

Empty Places by Richard Parks

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Jayn of Laksas was widely acknowledged a thief and rogue, but no one had ever accused him of incompetence. So it came as quite a surprise to him on one warm summer evening to discover someone was following him.

He was on his way home to Laksas after a very successful pass through several of the border towns near the foothills of the White Mountains. Jayn's purse was heavy and his heart, as he slipped through the wooded hills near Laksas, was light.

Perhaps I was careless, he thought, ruefully. Or ... am I getting old?

He didn't really think so, at least not yet. When Jayn washed his face in a quiet pool that very morning he hadn't noticed anything of an alarming temporal nature—his hair was still red, the face still unmarred except for a touch of windburn. His hands, when he'd tricked locks and pried doors in the last few days, were still steady and his grip firm. It didn't make any sense that someone could follow Jayn without him knowing. Unless...

Perhaps whoever is following me is really, really skilled.

Jayn considered the matter as he strolled ever so casually along the woodland path. He had two choices: either run or try to ambush his follower. Since he didn't know who was behind him or how well armed, running was the sensible thing. Yet Jayn's curiosity wouldn't allow him to run; he wanted to find out who was following him.

He waited until the path led him by the foot of a tall cliff and a tumulus of stones left by some ancient rockslide; he quickly checked the path behind him to make certain no one was within sight and then he slid quickly and quietly into a narrow crevice between two great boulders, where he waited.

And waited.

And waited.

The last of the sunlight faded into darkness, and it was out of that darkness that a voice finally reached Jayn within his crevice. "Are you going to stay in there all night?"

Jayn sighed. So much for stealth. "Show yourself!"

"If you insist."

There was a spark in the darkness, then a small flame, then a bigger flame. It took Jayn a few moments to realize he was looking at a campfire. Behind the flames, sitting casually on a small boulder, was a man of about thirty. His hair was black and nearly shoulder length. He was wearing a plain brown cloak pulled about him against the night's chill, so Jayn couldn't tell much else about him, though it was clear his build was slight. Jayn judged him to be an inch or two shorter than Jayn's own six-foot height.

“Who are you? What do you want with me?”

“My name is Timon, and I have need of your professional services. That being the case, obviously I intend you no harm.”

Jayn wasn't convinced. “How do I know you're alone?”

Timon smiled. “Obviously, you *don't* know. I could be surrounded by archers waiting for you to appear, or some other such rot, but do you really think the bounty on your head is so great for me to go to all that trouble? I'm alone, Jayn of Laksas. Either believe me or don't, but the alternative is for you stay in there and starve. I can assure you it's far warmer and more comfortable out here.”

The man's name sounded vaguely familiar but Jayn couldn't place it. He peered cautiously out of the rocks, but no arrows twanged out the night; there was no sound at all except for a faint crackle from the campfire and the small sounds of frogs and insects that Jayn would normally expect at this time of night.

“Your name is somewhat familiar. Do I know you?”

“I doubt it, but you may have heard of me. I'm usually known as Timon the Black.”

For several long moments Jayn just stared at the smaller man. After a little while he finally remembered to breathe.

“No offense, but I don't deal with wizards,” Jayn said a little unsteadily.

Timon looked a little surprised. He also looked a little relieved. “You believe me? Most people would need convincing, you know. Forgive my immodesty, but that's no small claim I just made.”

“You tracked me for a considerable time without my realizing it, and forgive *my* immodesty, but there are not many people who could do that. Besides, I can't imagine what advantage you'd gain by such a wild story.”

Timon nodded. “You're as clever as your reputation. Good. We can skip the

tedious proofs and arguments and get down to what matters.”

“No, we can’t. Didn’t you hear what I said? I don’t deal with wizards.”

Not that Jayn had anything against them as a group; he considered wizards self-sufficient and untrustworthy, which were traits he respected. It was more that, beyond the two traits already mentioned, he didn’t understand them. He didn’t know what they wanted or why they wanted it, and in Jayn’s line of work, that was very dangerous. Greed, Jayn understood. And lust, and avarice, and spitefulness and a host of other petty sins—those all made sense. Yet, if the stories were true, Timon the Black had committed some of the worst crimes imaginable simply because he wanted to, and he could. For instance, he was reputed to have kidnaped a princess of Morushe and murdered the hero prince who came to rescue her, all on a whim. Such a person was capable of literally anything.

“You can decide after we’ve spoken, but refusing to listen is not an option,” Timon said, then added, “Well, not a good one, anyway.”

Jayn put his hands on his hips. “Timon, I know your reputation as I trust you know mine. How do you plan—”

Timon didn’t even wait until he’d finished speaking. Thinking back on it, Jayn still wasn’t exactly sure what had happened. All he knew was that there was a blur of motion that might or might not have been Timon’s right hand. The next moment a small ash tree not ten feet away from Jayn burst into flame and exploded with a sound like thunder. Jayn found himself on the ground, his ears ringing. It took him a few moments to be certain he was still alive. He got up, slowly. He would have run, if he thought for a moment that would have worked.

“That was a warning,” Timon said. “And, since I’m rather fond of trees as a rule, I don’t think I’ll bother with another.”

As he spoke, Timon continued what looked like preparations for tea as if nothing at all had happened.

“Ahh...” Jayn suddenly found himself at a loss for words.

Timon, on the other hand, had no such loss. “I have plenty of tea and fire both, and I promise you that we’re going to share one or the other this night. Which shall it be?”

“I’ll take the tea,” Jayn said.

Timon nodded. “Good choice.”

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The choice, at least in the short term, turned out better than Jayn had suspected. Not only was he still alive, but his insistent host made excellent tea as well. Jayn usually preferred something stronger, but he could not remember when he'd tasted better.

Jayn regarded his cup thoughtfully. "I would almost give up wine for this."

"Each has its place," Timon said, "though a good pot of tea is usually harder to find. One reason I make my own. So. Have you considered my proposal?"

Jayn nodded. "Yes, and all I can say is that it is a very puzzling one." He eyed the package Timon had produced. It wasn't much to look at—little more than a small bundle wrapped in plain cloth, about the size of both of Jayn's open hands put side to side. Then again, it wasn't the package that puzzled him, although of course he was curious about it. Rather, it was what Timon wanted done with it.

"You want me to sneak into the king's fortress at Wylandia and leave this package in the nursery?"

"That is correct. If you wish, you may steal some identifiable item from the palace as proof of your exploit, so your reputation is enhanced at the same time. We both win. So. Will you do it?"

"We haven't discussed terms."

"Quite right," Timon conceded. "I could just threaten you, but I've found that a reward and a club get better results than a club alone." He named a figure. Jayn just stared at him for several long moments while his tea began to grow cold. Timon, for his part, drank the rest of his with apparent satisfaction and poured another cup.

"You're joking," Jayn said finally.

"Then why aren't you laughing?" Timon asked. "I tell very good jokes when the mood hits me. At the moment the mood does not."

"But ... I could live like a king on that much gold!"

"One of the poorer ones," Timon said. "And not for long. Most likely you'll find a way to gamble it all away or otherwise squander it."

Jayn raised an eyebrow. "Oh? And what makes you think I would be so foolish with my money?"

Timon smiled. "Because your history suggests that you don't really care about the gold, Jayn. It's the challenge and the reputation that goes with successful exploits of thievery that inspire you. You feel you have not gained the reputation you

deserve for all your efforts. If there's more to you than that it's not commonly known."

Jayn was going to argue the point until it occurred to him that Timon might have said nothing less than the plain truth. The truth always made Jayn uncomfortable; it wasn't quite so flexible as a good lie. "Even so, why offer so much? If what you say is true I would accept your challenge for much less."

"Because I do not wish to offer 'much less.' My reasons are my own."

"Is there an enchantment on the gift? Will it harm the child?"

Timon shrugged. "Does that matter?"

"I'm a thief, not an assassin. Besides, if you do mean to harm the little prince, I might not wish my part in the matter to be known. Gold and reputation together might not be sufficient shield against a king's revenge."

Timon nodded. "Point taken. Be at ease—my intention is not to harm the child. If it was, I'd have no qualms about saying so, and 'persuading' you to act against your instincts. Do you doubt this?"

"Even so ... if I agree to perform this task, how do I know you'll keep your word?"

"Because, at least on this one point, you needn't depend on my word." Timon reached into his pack and pulled out a heavy leather bag. This he extended and dropped within Jayn's reach. "Payment strictly in advance. Count it if you want."

Frowning, Jayn untied the bag. He reached far enough down among the gold coins to satisfy himself that, even if the rest of the bag from his fingertips to the bottom held nothing but lead disks, he would still be rich enough to buy a small town and everyone in it. He bit one coin just for show, but he already knew the gold was real.

"You must think I'm a fool," he said.

"I was withholding judgment," Timon said. "Why do you say so?"

"Because what's to stop you from blasting me like that poor tree after I do this task for you?"

"Not a blessed thing," Timon said affably, "likewise there's nothing to stop me from doing the same if you refuse, or accept and then try to escape from your obligations. Now. Which two of those three eventualities do you consider most

likely to annoy me?"

Jayn sighed. "Are there any conditions to this enterprise you haven't told me about?"

"Just one," Timon said. "I'll be accompanying you to the fortress. Once your task is complete—or you're killed in the attempt—we go our separate ways once we're safely out of Wylandia."

"I work alone," Jayn said. Which was true usually, but he mostly just didn't relish the idea of Timon being anywhere near him. The man was pleasant enough company, but Jayn thought that, perhaps, that fire trick might be harder to accomplish at greater distance.

The magician shook his head. "Not to impugn your considerable skills, but you'll never get into the fortress without my help. Consider this protecting my investment."

Again Jayn considered his options and again came to the inevitable conclusion that he didn't have any. "Very well, but just so you know: I don't trust you."

Timon just smiled. "Then you're not a fool. Good. That will help."

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There were two known passes through the White Mountains: the Pilgrim's Road and the Serpent's Path. The Pilgrim's Road was jointly maintained and patrolled by Wylandia and Morushe and was the main route of what uneasy commerce existed between the two kingdoms. The Serpent's Path was little more than a mountain trail. It had watch towers and a beacon system on each end in the event that any armed groups attempted to use it to catch either kingdom unaware, but was otherwise left alone. Jayn wasn't terribly surprised when this was the route they took to Wylandia. It was easy enough for two men traveling lightly to slip past the watch undetected; not quite so easy to make the other end in one piece.

"You do realize that bandits—and worse—reside along the Serpent's Path? It's a natural refuge for the desperate and predatory."

"Yes," Timon said. "The Pilgrim's Road is much easier and safer, but people tend to want to know your business when you take that way. Don't worry, Jayn. We won't have any trouble."

Jayn wasn't convinced of that until the second day after they slipped past the southern watchtower. A large group of very unpleasant-looking men appeared on a ridge overlooking the pass. Timon merely acknowledged them with a wave of his hand and they just as quickly vanished.

Almost, Jayn thought, *hastily*.

“Just what is Timon the Black’s arrangement with those men?”

“A simple one: They don’t interfere with my business and I don’t rip the flesh from their bones. You’d be surprised at how reasonable men can be, when the alternative is explained to them.”

Jayn thought about it. “It worked with me, and that’s a fact. Please don’t misunderstand me—the destruction of that tree was intimidating, but that was one tree. Could you really kill all of them? Are you that powerful?”

Timon just shrugged. “You of all people should understand the value of reputation, Jayn. Mine is such that they believe that I can and would. Therefore, I don’t have to.”

“That’s not exactly an answer,” Jayn said.

“Since this particular answer would require proof, I hope for your sake that you never receive one.”

The next morning Timon looked a little unhappy. “There’s been a new development.”

Jayn, who hadn’t quite managed to find a spot of ground without something hard and unyielding under it, wasn’t in the best of moods himself. “What is it?”

“The Queen of Wylandia will be in residence at the palace during our incursion. She was expected to accompany her husband on a state visit to Morushe, but apparently there was some ... disagreement, between them. Since the way to the nursery is through her private chambers, this may complicate matters.”

Jayn shrugged. “It would be better if she were not there, true, but I’ve ransacked entire rooms without waking the occupants ... wait a moment. How do you know this?”

“Because I’m a magician,” Timon said. “And finding the hidden is what we do.”

After a breakfast of hard bread and cheese they were soon on their way again. It was long time before either of them spoke again, and it was Jayn who broke the silence.

“You know what I think? I think you knew about the queen’s plans all along, and you merely announced it at the appropriate time to impress me.”

Timon smiled. “Interesting theory, and certainly a clever way to create the illusion of true magic without actually producing any. There’s only one flaw in your hypothesis.”

“Which is?”

“It presumes that I have a need to impress you. Jayn, you already know what *I* will do to you if you betray me. What more is required?”

“We still have a few days before we reach Wylandia. How do you know I won’t slit your throat while you sleep? There’s an end to that threat. I’m not saying I would, mind, but why isn’t it an option?”

Timon smiled. “Let us say for the sake of argument that you have a point. In which case it is in your interest to test the limits of my power, yes?”

“I suppose that’s true,” Jayn said.

Timon shrugged. “All right, but do remember: I did warn you.”

Despite Timon’s ominous implication, nothing unusual happened for the rest of that day. Jayn and Timon made good time along the Serpent’s Path, despite the fact that they were traveling mostly uphill. The way was clear, the weather was mild, and the bandits, if any, were keeping well out of sight. They reached the highest point on their route by evening and made camp once more. From their vantage point they could see the plains of Wylandia in the distance and the backbone of the White Mountains stretching out to either side.

The air was thin and cool; both Timon and Jayn kept close to the fire. It wasn’t much of a fire; dead wood was rather scarce in the higher levels of the pass, but it lasted long enough to heat a quick supper and now its dying coals provided at least some warmth. So it was with considerable reluctance that Jayn crawled out of his blankets, crossed the pass, and clambered up a slight rise on the left side of the trail. It wasn’t until the campfire was out of sight that it occurred to him that he didn’t have the faintest notion of why he had done so. He looked out in a distance seemingly composed of equal parts shadowed earth and brilliantly-shining stars.

“What am I doing here?”

“I called you, Jayn.”

Timon was standing right next to him. Jayn jumped backward three paces and landed in a crouch, his dagger ready.

“What do you mean, ‘called me’? What trick is this?”

“Just that,” Timon said. “I called you out of your sleep, but left your body where it was. I didn’t need that part.”

Jayn crept back to the edge of the ridge and looked down toward the camp. It was still there, as was he himself. Jayn saw the still form wrapped in blankets, knew it for his own.

“What have you done to me?!”

“Nothing. Yet.”

“Am I dreaming?”

“In a way. But ask yourself, Jayn—if I am privy to your dreams, how are you going to keep anything hidden from me? You have no choice here, Jayn, other than to do what I require.”

Timon continued to look out toward Wylandia or up at the stars, Jayn couldn’t quite tell which. After a moment or two Timon spoke again, but he wasn’t talking about missions or proof or anything of the sort. “I love places like this, Jayn. We’ll be gone in a moment or two and it will be as it was. Wylandia goes to war in a generation or doesn’t. Morushe becomes one kingdom with Borasur, or doesn’t. Large events to us but to these mountains? Nothing. That’s what I love about the empty places of the world; places with few people and little to see save earth, sky, mountains and cold, cold stars. They help me keep matters in perspective.”

Jayn didn’t say anything for a moment, since he didn’t have any idea what Timon was talking about. He kept his attention on what, as he saw it, was the matter at hand. “If I’m dreaming, how do I know that any of this is real? Your presence, what I’m seeing now, all could be just the workings of my fevered mind?”

“You’re a stubborn one, Jayn.”

Jayn met Timon’s gaze evenly. “I’m a hard man, wizard. I have to be. You are generous with your gold but you could take that away from me. I can’t trust you, as I said. How can there be any certainty of any kind between us?”

Timon nodded. “A fair question. Which I presume would be answered if demonstrate that you’re not going to take me by surprise? That is the case, I’m afraid. My precautions are such that I’ll know your intent before you do.”

Jayn sniffed danger like a deer in a meadow, but couldn’t think of anything to say that was as remotely plausible as the truth. “A demonstration would help,” Jayn admitted. “Though one that leaves me both alive and functioning would be in both our interests.”

“I’ll take that into consideration,” Timon said.

“So ... what will you do? Summon lightning? Raise a demon from the bowels of the earth?”

“You believe that you’re dreaming,” Timon said. “So if I were to do any of those things you either would not remember or would quite rightly explain the marvel as part of your dream, where such wonders are common. No, I must arrange something more ... solid. Look to the east, what do you see?”

Jayn glanced in that direction. “A faint glow. Dawn is coming.”

“Almost here,” Timon said. “You’ll awake in a little while, and you’re not going to remember any of this at first. You’re going to run thirty paces further along the trail and then stop and look to the right. Only then will you remember, and you will recall everything we’ve said tonight.”

Jayn frowned. “That’s it?”

“Just be grateful that it’s enough. Now wake up.”

Jayn awoke by the cold ashes of the campfire. Timon was nowhere to be seen. Jayn pulled his blankets off and sat up. He looked around carefully, but there was still no sign of the magician. Jayn assumed Timon had sought privacy to relieve himself and, very briefly, considered doing the same before the implication of Timon’s absence sank in.

Now’s my chance.

Jayn rolled up his bedding as quickly as he could, picked up his heavy pack, started down the trail. He had gone exactly thirty paces when he skidded to a stop before he even realized he was doing so. He looked to the right and there was Timon, leaning against a large stone.

“What kept you?”

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They slipped past the Wylandian watchtower on the fourth day. That proved very easy. The rough stone wall blocking the north end of the pass was to prevent a large force from crossing quickly, and give the watchmen time to light their beacons and give warning. It did little to prevent two very stealthy men from climbing over under cover of darkness. As he reached the top of the wall, Jayn could see the two watchmen huddled by a small brazier near the parapet of their tower.

“I wonder what they’re being punished for?” Jayne said aloud, though he kept his voice too low to carry.

Timon, who—Jayn had come to grudgingly understand—was even more nimble than himself, was waiting for him on top of the wall. “Punished? What makes you think so?”

“Out here? Isolated for months at a time with nothing to do but stare into nothing? I’d go mad.”

“I have it on good authority that men volunteer for this duty. I would think that someone of your background would appreciate the lure of solitude.”

Jayn shook his head. “I appreciate being unencumbered. That’s not the same thing as being alone.”

“Quite right,” Timon said. “And yet, to some, this sort of duty is ideal. Everyone searches for what they need, Jayn. You, me, those men in the tower. It’s no surprise that we’re not all after the same thing.”

They climbed down carefully. Timon led Jayn to what looked like an animal path through the underbrush; he was able to walk upright and still stay concealed from the watchmen. They were well away from both the wall and the tower before Jayn spoke again. “So what is it you’re looking for, Timon?”

The magician frowned. “Why do you want to know?”

Jayn shrugged. “Just curious. We have both miles and time to kill.”

“I’ll answer that question,” Timon said, “if you’ll do the same.”

Jayn grunted. “I thought you had me sorted out already; you played me like a drum at our first meeting.”

Timon dismissed that. “I understand your immediate motivations well enough to explain why you do what you do. The excitement of a challenge, the thirst for reputation ... simple enough on the surface. But is that really all there is to you, Jayn? A thief hungry for reputation?”

Jayn shrugged. “Isn’t that enough?”

“That’s not for me to answer, Jayn. I’ll answer my own question instead: what I want is to make a difference.”

“I must say you don’t seem particular as to what *sort* of difference, seeing as how your list of crimes is far longer and certainly more lethal than mine. I steal, but that’s all.”

Timon raised an eyebrow. “A moral harangue from a thief?”

Jayn sighed. “Just because I cross the line now and then doesn’t mean I don’t know a line exists. I never steal from those who can’t afford the loss and I’ve never killed anyone except in self-defense, even when good sense suggested that slitting a throat was in my best interests. I am quite moral, Timon ... in my own way.”

“Interesting notion. Perhaps we should test that sometime.”

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“Well, now. This is definitely a challenge,” Jayn said.

What was euphemistically referred to as the Wylandian summer palace was actually a fortified castle set on a mountain ridge so high and sheer that it looked like a wall constructed by some long-vanished giant. A section of the ridge had collapsed in a past age and the castle had been built near the edge, so the fortress was guarded on three sides by sheer hundred-foot cliffs. The only real approach was along the ridge itself, defended by a massive curtain wall and a sliding gate which, judging from the relative size of the guards near it, was at least twenty feet square.

Timon and Jayn sat at a rough table at an inn in Kandan, a bustling village at the foot of the mountain, near an unshuttered window that gave them a good look at the castle. Fortunately—or more likely, planned ahead by Timon—it was the second of two annual horse fairs held there on the border of the plains where the hardy Wylandian duns, much prized in the south and elsewhere, were traded. No one took much notice of the two men, as the town was normally filled with travelers during the fair.

“Pity there are no rooms available,” Timon said. “It would have been nice not to sleep on the ground for a change.”

“I don’t consider a bed more than likely stuffed with fleas much of an improvement,” Jayn said. “Worse, someone else’s fleas.” He lifted his flagon again, then sighed. “Good food and ale, though.”

“Too good,” Timon said. “Keep your wits about you, since you enter the castle tonight.”

“Why tonight?”

“I have my reasons. Let it go at that.”

Jayn nodded toward the gate. “Lovely. And now that we’re here, would you mind telling me your plan to get in? I’m a very good thief, but I’m neither a magician nor a bird. I must say it looks quite impossible from here.”

Timon smiled. "I'll do better than tell you, I'll show you. Yet you probably won't like it. I certainly don't."

That evening they slipped out of Kandan and made their way toward the base of the cliffs. The fields near the far end of the ridge were scattered with massive boulders, some as large as a house, apparently left over from that ancient rockfall. At times Jayn felt as if he was walking through a forest of fat stone trees, but at least they gave good cover, even though they didn't yet dare light the lantern Timon had brought. The base of the cliff itself was a jumble of broken stones, scrubby pines, and bramble that made progress both slow and painful. Though Jayn was a little mollified to note that Timon, even though he apparently knew the way, wasn't doing much better.

"You're right," Jayn said, after plucking a dead bramble cane from the back of his hand and pausing to lick the blood. "I don't like this."

"Then you're really not going to like it when the going turns nasty," Timon said, pulling a thorn from his thumb. "But at least we'll be out of this brush soon. Turn to the left when you reach that rock that looks like a cow pat."

Jayn did as he was told and found, if not exactly a path, a lessening of the undergrowth. He followed that with Timon bringing up the rear and came to a place where the stony ground turned to more solid rock, giving the pine and brambles fewer places to take root. The rock surface slanted upwards to reach the base of the cliff face and there Jayn found a gaping hole in the rock about six feet wide and nearly as high. He glanced up and could just barely make out a tower from the castle high above them.

It can't be as simple as this...

Jayn peered into the cave and realized that it was not a cave at all, in the true sense. Rather, it appeared that a boulder had been torn from its matrix during the past collapse; it occurred to Jayn that the landmark rock that looked like a cow pat could have been the original stone, now weathered down and buried in soft earth. The break in the rock wall only went about four feet into the cliff face and abruptly ended.

"What do we do now? Climb? In the dark? We didn't even bring a rope!"

"Actually I did, but we won't need it until near the end," Timon said. "Get inside."

"This hole in the rock? But it doesn't go anywhere—"

Jayn didn't quite finish, because Timon slipped past him and poked a section of the roof with a stout stick he'd picked up outside, and the stone moved, rocking

gently as if precisely balanced. “Shift the stone, and be careful. It should slide to the left.”

The section of stone looked like all the others. There were cracks visible, but there were cracks visible everywhere. Jayn put his hands against the stone and pushed, gingerly at first but then with more force. A slab of granite just over a foot wide and twice as long lifted off the roof of the fissure. It took a couple of tries, but Jayn managed to push it to the side. Then Timon lit the lantern with a touch of one finger and handed it to Jayn.

“Set this up in there so we can see, then climb up.”

Jayn lifted the lantern into the fissure and the almost absolute blackness retreated a bit, to reveal a wider fissure in the rock. It was easy enough to get a grip on either side of the opening and pull himself up. “Do you need a—”

Again, Jayn didn’t get a chance to finish, for in an instant Timon was standing right next to him. Timon very carefully slid the cover stone back into place and then picked up the lantern and held it high.

They stood on a shelf of bare rock about six feet across, just a little wider than the cave below. The fissure ended in another blank wall about fifteen paces further into the ridge. To the left was another wall of flat granite that reached further than Jayn could see in the weak light, as did the wall to their right. The difference was, the wall on the right was marked with ledges and broken stones that formed a natural stairway up toward the blackness far above them. The air was close and still, and there was a musty, faintly unpleasant odor that Jayn couldn’t quite identify.

“Does no one else know about this fissure?” Jayn asked.

“Keep your voice down, please. Sound tends to travel here,” Timon said in a whisper. “But yes, since it reaches all the way to the surface and the castle is built over it, many people know about it. What they don’t know is that there’s a way in from the cliff base.”

“I imagine there are people who would pay to know that very important detail. Say ... the King of Wylandia? Or Morushe, or Borasur, for that matter.”

“No doubt,” Timon said, affably.

“I’m making an implication,” Jayn said, keeping his voice just about the level of a whisper.

“I know,” Timon said. “The implication being that it might not be in my interest that this information be shared. And so it would therefore be more in my interest that you do not live to tell anyone, including any of the aforementioned

Majesties. Or did I misunderstand you?"

Jayn looked at Timon. "No, I think you pretty much nailed that board to the floor."

The magician sighed. "Jayn, by your reasoning it's in my interest that you disappear after this task but, since you're carrying a large measure of my gold, we've already established that. Stop trying to give me reasons to kill you; they're irrelevant. I'll harm you if and only if I want or need to."

"That's not much reassurance."

"It's the best I can do under the circumstances. Now. Climb or die."

The smell Jayn had noticed when he first entered the fissure got stronger as they climbed. After about thirty feet or so there was very little doubt.

"Is that...?"

Timon's nose wrinkled in distaste. "Human excrement? Yes."

Further up. They came to a broad ledge created by an irregular crack in the stone. There they found a dunghill so regular and ordered that it almost looked as if it had been shoveled up just so. Cave insects and Jayn didn't want to imagine what else had discovered this lowly food source; the pile was almost writhing with life. Far overhead there was a faint light.

"As you may have surmised, this leads to the garderobe in the queen's apartments," Timon said. "The only reason the smell isn't worse is that it's only used by one person usually, her Majesty. Plus, the beetles and worms do a fair job of breaking the royal waste down to compost ... not that anything else would grow down here."

"But ... why turn the fissure into a latrine? They could be contaminating their wells!"

"There are no wells. They use a system of large-capacity cisterns. Given that, and the fact that this is not a normal cave and therefore has very little water to contaminate, the design makes perfect sense: I fancy the smell at the upper levels is hardly noticeable, and the pit is so large that it never has to be mucked out. In the builder's place I'd have done the same."

Despite Timon's expressed admiration, they moved more carefully after that. The natural stone steps that allowed them to climb the wall hadn't gone totally unblemished, and more than once they had to avoid coprolitic deposits of varying ages.

“After this they’ll likely smell me even if they don’t see me,” Jayn grumbled.

“It’s a risk we’ll just have to take,” Timon said cheerfully.

As they approached the top of the wall Timon paused for a few moments and pulled out a parchment map. He found a clean spot on the stones and kneeled down to unfurl the map. Jayn leaned in so he could see.

“This is the floor plan for the level just above us. And here,” he said, pointing to one end of a cluster of small rooms, “is where you’ll emerge. The queen’s bedchamber itself is here, and the nursery is on the other side. You can also reach the nursery through the hallway, but unlike the queen’s own apartments, there will be guards there. If you can stay within these rooms without being discovered,” he used his finger to draw an imaginary circle around the entire cluster, “you should be fine.”

“And what if the queen is in her apartments?”

“I fancy she is, considering the hour. Use stealth,” Timon said, then added pointedly, “and nothing else.”

Jayn nodded. “Understood.”

Not that he wanted to harm the queen of Wylandia or anyone, come to that, but being a thief meant, whenever possible, keeping your options both open and as plentiful as possible. You never knew when you might need another one.

There was a light, still, from above. Jayn recognized the distinctive flicker of a candle, shining down through an appropriately-sized hole overhead. They were careful not to get directly below that hole, but when they reached as near to the top as the natural steps in the stone would take them, then were still about ten feet below the garderobe and about as many to the side. Timon reached into the bag slung over his shoulder and pulled out a length of rope and a grappling hook, its tines wrapped with cloth to muffle them. Thick wooden beams supported the rooms, and below those beams heavy braces had been set into either side of the stone. Timon aimed for the brace nearest to the garderobe and, after an expert twirl of the rope overhead, hooked it on the first try.

“Climb up and do what you came to do,” Timon said. “I’ll wait here until either you return or I know you’ve been caught.”

“If I’m taken aren’t you worried that I’ll betray you?”

“No, because I’m certain you would, if you thought it would save your own skin, and why not? I’d do the same. Now go.”

First Jayn handed his pack to Timon. “You know I can’t climb with this.”

“Someone more foolish might have tried, though. Don’t worry; I’ll keep it for you.”

Jayn grinned. “Why should I worry?”

Jayn tested the rope. It was thinner than he would have preferred but surprisingly strong, and the hook was well placed. Jayn took a good grip and gently pushed away from the stone ledge. He swung drunkenly over empty space for several distinctly uncomfortable seconds before he managed to clamber up the rope and grip the brace. After that, climbing up was easy. He reached a point just under and behind the garderobe seat where he crouched, his feet securely planted in the lee of adjoining braces, and listened for several seconds. He heard nothing.

Her Majesty’s just left a night light. How practical.

Jayn traced the edges of the seat. The opening of course was too small, but a slight push told him that the entire slab was simply sitting within the wooden frame, using its own weight to anchor it. He slowly straightened up, lifting the seat as he did. The seat was made of white marble; Jayn only recognized it because he had once stolen a small statue made entirely of the rare stone. It was, also, fairly heavy.

Nothing’s too good for Her Majesty’s royal butt, apparently. Must be cold, though.

When he was high enough to see that the garderobe was really empty, he very carefully set the seat aside on a section of bare wood on the bench that made up the frame for the slab and pulled himself up and into the small room. A thick candle burned unattended on a stone table on the left. It gave a weak but adequate light. The only exit was closed by a curtain instead of an actual door, for which Jayn was grateful. Iron hinges tended to squeak, something drapery generally did not do. Jayn carefully set the garderobe seat back in its place before he pulled the curtain aside and stepped into the next room. He waited for his eyes to adjust to the darkness.

Timon’s been right so far.

The map had identified the room Jayn stood in as the queen’s changing room. With what Jayn could see now, that appeared to be true. There was a tall linen press for bedding, several large chests for storage, and a fairly large glassed window on the outside wall to take advantage of whatever light might be available.

That glass must have cost a fortune, not to mention that marble garderobe. The horse trade must be more lucrative than I thought.

While it was true that Wylandian-bred horses were much in demand, it was

only now that Jayn was starting to understand the true wealth of Wylandia. The kings of Wylandia had long held the reputation of being fairly belligerent neighbors, though in truth most disputes tended to end as little more than border skirmishes. Still, there were a lot of them and it was these flare-ups that tended to be what people first thought of when the name “Wylandia” was mentioned, not the relative prosperity he had seen both in the castle and the village at the foot of the mountain.

Perhaps it is the kingdom’s small size that makes it feisty. Or perhaps it is simply that ill-tempered bastards tend to breed the same.

Jayn shrugged. Either way, it wasn’t really his concern. He was close to fulfilling his obligation. After that he’d have to worry about Timon’s true intentions, since the only other ways out of the castle were either down the cliff or out through the gate, and neither alternative looked any better than, if necessary, taking his chances with Timon. Jayn crept to the second curtain that separated the changing room from the queen’s bedchamber.

The queen was not sleeping.

Jayn peered through the curtain and froze in place. There were two candles burning on a small table, but that wasn’t what worried him; the one in the garderobe suggested that her majesty might be afraid of the dark. He’d seen such often enough before. No, it was the sight of the queen sitting at that small table within that candlelight.

She’s just a girl...

On second look he revised his impression a little but not much. She was probably sixteen, maybe seventeen. Marriageable age, especially by royal standards. She had long dark hair bound into one braid that ran down her back. She looked small and alone sitting in the pool of candlelight as her pen scritchd on the parchment in front of her.

Is she ... crying?

Her eyes were red but that just could have been the result of writing in weak light, since the candles were barely augmented by the weak moonlight coming in the window. Every now and then she would use a kerchief to dab at her eyes. Jayn stared at her perhaps a bit more openly than he should have, but all her attention was on the parchment in front of her. She paused, apparently thinking of what to write next, then turned back to her work.

Jayn watched her with a mixture of fascination and discomfort. He had never been so close to royalty before and certainly not a queen in her own chamber. Forget being a thief, *anyone* caught in a queen’s chambers who didn’t belong there could count on their head being the part of their bodies that would be chopped off

last. Jayn knew this and yet he couldn't stop staring.

He frowned. Here, in the depths of leisure and luxury. What bloody right does she have to be unhappy?

In a moment the answer came to him:

THE SAME RIGHT AS ANYONE. IT'S NOT ALWAYS SOMETHING YOU EARN.

Jayn wondered, perhaps, if that thought had really been his own. He decided that it was. After all, it was true enough, even though there certainly were people who deserved unhappiness and more. In his darkest hours, he sometimes thought that, perhaps, he was one of them. He shook his head, slightly, and the curtains fluttered. Fortunately the queen took no notice.

Do your job and get out, Fool. The problems of one silly girl-queen are not yours.

He kept still, and waited. After what might have been a few minutes or perhaps longer, the queen seemed satisfied with what she had written. She rolled up the parchment and used one of the candles to drip wax for the seal.

“Lyassa, come here.”

The queen only had to repeat the call once before a middle-aged woman emerged from one of the side rooms that had been marked “Lady in Waiting” on Timon’s map. Her eyelids drooped and she carried a small candle of her own. “Yes, Majesty?”

“I’m ready to retire. I’ve left a scroll on my writing table. In case I don’t rise early enough in the morning I want you to see that it gets to my post rider ... and no one else. Is that clear?”

“Yes, Majesty. I’ll take it now for safe—”

“No!” The queen stopped, then continued in a calmer voice. “No, that’s all right. I might ... I might change my mind. If the scroll is still on my table in the morning, please do as I instructed.”

“Yes, Majesty ... would you care for a cup before you retire? There’s still some brandy wine left.”

“I’m surprised,” the queen said, but then smiled faintly. “Yes, Lyassa. Thank you.”

The woman disappeared back into her room for a moment and returned with a small goblet, which the queen drained at one gulp. She made a face and coughed, slightly. "There's the end of it, and that's probably best. Good night, Lyassa."

"Sleep well, Majesty."

The servant woman curtsied and withdrew. The queen went into the nursery for a while, apparently to reassure herself that the child was well, then returned and snuffed out the candles. Jayn kept still and let his eyes adjust once more to the darkness as the queen removed her outer robe and crawled wearily into her overstuffed bed. Quickly her breathing evened out and Jayn heard a faint snore. Too quickly, in Jayn's opinion. Clearly some small crisis was in play; the change of plans hinted at this. Had the queen's servant placed something in her drink, perhaps to help her sleep?

If so all the better.

Jayn waited a little longer, then slipped into the room. He glanced at the queen in her bed, and then at the door to the servant's room, then started across the chamber. When he got to the table, he hesitated.

Something to prove I was here. That was the bargain.

The seal was the obvious choice, but a little too obvious. The Queen of Wylandia's personal seal would be proof to anyone, but only if he were fool enough to let it be known he had such a thing. Then it might be worth more than his life. No, something else. Something less likely to be missed. Like, perhaps, the letter? If the letter was no longer there in the morning, then the servant would assume the queen had changed her mind. If he was right about what had been in that goblet, then the queen would not wake early, and find the letter gone as she had instructed. And if the letter never arrived ... well, that wasn't such an uncommon thing.

A private letter from the Queen of Wylandia, bearing the impression of her seal?

Perfect but also risky, since he didn't even know what was in the letter. Yet, Jayn realized, that was part of the appeal. He wanted to know what was in that letter. Who it was for. What it said. Moreover, he wanted to know why such a person could be so unhappy. It was there. In her face, in her bearing. It was also none of his concern, as he had told himself more than once. And yet, he still wanted to know.

Jayn hesitated, then left the scroll where it was. After that it was the work of but a moment to slip into the nursery and leave the package by the royal crib. He hesitated at the nursery door on the way back, and that was the only thing that saved him.

Someone else was in the queen's chamber.

Lyassa crept across the floor and, glancing several times at the bed to make sure her mistress was still sleeping, she took the letter.

So that was the real reason you slipped your mistress that draught. Not giving the poor girl a chance to change her mind, are we? Who do you really plan to deliver that letter to?

Lyassa left the chamber immediately and returned to her own room. The way was clear now for Jayn to slip out through the garderobe with none the wiser, and he knew that was exactly what he should do.

Jayn turned to the sleeping girl. You're in a sorry pass, Majesty, when a thief like me serves you better than your own.

Jayn waited as long as he dared, then crept into the servant's room with all the stealth and skill he could muster and stole the letter back.

Timon, as promised, was waiting for him in the dark cavern beneath the castle. "Is it done?"

Jayn sighed. "Do I die if I say it is?"

"That's answer enough. Jayn, you and I both know there's nothing I can swear that you'll believe, so let me simply say this: If you try anything foolish, you will certainly die. It's more or less the same choice you've had all along. Here's your gold, by the way. I'm not carrying it for you."

Jayn took the bag, but he remained on guard. "Where are we going?"

"Back to the Serpent's Path, of course. 'Safely out of Wylandia.' That was the deal, remember."

"I remember. But after?"

Timon sighed. "Jayn, for a thief and a rogue you worry too much."

* * * *

It was the fourth day of their return journey. They had made camp once more at the highest point of the pass, looking out over the plains of Wylandia. Once more Jayn had been summoned from a sound sleep, only this time, when he glanced back at the fire, he was a little relieved to see that he was not, in fact, still sleeping.

Even so, Timon was waiting for him on the ridge. The magician didn't say anything at first. He just stood looking out on the distant plain and a sky full of stars.

“If you’re ready to kill me now, just do it. No suggestions for jumping off a cliff in the morning or any of that nonsense. Please do me the courtesy of being direct.”

He sensed rather than saw the magician smile. “I am always direct ... in my fashion. I see you burned the letter.”

“Yes.” Jayn wasn’t surprised that Timon knew all about that, though he knew he should have been.

“Why?”

“If you already know what was in the letter, then you know why.”

Timon sighed. “That’s just it—I do know what was in the letter, and I don’t know why you burned it. I want you to tell me. I think it’s important.”

“If that’s true, first tell me what the letter said.”

“I don’t know,” Timon said simply.

Jayn put his hands on his hips. “You just said—”

“—that I know what was in the letter. I did and I do. It was the letter of an unhappy young woman reaching out to an old friend. Am I wrong?”

Jayn thought about it. “No. You’re not wrong. All right: I burned the letter because it was dangerous to keep it.”

“Dangerous for whom?”

“For me, for all concerned ... all right, for her especially if it came into the hands of her lord the king, who is not noted for his compassion. It’s best this way.”

Timon nodded. “Because the old friend she was reaching out to was a former playmate who today happens to be the heir of Morushe. Yes, you were right to burn it. But doing the right thing is not part of your reputation.”

“Nor yours, if I may say, yet I have to ask this: did you send me there to steal that letter? Was that silly gift just the pretext?”

For a moment the magician acted as if he hadn’t heard. When he spoke again it was as if he were speaking on another subject entirely. “Like the Wylandian Dun breeding stock itself, there are many admirable traits of the royal bloodline of Wylandia: they tend to be brave, and honest, and shrewd. They also tend to be

bad-tempered and stubborn.”

“Pardon me, magician, but this is well known, though there are few who would say as much to their faces, and certainly not the current king.”

Timon smiled. “So if, perhaps, one wished to effect a change in their behavior, one might look for more indirect methods?”

Jayn thought about this. “Such as?”

“Such as preventing a misunderstanding between a young married couple from turning into something more intractable. Such as leaving a sweet and thoughtful gift which the king himself forgot to do, on the occasion of the birth of his heir. Such as, in the face of that gift, a queen might, perhaps, reconsider her harsh appraisal of her new husband and treat him with a little more patience. Such that the king, in turn, might come to know his queen a little better and in turn treat her with more of the gentleness she needs and deserves.”

““The smallest seeds grow the mightiest trees,”” Jayn said, repeating an old proverb.

“Not always,” Timon said, “but everything large or small has to start somewhere.” He shrugged. “Who knows? Maybe the new prince of Wylandia will grow up to be a mite less of a bellicose bastard than his father. One can but hope.”

“How did you know that I would steal that letter? For that matter, how did you know about the letter in the first place and the possible consequences?”

The magician didn’t answer directly. “You were born with a talent for moving quietly and tricking locks. So you became a thief. It would have been strange if you had not, yes?”

“True, but I don’t see what that has to do with anything.”

“Just that it’s the same for me, Jayn. Hidden things, remember? I was born with the talent to see the places where history turns. It’s not that I want to—I have to. There came a time when I could no longer ignore what I saw ... for good or ill.”

“So it was all pre-ordained?” Jayn asked. He sounded bitter.

“Don’t confuse possibility with destiny, Jayn. I knew about the letter, yes, and how it might fall into the wrong hands. I did not know for certain that you would take it.”

“What if I hadn’t?”

Timon shrugged. “Then you wouldn’t have been the man I judged you.”

Jayn looked out toward the stars. “You’re not what everyone supposes you to be, Timon the Black.”

“For that matter, neither are you. No surprise. It’s not ‘everyone’ who gets to decide who a man is. Still, for reputation’s sake I’ll keep your secret if you’ll keep mine. Agreed?”

“Agreed. Shall we swear binding oaths?” Jayn asked, smiling.

The magician smiled too. “No need. I trust you.”