and arms pained me still, but far less than they had, as I leaned to nudge him out of his usual twitchy fox-sleep. He had searched out a couple of fat-leaved weeds that morning, pounded them for a good hour, mixed the resulting mash with what I tried not to suspect was his own urine, and spread it from my palms to my shoulders, where it crusted cool and stiff. I had barely touched his own shoulder before his eyes opened, yellow as they always are when he first wakes. I wonder what his dreams would look like, if they were to take daylight substance as a Goro's do.

"Three more days on the Nai brings us where?" I asked him.

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