

Time Management for Mercenaries

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Aardbassett Books

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Chapter 00 ~ Valkyries

Pierce lay on his side dreaming of peace, his view of the slaughter-field blocked by ranks of spearmen. He'd run the gamut of emotions today — fear, irrational calm, anger, exhilaration, apprehension, and fear again as battle waxed and waned.

Near an hour had passed since the last attack. The sun lowered, half hidden in banks of mist. A light breeze blew from the south, wafting serried clouds high overhead.

Buttermilk sky. How queer the name in this bloody place.

Better imagine those sun-glinting drifts Valkyries come to carry the slain to a Saxon Valhalla, there to feast and fight and be made whole again until Gotterdammerung. The swan-maidens would have heavy work this gore-soaked day.

In him they awaited a reluctant fighter a millennium out of time. What sense to travel so many years and miles to seek an early death? He felt a brief unreasoning anger at the man who'd brought him here.

Unreasoning... for none but Brian Pierce was ultimately to blame.

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Chapter 01 ~ The Right Man

In the study of a fine old home — two walls lined with books, plank floor dark and lustrous — sat a brawny strong-featured man, his dark hair streaked with gray. The Southern California sun, barely restrained by filmy curtains, beat in through tall windows as he spoke into the phone, his voice husky.

"Yes, I understand, and I hope you— No, no hard feelings. You have your— Well, thank— thank you for your— No, my discretion is— Certainly not, Colonel."

As a larger man entered, he turned to glower in disgust before returning to the phone.

"Absolutely. Under the circumstances you've pointed out— You've convinced— No— No, I simply have to give up this project. Yes— yes— Right."

He hung up, leaning back and giving a huge sigh.

"Colonel Radabaugh again, Mister Cam?"

Dimarico turned weary eyes toward the doorway.

"Who else? Hard to get a word in edgewise."

"You say you're quitting?"

"To shut him up. I'll never quit — you know that."

"He chicken out?"

"Wouldn't touch this deal with a barge pole. Concerned for his reputation if it became known he even *talked* to me... Yet he looked so good, Saipale — credentials and

in person, too." Dimarico's voice hardened. "But it seems there's a difference between a good man and the *right* man. And now... Now only one left, my friend. The least impressive of the entire bunch, with a questionable record to boot."

"Maybe not-so-good record better. He don't have to always worry about his rep — how he looks to other officers."

"I wonder..." Dimarico and the big man studied one another. "We're running so short of time I'm ready to consider anyone with fewer than three heads. And I am *not* going to drop it, regardless of what Radabaugh thinks he's talked me into."

"Look up the Marine?" Saipele sat before the desktop and started mousing. After several clicks, he said, "Maybe at that range today."

"What times?"

"Starts ten-hundred."

Dimarico looked at the clock and came to a decision, energy returning in a rush. "It's late but... let's move!"

"I was working. I should —"

"Only a clean shirt. *Go*, man!"

* * *

Swann's final shaft cleft a stunningly blue sky to the zenith before arcing down toward its goal ninety meters distant... only to strike in the black, contemptibly far from essential gold. Failure!

As if he needed more of it.

Family lost, profession gone — now even his hobby letting him down.

A wave of petulance hit him — disgust, anger, frustration with the entire sport of archery... And with plenty more. He longed to walk away, not even retrieving his arrows — to leave this useless, time-wasting piddle forever behind.

But no.

Trained his whole life to act the part of a man, he'd not change now — not give way because of one more paltry setback.

He unstrung his bow, resigned to playing a civil role a while longer.

Among bleak dry California hills, backed by bleaker California mountains, a few level acres of hilltop had been fenced, and a wide swath of brush cleared and groomed as an archery range. At the front of this plot beside a narrow asphalt road stood a green shed. Eighty or so men and women congregated there, next to a carpark.

A young man hailed Swann — Brian Pierce.

"Jack! How'd it go?"

Elbowing through a crowd around the scoreboard, Swann grimaced.

"You saw it."

"Sixth ain't bad."

"Not bad! Worse — it's pitiful. Time to move on, I think."

"C'mon, man. Next year you'll be swimming in medals."

"Too old for this kid stuff, Brian, and I'm bored. Time to look for another hobby — shuffleboard, maybe."

"What's this *too old* baloney?" A tall girl with striking looks strolled up to them.

"Sheila!" Pierce exclaimed.

"How'd you do?" Swann asked.

"The usual," she said, smiling as she reached to brush at his collar.

"Tell him," Pierce said. "Nothing to be ashamed of with sixth."

"Hope you beat the boy here, at least," she said to Swann, ignoring Pierce.

"He got third."

She glanced at Pierce. "Luck still pays off, huh? But hey, I gotta run. See you next month, Maje."

Giving a wink, she turned and strode off.

Swann sketched a wave, but Brian called, "So long, *Diana!*"

She made no acknowledgment.

Pierce gazed after her.

"I don't get it! Women don't usually hate me, but she acts like I'm not even here."

Swann shrugged as they walked off — Brian's lovesick act was getting old. Despite a clean-cut appearance, intelligence and a great deal of persistence, the girl showed no inclination toward him — had, if anything, become cold.

Too bad, perhaps, but Swann had his own predicaments to think of.

"She acts as if she's interested in you, Jack, even though, er..."

"Go on — old enough to be her father, right?"

"Naw," Pierce protested.

"Well, you're close. I have a sixteen-year-old, and she's what?"

"Twenty-three, I think, and so gawd-awful beautiful! But I can't even get her to tolerate me, much less go out."

"Golden goddess of the range, old buddy."

"She's almost tall as you, Jack. What's your height?"

"Oh, near six on a sunny day. Five-eleven and a skosh."

"Think I'm too short?" Pierce whined.

Swann laughed. "You're the most negative... You're as tall as I am!"

"Yeah, but if she wore heels?"

"Get yourself cowboy boots, doofus."

They stopped at Swann's vehicle, nodding and waving as shooters and spectators straggled past.

"Boris has finally decided to bring up her transfer to the men's divvy."

"Yeah, I heard, Brian."

"So how do you stand on it? She's been nagging forever."

"More reason to quit. I'd be seventh with her in there."

"C'mon, man. She's not that strong to handle another twenty meters."

"Maybe, maybe not."

A rawboned figure passed by. "Hey Jack! Brian!"

"Early-bird!" Swann replied.

"Ya see what I did? Almost caught ya, old man."

"Might have to break a couple of your fingers, Earl."

"Beatcha next time, huh, Jack?"

As the man drew away, Pierce muttered, "What a jerk!"

"He's OK — just rather basic social skills. Shirt off his back, though."

"I can't stand him, and nobody else can either."

"He only bothers the snobs."

"Like me, you mean?"

"Well... think it over."

Pierce sighed. "But Sheila, Jack — I can't get over her. I love that build. Maybe I'm weird to go for a girl who's so muscular."

Swann snorted. "Huh! You'd better check her again — she's got all the right equipment. Plenty of bone and muscle, though. Could've used her in the Corps."

* * *

Northern Tehachapi Primitive Archery and Boozing Club.

Contests shall consist of 18 arrows

from each of the following distances,

shot in this order:

30, 50, 60, 70 meters for Women

30, 50, 70, 90 meters for Men

Women and men shall shoot alternately at each distance.

122cm target face shall be used for 90, 70, & 60m distances

80cm face shall be used for 50 & 30m distances.

"Abandon recurve, all ye who enter here."

~

"There!" Dimarico shouted. "That sign — turn there! They're leaving. Get in the—

OK, OK. Right here by the gate."

"We catch him at home if he—"

"Who knows if he's *going* home? Out and look!"

They jumped out and climbed the bumpers.

"See it?"

"Lots of silver vans. Maybe— Look there, Mister Cam! He's talking to somebody."

"Run quick! I'll grab the keys. *Don't get hit!*"

But Saipale was already gone, sprinting between the exiting vehicles.

* * *

As Pierce laughed and turned away, Swann stored his gear, thinking this might be the last time. Should he care? No, not much, except for the loss of a few acquaintances. The club was merely another filler in an empty life. Even had he improved to the point of regularly medaling, boredom would have set in, simply taking longer.

So... No family, no job, and now no hobby. Perhaps the time had come to get away from California with its associations and memories — find another home and new surroundings in hope of attenuating his yearnings for the unattainable.

Hearing footsteps among the other noises he glanced left. A large man ran through the dusty lot, dodging cars as if they were tacklers, headed this direction. Swann's eyes narrowed. He was coming— was right here!

"*Whoa!*" Swann yelled as the man leaped in front of his opened door. "What the devil are *you* after?"

"Scuse me, Major. Mister Dimarico wants to talk. You wait, please — OK?"

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Chapter 02 ~ The Pitch

Swann, with Dimarico as his passenger, followed the speeding Escalade as they headed toward a diner in the next town.

"Your boy doesn't waste any time."

"Ten percent above, that's it. We avoid attracting the law." Dimarico said. "And *my boy*, as you call him, has spent half his life in your outfit."

That put another light on things. "Samoa or...?"

"Right. Now let me give you the background. My family's company is Randolph-Lectro. In the previous generation my branch lost a fight for control and was bought out, leaving us stock-poor but well-funded. As a result, I've gone in for... serious hobbies. I don't tell you this to boast, but to assure you I've got the wherewithal to back a project such as I'm going to describe."

"How do Dimarico and Randolph work together?"

"They chose Randolph because at the time of corporate formation Mussolini or Capone was too many Americans' idea of Italian."

"And how did I come by this high honor?"

"To be chosen? I went over lists of recently retired military officers for certain qualifications — including ground combat experience — then cross-checked archery clubs, looking for skill with the bow. Tehachapi was perfect, in fact, because it doesn't allow all those strings and pulleys and composite materials."

"The bow, eh — not too many available."

"You're the fourth on my list. I started at the top and worked down."

"Down? Down by rank? Where'd you start?"

"Brigadier general, as it happened."

Swann frowned. "Thank goodness you didn't have to lower yourself any further."

Dimarico gave him a sharp look.

"I won't apologize for wanting rank. You'll see why when you learn more. A couple I eliminated upon meeting. Too conventional in their thinking and too old, as well. I wanted someone in good shape — mental and physical both — and open to new ideas."

"The next one — a lieutenant colonel — I considered my man. Today we had our final conversation, and he did me the favor of pulling out. I was afraid he lacked independent judgment, and today he proved it."

"But somehow, Major, I don't think that's going to be *your* problem. Too much the other way, perhaps."

It was Swann's turn to give a sharp look.

* * *

"Primitive weapons in this day and age? I can't believe it! The most backward of

backwaters — outside some of the Andamans, perhaps — are full of AK-47s, RPGs and Heaven knows what else — camel-bombs if not car-bombs."

Dimarico chuckled. "Beside the Andamans, what others could you dream up?"

They sat in a corner with Master Sergeant Saipele Manaea in the next booth to assure privacy — as Cam and Jack, now on a first-name basis, discussed Dimarico's scheme of third-world liberation on the sly. The tiny restaurant had emptied, and they switched to neutral subjects whenever the waitress came by.

"Here's another surprise — the climate is temperate. Chew on that for awhile. But all in all, you're going to have to take it on faith for the time being. I don't intend to release details to anyone, as yet."

"Yeah, but... There are certain laws against coups, piracy, making war without an act of Congress — that sort of thing."

"This isn't a coup or piracy. Now, the latter — making private war — could be somewhat stickier, I'll admit, but if we can avoid publicity, it won't be announced to the world by me. Further, it'll be clear we acted in the interests of the locals. And if worse comes to worst we can simply stay there, safe from American law."

"You know, Cam, you're saying the right things, but I'm doubtful. I don't buy the idea any society such as you describe still exists."

"In fact, Jack, there's been no real description yet —"

"No kidding."

"—but I'm going to give you one. Although I can't tell you anything yet that'll allow you to guess where it is, everything I say will be factual."

* * *

Half an hour later Swann was pensive but still skeptical. "So — it's a kingdom, and well-governed —"

"For its level of development — you've got to keep that in mind."

Swann gave a wry look.

"My mistake, Jack — I don't mean to talk down to you. Go on."

"You say the king is selected by a vote of the elders, so it can be considered — sorta kinda almost — a representative form of government. They collect taxes in an equitable way, they've got both a militia and standing army, there's a primitive communication setup, and their finances aren't hurting. So what's the problem? These folks can't lose, assuming some world power doesn't get involved."

"They're divided internally, and they have more than one external enemy. Agreed — they can probably handle one invasion with success, but what if two hit them simultaneously? And when they're defeated, personal freedoms are lost, their land and wealth go as spoil to the invaders, their retainers become serfs, their widows and daughters are prizes, thousands go into exile, and the more recalcitrant portions of the

country are desolated. Not a pretty outcome, Jack."

"You make it sound foreordained."

"I believe it is." Dimarico was somber. "By the way, do you know any languages?"

"Only German, and it's rusty."

"German! German is good."

"This isn't the Liechtenstein Liberation League, is it?"

Dimarico laughed, and decided to bring matters to a head.

"Here's my offer, Jack." I know you're not hurting for money. Take it easy — of course I checked you out. Even though you're supporting your son, you live simply, and your pension and savings are enough to keep body and soul together. Yet as the Bible says, *Wine maketh merry, but money answereth all things*.

"First, you'll get a three-hundred thou annuity, payable to your son or whomever you want, on terms you select. Monthly, you'll get four thousand, as will the enlisted. In addition, reasonable expenses. In the combat zone, there'll be... let's say, other rewards.

"For each recruit you find, a two-thousand immediate bonus plus a pay increment of one thousand per month, up to ten thou max salary, but the bonuses continue. How does that sound to you?"

"Pretty good, and I could pick up plenty of former Marines."

"And how long to make good archers of them? We're in a hurry."

"That's a problem, of course."

"I'm in DAA, Jack — Dark Age Anachronists. At least one kid there will join up."

"One other problem, Cam. Travel and adventure are genuine lures, but when you want a special skill, and when there's no glory to be had — sort of a secret mission — and when the prospects of living to spend the money seem questionable..."

"I know what you're getting at. This is only going to appeal to those who have weak roots, whose futures look bleak, who've lost many of the things they hold dear, or are desperate to change their lives... People like you, Jack."

That hurt, and anger almost made Swann spout off — but it rang too true to deny. His wife, Ashleigh Callender now, had been one of those who simply couldn't take long absences for training and campaigning — couldn't handle the thought she might become a widow without notice. After their child arrived things got worse, and when he deployed a second time to the Mideast she'd called it quits.

He loved his son and still loved *her* — once hoped they could get back together. But she'd remarried. His son lived with Ashleigh but he'd refused to allow Jeff to be adopted, though by all accounts the boy got on well — too well! — with the stepfather.

Dimarico interrupted his thoughts. "Jack, I want you to do one thing for me. I checked you out by conventional means — finances, general history, your reputation among the few folks who know you. One thing I couldn't check, not even using Saipale's contacts. So... exactly what happened between you and the Corps?"

Swann thought it over before deciding to explain — to unburden himself as it were

— something he'd done with few in the Marine Corps and no one outside it.

"Well, Cam, you know something of the Geneva Conventions, I suppose. It's all to do with them. Most people don't realize they're meant to protect *our* troops, not the enemy's. That is, *we* behave so *the enemy* will behave. It's supposed to be mutual."

Swann had fallen afoul of American rules of engagement. Determined to preserve his troops' lives, he held that false surrenders released capturing forces from the need to risk themselves in order to protect a treacherous enemy. He offered no second chances to enemy fighters who pretended to surrender then ambushed unwary Americans.

"Putting it simply, I objected to codling terrorists for the purpose of burnishing our reputation with people who wouldn't sympathize with us in any case — who wanted our heads regardless of how *honorable* we might be. I believed, and still believe, if we'd have been less wimpy we'd have tamed them quicker. They didn't fear us enough to respect us, you see."

"Specifically though, what caused you to leave early?"

"I wouldn't — couldn't, the way I saw it — let it go. I took it up with the light colonel commanding until he stifled me. Then — with permission, of course, though unwillingly given — I took it up the ladder high enough for someone to suggest I'd done enough damage to my career — that I'd be happier as a civilian as soon as I'd put in twenty."

"So that was it."

"That was *absolutely* it. Political correctness trumped practical matters... And cost us lives and injuries."

Dimarico let a few beats pass.

"Seems you'd want to grab this opportunity — a chance for redemption, isn't it?"

"Redemption! I feel no need for *redemption* — I've sacrificed my career for my principles. And as you've made clear, no one will see me *redeem* myself in any case."

"So... is that your answer?"

"Afraid so, interesting and challenging and ennobling though your project might be. It's buying a pig in a poke — and for all I know you could merely be a great salesman. Why risk my life for that?"

They sat in silence, both downhearted — Swann disappointed nothing better had come from this momentarily exciting prospect, Dimarico seeing the potential ruin of something long planned.

Swann made a move to rise.

"Well, Cam —"

"Wait, Jack — perhaps I've mislead you. Do you realize I'm not merely *recruiting* you — that I'm going to be *with you* over there?"

Swann sat back down.

* * *

By the time Dimarico finished explaining his own role, he assumed from Swann's interjections that he had him.

"I still have plenty of questions, Cam, but... I'm in."

"That's great, Jack." Dimarico raised his voice. "Saipele! What do you think?"

The big man turned round in his booth.

"I think Major Swann is a good man, good officer. I think troops follow him, obey him. You know, Mr Cam — they take risks for him, go where he leads. He's your right man."

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Chapter 03 ~ Thine Own Self

Taking security seriously, Swann moved his lips as little as possible, although nothing — not even a scrawny desert bush — stood nearer than fifty yards. With Pierce showing insufficient enthusiasm, he was steering the lad toward his vehicle.

"That's the deal, Brian. But you're hesitant, so let's drop it."

"It's weird, Jack. I mean, who ever heard of Americans having a private army? It's like some goofy-stan place."

"Weirder yet is primitive weapons. I would have sworn there wasn't a nation in the entire world that didn't have a supply of AK-47s or the like."

"And you still think..."

"Can't help trusting this guy. Tons of charisma and a big packet to boot — worth eighteen mil as far as I can determine. One thing I don't doubt, though, is he's misleading me for reasons of security. That I can excuse, though, or even approve."

"I wouldn't call the pay so great, would you? Except for the annuity, and who knows if we ever live to spend it."

"Well... no. His idea of excellent pay is less bountiful than mine. Still, it's not exactly slave wages."

"So are you the honcho, Jack, or is he? How's it work again?"

"Put it this way. He's theater commander, I'm field commander. He liaises with the locals, determines policy. I plan the campaign, set tactics, train the troops, lead the battle."

"In other words, you do all the dirty work."

"Not quite. He takes care of logistics — a major job — and he's in the field with us under my command, sharing risks and hardships. That's what sold me."

Pierce grimaced. "Still sounds crazy, Jack. The idea of getting cut up, maybe a poisoned arrow in the gut... It gives me chills, I've got to admit."

Swann had approached club members, picking those with limited ties to their present situations. He didn't care whether those weak ties were concrete, like an unsatisfying career, or psychological — disillusion with the way life was headed.

Only four met his standards, and two he dropped during initial exploration.

This was his second discussion with Pierce, the person he'd most expected would welcome the chance for adventure, but who now sounded questionable. Only Earl Gephart had jumped at the offer, with surprising alacrity and enthusiasm.

They halted at Pierce's car.

"I'll have to let you know, Jack, that's all I can say."

"No you won't, Brian. I've already crossed you off my list."

Pierce drew back. "That hurts — I thought we were friends."

"No change — it's merely that I looked upon you as a kindred spirit, and I see I've misjudged. No hard feelings, though — nothing like that."

Pierce hung his head as he slid into the seat. "Sorry to let you down, Jack."

"To thine own self be true, Brian. That should be your motto... and mine."

* * *

Dimarico was more than a little critical.

"I expected far better from you, Swann — half a dozen at least. What do we do, go over there without a cadre? A measly one man, and him without military experience. This shoots things all to hell!"

"If I could go after Jarheads..."

"How long to make them into capable bowmen — a year or more? And how much longer to make them competent trainers? We need to do most of our recruiting locally, and it's ridiculous to attempt training hundreds of foreigners with such a small crew."

"There have to be plenty of Marines and former Marines who are archers, and there are plenty of bow-hunters out there whom we could..."

"I've gone through that on my own. How do you tell which ex-military shoot the bow — put up a billboard? It's different with officers — more info available. And we've still got to think of security. Hunters? Sure, but the same problem exists. We can't go to

archery or hunting clubs broadcasting our interests — we have to do it quietly through personal contacts... And now it turns out you don't *have* the contacts."

Swann gave him a long level stare.

"Let's remember that I'm not one of your flunkies."

Dimarico looked away for several moments, drumming his fingers on the desk.

"Forgive me, Jack. That was money speaking. I'm too used to telling people to jump, and seeing them immediately put on their gym shoes. You're an associate, same as Manaea — don't think otherwise."

"But I see the problem. Can you get any more of your Dark Ages buddies?"

"No, blast it! I've had little more luck than you. Of course, they're heavily into sword whacking, and that's all my one poor recruit is up to. He's no archer either."

"Let me suggest this, Cam. Despite your security concerns — which I agree with — in the last days before we leave it should be safe to recruit and scoot. What do you say?"

Dimarico took a while before replying.

"It's not simply recruiting but setting up the annuity. I'm also not sure we could find any decent numbers in a few days — it might take weeks. However, what if we recruit in another country? I could probably advertise ahead there without much concern, and that should avoid problems with US authorities. I'd have time to work out the financial arrangements, and I plan to jump off from outside the US in any case... Yes, we'll take on a few foreigners."

* * *

Swann picked up his phone after coming back from a short jog, still breathing deeply from the terminal sprint.

"Yeah?" he gusted.

"Jack? I've decided — I'm in."

"What! Is this Brian?"

"It's me. I'm ready to go with you. You know, the—"

"Hold it!" Swann commanded. "Meet me at... What's the greasy spoon toward Rands? Yeah, that's it. Give me until... say ten-thirty — I have to shower. And don't talk any more — let's just meet."

He hung up. *Yahoo!* Though on the other hand, why couldn't the kid keep in mind they weren't to talk openly?

Getting ready, he considered Brian's change of mind, wondering what had brought it on. He'd cooled to the lad since the turn-down, thinking he might have over-rated him. After all, the fact he thought of a twenty-five year old as a *lad* was bad enough.

After joining the club he'd immediately hit it off with Pierce despite the age difference. He missed his son, and Brian filled some of that place for him, albeit as an older and more independent son than Jeff. He fit the position in part through his

youthful enthusiasm, somewhat clinging ways, and continuing need for advice.

Witness the ongoing Sheila Brennen matter, an infatuation lasting months now.

He wondered whether he'd be doing right in allowing Pierce to join up, although it could easily be justified as a good way of helping him mature. Yet if he matured only to end unwept in distant jungle or tundra — what kind of favor would that be?

Yet the die was cast, he supposed. He himself was committed, and Brian had now committed his own self.

He pulled up to the diner in a mood of somber acceptance.

* * *

Over eggs and hash Swann listened to Brian's song of epiphany, and coming to the apex of the tale...

"And when I saw how Sheila lit up on hearing about —"

"What!?" Swann grated, trying to keep his voice low and almost succeeding. "What the *devil* are you saying?"

"Well I... she —"

"Shuddup! Not another word inside here." He rose, dragging Pierce with him to the checkout, then out to his van.

"Get in," he told the cowed Pierce.

He played with tuning the radio while getting his temper under control, then turned to his potential recruit.

"Exactly what did you blab to her?"

"Not much, Jack, believe me. I —"

"*What?* Straight and short."

Pierce gulped a couple of times before getting anything out. In a near whisper he said, "You'd asked me to go on an expedition."

"And?"

"Only... only that it... we'd use bows and such." He paused. "So help me, Jack, I didn't give anything away. I mean, only that little."

"*Only that little.* In other words, everything we're trying to keep secret except the sailing date."

Swann could hardly trust himself to say more. This young man, whom he'd befriended and even compared to his son... Why, his son had twice the discretion of this fool, and more maturity besides.

"What more could you have said, jackass? Did you give any names besides mine?"

"I don't *know* any other names, Jack," Pierce whispered.

Yeah, that was true. At least he hadn't blabbed anything more himself — but if he had, no doubt Brian would have spilled that as well.

"I only hope, Brian," Swann said in resignation, "you got something worthwhile in

return."

Pierce start to cry.

* * *

Dimarico exited the office, leaving Pierce within.

"I don't think we got ourselves any bargain with this one."

"No."

"He's weak — a boy compared to the other one, Early-bird."

"And to think this was the one I thought most likely."

"He's bright enough. A good shot, you say? Could be a useful instructor, but how's he going to hold up in a fight?"

"Don't know, Cam."

"And yet I think we have to keep him. Do less harm on the inside than out, maybe. Think he can keep his mouth shut in the future?"

"He says he'll drop her, but he's been infatuated for months, and any time we're together he goes on and on about her. It's verging on unhealthy. On the other hand, why would she shoot off *her* mouth?"

"Could he fool her by claiming he lied?"

"Think he could pull it off? I don't. Question is, what tack should *I* take with her, assuming she stays curious?"

"The other choice is, you and he stay away from the club... Only then we lose any chance of further recruitment."

"He stays away but I go, though I'm not confident of finding anyone else. If Sheila brings it up to me I'll have a good lie ready. Maybe I'll claim to've snagged a guy who wants to bow hunt, and I'm going to train him and go on hunting trips as well. If she can't see Brian he won't be able to give it away, and I ought to be able to spoof her."

"Let him know so he can play along, Jack — if she contacts him for any reason."

"I will."

"What of Gephart?"

"He shouldn't know anything of this Brian fiasco, and Sheila won't suspect him of being part of our mob. Even if she did and remained curious, I can't see them getting together on any terms... You know, Cam, we're getting so nervous we're making a kind of Mata Hari of this girl. Chances are she'll drop it. What's she got to gain beyond satisfying her curiosity?"

"OK, fine. Now let's get Pierce on his way while you and I discuss supplies — both what we'll take with us and what we'll need for troop maintenance when we get there."

"How about a guess at where we're going — you ready for that?"

"You take a guess, you mean?" Dimarico gave him a considering look. "OK, I'll chance it. If you get it right I'll tell you — I feel I know you well enough by now."

"When Hitler invaded Russia, Stalin — the paranoid SOB — cleared out a lot of minorities for fear of treachery. He moved them all, so far as I know, to Siberia. And this included, from the Crimea, the remnant of the last Eastern-Germanic tribe — the Goths, who still spoke their own tongue." Swann raised his eyebrows in query mode.

Dimarico smiled. "And you think there might be some of them left after half a century and more, living deep in Siberia and still speaking Gothic." Swann nodded. "And you figure they must be pretty primitive, or else they'd be known instead of hidden from the world. And maybe Turkic or Mongolian tribes are pressing hard on them. And your knowledge of German — even though it's a modern West Germanic language — would be useful in learning the East Germanic Gothic."

Swann nodded again, and despite his best effort looked smug.

"Good reasoning, Jack — very darn good. Shows a lot of knowledge on your part, and the ability to put two and two together and come up with..."

A smirk showed on Swann's face — he couldn't stop it.

"...five! Sorry. So close and yet so far off! Yet it's good thinking, Jack — that it is."

~

Chapter 04 ~ Shrapnel

Too distracted to do his best at the next shoot, Swann landed in ninth. Having decided to move on, he no longer cared.

He spent time looking for dissatisfied expressions and listening for whines and complaints not connected with archery performance, and initiated a few conversations in the hope of eliciting such information. No possibilities presented themselves.

He longed to go up to the club president, Boris, and ask, *Who's having troubles at home? Who hates his job?* Impossible, of course.

And after scores had been posted the inevitable occurred.

"Maje!"

Swann turned to Sheila, finding her bright-eyed and bushy-tailed as ever.

"Ah, the queen of the quarrels."

"The what?"

"Quarrels. Another name for arrows — but for crossbows."

She looked nonplussed. "Oh... Where's your bosom buddy?"

"Presuming you mean Brian, I don't know, though it's possible his social life has become too demanding of late."

Her grin faltered. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"I assumed you could tell me."

"Pooh! We had a drink — no big deal."

"For you a social drink, for him a social revelation."

"What bull! But I don't want to see *him* — I want to talk to you."

She linked her arm through his, pulling his right triceps against her not inconsiderable bosom as they strolled toward the parking lot.

"I'm feeling happy to see you, Sheila, if you know what I mean."

"I'll bet you are, Major Jack, but... Say, why do they call you *Jack* when it's D Swann on the records?"

"D for Daniel, therefore *Jack* Daniels. Get it?"

"Hah! Almost funny, in a low-class Leatherneck kind of way. But are you going to help me get into the men's divy? It's up next meeting."

Swann felt a rush of relief. If she'd buttonholed him for this, his worries were over.

"Not a chance, Sheila. Why would I want more competition when I can't medal now?"

"You dog! I don't believe you mean it. Will you help or not?"

"I'll help to this extent — I won't show up to vote against it."

"You aren't *that* big a rat! I'm gonna expect your vote, Jack."

"Oh, it's *Jack* now, is it? Not even showing respect for my rank."

"I'm not kidding." Her voice lost part of its wheedling quality. "I want you to back me. God knows I've been nice enough to you."

"Look, Sweetie, you can work your wiles on practically every man in this outfit, so you don't need my help. And the women will probably go for it to lessen the competition, so you're in like Flynn. As for me, I'm leaving soon, and see no need to inflict my judgments on the rest of the crew."

"Yeah, but I don't want any split decision — I want it unanimous."

What an ego! "C'mon, Sheila — my humerus or whatever is getting overheated. Can you let go of me now?"

They stopped at the edge of the parking area. She gripped his arm tighter and rotated into him, purring in a sultry voice, "I don't *want* to let go of you, Jack."

"There you go, getting familiar again! What am I to do with you attached to me like a remora?"

She ignored these half-comic insults, secure in her beauty and sexuality.

"And I want to ask you something else. What's this expedition thing?"

He pushed her off and shook his arm loose, glowering.

"How do *you* know of it?"

"Tell me what's going on." She clutched him again.

"I asked you a question, Sheila."

She tossed her hair. "How do you think I know? Your buddy bragged, that's how. He wanted to make himself a big deal, and he told me every single detail."

"And you, of course, didn't weasel it from him with great promises of physical pleasure or anythi—"

She stuck her face into his. "We had a *drink!* If he told you anything else, it's a lie!"

Swann was getting angry himself, but lowered his voice to further mislead her.

"Thank you, Miss Brenneman. Our conversation has been extremely enlightening. You've told me far more—"

"You're getting on my nerves, Swanny," she almost yelled. Then she too regained control. "Simply tell me more — that's all I'm asking."

"And all I'm telling you is it's confidential between me and my client. Pierce should have kept his mouth shut, and now he's probably off the payroll."

"Payroll! Are you guys mercenaries? I thought you had a rescue mission to some third-world joint."

Swann forced a puzzled expression onto his face.

"Now *I'm* confused. What the devil did Brian tell you?"

She peered at him, trying to penetrate his brain.

"He said you're gonna liberate some jerkwater place in Africa or somewhere, and you're gonna use primitive weapons to keep it quiet from the UN and CIA."

As she presented this unlikely tale to his skeptical gaze he could see doubt build in her expression, and he now did some of the greatest acting of his life, bending over and bursting into loud guffaws.

"He told you...! Bwa-hah-ha-ha! I thought, I... I thought — ah-hah-hah. Oh God, I'm sorry, Sheila, but..."

Her face was red and scowling, yet he couldn't help noticing — she still looked pretty good. With an effort he controlled himself.

"Sheila... Sheila, forgive me. I... Well, I simply assumed you were the one leading *him* down the garden path, but now..." He broke off for a chuckle. "...now I see it's mutual." He shook his head in mock sorrow. "Never thought he had it in him. What a cad!"

"*Jack...*" Her voice quavered briefly. "What are you telling me, Jack? Are you saying he lied? Cause I don't believe it! We sat there for..."

"One drink, remember."

"Three, actually. It took that long to worm it out of him."

"*Three* drinks! You oughta be ashamed. Except he took as much advantage of your gullibility as you did of his infatuation. You're a real pair! Maybe I won't fire him after all — at least he managed to dupe *you*."

"I don't believe you, Jack. I know when a man's slinging it, and you guys don't fool me one bit."

"Mislead yourself if you need to, but now you'll get your wish. I'll tell you our little secret — without any names or details — and all you've got to do is swear to keep it under your hat. And if I learn you've spread it around... well, that's it between us — I'll have nothing to do with you in the future."

"I still don't believe he fooled me. But sure, I'll swear, cause I don't much care whether you stay friendly or not."

"Not only my friendship — my respect, as well."

"Spare me the BS."

"Simple enough. A guy who's killed enough critters with slugs now wants to stuff another trophy room. Go primitive — no fancy gear. Might even be wanting us to knap flint before he's through."

"Nap...?"

"Chip it — make arrowheads."

"That's crazy!"

"Eccentric, Sheila — *eccentric*. You don't call paying clients crazy. I don't know if he'll go that far, but I'm prepared —"

"You don't hunt," she scoffed. "So why'd he pick *you*?"

"Marine Corps contact."

"He's a Jarhead too?"

"You want his serial number? No, he's a feather merchant all the way. A guy who works for him —"

"Wait!" Her face reflected confusion, puzzlement, loss of assurance... and suspicion. "Brian said..." She tried to stare into his brain again, big blue eyes wide. "You're pulling something on me, I know. You... you could fool me — you've got a great deadpan. But Brian..."

She shook her head, perplexed.

"Something don't add up, Jack. Something ain't right here."

"Think what you want, but remember your promise." He turned to go.

She grabbed his sleeve.

"Wait!" He shook loose again. "No, wait a minute, Jack. I want to go with you."

This he wasn't ready for.

"Huh!"

"Yeah, I want to go with you — whatever it is."

Now his laugh came unforced. He could picture her and her lovely derriere, her blond ponytail tucked up under a beret or campaign hat, snooping and pooping in some Godforsaken bush country — freckles hidden by camo paint, shapely legs flexing in green utilities, bosom thrusting at her bush shirt...

He began to feel some deliciously discomforting sensations — and she blathered on!

He interrupted. "Have any nursing skills? Can you set up camp, prepare and cook game? Or are you looking to be a comfort lady?"

"What's that — something dirty?"

"Uplift the troops' morale."

"Troops! So it *is* guerrilla stuff."

"Pfft! You've got a one-track, mind, Sheila."

During their argument everyone else had straggled past and left the parking lot, leaving them alone. Dust sifted down unnoticed.

"I'm coming with you, Jack! I deserve some adventure in *my* life, too. If you won't help I'll drag it outa Brian. I'll —"

"If Brian gets within half a klick of you I'll have his scalp. If he ever says *G'day* I'll... Well, never mind. Let's go — I'll lock the gate."

She shouted from her SUV window as he relocked the gate. "I'm goin' with you, Gyrene — when I want something I get my wa-aayyy!"

Her vehicle leaped onto the highway in a storm of dust and pebbles, while he crouched to avoid the shrapnel.

~

Chapter 05 ~ Hanky-panky

Swann sat on a table in the office of Dimarico's beat-up warehouse, swinging his legs like a kid. Everything was going swimmingly. No new recruits, but the plan to interview men overseas was set, and he'd started field training for his minuscule squad of Brian Pierce, Earl Gephart, Saipele Manaea, and Dimarico's young friend Barry Sutton.

The latter two practiced their specialties of sword and spear and shield work, but he also wanted them able to pick up a bow if needed.

Edith Lachey, a drab somber woman, entered the room bearing a coffee for Swann, and he decided to jolly her out of her perpetual depression.

"Thanks, Edith. You couldn't be more welcome if you were offering fifty-dollar bills."

The witticism fell so flat he wondered whether it might have an objectionable second meaning. She made no response whatsoever, turning and walking out the door.

Swann was here to see a demonstration of some gizmo developed by one Professor Evan Koskinen and his technicians — Dale Kinnard and Lachey. He had no clue as to how this fit in with their expedition, and neither Dimarico nor the help was offering any.

So here he sat cooling his heels in this barren office — bereft of magazines, calendars, chairs or any other equipment — and resting his bones on the single piece of furniture in sight.

He knuckled an eye and yawned, thinking of the warm bed he'd unwillingly exited early this morning.

Forty minutes later Dimarico woke him, and he stumbled into the warehouse, alternately brushing dust off his right side and rubbing his eyes.

They stopped ten yards shy of a small wooden platform topped with a four-foot round metal plate. A cable led to the underside, and from its outer edges stuck three antenna-like prongs. Off to one side stood the professor and his minions, and beyond

them a console connected by the cable. Everyone watched the platform.

"What's the silly drill, Cam?" Swann asked.

Dimarico held up a hand. "This is a demonstration — explanations later."

Swann found this mystery ungratifying, and furthermore something continually screeched in the background.

"What the devil is yowling?"

Dimarico pointed, and off beyond the console, half hidden by a steel column, Swann spotted a small whitish creature in a hardware-cloth cage.

"A cat!" He wondered if he were dreaming this surrealistic scene.

"What the heck are we waiting for?"

Dimarico glanced at his wrist. "Ten forty-five."

Swann checked his own watch. "It's ten forty-eight right now."

"Ten forty-seven and a few." Dimarico sounded worried.

No point arguing over a minute, Swann figured, but... "Can't you get rid of that ca—"

A dull *POOM!* sounded, and he crouched and swiveled toward the platform.

What! Now the cat and its cage were here, the yowling twice as loud.

Swann boggled. "Caa-amm!"

Dimarico pointed as before — and there were cat and cage by the column, and here were cat and cage in front of him, and there was cat and here was...

* * *

"Not a chance! I wouldn't believe this if it were printed on the front page of the LA Times. In fact, I *especially* wouldn't believe it there. I don't... What's the gimmick, and what's it got to do with anything?"

"You won't believe the evidence of your own eyes?" This from Doctor Koskinen.

He, Dimarico and Kinnard tried to convince Swann of the impossible, while Lachey disposed of the cats outside. Swann surreptitiously eyed the exit in case he needed to make a run for freedom.

The *Perfesser*, as Swann denoted him, droned on.

"This is not surprising, for it's the common reaction. Even Dale, even Mister Dimarico found it difficult to accept at first. You must simply —"

"I must simply *nothing!* I don't and won't believe it's anything but a con. It ain't possible, and I ain't gonna be convinced."

Koskinen turned away with a disdainful shrug, leaving the problem to lesser minds. Kinnard grimaced nervously but hung on, determined to make the sale. Dimarico grinned, as though enjoying this reprise of the skepticism of earlier converts.

"Unless I see the wound," he attempted to quote, "and put my fingers into it..."

This venture at a Biblical reference merely irritated Swann. God knew he wasn't

much of a Christian, but he respected those who believed, and resented cheap hucksters who used holy text for their own crass purposes. And the man prated on.

"Why don't you make a test, Jack?"

"Me! How would I do that, for crying out loud?"

"Send something of your own back."

"Back! And how do I get it again if I send it *back*?"

"You'll get it," Kinnard interjected, "because the other you will send it from the future, and this you — er, *you!* — will get it here."

"Have you any idea how *crazy* that sounds?"

Dimarico still grinned. "Send your watch, Jack."

"But I want to *keep* my watch, Cam," he explained mock-reasonably.

"*Jack!* We're trying to tell you — *you* won't lose it, you'll keep it. The *other* you will lose it — the *alternate* you!"

"Sure, Cam — and that's all well and good — but I have a feeling the *alternate me* won't want to lose my... er, *his* watch either."

Dimarico gave a big guffaw, and he and the technician walked away to have a laugh and plan their strategy.

Yet now Swann — his head spinning with the attempt to make sense of something he knew impossible — decided to make a test simply to shut them up, to kill the practical joke or whatever was going on.

He pulled out his handkerchief and walked over to them. "Here, send this back."

They pivoted to see what he held, and Dimarico said, "Your hanky? Sure. What time is it?" He looked at his watch while Kinnard went toward the console. "Eleven thirty-six. Let's plan on eleven forty."

"Plan *what*, for—?"

Out of the corner of his eye Swann saw the professor, standing near the platform, give a flinch.

"I'll be darned," Dimarico said. "There it is!"

Even to Swann's skeptical eye, there it was indeed. His handkerchief, neatly folded, lay near the middle, and his handkerchief, neatly folded, still resided in his hand. An eerie feeling overcame him, as with unwilling steps he approached the platform.

Dimarico's voice assaulted his ears.

"Maybe we didn't hear it arrive because we were talking, or might be it's too small and soft to make much of a sonic boom." He turned to Koskinen.

"Doctor! Here's another thing — it came through early — at least three minutes. Are we seeing instability?"

Whether he knew or not, Koskinen rushed to assure him.

"I very much doubt it, Cameron. Most likely they — we — made a slip with the settings, or perhaps we — alternate we — decided to send it earlier."

"You know, Evan, alternate me could have done it deliberately in order to more

easily convince Jack there was no hanky-panky with the evidence." He snorted a laugh and nudged Swann. "Catch that, Jack? Hanky-*panky*. Simply came out that way." He picked up the *new* handkerchief and laid it in Swann's unresisting left hand.

Swann turned like a sleepwalker and paced over to the office, entered and kicked shut the door, blew any remaining dust from the table corner his jeans had earlier polished, and laid the two pieces of evidence side by side. For several minutes he stared at them, collecting his thoughts and trying to make sense of what he'd seen, for in these items lay the key to a puzzle or — perhaps as likely — a key that would open the door to a greater mystery than any he'd yet known.

A week before he had taken this — one of these — handkerchieves from his bureau drawer to place in his pocket. A gift from his wife many years ago, it was of fine cotton embroidered with the initials DES — she'd never cared for the nickname *Jack* — and had a quarter-inch satiny dark-blue band woven near the periphery.

Hardly used, he hadn't changed it since. But a few mornings ago, by dint of vigorous snorting, he deposited deep in its folds a particularly repulsive gob of bloody mucus, and in the refolded kerchief that evidence no doubt still hid. He reminisced about the gift, one of a set of four Ashleigh had given him, the others sporting bands of maroon, dark green, and bronze — classy items, in keeping with their giver.

He unfolded the one from his right pocket — once, twice — and there in desiccated splendor lay a small attestation to his mortality. He unfolded less willingly the other, outwardly identical to the first — once, twice...

* * *

A tap on the door, and Dimarico stuck his head in. "Jack..."

Swann leaned against the table — arms and ankles crossed, his face expressionless.

"Well, what do you think?"

"I'm going home."

Dimarico was silent for a moment. "That hard for you to accept, eh?"

"Yeah."

"Anything else we can do?"

"DNA test on those cats... but you've let them go."

"Considered it, but results take too long — weeks for a thorough match. Besides, we've done it before, and I can show you the results — ninety-nine point nine-plus likelihood of identity."

Swann gave a weak chuckle. "How many cats have you got?"

"We trapped that critter this morning. It was wild, running around here. I think Edith might have been feeding it on the sly. No, we used a mouse before. A lab gave those results for the two carcasses."

"A mouse!" Swann jeered. "Those things are practically clones anyhow."

Dimarico looked stumped but then smiled. "A *wild* mouse, Jack — not one of those white lab rats."

"Oh... And you didn't worry about Hanta virus?"

"What's that?"

"Some African disease that's migrated here. It's now endemic in the southwest US, and it's got a real high mortality rate."

Dimarico seemed nonplussed.

"Too late to worry now, I guess. The DNA results were good in any case, disease or no disease."

"So where are you *really* planning to go?"

~

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Chapter 06 ~ Shangri-la

"The ancient world, of course — back to hammer and tongs style warfare. Back to simple living and low pollution, if you don't count horse manure and human, too."

"To change history."

"Yep."

"For better or worse."

"If we're lucky, for better. If unlucky, we won't be alive to repine."

"And what happens to today — this timeline or alternative as you call it? How does *now* come out?"

"According to theory, it goes right on as before. Not that we'll ever know."

"Whose theory?"

Dimarico tilted his head toward the door. "Our resident genius and crackpate — Professor Koskinen. Yet we — the techs and I — have had our discussions, and we have our own ideas.

"It's this way, Jack. A friend told me of this crazy scientist several years back, who was pushing an idea wilder and more unlikely than cold fusion. He dared me to look

into it, and as I was at loose ends — had been most of my life, in fact, and thought I needed a unique hobby — I checked it out. Koskinen, I found, was cordially despised by the rest of the faculty, laughed at by his more sophisticated students, barely tolerated by the school administration, unable to get another grant to save his soul.

"So I gained my hobby — supporting a mad scientist.

"For diversion, and partly by way of charity, I funded a grant for him — enough to get him through the year. It's all I initially planned, but as I became familiar with his ideas I lost part of my skepticism — began to think if sub-atomic particles could travel back in time, as a few experimenters claimed...

"You see, one particular period in history has always fascinated me — a nexus that could change the world and astound every historian who had ever pontificated on its effects. So I set him up for another year, and he left the university to devote more time to to his mania."

"How old are you, Cam?"

"Fifty."

"You don't look it."

"And you don't look forty-four, Jack. So what?"

"You've devoted how many years to this?"

"Going on seven."

"Huh! You must be a true believer."

"Gradually became one. Each year we've accomplished more, and now it's nearly done. Things have been zapping through time for several months now. We're going to build a larger model, and if it works we'll go full-size immediately, do the briefest of tests, then it's off to... off to our next stop.

"I can't fully express, Jack, how excited I am. And I'd give anything — everything — to do this."

"And, in fact, that's exactly what you're doing."

"As far as money, yes. And as far as my existence? Well, I'm risking *it*, also."

"And mine."

"If you're willing."

"There's a choice? Are the doors unlocked?"

"Locked but able to be unlocked. It's still secret except for the inner circle, and not even *you* will know all the details until immediately before we take off. But everyone will be informed at the last, and anyone who wants to refuse — anyone I've misjudged, in other words — will be free to return to the US and spend his new money. All except the annuities, which I'll immediately cancel."

"So there won't *be* very much new money."

"Well... You can't expect me to offer an incentive to quit, can you, Jack?"

Through the walls they heard another of those soft explosions that had heralded the arrival of cat number two. Dimarico's expression altered and he sprang to the door and

flung it open. Koskinen and Kinnard stood by the platform, lifting off a weighty corrugated-paper box. A guilty look crossed the technician's face but the professor displayed no concern.

Dimarico raised his voice but kept it neutral.

"I believe we previously decided to make no unnecessary tests, did we not?"

"This was an assessment of mass capacity, Cameron."

"Ah! What is the total weight of the box, Doctor, and the ratio of mass to volume?"

Now Koskinen showed discomfort.

"I will immediately calculate it."

Dimarico blandly continued, "Yet isn't it field size we've agreed is most critical, Doctor? And haven't we made the tests needed on this generation of transport?"

Koskinen counterattacked with a smirk. "How are we to control the actions of our future selves? If they wish to send, what can we do but receive?"

Dimarico considered, and Swann thought he detected a sign of triumph in The Professor's mug. But no, Dimarico had an answer.

"Good point, Doctor, so here is what I'm going to do. For those transmissions which fail to have my authorization, a fine of ten percent of monthly salaries will be levied."

"But if they —"

"I must levy the fines in *this* timeline, of course, but I'm quite sure the alternate Camerons will do the same in *their* timelines."

He raised his voice to be certain it could be heard by Manaea, who stood as far as possible from the mischievous ones.

"And the fine will be paid by all present, active or passive. You may inform Miss Lachey, Saipele." He turned back to the guilty two. "And that means I must take it from my own pay, as well, Doctor — simply to be fair." He gave a broad phony smile.

Swann immediately scurried for the office to have his laugh in private.

Dimarico followed, and after closing the door said, "I don't know why you think it's funny, Major — it includes you as well!"

Swann grinned. "Well worth it to see the expression on the jackass's face. Congrats! You've acted in the best traditions of the military with the mass punishment approach, and it's so logical yet illogical there's no hope of him fighting it."

Dimarico looked quite pleased with himself.

Swann continued, "I imagine you included Manaea to make sure he keeps an eye on these two."

"The doctor, yes — Dale would never pull such a trick on his own." He turned serious. "I hate the idea of tampering with something we don't understand, possibly wreaking havoc in the alternate times, tearing at the fabric of space-time every button we push. We need to test in order to have any hope of success, but a conservative philosophy demands we transmit only enough for our purposes, and never for sport or diversion. You see that, don't you?"

"Absolutely. In fact..." Swann frowned.

"What's the matter?"

"Have you ever received more than one transmission? I mean, do you only receive something when you've already planned to send it back? There's never anything spontaneous from the future?"

"Right. So far, anyway."

"Well then... Then how do you know the future still exists? How can you be sure it isn't destroyed — the alternate future — every time it shoots something into the past? What proof—"

"You're a bit *too* bright for this job, Swann!" Dimarico snapped. "Yeah! I have *that* on my conscience. Good ole Doc Kosky has a soothing explanation, however — timelines, branching timelines! He's got so many branches it would take a forest of redwoods to match them!"

"Then you *don't* know."

"Hell no! I don't know, you don't know, Dale and Edith don't know... And Koskinen! He only knows how to come up with a glib explanation. He probably knows — and certainly cares — no more than any of us... One thing we *have* done, although it isn't absolute proof, is send back — that is, have sent back to us — two items in succession, one after a slight delay. It indicates the alternate timeline still exists for a short period, at least.

He paused.

"I know this much, Jack. It appears to work, and I'm going to be taking the big step back along with anyone who has the guts or hopefulness to come with me, even if it's only Saipele — that's what *I* know."

"So... And what does Saipele know?"

"He's no dunce, Jack — you see that. Only he comes from a culture which pretty much takes American scientific and engineering miracles for granted. I imagine if I told him tomorrow we'd changed our minds and were going to take a spaceship to Mars, he'd be puzzled for awhile but ultimately accept it."

"Categorical loyalty."

"I believe I can count on that with him."

* * *

They went out for lunch and brought pizza and drinks back to the crew. They spoke in Dimarico's vehicle but left any significant discussion for the presumably secure site of the warehouse.

"Assure me you're not misleading any of us."

Dimarico was silent a long time, and Swann refused to let him off the hook by adding more.

At length the man said, "In all candor, Jack, the only ones who know my full plans are me, myself and I. That's the way it has to be, and that's the way it's staying. Yet if I've judged you accurately you won't regret any surprises which come up."

"So it's still to be taken on faith — you, this joke of time travel and alternate timelines, this pompous professor and his laughable theories you've inflicted upon us and yourself..."

Dimarico simply nodded.

Swann said, "A mad voyage into the unknown under a mad captain, guided by a mad navigator, with a half-mad crew."

"And where do *you* come into this hierarchy of the mad?"

"The mad son of a sea-cook, maybe, because I want to come along."

"We were both born too late, Jack. We belong to the age of the conquistadors."

"Or of the Children's Crusade."

"Do you realize you've gone from the ultimate in skepticism to acceptance inside three hours?"

"I'm going home to study my handkerchiefs more, and if tomorrow in the clear light of dawn I still can't figure out how I've been conned, then you can call me a believer."

"Time to bring the recruits into the picture. Next week we'll have the pilot model ready, and we'll put on a show for them."

"Consisting of...?"

"The night watchman here is Dale, and we've fixed up a locker room for him."

"*Dale!*"

"Wait. He's got a big ugly mutt — it's tied outside when we're working — to do the guard-dog act. And you saw those signs on the console."

CAUTION! 20,000 Volts! DANGER!
¡Precaucion! ¡20,000 Voltios! ¡Peligro!

"So if your burglars can read..."

"Doggy is quite friendly but looks mean as the devil and has a bark like a cannon blast — he's the real watchman. And we'll soon be guarded twice as well. Plugger — who's a hundred pounds if he's an ounce — makes the big jump next week, to arrive as Plugger II, the clone and brother of number one. That'll be our show for the boys."

"You're willing to put them in the picture — not wait till the last minute?"

"They deserve it, of course, but my reasons are purely practical. We've got to be sure of a minimum cadre before we finalize the jump arrangements. I don't want to arrive in, er... *Shangri-la* with only you, me, Saipele, and the good doctor."

"In the five-hundreds Theodoric, Emperor of the Goths and Romans, died without a

strong heir. In a generation or so the Eastern Empire reconquered Italy, and with Gothic power broken the gates opened for the Franks and Lombards and whoever, and the Dark Ages descended over the Western Mediterranean."

"Beautiful reasoning again, but..."

"But?"

"Too many Goths."

~

Chapter 07 ~ The Home Front

"Because of *me*, Dad?"

They sat over lunch at an isolated picnic table in a park near the home of Swann's ex-wife. Jeff was crying.

"Never!" Swann's eyes streamed, too.

"Because I wanted to have him adopt me?"

The boy meant Ashleigh's second husband, by all accounts a prince of a man. Swann almost couldn't hate the guy — almost. Ashleigh and Jeff wanted to make their new family more official, but Swann had refused permission.

"Never, Jeff. Nothing you could do would make me reject you. You're my son and always will be, whatever you call yourself."

Swann had explained his trip in its earliest version — liberation of some backward land. He had sketched the financial arrangements set up by Dimarico, and explained the trust fund he'd endowed out of his own resources. He wiped his eyes for the twentieth time and energetically cleared his throat.

"Get this, Jeff. As part of everything, I'm giving written permission for the adoption from one year after I leave. It'll be finalized when I know the exact date."

"You talk as if you're not coming back *ever*!"

"I know... If I could figure any way to get back together with your mother and you I'd never consider this step. But I've spent so many years in this dream, and I can't take it any longer. I need to have a life with meaning."

"You're talking about dying in some hole — not a new life!"

"I'm talking about meaning, mostly. Can't you understand?"

"I understand you're *abandoning* me." The boy broke down, his arms on the table, face hidden, shoulders convulsing.

Swann dabbed at his eyes and peered around, but no one seemed within earshot. He wanted to calm the lad but didn't know what he could do. His son's arguments made more sense than his own. He knew the ultimate selfishness of his motives for leaving, yet what choice had he?

In a few years Jeff would be grown and living on his own. Unless grandchildren

came, Swann beheld himself playing less and less of a part in Jeff's life — could only predict a lonely and pointless old age. He couldn't see himself remarrying while things remained as they were — setting up a new family while the one he longed for remained tantalizingly forbidden to him.

If Ashleigh's new husband were to kick the bucket, or if he could think of a way to safely... But no — that was wrong, and stupid to dwell on. Even if her were to baffle the authorities, his attitude could make Ashleigh suspicious. She knew his moods and expressions too well, and he wasn't a sufficiently hardened criminal.

Or if the Corps had allowed him another ten or fifteen years with appropriate promotion... If *anything* challenging might be going to happen in his life he wouldn't have thrown himself into this Quixotic and illogical adventure with Dimarico.

Hateful to think of sitting on a park bench yarning with other ancient citizens thirty or forty years down the road. He wanted to die in the bosom of his family or die with his boots on. Better an arrow in the neck and five minutes oozing out his life on a muddy trail than years of lonely descent into senility.

"Dad?" Jeff was sober but composed. "I don't like it but I have to accept it, don't I?"

Swann silently nodded.

"I... I want you to know I think you're doing something noble."

Swann's eyes began to prickle again.

"I'll miss you and I'll always remember you, but I've worked it out. I won't let him adopt me. Or even if I have to for some legal or money reason, I'll never change my name — it'll always be Jeff Swann."

Now Swann broke down, while the boy tried to comfort him.

* * *

"The way I'm disposing of my personal funds is this. Your mother will get an immediate check for five thou to spend on you or herself or whatever she wants — no strings. If any small debts I've forgotten crop up, she can take care of them. You'll be getting a check for five hundred every birthday as a little present. I've set up the trust out of state because I assume you'll go to college here, and it'll improve chances the vultures in financial aid won't get their claws on it. They'll strip your bones if they can.

"The trust will run until you reach thirty-five, at which time there'll be no restrictions. You can keep it for a yearly income, which should be better than four thou even if the market does nothing for the next nineteen years. And if it comes back, the income should be over ten, which is why I've kept the yearly payout so small, to give the capital a chance to grow.

"It'll be your decision. If you want to pay cash for a vacation home — assuming the mullahs still allow vacations — or buy the world's fanciest car..." This got a chuckle from Jeff. "...or take a trip round the world, or pay your own son's way through school

— it's up to you. I figure by that age you'll have the judgment to choose wisely.

"And there's the other three-hundred insurance I explained earlier. When and if it comes through there'll be a hundred-thou for your mother and the balance for you.

"Here's the spare key to my shack — don't lose it! I've bought out my lease. When I'm gone, get your mother to bring you up and clean out the personal gear I haven't already disposed of, then let the owner know you're done. Don't wait for someone to learn it's empty and break in to help himself. You keep what you want, and dump what you don't. Don't be too sentimental and save my old skivvies or anything such as that — think utilitarian."

"I feel a lot better, Dad."

"So do I. Practical details always help. But get ready for more tear-jerking. When I'm presumed dead — officially or not — your mother might be thinking of a memorial service. I vote no, but it won't be my decision, of course. I'm letting you know so your conscience — and hers — won't be too tender. Also, whatisname — he whom I choose not to identify — you've got to think of his feelings in the matter."

"I understand."

"That's it, I imagine, unless you have something to discuss. Let's clean up our trash and take a walk around, then I'll take you home."

"I'll never forget you, Dad."

"Good! Nor I you. Now don't make me break down again. Come back in a week and I'll bet the grass here will be green as anything, we've watered it so well."

The boy smiled and gripped Swann's arm.

"In a couple weeks or so, Jeff, I'll call you right before I go, and we'll have a good talk on the phone. Be a man, take care of your mom, and whatever you do in life try to do well and honorably."

"I won't forget your advice, either."

~

Chapter 08 ~ You Just Wait!

At the range they set up 3-D deer targets, one straight out and the other two at wide angles. From various ranges and positions the archers stood sideways or backwards until Swann cried, "Enemy!" followed by "...left," "...right" or "...center."

With arrow nocked, they would pivot, draw, aim and shoot for speed and accuracy. Barry Sutton and Saipela Manaea had earlier worn themselves out swashing their buckles, then done some shooting. The latter two weren't intended to be archers but he wanted them familiar enough to pick up a bow if needed.

The Samoan was another Dark Ages Anachronist, and had — because of his size, strength and determination — been tagged with the DAA moniker Lord Sappy von

Killawhalo, a pun on killer whale. They all found it a laugh to watch Manaea hack and stab at Sutton with grim homicidal stolidity while the smaller quicker man dodged and parried and endlessly backpedaled, rarely taking a hit but as rarely landing a counter.

Brian told him, "If he ever gets you inside a fenced acre, you're dead meat!" And Sutton agreed with a ready grin. His positive attitude raised the spirits of all.

A well-built, good-looking kid and varsity running back, Sutton had slid through high-school and dabbled at junior college. Lacking any particular aim in life, making no meaningful connection with any young woman, a bit detached from his family — he was another natural for their expedition. No scholar, he had an interest in the Middle Ages, and was well-read in chivalric fiction and in swords-and-sorcery fantasy. Thus his joining DAA.

His approach to a career followed the rest of his outlook. After his fling at college he'd taken a job in auto sales. The requirements of the profession had soon sickened him. An older salesman told him, "If you see me smilin' as the customer leaves, you'll know I took another sucker — an' I always got a grin on."

He found a spot at a small country dealership where the attitude was better, and managed to make a living — but high adventure was his true calling.

* * *

All were resting, equipment at their feet, when Barry pointed. "Major?"

Swann turned to see an SUV at the gate.

"Oh... my... gawd! Why didn't I foresee this?"

He jumped up and trotted to the parking lot, arriving as Sheila exited her vehicle.

"Hi, Major Jack! How's the shooting?"

"You quit work and drove two hours simply to pester me again?"

"Eighty-four miles, and all of it uphill."

"How'd you know we'd be here?"

"Three times already — I knew you'd be around sometime. Smart, huh?"

"Like a yellow-jacket at a picnic. Is that smart or merely insane persistence?"

The gibe set her off.

"Nothin' insane when it comes to outsmartin' *you*, you dumb Jarhead."

He grimaced and turned to give the assembly signal. The men started taking down the targets, and soon wended toward their vehicles.

She peered to her heart's content, he figuring any attempt to interfere would simply increase her curiosity.

"Earl? You got *Earl* with you! And who's the big black dude?"

"NFL," he lied.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Former NFL player."

"What's *he* hunt for — wild footballs? That's your boss, is he? I want to meet him."

"No." He grabbed her arm.

"You don't tell me— Let go!"

She surprised him by leveling not a slap but a right cross at him, which he only partly blocked.

"You little...!"

He grabbed her arms and shoved her off balance, this way and that, while she attempted to break loose and launched kicks at him whenever two feet were on the ground simultaneously, turning the air blue in the immediate vicinity.

By mutual consent they paused.

"I'll let you go if you—"

"*Bri-aaaan!*" She screamed, renewing her efforts. Soon the vehicles were loaded and heading for the gate.

"Only..." Swann panted, "...two more minutes... Sweetie. Then we, unh... can have a nice talk."

She managed to land a good kick, and he seriously considered throttling her. The vehicles cleared, Earl locked the gate, and Swann shoved her away. She launched at him in a rage but he cocked his fist and she stopped.

"I warn you, Sheila — come at me again and I'll knock you down."

"You'll be singin' soprano if I get at you."

"And you'll never sing again with my hands around your throat."

They gulped for air and calmed — seemingly. Sheila resumed seductress mode, and Swann prepared for the verbal phase of their contest.

"I guess those swords and spears are so you can hunt like those African dudes who fight lions, yeah?"

"Masai?"

"Ma-sigh, ma-see, ma-saw — what do I care. Proves you're a lying so-and-so is what it does!"

"Maybe you're right, Sheila — maybe I should come clean with you. You deserve that much."

"You bet I do!"

Swann collected his thoughts, conscious that in this new career of big-time liar he had achieved the pinnacle.

"Brian told you part of this, and most of what he said was fairly accurate."

He told her of the Goths, starting with their earliest known history in present-day Sweden and Poland, their subjugation by Attila and rebellion after his death, the Balkan travails, the conquest of Italy and so forth.

Yet always, he pointed out, remnants stayed behind when the warbands and wagons went on trek to greener fields, and in the Crimea particularly, a part of the Gothic nation remained until exiled by Stalin.

Here the fictional portion began, and in his description of their harsh but spectacular new homeland — desolate tundra, bold mountains, barren deserts and dense forests, deep lakes and swift streams — he became excessively poetic. He described their difficult life, hardscrabble farms, wiry cattle and horses and goats. He spoke of the efforts to retain their ancient tongue, now much diluted by Russian, and their traditional customs, inevitably modified by the years.

He told how through it all they retained their love of freedom, still gloried in their warrior skills, repulsing the raids of skulking Turk and Hun. But now, their enemies reinforced by backing from China and Muslim nations to the south, they faced their sternest test, the one which would determine whether the grand Gothic tradition would prevail or be wiped from the Earth.

"This then is our mission — to keep these proud but hard-pressed folk from genocide by their neighbors."

Dazzled by his own eloquence, he paused and looked at Sheila, almost expecting to see tears in her eyes.

"What incredible *bull!*" she shrieked. "You must think I'm the biggest idiot in three states! Everybody knows — *everybody!* — the Goth movement ain't more than twenty years old. I'm letting you blather on merely to see how far you'd take it. I'm ashamed for you — yeah, *ashamed* — to think you're so stu— What's goin' on?"

Swann doubled over in laughter, almost strangling with glee. He'd failed to convince her but... Out of the corner of an eye he saw a kick coming and dodged in the nick of time. He could easily imagine how Dimarico would respond to this tale.

He was able to straighten in a few minutes, but still laughed, pointing at Sheila as her rage sent him into fresh gales of mirth. She didn't have a clue! *Not one clue!*

At last his guffaws and giggles ceased. A few deep breaths, some gusty sighs, an occasional straggling chuckle, and he readied for round three.

"So you won't buy into the Goths," he wheezed. She only sneered. "What do you think it is, then?"

"I'm only surprised you weren't more original, and tried punks or rap artists. *Goths!*" she derided.

"OK," he said, "you've seen through my best. Now I'll have to try the truth."

"About time," she muttered. "But no matter what you come up with, I'm going along — whatever you say, whatever you do."

"The problem is the Kraloths."

"The what?"

"Klaroths."

"Didn't you just say it different?"

"Sorry — Kraloths."

"How would you spell it?"

"In English? K-R-A-L-O-T-H."

"African tribe, right?"

"No!" he snorted. "Forget Africa. It's got nothing whatsoever to do with Africa, and never did. Kraloths aren't African!"

"OK, I get the picture — not African. So why can't I go? Not that you're gonna convince me, Kraloths or no Kraloths."

"Well, here's the deal. They've got a taboo or something of the sort. They're similar to Muslims — no females aboard their spaceships."

Her rage now was something fearsome to behold, and he took a step back — but it subsided.

"Nobody, Major..."

He went on guard at her use of the respectful mode.

"...has ever frustrated me the way you have. I always get my way with most men. Nobody's ever been as tough as you — and I respect it. Only I don't understand. Why won't you take me along? What's the problem?"

"Everybody likes me mostly. I can keep up. I'm as good a shot as anyone here. You've got it in for me for some reason, and I don't see why, because I've always been nice to you."

He merely looked wise. She stepped closer and he tensed, ready for fight or flight.

"I've always liked you... a lot." She chuckled. "Brian's been after me to go out, but I'd rather *you* asked. You're a pretty decent-looking old stud, and sorta nice. And I wonder why you don't? I've given enough signals, I think. Seriously! Tell me why. Why aren't I good enough for you?"

Aw, what the heck. She could be sweet when she wanted. He'd let her down easily.

"I'm in love with someone else."

"Who?" she demanded.

"My wife, of course."

"Your wife! You got no *wife*. You've been divorced forever, you lying pimp!"

"Sheila, I bid you good day."

He climbed into his vehicle, drove to the gate and dismounted to unlock.

Her angry shout followed. "I'm going, Jack! I'll find out, and I'll go! You just wait!"

~

~

Chapter 09 ~ Motherships

Swann's story of Sheila and the Goths sent Dimarico into gales of laughter, even as both worried once more over security. Time was growing short, as was dog food with two of the big creatures to feed. The pilot-model transporter successfully checked out, as did a mock-up of the final version — not yet updated with new controls.

Dimarico shared further concerns regarding Koskinen with Swann.

"Electronics isn't my specialty but it *is* the family business, so I couldn't help but absorb a bit. His circuit diagrams make no sense to me, nor do they seem to match up with his descriptions. The wiring of the controls looks strange, insofar as I can trace it."

"Are they boards or...?"

"Mostly discrete circuits, with a few standard boards and lots of jumpers. Can't be sure whether he's deliberately hiding what he knows — which I certainly wouldn't put past him, paranoid SOB and manipulator that he is — or whether he doesn't know himself what he's doing, like a kind of idiot savant, working with psionics or something far beyond my ken."

"With *what*?"

"Psionics — paranormal stuff, ESP — that kind of thing."

"Exactly how serious are you?"

"Jack! I do *not* know what we are doing. All I know is the tests seem to work."

Swann wondered, not for the first time, what he'd got himself into.

"Tell me one thing — have you ever used the machine without him being present — used successfully, that is?"

"You're thinking of mass hypnosis and such? Yes, we've run it with him absent, with Kinnard and Lachey absent, and even with me out of the way, as you've seen. Mind control seems pretty doubtful."

"That's one relief... What do you still need for the large machine?"

"Capacitors — huge ones. Another week, at least."

"Then we're looking at what — a month before we jump?"

"Hope not. The frame is on its way to... the place. And you'll notice on the mockup we're not using plate but store-bought heavy aluminum foil this time — two layers. Assuming it continues to give results, everything is on for two weeks."

"What port did they ship to?"

"Naughty-naughty! Don't push for cheap clues — it's beneath you. You'll get a big one when we go over to recruit — only a week off."

* * *

Swann was in his garage cleaning up. He'd decided to ready his mower for sale by changing the oil, but a slip led to disaster, leaving a filthy mess on the floor.

As he finished, a large white van pulled into the drive, and with a feeling of apprehension he stood, ready to meet the FBI with bland assurances. The man who dismounted from the passenger side immediately dispelled his concerns. If this fellow was FBI, Swann was Popeye.

He tossed the soaked rag into the trash can and retrieved another to dab at his hands and trousers, then stepped up and nodded as a small man in a pale lightweight suit came to meet him.

"Mister Daniel Swann?"

"Yep. What can I do for you?"

"Let me introduce myself — I'm David Offutt with County Neighbor."

"With what?" Swann was distracted now that the specter of federal agents had receded. He finished with the latest rag and turned to toss it away.

"County Neighbor. We're an independent social agency covering the rural areas of the county. Our support comes partly from private and partly from public sources."

"Ah. Well, if you want a donation you've caught me at a bad time."

"No, no. I'm simply here for a chat."

The man gave a hearty but fraudulent laugh, and Swann teetered between cordiality and sending him on his way.

"I've got to clean up — change my clothes. You want a cuppa something?" He gestured toward the side door.

"That would be fine."

Again with the laugh, Swann thought.

"What about your friend?"

"Oh, nothing for him. He's my driver."

"Not thirsty?"

"He's the driver," Offutt insisted, as if it explained everything.

Swann ushered him into the kitchen of his three-room cabin.

* * *

Emerging from the bathroom — washed and in clean shirt and trousers — Swann found the little man still nursing his icewater at the kitchen table.

"OK, what's up?"

Offutt forced a smile. "We — the agency — focus on rural areas where people might be isolated, lacking in social and civic services, have too much time on their hands."

"I know the feeling," Swann said as he boiled water for tea. "You concerned for my neighbors?"

"Well... Have you noticed any problems with them at any, er... time?"

"Not hardly. We tend to keep to ourselves."

"There, you see — isolation."

"Three places for nearly a mile, so of course it's isolated. It's something we each wanted in the first place."

"Yet is isolation a good or bad thing, Mister Swann, when you have so much time on your hands?"

"I can't speak for them, but I don't feel isolation — merely serenity when I gaze at these mountains. And I keep pretty busy."

"And do you find time moves slowly for you? Do you ever wish to speed up the flow of time?"

"Hardly! I'm getting old fast enough as it is."

He couldn't help laughing at the prospect of time moving faster. Did backwards count? *Good Lord!* The thought hit him — did they know whether people — creatures — regressed in age as they traveled back in time? Moving back ten years — did you arrive ten years younger? He jumped up.

"We've gotta cut this short. I have to see someone right now."

Offutt still sat. "Wait, Mister Swann! Does this have anything to do with..." He whispered the words, "...time travel?"

"What!" *Here we go again! How is this stuff getting out?* Did they have a mole on board? His mind spun — but the pieces started to fit together. He took a deep breath and sat down, putting on a knowing look.

"Now I get it. You're after *me*, not my neighbors."

"We're not *after* anyone, I assure you. We simply want to help—"

"People who are confused, delusional, have strange visions, hear voices, want to liberate Orleans from the Goddons," Swann supplied.

"New Orleans?"

"Orleans, France — Joan of Arc."

"Er, possibly," Offutt admitted, seemingly baffled.

"And time travel — that's a new one, right?"

"Mister Swann —"

"Yes or no, if you please."

"I'm not sure I know what you mean."

Lies, don't fail me now. "Have you been in touch with the Sheriff?"

"We *do* have liaison with the Sheriff's Department on occasion, but there's no connection with my call on you today."

"OK, but —"

A voice called from outside. "You alright, Dave?"

"Yes, fine. Go sit down, Frank."

"Ten minutes, OK?"

"Yes, fine — *fine!* Go sit down now."

Swann grinned. "Needs that drink, you think?"

"He's only checking on me. Never mind — let's get back to your problem."

"I don't believe I *have* a problem, Dave."

"Well, time travel and the Sheriff persecuting you — those sound like problems to me, Mister Swann."

"Let me make a guess, my friend. You got a tip from someone saying I was into time travel? Someone who thought I needed a type of help which could best be accomplished from inside a locked building? Am I right?"

"Let me assure you, we don't lock people up, Mister Swann. You have nothing to fear in that regard."

"Again, simply a yes or no, please."

"We have a referral, yes."

"Let me take a few more guesses. Do you enjoy guessing games?"

Offutt smiled back at him, perfectly at ease now — sure he had caught his fish, trapped his mouse, roped his calf, harpooned his whale.

"Certainly, Mister Swann. Go right ahead — Frank and I can wait."

"First, I apologize for being slow on the uptake. I've been busy with three or four other things, and couldn't concentrate. And let's face it — I'm not getting any younger."

"Pooh-pooh, Mister Swann! You don't look a day over... forty — thirty-five?"

"Eighty! Yes, I'm eighty, Dave. Because time travel is the fountain of youth. You go back slowly to get younger, and return to the present real fast so the change freezes. I'll tell you this — when I've got it perfected it'll put plastic surgeons out of business."

Offutt's face was a study as he struggled to maintain the preferred bland expression during this bizarre admission.

"Of course," Swann confided, "my driver's license says differently, because the space aliens took care of it. You *dig*, daddy-o? By the way, I picked up that term in one of my trips to the forties... or was it fifties?"

Offutt leaned forward in confidential mode. "Let me offer you some assistance, Mister Swann. If you would — voluntarily, I assure you — visit our offices, you could

talk to one of our counselors regarding these matters, and we could arrange for..."

"Let's cut to the chase, Dave. I've enjoyed pulling your leg but the whole thing gets tiresome after awhile. I'll tell you what happened."

"Certainly, Mister Sw—"

"You were approached by someone who told you I'd been babbling about time travel, I suppose?"

"We can't discuss referrers, I'm afraid."

"No need, Dave, because I'll tell *you*. A few weeks ago a Sheriff's Deputy stopped here to discuss my sighting of little green men, and my trip up to the mother ship where they put this gadget into my body. Except... it was all news to me. After we got things straightened out and shared a good laugh, he *did* give me some info on the referrer. Now I don't know if the same person went to you or if she used an intermediary, but here's the deal — it was probably a young woman, right?"

"We can't discuss—"

"An attractive young woman."

Offutt's expression fell. "We can't—"

"A very attractive tall blond young woman with a long ponytail and big blue eyes, plus a figure to tempt a monk. Someone who's been compared to the goddess Diana, as a matter of fact."

"I still can't say anyth—"

"No need!" Swann could see his bolt was in the gold. "Let me tell you the tale. It's flattering at first to be followed around by someone like her, but there's more to personal attraction than looks alone. So after awhile it gets to be uncomfortable — similar to stalking. Can you believe it? That someone so sharp could go for an older guy such as me? I felt plenty of doubts at first — wondered if she was mocking me. But seems it's true, and this is her way of dealing with rejection — harassing me with prank reports, such as to you. So *now* what do you say, Dave?"

"You... As far as time travel goes?"

"Never done it, and not looking forward to it. The gadget I was working on when you came up? Not a time machine — only a lawnmower."

"And these aliens you've mentioned?"

"Oh! Those are real enough. Mostly Mexican, though, and no motherships."

~

Chapter 10 ~ Well-behaved People

"This is so *great* of you, Brian. I'm so excited I can't sit still. I'm gonna heal that bruise for you."

"Hey, I'm driving!" He brusquely fended her off her attempted kiss.

The attraction had ceased on Pierce's part, and he now knew there had never been any on hers. When forced to admit his slip during a meeting of the troops, his chagrin was extreme. With Swann walking away in disgust, Gephart had the gall to knock him down and call him names, while the major strolled off, pretending not to notice.

And next to him Sheila now blathered on, full of herself as usual, not even noticing *his* problems.

"I woulda happily driven here myself. You didn't need to pick me up — go so far outa your way."

He ignored her.

"How far is it, anyway? Are we *there yet*?" she mimicked, laughing a fit at her own joke.

"You'll find out all too soon," he muttered.

"What? What's that?"

He turned the last corner.

"What a dumpy... Hey! A welcoming committee. And the big guy's here!"

Wonderful, Pierce thought, *absolutely wonderful*.

* * *

"We've done that check. We sent back — well, you know what I mean — planned to send back after a delay in the future —"

"Planned — you don't actually know."

"We *never* know. It's always on faith, Jack — *always*. We used a seedling and a young mouse — a real baby, just weaned we figured — barely old enough to feed itself. The plan was to hold them a few days before returning them."

"Yeah?"

"The seedling — a sunflower with only the seed leaves — appeared within a minute of our set time. Except it now showed two true leaves. The mouse looked no different, but it weighed a few grams more than the original. Then, Jack... Then we figured to do the same thing, but for a longer period, with both sets of plants and mice. This was the clincher for me."

"What happened?"

"Well, they were back in no time, of course. We never need to wait on this end. The time is set digitally to the minute, so only if the length of day has varied over eons... Not a problem with the durations we're using. At any rate, both seedlings were larger, although one of them had died and withered. The mice were noticeably bigger and older. To me it indicated everything worked as planned."

"How'd the animals appreciate the trip?"

"No problems, but then we put a delay into the transfer. The sonic booms had got so loud we feared for the windows, not to mention exciting passers-by. So Koskinen

figured a way to make the transfer less than absolutely instantaneous. Now it appears to cause minor discomfort in animals but makes less of an ear-splitter."

"*Less than...* You mean your liver arrives before your lights? Or is it vice versa?"

"The usual answer."

"Yeah, nobody knows. What of the dead plant? What does it signify?"

"Plants die — what else?"

"The discomfort problem concerns me."

"They seem to get over it in seconds, so it can't be too serious."

"You do any autopsies?"

"Dissections, yes. My chiropractor did them."

Swann laughed.

"I'm not being funny. He knows what he's doing — when he's not three sheets to the wind, at least. His basic medical education is better than you'd expect. There were no major abnormalities."

"Did he know what you were up to?"

"*Please*, Jack! I'm always security conscious."

"And he goes along with this kind of weird doings?"

"He's an old and somewhat dependent friend."

* * *

Manaea opened Pierce's door and helped him out, while the two females hauled Sheila from her seat. One, a thin sallow woman with lank black hair and an expressionless face, said nothing, but the other, a cute little blond with short curls, hardly stopped talking from the outset.

"Sheila Brenneman, is it? I'm LeeAnn Dasczo and this is Edith Lachey."

The two women linked arms with her and marched her toward the door of a crappy-looking factory-type building.

"We're so happy to have you with us — so few women and all these men."

"When is too many men a problem?" Sheila cracked, and by blondie's reaction you'd have thought it the funniest joke ever. Sheila now noticed studs and at least one tattoo. *Eeww!* Not so cute after all.

They entered and continued toward the far side.

"Don't you love the decor?" LeeAnn smirked. "Should we call it Japanese metal style or early modern barren, do you think?"

"Are you my escorts or something?"

They propelled her toward a door.

LeeAnn laughed heartily. "We sure are, Honey, but here it ends."

The door opened from the inside and she was shoved through without ceremony.

"Where's Brian?" she called over her shoulder, but the door was closing. She turned

her head and...

"Jack! I'm almost happy to see you. I told you I'd be coming, didn't I?" She reached up to caress his cheek but he slapped her hand away with stinging force, his face stern and unwelcoming. "Hey! What's the deal?"

"Miss Brenneman."

She swiveled to face a large man, dark-haired and handsome in an older kind of way.

"I imagine Major Swann disapproves of familiarities between the commissioned and enlisted ranks."

"Whadaya mean? And where's the Boss?"

"That would be me."

"What about the football player — the big black guy? Where's he?"

Dimarico looked at Swann, who mouthed, *Saipele*.

"You're referring to Sergeant Manaea. He'll be with us later. You'll be seeing a lot of him soon."

"What's that supposed to mean? Jack told me he's the boss — another lie, I guess. You ever tell the truth, Swann?"

"He's *a* boss, but I'm *the* boss." Dimarico flashed a quirky grin. "You'll be taking orders from both of us — from almost everyone, in fact."

"Oh yeah? Well, I don't take orders so good as you think."

"So I've been informed." He smiled more broadly.

"What's so funny?"

"Why don't we get down to business. Your questions will be answered in good time, and if you listen rather than interrupt it'll be sooner rather than later."

Sheila began to have second thoughts of the wisdom of having pushed her way in here, but saw the need to dissemble now and hope to gain her freedom later when she might not be surrounded by fake-friendly men and women who didn't boggle at pushing her around.

She hesitantly nodded.

"You've volunteered to join our team—"

"Volunteer! I didn't volunteer for *nothing*."

"Hold it! Didn't you demand of both Major Swann and Private Pierce that you be allowed to accompany them? And didn't you use espionage techniques to wile information from Pierce? Didn't you invade our training session with yet another demand to be taken aboard? Didn't you repeatedly and vociferously request to go on whatever type of expedition we organized, whether hunting or warfare? Correct me if I'm wrong in any detail."

She objected in a small voice. "Well, I didn't expect to be shanghaied like this. I didn't sign anything, or agree to be a *private*."

"There's been no shanghaing, and I doubt if anyone offered to make you a general

right off. This is a quasi-military operation and you are merely a recruit at the start, with everyone else having more seniority if not more rank. Is it clear?"

She could simply nod, awed by this man's assumption of authority, and by his logic. Brian and Jack! They'd baited her into this. If they'd told her what it was going to be like...

Still the guy kept talking. "...no official sign-up. Everything is verbal and therefore deniable. Nod if you understand."

She nodded.

"Because we've established you are ambivalent and unreliable, you'll be under special custody until the day before we make our departure."

"What...?"

"Departure. At the time you'll be given a choice — as will everyone — of staying with this challenging but dangerous mission, or returning here with a termination bonus in your pocket. Clear?"

"What sort of bonus? What's the pay?"

"Everything will be explained, but I don't have time now. I think you'll find it quite generous."

He nodded to Swann, who stepped to the door and opened it for Manaea and Lachey, obviously waiting directly outside.

Sheila's head spun from this continuing display of efficiency and inevitability.

"Let me introduce Master Sergeant Saipele Manaea, your immediate commander and fiancé. This is Miss Edith Lachey, your chaperon. They'll be with you at all times, day and night, at work or at home, at table or in bed."

"What's *her* rank?"

"Civilian."

"Wait! *Fiance!* I ain't sleepin' with this big black stud."

"Calm down — nobody said you were. Miss Lachey will share your bed."

"Well, I ain't too crazy for that sorta deal either."

"You won't be harmed, and you won't be forced to do anything degrading or outside your duties. Simply understand this..." He looked hard-eyed at her. "Your every minute will be spent in the presence of these companions. Outside this building or Sergeant Manaea's apartment you will be next to him, and he will either be holding your hand, or have his arm around you. Do you object? Because the other choice is handcuffs."

"Miss Lachey, as well, will be continually in your company. Either she or the sergeant will drive the car, and the other will sit next to you in back. In the bathroom she will be at the door, and the door will be unlocked — I'm informed there's no window. In bed, the same. If you need to leave the bed for any reason, you will wake her and she will accompany you. Your affectionate lover, meanwhile, will make *his* bed in front of the apartment door. Do you agree to these conditions? Decide now."

Sheila's eyes flicked around searching for an escape, her heart pounding like a hammer. She licked her lips.

"Have I got a choice?"

"Very little, I'm afraid."

"OK, I agree."

"You'll obey their every order. In the event they disagree you will obey Saipele because he's bigger."

Sheila did not smile.

"You'll be totally free within four weeks if our schedule holds. In the meantime we intend to treat you well and with as much dignity as practical. If you have any complaint you may bring it to me or Major Swann. We'll arrange for your employer and relatives to be notified of your departure on a sudden vacation. Understood?"

"Yeah, sure. Only I'm not too thrilled with gettin' squeezed by some black dude."

"How very old-fashioned! You disappoint me. But Saipele is Samoan, and they are quite well-behaved people. Right, Sergeant?"

"Sure thing, Mister Cam... long as we don't get too hungry."

Sheila didn't get it, but all three men laughed.

"Why can't Brian play my fiance," she whined.

To her chagrin, they considered this even more funny.

Dimarico took a book from the pocket of his bush jacket.

"*History of the Goths*," she read. "What's this for?"

"The whole book is quite interesting, but look in the index for *Crimea* first."

* * *

After the three left, Dimarico and Swann looked at each other. Failing to keep straight faces, they burst into laughter, straining to keep the noise down.

"I can't..." Swann gasped, "I can't believe she fell for it!"

"As I told you, Jack — any number of people prefer a conspiracy theory to a simpler, more logical explanation."

They had rehearsed and rewritten their act several times. Pierce had been absolutely necessary to the plot, much as they would have preferred to keep him on the sidelines — but he managed his part well enough. Sutton could not keep a straight face, and Kinnard repeatedly muffed his lines, so those two kept away. Lachey played her part perfectly, to Swann's surprise, but she need merely be herself and say no lines. Manaea was habitually stone-faced, and LeeAnn Dasczo, Swann felt, was a born con-artist. So all came out well.

Had Sheila at any point caught on to them, or simply refused to be shanghaied, they would have immediately gone to Plan B — general laughter and the admission of a joke, along with the claim the group was a historical re-enactment troupe. Swann had

argued for using that approach from the start, as it would presumably forever rid them of her. Dimarico was adamant for Plan A, however, insisting it would be easier to convince someone of her psychological makeup she'd penetrated a conspiracy than to get her to believe Swann capable of putting together an elaborate practical joke.

"You missed your calling, Cam — Hollywood beckons. And the book is to keep her off the trail?"

"Right. Someone will slip soon, but she'll be confused for awhile longer... Two days maximum to fix the locker-room, then they move in here. I think we want another guard, too. She'd break Kinnard with one arm, pencil-necked geek as he is. Who?"

"Not Pierce, for sure. Either Gephart or Sutton. You choose, Cam."

"Gephart. I trust Barry pretty well, but he's still of the age to be afflicted with raging hormones, and if anyone could make hormones rage, it's her. After they're situated we take off for..."

"Yes?"

"A few more days of mystery, Jack. We'll check on the arrival of the transporter, see whom our ads bring, spread some cash around, then come back here to collect the crew of the good ship Chronometer."

"And what of my bonus for this latest excellent recruit?"

Dimarico gave him a long look. "Tell you what — maybe I won't dock your pay."

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Chapter 11 ~ One Less Mystery

"Where'd the palms and plants come from?"

"We wanted to make it nice for you," LeeAnn told her, winking.

This one's always got an answer, Sheila thought, and she sticks like a barnacle. There

goofy Earl watched them, and there Saipale, the big dumb dusky Jarhead. And the weird witchy woman who never said anything or looked directly at you.

Gives me the creeps.

LeeAnn was saying something about the dogs, chained outside but in for an occasional run.

"Yeah, I love them too, LeeAnn," she drawled. "They must be brothers, they're so alike. Or clones — are they cloning dogs yet?"

"Sure looks that way to me, Honey."

Gawd! What's with the honey stuff all the time? They must think I'm stupid to be taken in by this gabby tart playing my bosom buddy. Dimarico's secretary! You'd think he'd do better with all his money. She noticed the girl had a bruise today.

"I hate the looks of this place."

"The plants help, don't you think?"

Sheila shrugged. "Better than piles of trash, I suppose."

LeeAnn giggled on cue.

"When are the boss and Jack coming back?"

"Beats me, Honey. Mister D calls the shots, and we simply do as he tells us."

"Why? Why're you willing to put up with this... this servitude?"

"Good pay, for one thing. Plus, he treats you decently — takes care of his people."

Sheila sneered. "A great big sugar-daddy, huh?"

Before he and Swann left, Dimarico had tried to butter her up.

"Jack says you're a good man. And he meant it in a nice way."

Sheila preened herself for him, but wasn't fooled. She knew he had an angle with every word he said.

"I can keep up with any of these guys — at the butts and on the trail. Try me and I'll show you."

"We'll be counting on you. And I want to apologize again for putting you through this tag-along routine, but I'm quite security conscious and don't believe in taking any chances whatsoever."

"Who're you afraid of, for cryin' out loud?"

"You!"

"No! I mean, who do you think *I'd* tell? Why d'you think I'd want to screw up my chance to go with you?"

"You probably wouldn't, considering the trouble you went through to get here. Yet why should we take chances when we're on the brink?"

"Oh well, when you put it that way... I'm kinda sorry I didn't believe Swann when he told me the stuff at the range. Is it what we're gonna do, for sure?"

"You've read the book?"

"The part you told me to — the Criminy deal. I'm surprised I never heard of them."

"There are plenty of things you — and I — have probably never heard of."

He hadn't exactly answered her question. Sure, it made sense, in a way, but how could those old Krauts be so primitive as to have no guns? And why couldn't Dimarico sneak a few modern weapons into the country? Everything would be so simple! Of course, then they wouldn't need archers, but still...

* * *

As they flew back, Swann nearly burst with the desire to elucidate his theory as to their time destination, which had become clear to him within hours after they'd landed. But Dimarico was still playing his silly game, as Swann saw it — so he had decided to play his own silly game, and make Dimarico beg him to expound. They exchanged a lot of self-satisfied smiles while in the air, and more of them on the ground.

Their recruiting had been mildly successful — two capable bowmen, one of them half-crazed. Yet that was their standard in any case. The platform and its components were in storage, ready for assembly with non-ferrous bolts and glue. The most surprising thing had been Dimarico's disclosure of an extensive silver minting operation by four different stamping operations — unknown to one another so as to prevent the loss of the entire hoard should part come to light and be interfered with by someone in authority.

Seeing these coins hardened Swann's hypothesis into firm belief. Penny-sized but thinner, they showed a spread eagle on one side, and on the reverse a full-width grooved cross.

They moved to another country for the flight home — more of Dimarico's security — and in an isolated spot on the boat to Dublin he asked, "Well, Jack, what do you think?"

"Think what — the possibility of getting away with it?"

"No! Where we're headed — our ultimate destination."

Did his tone show disappointment at Swann's apparent lack of interest?

"Oh gee, Cam, I've been too busy lately."

"I'll bet," Dimarico said, with the slightest bit of skepticism.

"It's off the subject, but in the area of alternate history — which, after all, is what we're involved with — what if the Greenlanders' discovery of North America had been followed up? In fact, why didn't it succeed? They weren't anywhere as technologically advanced as Europe five hundred years later, but still — their political structure, techniques of warfare, iron tools, ships and livestock — those should have been enough to establish stable colonies in Indian country."

Dimarico hid a smile, convinced — Swann was sure — he had him sniffing the wrong trail again.

"Good points, Jack — real good. Quite a quandary — not to you and me alone but to most historians, I imagine, as to why the Norse were successful in Britain, France,

Sicily, and Russia against more advanced opposition, yet they abandoned America, a land of boundless opportunities. Why, the timber alone would be a major lure to people living on treeless islands.

"So," he added slyly, "do you think that's our objective?"

"No, I'm not thinking of that — merely of our endless possibilities to screw up the whole history of the world forever and ever. Right, Cam?"

Dimarico sighed and looked pensive.

"Yet you still want to do it, don't you, Jack?"

"God help me, I'm willing to risk the destruction of everything — time, space, the future, my family... It's darned near the greatest adventure ever, and I can't turn away." He went on in a quieter tone. "Yet there are so many unknowns — for us and for the future we'll leave behind... Tell me, have you ever got anything through it you didn't plan for?"

"As I think I've said — never."

"And doesn't it bring a tremendous doubt to your mind?"

"In a way, Jack. There's only one other thing. We early on made a small transport back in time, coming through with no problems — at least, none we know of. This encourages me to believe the alternate futures will freely continue after a transport."

"One! That's adequate proof for you?"

"One. You know my philosophy. I'm hesitant to do any excess playing with the fabric of time, as it were."

"What was it?"

"We sent? A plain old graphite pencil."

"I suppose a pencil couldn't destroy too many civilizations... One more thing, though — are you *lying*?"

"No! For God's sake, Jack, who do you think you're dealing with?"

"A monomaniac. A man desperate to change history to suit his whim. The mad captain of a half-mad crew."

Dimarico made another of his casual periodic scans to check for privacy before saying, "And you're another."

* * *

Nearing port, they took up the discussion again.

"Barry — what's your take on him, Cam?"

"Mad to prove himself in combat with the ancients."

"Brian?"

"Mad teenager, despite his age."

"Well put. Earl?"

"Hmm, madly trusting of you, unhappy with his dull life but can't imagine an

escape by himself. Perhaps desperate is a better designation than mad."

"Saipele?"

"Sanest of us all, but still mad for adventure. Left home for the alien US, and now off to something even more alien."

"Sheila?"

"Borderline paranoid schizophrenic with bi-polar manifestations."

"Jeez! But I'm afraid you're possibly right. The Perfesser?"

"The maddest and potentially most dangerous to us."

"How reassuring... Dale?"

"Half mad pencil-necked geek."

"C'mon. He's OK."

"He's a key man — good designer, good mechanic, willing laborer. Without him none of Koskinen's dreams become reality. Admit it, though — if he's with us he's half-way round the bend."

"Lachey?"

"Tragic case. Terrible childhood, poor environment with her aunt whom she won't leave, probably abused as a girl by her mother's lovers. She's mad or desperate for some impossible salvation, and probably headed for a tragic end. Does her job, though."

"It's sad. I've tried to get through to her but the shell is impregnable."

"She doesn't react to me either. And I think — not trying to be egotistical — if a woman refuses to be charmed by at least one of us, something's gone missing."

"LeeAnn?"

"Ha! The mad airhead, yet she's sharper than you think. I'd say she rivals Saipele for most sane among us, but a tad feckless."

"And now — you."

"Same as you, Jack. The same, but maybe a tiny bit worse."

* * *

They flew tourist on the return — more of Dimarico's security tricks. The man had shown tension even before takeoff, and Swann wondered whether it was the approaching deadline or another problem.

Well, I'm getting pretty tense myself. Even if his brain were convinced of the reality of time travel his gut could not be. Dimarico had accused him of being too logical — a compliment disguised as a criticism, part of the man's use of flattery as a leadership tool. Yet Swann was well aware the time hypothesis wasn't proven.

That they need only plan an action for their future selves to flawlessly perform seemed too glib to be trustworthy. To design and build transporters reserved for exclusive use by their *alternates* was bizarre.

Of further concern — only one test was being made of the mockup of the final

design, with greenery and a couple of tall dogs as cargo — despite the fact they ultimately intended to displace far more mass and far more living flesh. And why the use of no ferromagnetic materials in the base, when practically anything could make the trip *within* the field? He'd listened to Koskinen's jargon-filled explanation regarding *the magnetic component of the quasi-synchronous displacement field, yatada, yatada*.

Dimarico was right — the *Perfesser* knew no more of what occurred than did they.

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Chapter 12 ~ Hell or High Water

Dimarico and Swann ignored one another until on the sidewalk of the airport pick-up area. In a short time a small sedan pulled up, driven by Lachey.

"Hers?" Swann asked. "How come?"

"More convenient, more secure. We'll talk inside."

They dumped luggage in the trunk and entered the back seat, greeting the woman. She immediately informed Dimarico, "Someone came around two days ago — building inspector, he said."

Dimarico snapped alert. "What happened?"

"Mister Manaea dealt with him."

"But what happened? Were there any consequences? Did he leave or did Saipele let him inspect? What occurred?"

"I'm sorry — I don't know. He went away, but I think he was angry."

Dimarico slammed back in the seat. "Great! I should have been checking-in instead of worrying over calls being traced. Three days is all we need and... Two days back, you say? See, Jack! He's had time to think it over, time to talk to a supervisor. This is bad."

"Or it's nothing."

"Don't give me that! We can't leave anything to chance at this stage."

"No, but you can't go into panic mode either. If this was an ordinary inspector, their next step is probably a nasty letter or — at worst — a court order to let him in."

"And if it's a probe — then what? Remember the lieutenant-colonel I told you of? He could have gone to the authorities. He said he'd keep it under his hat, what little I told him. Though whether I can trust him if he thought he needed to protect his bloody fine reputation."

"Wouldn't they immediately raid if their concern is high? Or would they wait to gather forces?"

"Or maybe they'll let more mice gather before springing the trap. Perhaps they aren't even sure what we're up to. They'd merely know the initial version, but it's the exact one they'd fear. If they knew we'd been playing at time travel they'd figure we're crazy, have a laugh and scheme how to tax us. Probably should have used it from the

start — let them think we're some kind of nutty cult. Regardless — worst case, we've got to get out and get out quickly."

"Yet if they see the ants scurry..."

Dimarico frowned. "Go on, Jack."

"Are you leaving from here, or did your devious mind plan to confuse the trail?"

"The field's approximately four hours—"

"Huh?"

"Not commercial this time — a lease picking us up at a private airfield. And I figure to use an old motel in the area as a staging point."

"Reservations set?"

"Not this place — too run-down to ever be full. We could send Manaea and Brenneman up there on a vacation — definitely don't want her around if anybody else comes a-knocking. Can you do it, Edith?"

"I hoped to sell my car."

"And do what?"

"Put the money in the bank."

"For your aunt?" She nodded. "You're staying with me, then?"

She nodded again. "Yes."

"Good! I'm glad to have you."

Swann couldn't hold back. "You're willing to risk this with what you know of Koskinen and his theories? You're not afraid?"

"I'm afraid, but... I'm going, and I want to stay."

Swann and Dimarico exchanged pleased glances.

Dimarico said, "I could easily buy your car if you think a few thousand more will help your aunt, but what else do you have to do?"

"Arrange for a visiting nurse. I... I only made up my mind right now, so I... Well, nothing's set."

"Send LeeAnn with Sheila, Cam," Swann urged. "Can't she drop everything? And send another man. Make it a double date."

"I could."

"Barry looks the part of a young lover, and he won't be too easily conned. Have them box-up their weapons so they won't have to fret about a casual traffic stop."

"But Sheila! How is she going to take this move? I can easily see her giving a cop a distress signal."

"Make it an adventure for her. Give her some responsibility. Put her in charge of getting a picnic ready for the rest of us."

Dimarico laughed, relaxing at last.

* * *

Manaea admitted offering the inspector two hundred dollars, saying *the Boss* had told him to take care of any permits. It had been indignantly refused. Dimarico cursed him for being so clumsy at offering a bribe, but felt relieved the incident appeared relatively innocuous.

Saipele, Barry and LeeAnn were given their instructions, she squeaking at the zero notice but quickly agreeing to play the game. Sheila seemed to fall in with the idea of a final party with herself in charge of arrangements, and they were rushed off to find a spot, Saipele knowing exactly where to head.

They enthusiastically daubed a paper banner with poster paint, declaring *Southern Sierra Reenactments, Ye Olde Medieval Faire Oct 30, 31*, and taped it to the long wall in the building. Next to it a typed notice warned the participants to report no later than midnight Friday next week for the last weekend of rehearsals, and reminded them November would commence *Old West Days* practice. Signed *The Boss*, penciled graffiti lent it realism. As a whimsical crowning touch Dimarico sent Kinnard to buy the men cowboy hats, and the ladies tasteful sombreros.

In short order Dimarico needed to avert another crisis. He and Koskinen retired to the office whence loud rumblings were heard. In time they emerged — the doctor deeply chagrined, Dimarico grimly satisfied.

In response to Swann's lifted eyebrows he said, "Our good doctor declined to be rushed, so I reminded him of the Golden Rule."

Swann supplied, "He who has the gold makes the rules?"

"Exactly. I also accused him of doubting his own dubious theories. It did the trick. But I'm going to have to take him to his pad so he can retrieve a few toys."

"What's his concern?"

"I truly believe he thinks he's going to come back to a world unchanged except for his triumph, in which he will glory to the fullest."

"*Unchanged!* In exact contravention of his own theory."

"He wants to prepare ahead of time for the revelatory show and celebration. I'm going to need to watch him as closely as Sheila."

"And you're letting him go home?"

"Not alone. I'll be tight as a tick with him. We'll go to my place, and then... I've not decided exactly where and what, yet. Also, I've got to finish last-minute arrangements for the trusts. But come hell or high water, Monday evening we're every one of us going to be headed for England's green and peaceful land."

"Do you need to clear out any more gear?"

"The platforms are on their way to being firewood, the old controls are dismantled and disposed-of, the cables are in my ride and will be dumped, the old antennae are gone, the aluminum plate and plants can stay, and the dogs will go to a doggie hotel with perpetual maintenance until adoption. Dale's cleaning up the living areas and lockers. The beds are stripped and can stay, and we've never kept any paper around.

Can you think of anything else?"

"Brian and Earl go with me. Edith — you'll pick her up?"

"She and Dale will help me with Evan. I swear to God, if I have to I'll knock him down and drag him! He is *not* going to screw things up after all these years."

"I've never seen her — Edith — so talkative as today."

"Relief, I think. Getting out from under her aunt and away from the past's ugly scenes. It's an escape for her. She's weighed down by a sense of responsibility, though."

"Good luck with those big mutts in your vehicle."

"One positive — they'll sure make the police less eager to stop us."

~

Chapter 13 ~ The Question

An hour before sunset the plane lifted, allowing Swann a feeling of ease for the first time in days. His intellect knew it was over-optimism, but the symbolism of escape was sufficient for his emotions.

Dimarico had an even more intense reaction, and fell asleep. In fact, almost everyone aboard instinctively relaxed as the wheels left the surface — everyone, perhaps, with the exception of Sheila, who appeared ready for mischief.

Perhaps nonchalance was appropriate. They might never have been under any scrutiny, for the guilty flee where no man pursueth. Or they could be, as Dimarico was all too prone to fear, the target of airborne surveillance this very moment.

Swann made a last call to his son before they left, only reaching the family's voice mail. He assured him again of his love and his admiration for the boy's manly behavior, advised him not to hesitate getting a lawyer if any problems came up with regard to his inheritance or trust fund, and requested once more he look after his mother. Then had come the parting.

"So it's goodbye now, Jeff, and I hope if there's some better world after this one we'll meet again. Be happy and do right as you've been taught, and as I trust and know you will."

His control held until the last few words.

* * *

They landed at Newark for refueling and to let the pilots take a nap. The party wandered around the concourse for breakfast and — for those so inclined — liquid stimulants. Among the latter was Dimarico's chiropractor and erstwhile animal pathologist, *Doctor* Robert Tobie, a last-minute addition to their group.

Dimarico and Kinnard escorted Tobie and a peevish Koskinen for breakfast and booze. Manaea and Sutton squired the women, Barry flirting furiously with Sheila so as

to keep her clear of trouble while allowing her to add another man's scalp to her belt. Swann, with Gephart and Pierce, attempted to unobtrusively patrol the space between and around the two groups.

Tension remained high for the two leaders until they re-boarded.

Sutton insinuated himself next to Swann before takeoff. After the plane had been airborne for several minutes he turned and got a receptive glance from Swann.

"Do you think we're home free, Major?"

"We can hope. Yet if AWACS has an eye on us we'd hardly know it."

"I tried not to be obvious, but looking around I didn't see anything suspicious — assuming I could tell."

"Precisely. Who among us — including Dimarico — is experienced enough to detect professional surveillance? On the other hand, we might be paranoid. With all their other problems, do the feds care about crackpots with bows rather than bombs?"

After a pause Sutton flashed Sheila's book.

"She gave you that? You're getting rather cozy."

Sutton flushed slightly, craning his neck to make sure the girl wasn't within range.

"Well, it's my assignment. But Major, can you tell me if she has the right idea?"

"Which is?"

"We're going to help the Goths, but in the past. She thinks you told her part of the truth but misled her on the time part of it. So they're not there now but when we go back several hundred years or so..."

"Well, Barry, it probably doesn't often pay to take her too seriously — on this or any subject."

"Do you know where and when, sir? Can you clue us in?"

Swann rubbed his chin before saying, "I believe I *do* know what we're up to. But look — if I tell you and I'm wrong, you'll be disappointed. And if I'm right I'll have spoiled Cameron's surprise. If everyone can wait a few more days it'll be clear."

After glancing into *History of the Goths*, Sutton commented, "They *were* a great people, weren't they? It's truly sad everything fell apart for them."

"Another of many nations and civilizations which went into the dustbin of history, as somebody called it. Don't you wonder when it'll be America's turn?"

Sutton's voice dropped.

"What we're planning to do — the trip — it's so..."

"Counter-intuitive, whacked-out?"

"I guess so. Don't you think Mister Dimarico...? I mean, sometimes it seems even he has doubts."

Swann considered the morale value of fobbing off the young man with a facile assurance, but the possible end of his life loomed too near to burden his conscience with unnecessary lies. Besides, this lad was one of his troopers, someone upon whom his own life and success might well depend.

"Barry, there's not a person among us who knows if this will work. Sure, we've seen several miracles occur, but we have no more idea of what has *truly* happened than the man in the moon. We're operating on hope and faith, from Koskinen down to LeeAnn, and we won't know for sure what will happen until it happens."

"Mister Dimarico says we'll have a chance to withdraw. Do you think he means it?"

"I believe he does. And if not, after all his promises, I'll be mutineer number one."

* * *

After a nap Swann woke to find Pierce beside him.

"Where'd Barry go?"

"We switched."

"Your turn as interrogator?"

"Well..." His voice dropped to a plaintive mumble. "What *is* the story, Jack? I mean, Barry says this is a real gamble. Be straight with me, can't you?"

Swann wondered if his recent excess of candor had been wise, but his course was set and he didn't intend to change it now.

"I'll try to keep my creativity to a minimum. Here's the long and short of it. We *think* this can be pulled off, but mainly we *hope* it can — you, me, Cameron and the rest. We're into unknown territory — like the first fliers, or the first caveguy who thought of a way to get from Morocco to Gibraltar."

Brian stared at him.

"Am I gutless to be scared of this?"

"Sensible."

"You... You're not making me... I don't know what to think."

"Are you a gambler, Brian?"

"With money? Not much. What're you...?"

"This is a gamble with your life. Dimarico is willing to do it. Manaea has the faith. I'm willing, I *think*. The Perfesser is willing, although he's looking more nervous by the hour. So... are *you* willing? Only you can decide. Oh — Kinnard and Lachey are also willing. They're smart and knowledgeable enough to understand what we're up against, and they seem to be at peace with it."

Pierce looked disoriented.

"My head's swimming, Jack. I don't understand the technology or theory. Before... Before I simply went along with everybody, but now we're getting close. And I... and now I'm really confused with what to do."

"Join the club, Brian. I sympathize, but I'm in the same boat."

"Barry said you wouldn't tell..."

"I don't know. I've got some guesses, but why say until I'm sure?"

"Oh. Uh, Earl wants to..."

"Send him over. I've got a slot open."

"Hi, Major."

"How's she goin', Earl."

"OK, I guess. Er, the boys tell me—"

"How're you getting on with Pierce now? He over the fuss?"

"Oh, I ended up apologizin' to him, and we shook. He told me how she got him half-drunk and into bed, then when he wanted to sleep she kept after him, and... Well, I could see that happenin'. So, *What the heck*, I said, *let's forget it*."

"Good. So what do you want to know?"

"Well, the boys say you ain't so sure of how we're going to end up."

"I can't say I am, Earl. We don't have any maps here. It's a new course across an uncharted sea, so to speak."

"So... Are you going or don't you want to?"

"I don't want to, but I'm going. At least, I'm fifty-one percent sure at this stage."

"Uh-huh. Well, those are kinda thin odds, but I figure to follow you, one way or the other."

"You have to hang *that* on me, too? I'm to decide *your* fate as well as my own?"

"Well, look, Major, I don't know nothin' about this time stuff what never once entered my mind until you talked me into this deal. The whole adventure idea sounded good to me, fixed the way I was at work and all. But I'm takin' this on credit, so to speak, and I don't know if what we seen is magic or science or hallucinatin' or what. So anyways, I'll stick with you because I think you're a straight guy who never yet steered me wrong and always treated me OK."

Swann gulped, overwhelmed by this declaration of personal loyalty.

"Earl, I've been as honest with you as I could, and I intend to continue. Yet I can't take the ultimate responsibility for your life. I'll make my decision when the time comes, and it's up to you to do the same."

"And I'm stickin' with you, Jack, if you don't mind my still callin' you that."

* * *

"I hear you're getting cold feet, Major Swanny."

Swann woke with a jerk. Sheila, unlike the others, was quite willing to keep her tone at a normal level.

"What?" He yawned, playing for time.

"Getting cold feet."

"Only one way to find if my feet are cold, Sheila — a way forever denied to you."

"Sure, as if you wouldn't jump at the chance."

"Don't worry your pretty little noggin regarding my feet or any other part of my anatomy."

"Well, *I'm* not scared. If the boss is going, I'm going — never mind you or anybody."

"Hitched your wagon to a new star, eh?"

"What?"

"Chosen a guru, got a new leader, found a new compass, set your sights on a—"

"Why don't you stuff it!"

"It's *Stuff it, Major*, from you. But it's OK, since I'd run short of metaphors anyhow."

"You're still scared, though, aren't you?"

"Find another pew, Private, this one's taken."

"Big bad Marine!" she gibed, and with that got up and left.

And now LeeAnn showed up, leaning over him and whispering, "Mister Dimarico wants to talk to you, Major," and she nodded toward the front of the cabin where Cameron had cleared the seats behind him to have more privacy.

Swann slid into the seat beside him without a word, while Dimarico glared.

"Are we going to have anyone left by the time we get there?"

"They're coming to me, Cam, because they can't get anything from you."

"And you're destroying their morale."

"Playing it straight, yes — it's my style."

"I'll let Brenneman know."

"With those I respect, that is."

Dimarico's eyes bored into his. "Am I among those privileged few, Major? Do I have your trust and respect?"

"So far you do, Cam, but there's got to be an accounting before we take the big step. The mysteries must end."

Dimarico kept silent for several minutes, looking stonily at the cabin wall.

"Whatever comes, Jack, I'm going to take the jump."

"Plus Edith and, I assume, Saipele at the least."

"Unless you scare them off. Plus the good professor, even if Manaea has to tuck him under his arm. He's going whether he will or no."

"I'm surprised you even want him."

"What I don't want is to leave him behind to play with this technology — to wreak more havoc in the future."

"You know, Cam, you're a paradox. You fear, maybe hate, this whole concept — the making of all these alternative futures, these branches in the time-stream. And yet you're bound and determined to go ahead — a compulsion."

"Yes it is, since boyhood... Well, we needn't go into it. What I want to know is — are you coming with me, or have you chickened?"

"I want to see how your apparatus goes together, see where you plan to set up, hear your last-minute advocacy, sacrifice the chicken and check the auspices. Yet as of right this minute, I'm still on board."

Dimarico punched him on the shoulder, vastly encouraged.

"Good man! Now," His eyes sparkled. "have you figured out where and when we take off to?"

"Absolutely."

"So sure, eh? Tell me."

"When we came to England, I figured this must be it, what with Koskinen's *The nexus of transport is fundamentally fixed by geographical engagement*, or whatever his spiel is. Which is a good thing, otherwise we'd end up a gazillion miles off in space somewhere. I figured even *your* convoluted approach wouldn't have us skipping around somewhere else, although I wondered briefly when we jumped on the ferry to Ireland."

"And the period?"

"The coins. *Medieval* is written all over them. So the single question is *where* in the Medieval — or maybe Renaissance — would you choose? Save the last Plantagenet, Richard the third — a decent king, and falsely accused of doing in his nephews? No, there were plenty of archers at Bosworth. Save the life of the Lionheart, or maybe go on crusade and try to encourage him to take Jerusalem? I didn't see where you could be sure of attaining sufficient influence to do either. Go back further — help Alfred against the Northmen? Or into the mists of myth and find King Arthur?"

"C'mon, Jack, lay it out for me. Don't stall."

"Cam, this leaves us one key period in the history of England, and therefore in what is ultimately to become the history of America. One time which would stand the future of Western Europe on its head, should it be changed. One time, Cam, that generations of men have looked back on and said, *What if this had been different?*"

"Well, let's have it."

"The key time, Cam — the time which would vastly change history, the one incident a few trained and determined men could affect—"

"Will you *say* it?"

"The question of who wrote Shakespeare's plays — Oxford or—"

Dimarico slammed his fist down on the armrest. "Blast you, Jack!"

The copilot peeked out from the front cabin. "Luton in twenty-five minutes, sir."

~

Chapter 14 ~ Things As They Are

"Lets get ready for action," Dimarico said, stepping over Swann into the aisle.

"Listen up, folks! We're going through British customs, which will be different from American. We'll have their officers come to us either on the asphalt or right inside the concourse, but because of recent security alerts there will probably be closer attention paid than usual. I want to rehearse you on what we're supposed to be doing in the UK,

and what you should say or avoid saying to get us through without problems."

* * *

Light misting rain fell as three customs men interviewed them on the tarmac beside their plane, an armed soldier in attendance. Dimarico handled the passports and dealt with the senior officer, while the rest of them fielded questions from the other two.

"The whole party will be traveling together, sir? And your itinerary?"

"It's not rigid, but we'll head first for Stonehenge, where we've got a tour planned, then perhaps through the Cotswolds, down to the southwest, and a visit to Slapton Sands, among other places."

"Ah, the site of the Nazi sea attack?"

"Correct. And if we can set it up, we'll split off to meet with the Medieval Siege Society or Regia Anglorum or any other reenactment group of the proper period."

"Somewhat late in the season, wouldn't it be?"

"It certainly is, but our plans firmed-up at the last minute, so our preparations have been sketchy, to say the least. If we—"

Sheila sang out, "What's with this five pounds of plutonium?"

One of the officers strolled toward her, while she looked off into space, a sly smile showing.

The officer speaking to Dimarico raised his eyebrows but didn't move.

Dimarico said, "Inevitably, our type of organization attracts some people who enjoy being a continual center of attention."

"Have we any questions here?" the customs man asked in Sheila's general direction.

"Only kidding," she said, giving him her best come-hither look. As he continued to stare at her, she added, "Like my hat?" and tilted the decorated brim of her gaucho special, the little balls dancing.

"Quite fetching, Miss," he replied deadpan. "By the way, here in the UK we now use kilos rather than pounds and stones. We're rather strict over it, in fact."

"Thanks, mate — I'll try to remember." More grinning and head-tossing.

"Now, sir," asked Dimarico's inquisitor, "all these arrows."

"Arrow *shafts*, mostly."

"Yes, but more than one thousand — quite an armory."

"In a FITA archery contest each person shoots a hundred forty-four arrows. With four archers it amounts to nearly six hundred shots."

"Surely you retrieve them."

"The undamaged, of course — but in a re-enactment you can rain down hundreds of shots in a relatively short period, and they can't be retrieved until battle ends."

"Hmm, and the lack of points on most of them?"

"We couldn't be sure what type of blunt is acceptable over here — for safety, you

realize — so we reckoned to obtain points locally."

* * *

No tours were available next day, so they passed Stonehenge at a distance. A light rain began, and they sought shelter early at a bed and breakfast. After tea, Dimarico and Swann discussed the potential fighting qualities of their personnel.

That is, Dimarico discussed them, since Swann hesitated to make predictions.

"I've seen too many feather merchants turn into crazed combat-Carls, and too many tigers turn pussycat."

"Sheila?"

"Who knows? For all her bravado she might faint at the sight of blood or quail at the thought of a nasty slasher on horsie-back. Contrariwise, she might be cool as a cucumber, waiting for the whites of their eyes."

"Earl?"

"Probably steady with an example set for him."

"Saipele, then."

"Be surprised if he failed to stand like a rock."

"OK, *you*."

"Frankly, I'm not sure."

"Two wars, and you're not sure?"

Swann sighed.

"Look, Cam, this is almighty different from what I or Manaea have been through. For me, when a shot goes by or a shell goes off, I get a tremendous jolt of fear — my pulse skyrockets, my mouth goes dry, my bladder... Then as soon as I think, *Missed me again*, it's back to normal, and I gather my thoughts and go on."

"Ever hit?"

"Scratches — minor shrapnel. I've been plenty lucky."

"Any medals — Purple Hearts?"

"You don't get Hearts for band-aid wounds."

"So I take it you weren't planning a run for President."

Swann smiled. "When you can't see what's coming, it's one type of combat, although a screeching shell or an RPG lighting off can freeze your blood awhile. The question is, how will I or anyone react to seeing some character start toward me behind the point of a long sharp spear? How will one of us react if he looks up and sees hundreds of lethal missiles poised at the top of their trajectory, and all aimed at him? Will he freeze, cower under his shield, run behind a tree?"

Dimarico grimaced.

"You're giving me a rather sobering analysis, but... Well, how do you think *I'll* do?"

"Let me make you feel somewhat better. Probably you, I and Manaea will set an

example like the Civil War general who paraded on the ramparts telling his troops, *Don't worry, men — they couldn't hit an elephant at this dist — Arhg! Plop.*"

Dimarico laughed rather too much, and when through asked, "And who leads the troops after we valiantly fall?"

"Now you're asking the right question, Cam."

* * *

Next day the rain increased, and reports predicted a storm. Dimarico was tight as piano wire.

"Our schedule is in danger. In two days we've got to meet the Limeys and pick up our loot. I'm tempted..."

"What?"

"I'm tempted to jump back a year in order to get better conditions."

"Cam, don't even *think* of making this any more complex. It's crazy talk!"

"Jack, we need to hit max low tide — that's key."

"Don't tell me you can't wait a day or two. Even Overlord was postponed a day."

Dimarico snapped, "One day, then two, and then it's a month. How in God's name can we wait a month without the English chasing us down for overstaying our visit?"

"How can you even *dream* of making a sonic boom like the Shuttle landing, and think no one will come a-looking? Besides, isn't it only two weeks to a max low? Or min low, or whatever it's called?"

"A spring tide. And we can't do this in the tail end of a storm, either. We can't have delicate electronic gear operating when it's raining and the waves are spraying seawater over everything."

"Good Lord, Cam! You want perfect conditions, and at the start of the storm season."

"It gets worse. We've got to set up quickly before the tide starts rushing in, and at spring tides there's minimal slack water. Plus we need to squeeze in a rehearsal."

Swann's spirits fell faster than Dimarico's.

"You might have to wait till next summer, you realize."

Dimarico began to pace.

"This is what I get for rushing — being overeager. Our plans peaked too early. I don't know if I can go through this again. Too many pieces of the puzzle could get lost in six or eight months, not to mention the possibility of the whole plot coming to light. What'll we do, Jack? Feed me a plan."

Swann tried to pull his thoughts together.

"I sensed this was going too slickly, but... I can think of only one thing — we play it as it lies, wait for the right conditions as long as feasible, then pull up stakes and try next year."

"God help me! I'll go nuts if I have to wait."

* * *

At Swann's insistence, next day they rehearsed despite continuing rain and wind — an altogether nasty day. He argued that realistic conditions would be helpful. After all, the final erection would be taking place on a slippery seabed during who knew what weather conditions.

The three vans drove on main and side roads for over an hour before entering a walled property, then cut off its main drive to follow a muddy track for a few hundred yards, coming to a modern barn on the edge of a wet meadow. Dimarico explained the situation to Swann.

"This is a contact set up almost two years ago through Randolph. The owner thinks it's an official project being developed under wraps."

"So he's half right."

"I paid for the construction, and for a one-man continuous patrol. He gets to keep the building when we're done, and in the meantime his estate has extra protection. It's secure enough if no one suspects it's worth investigating."

"And the shekels?"

"Not here yet — still separate."

They unlocked and unbarred the main door. Under Kinnard's direction they began to remove and assemble the apparatus, everyone taking a hand. To Swann's surprise all parts were readily located, but two problems quickly became apparent.

First, despite Kinnard's intimate familiarity with it — his conception and design, and he'd monitored its manufacture — organizing a construction crew wasn't foremost among his abilities. Second, for something needing to be assembled and adjusted in under two hours, it was satanically complex. Swann wondered whether the design might have been rejected by Rube Goldberg before being picked up by Dale Kinnard.

Dimarico reasoned if they wanted to have a believable cover story for the back-time locals they must claim to have arrived by sea. Certainly they didn't wish to be branded as magicians after arriving in midair with a thunderclap. In order to minimize detection on arrival they needed to choose a deserted spot.

The topography of most places alters over the centuries — especially seashores — so they would pick the most stable beach available, and in an area unattractive to farmers and fishermen, insofar as it could be estimated. Assuming even a stable beach would have eroded somewhat over the centuries, they would want to appear to seaward of the present shore, and at a height sufficient to clear the past beach. Being transported into a solid rather than vaporous medium would result not in a sonic boom but an explosion similar to a meteor strike, with obvious deleterious effects upon those transported.

The fact they chose to materialize over water necessitated a buoyant device, and should the drop to either water or land be appreciable, they required a sturdy vehicle with some cushioning. Lastly, the construction would need to lend itself to quick assembly. With all these requirements it was hardly surprising Dale Kinnard's design included severe compromises.

* * *

Five or six hours after the barn had been opened — soaking wet, cold and, according to individual character, angry, bitter or despairing — they abandoned the effort with the setup no more than half done. They ate their cold lunches, sullenly commencing tear-down. Koskinen and Tobie — having declined to exit the barn — were the only dry ones.

Dimarico clenched his jaw and ignored the growls and gripes of his crew.

"We'll have a conference at the B and B after supper," he told Swann. "You, Dale, and Edith."

"She won't contribute anything. And why not Koskinen?"

"He doesn't sully either hands or intellect with our petty concerns. Unless it's circuit design or basic concepts, he graciously allows us to labor unimpeded."

"And the amazing thing is, you hardly sound bitter."

Dimarico grimaced.

"I deal with things as they are, not as I would wish them."

"Sounds like a quote from someone."

"If it isn't it should be."

"You'd better consider nap time if you expect intelligent discussion. I'm near dead on my feet, and Kinnard's worked himself half into a frenzy."

"You're right. Make it ten, and tell everyone to get some rest."

"What of Manaea?"

"He'll need to keep an eye on the others. Besides, you can't expect much from him where technology is concerned."

~

Chapter 15 ~ Well Thought Out

A little past ten, and the others waited for Dimarico to start off, but when he chose to be silent Swann spoke up.

"OK, folks, at this point the leader is supposed to say, *Let's look upon this not as an obstacle but an opportunity*. Anyone see much?"

Kinnard jumped in. "I know we can do this with more practice, when the others are with us."

Dimarico remained silent, so Swann replied.

"How long would it have taken with our crowd today? Were we even half done?"

"Almost, almost."

"A mere twenty percent more labor—"

"Not so! The doctors didn't do anything, so it's ten compared to eight — twenty-five percent. And the women — with more men... Plus the learning curve. We can more than double the, the output—"

"You're kidding yourself."

"No — no! The organization — we can improve—"

"Wait a minute."

"We started, er... started badly but I can lay out the, the tasks..."

"Well—"

"We can! You think you can do it — direct them better than I... You want to take over? My design — make the feet bigger..."

At this point Edith Lachey made her first contribution, looking a plea at Kinnard to stop making a fool of himself.

He immediately quieted, and after a moment asked — almost begged, "What do *you* think, Mr Dimarico?"

Eyes half shut, Dimarico still made no response.

Swann looked at each in turn while gathering his thoughts.

"In the service we're often faced with situations where we need to improvise, as was the case today. Could I have done a better job than you? Yes..." He held up his hand to forestall Kinnard. "...assuming I'd been familiar with the device. And you will certainly do better the next time. Our main question is, however, should there *be* a next time."

That woke Dimarico.

"Again," Swann continued, "in the service we train and train, and I've got a good feel for how steep the learning curve is, and how much effort we can get from people under poor conditions. The women? Brenneman — give her credit — worked like a Trojan, albeit not always toward the proper ends. Dasczo stuck to it. Edith here, presumably because she's familiar with the design, put her hand to whatever was needed at the right time. So I don't see how two more men are going to much improve our output."

"It'll help," Kinnard muttered.

"Not enough. As I see it, had we continued today we'd have still been working next morning, and probably have to be correcting mistakes brought on by fatigue. To be realistic, I imagine four good men, well trained and rehearsed, and working under Dale's direction, could put this thing up in eight hours."

Kinnard looked ready to explode, but Lachey touched his forearm and he immediately subsided.

Dimarico took this in without reaction, yet Swann could easily imagine his feelings.

Nonetheless he continued.

"Stating the obvious, we're in the position of the man who wanted a baby in one month, so he got nine women pregnant. In other words, there's no way this device, clever though the design is, can ever be set up in a couple hours time."

Dimarico said, "I won't call it off, no matter what. Think of something."

* * *

Kinnard's design was truly ingenious, Swann believed. Swiveling feet supported a triangular base sixteen feet on a side. Guide rods stabilized a similar upper stage, and four thirty-inch plastic bellows gave a ton and a half of lift for each pound of pressure.

Atop the upper frame sat a triangular *boat* with four-foot gunwales, fabricated from double-walled fiberglass filled with foam, assembled of sections gasketed and bolted together. Ballast would be their boxed equipment, including the coin coffer.

The bellows would lift them beyond the presumed sea level of the previous time, and upon time-displacement, the boat would fall into the sea, staying afloat to be rowed to land. If the craft broke up, the individual sections should remain buoyant, and the travelers would in any case wear life jackets. Their gear would be buoyed and anchored or, if heavy enough, anchor itself. Should they be so unlucky as to descend onto soil or rocks, thick padding — twenty-centimeter gymnastic mats — inside the boat would help protect them.

Between frame and boat went the aluminum sheet. Only the boat and contents would displace, frame and components remaining to be destroyed by the sea.

The air compressor would be jettisoned, while controls and power devices would make the trip along with a gasoline-powered generator, antennae and rolls of thick aluminum foil to form a diamagnetic shield for the return trip. Frame structures would be re-fabricated on the spot.

Everything had been thought of except for difficulty of assembly in an adverse environment. Working on the soft meadow, no sooner were the feet in place than adding trusses or guides would cause one or two of them to sink or slip, necessitating re-bolting and re-alignment of components.

This happened again and again, forcing Kinnard to run around with a long carpenter's level calling for continual adjustments.

He correctly insisted a firm seabed would react differently, but wet rocks would be slippery and might contain treacherous pockets of sand or clay. In addition they would be chased by the tide, and as soon as a wave washed over one of the feet the whole structure could well shift.

The discussion went on and on, alternately confrontational or composed, getting exactly nowhere until the designer resigned himself to the inevitable.

* * *

Kinnard, after calling himself an idiot in several different ways, slumped half conscious in his chair. Dimarico remained unmoving with his head on his hands, possibly asleep. Swann yawned almost continuously, and Lachey stared dreamily off into space.

She said, as if speaking to herself, "If we pre-assembled it on a boat..."

Kinnard sat up alert, then slumped back.

"Too unstable — it would roll all over the place with us several feet off the... off the deck. And we probably couldn't get close enough to shore."

He sat up again.

"Edith! Pre-assembly is the key. What if we pick it up with a really big helicopter? Drop it loaded at slack tide, a few people jump out to... to level it, then off we go." The excitement seeped from him as he continued. "But if the feet slip when we're leveling..."

Swann offered, tongue-in-cheek, "Tell the Marine Corps you're planning a movie about them, and need a hovercraft. They'll ship one over the next day."

"What's the advantage?" asked Kinnard.

"Stable, go almost anywhere, transition from water to beach with no trouble, and lots of capacity in the big ones. Only I don't think the Secretary of the Navy is quite ready to let one go."

"But don't they have them here?" Lachey asked. "To ferry people to the islands?"

Dimarico raised his head. "Go to bed, everyone. We'll think more clearly tomorrow."

~

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Chapter 16 ~ Worker Bees

"*This* is the place you've chosen?"

Dimarico looked up and down the coast before replying.

"This beach is believed to have been deposited by the glaciers, and has been stable for thousands of years. We're going to take off outside where we think the shoreline existed, with our platform several feet above normal high tide."

"I want to know how the heck a notoriously stormy area, open to weather from south and east—"

"Listen, Jack — there's a nearby town which lost its protection a good while back. The sloping underwater part of the beach — the submerged area that slows down and diminishes the effects of waves and currents — was dredged and used for fill elsewhere. Within twenty years a storm and tide surge destroyed the village hanging below the cliff — a place quite similar to this one."

"Quite a confidence builder!"

"The point is, it *didn't* wash away this one."

"Oh... OK, but do you know where the shoreline was, compared with today?"

"As I say, it's believed to have been stable for millennia."

"For what period are there records?"

Dimarico frowned and looked away.

"Almost five hundred years."

"That is *so swell*! And if I sound sarcastic, there's a reason."

Dimarico walked away to stand near Tobie and Koskinen, then thought better of it and came back.

"You'll have your chance to chicken-out tomorrow if you want," he whispered, immediately turning again to Tobie.

Sheila strolled over, trailed as usual by LeeAnn.

"What'd the boss want, Maje?"

"To know whether I was chicken."

"Are you?"

"Yes."

"Isn't that nice... Where are the dork and dorkess — working on the boat?"

"Oh, Sheila!" LeeAnn chided her, "You are so mean."

But Sheila had other matters in mind than her shadow's concerns.

"Why'd they have to take Barry and Brian?" she complained.

"Not tall enough for you," Swann replied.

"Ha ha, real funny. And the English guys — why them?"

"They need someone who speaks the native tongue."

"Man! You're a riot today — you ever give a straight answer?"

"Ask me no questions and I'll tell you no lies."

"Say, Major," LeeAnn asked, "why *aren't* we going there to help?"

"Cam only wanted worker bees, I imagine, and felt we'd be in the way. Or maybe we worked too hard the other day and need a rest."

"And get this place," Sheila scoffed, "speaking of bees — Bee-sand! Didja ever hear of anything more stupid? I don't think so."

"A beautiful place, though, Honey."

LeeAnn's *Honey* set Sheila's teeth on edge.

"This whole country makes no sense to me. And look at those guys he hired! That Bricksley is a real idiot. Got a bigger ego than yours, Jack."

"Brixby, Honey — Ian Brixby," LeeAnn coached.

"Who cares! He's a jackass no matter how you say it. And the other one — so quiet he'd make a match with the Witch. And look at the honker he's got on him!"

Swann snorted, and she glared at him.

"You think it's funny?"

"I think *you're* funny," he said. "Does that count?"

Sheila turned away with a gesture of contempt, followed again by LeeAnn, who threw Swann a droll look of despair, valiantly sticking with her assigned duty.

He scanned the beach, a curving strand of coarse sand and pebbles stretching for miles, with cozy stone houses pressed to the cliff behind it — protected from the west and southwest by a prominent point with a classic lighthouse. It had some protection from the south, too, but lay wide open on the entire eastern quadrant. He couldn't help but think it must have eroded significantly over the thousands of years since the last ice age, particularly if weather patterns had differed from present-day prevailing westerlies.

A beautiful setting — LeeAnn was right. Had he a family and the necessary bucks, what a vacation they could have! But no advantage in churning-up that again.

* * *

Master Sergeant Saipele Manaea stood watching the construction crew as they finished blocking and mounting the time transporter's upper frame to the deck of the AP1-88. Kinnard operated in high-frenzy mode, running back and forth to check every detail, shouting sometimes conflicting directions, becoming the target for increasingly common glares and jibes from his workers. Manaea stood at parade rest, feet spread, hands locked alternately behind or before him, amused and patiently waiting for an incident that would require his stepping in.

The peppery skipper of the craft — one Gerrard Hannaford — came toward him, a dyspeptic expression on his face.

"How long do you plan to let this Mister Kinnard run free, Sergeant? He seems to have quite an eccentric way of handling a project, jumping round reminiscent of a flea on a hot griddle."

Manaea gazed calmly down on him.

"Soon I will talk to him, Captain."

"Ah, yes!" Hannaford said with heavy irony. "Will that be before or after he damages the Petrel?"

"My business probably like yours, Mister Captain — timing important."

Hannaford responded with a disgusted look.

"And this Brixby fellow of yours — I don't mind telling you I'm well tired of being addressed as *Admiral Drake* or *Captain Bligh* and such. What do you plan to do regarding *that*? I expected discipline in your unit but it's certainly not of the level I thought."

Manaea could agree with one concern of the Captain. Brixby considered himself a wit, and had taken to addressing Manaea as Big Chief and Sitting Bull.

The Sergeant had nothing against American Indians — had served with a few — but he was Samoan, and to be deliberately mistaken for another race irked him. He had often been assumed to be Hawaiian or Tahitian, or even Black on a few occasions by foolish people such as Sheila, but to be misidentified by someone for the sake of humor was irritating. He decided to wait for Brixby to call him Pocahontas or Minnehaha — he'd make sure the man would think twice before erring again.

But to *this* man he said, "Americans don't understand English jokes, I think."

Hannaford seemed to find this response unsatisfactory, turning on his heel to stalk away. Manaea repressed a chuckle. Think of the little captain's reaction tomorrow when, with a clap of thunder, passengers and all would disappear from under his nose.

As for himself, he could hardly believe it would happen, even after the demonstrations he'd seen, but Mister Dimarico had faith in it, and the doctor was a smart man, for certain. Major Swann, he knew, doubted — and he respected the major's judgment — but Mister Cam was his boss, and had never yet let him down.

* * *

Gephart gave an impatient snort upon hearing the latest string of directions from Kinnard. Why the major hadn't been given charge of this operation he could not for the life of him understand. Not as if there was anything wrong with Sergeant Manaea, exactly, but the big stiff only stood there most of the time, letting Kinnard tie himself and the rest of them into knots. Perhaps it ran beyond the sergeant's understanding — too technical, maybe. One thing sure — it was too technical for Earl Gephart.

This Koskinen fellow looked to be a big con artist, however successful his experiments. If they ended up in the past instead of being blown to Kingdom Come, Gephart for one would be staggered.

Time travel without the complications seemed sorta possible — he'd seen movies make use of the idea. But the thought of branching time-streams or whatever — of a great number of alternate Earl Gepharts running off each in his own direction, none of them knowing what the others were doing — that purely seemed crazy.

The idea of a wild endeavor had seduced him, ordinarily the least adventurous of men. His life bored him to tears, almost. He didn't daydream, had no great plans for the future, was attached to no one. The idea of heading off to an exotic land, of risking his life — he who never risked anything — had immensely fired his imagination. He'd never read Don Quixote nor even knew the name, but yearned for windmills and warlocks.

Archery had started him off. The primitive aspect intrigued him, and the self-deprecating title of the club. Then at his first shoot — awkward among strangers — he bumped into the major, who gave him some advice and put him at ease.

He now counted Swann as a friend — maybe the only good one he had. Not that they socialized — he recognized they had little in common beyond archery — but the man had always been ready with a greeting, took an interest in Gephart's rapidly advancing skills, encouraged him to improve. When the major had asked if he might be interested in something exciting, worthwhile and dangerous, he'd jumped at the invitation.

Now he wondered whether he'd made the right choice. The Major himself had his doubts, he knew, and didn't bother to hide them. Yet if Swann went he would honor his own word, never mind if Dimarico offered them a chance to renege. He would willingly follow Swann through hell, as the saying went.

As for his other companions... Pierce was just a punk kid, though he could see why the Major wanted him — a good shot, young and athletic, and a good worker when in the mood. That Sheila, though! She didn't like him and he didn't think much of her, even though she was easy enough on the eyes. She'd be trouble — already had been.

Manaea seemed a solid old-timer, though he couldn't warm up to him. Sutton was a good kid and could even be a friend, despite being younger. Dimarico seemed honest and sharp, but he couldn't quite bring himself to trust a rich man. Their fortunes were always their first worry.

And this one new jerk! Shooting off his mouth at every opportunity — already making smart cracks and slighting references to Gephart's name. Blabbing how he'd served in the toughest outfit in the world! He longed to wipe away the sneering laugh.

But here came Kinnard again, getting revved up over gluing the aluminum strips to the frame. Why didn't the sergeant take charge for awhile?

~

Chapter 17 ~ Nine Forty-two

At sea the day proved bright and clear. Swann stood alone at the aft end of the freight deck, his attitude announcing he wanted no company.

They zipped over three-foot waves at a good twenty or twenty-five knots, he

estimated. The plan now was to transport at high tide so as to be on level sea rather than sloping beach, to position their craft as well as they could by observation of landmarks, and to fling themselves through the cosmos at exactly the right height to land safely on the ancient surface with a minimum drop.

Everything depended, of course, upon their knowing how high and where the surface was. The climate had been a few degrees warmer then, and average sea level would have been higher. Tide might be in or out, and either storm or calm could greet them. Complicating matters further, ever since the retreat of the glaciers the southern end of the British Isles had been tilting downward while the north end rose — nobody knew with certainty where land and sea had interfaced in the past.

Dimarico paced back to talk to him — standing with lips almost touching his ear, the noise level was so high.

"I wasn't sure you'd be coming with us. Plenty glad you did."

"I'm not here as a true believer."

"None of us is. None, that is, who look on it as less than magic. What decided you to stick?"

Swann nodded toward the others, clustered in and around the boat.

"If they go, I have to go."

"You could have talked them out of it."

Coulda, shoulda, woulda. Yet he'd taken the king's shilling, so to speak, and didn't feel right about going back on his word. Had Brian or Earl chickened he might have talked the other into quitting, and readily followed suit. As it stood...

"How did you manage to pull this together so quickly?" He waved his hand to indicate the hovercraft.

Dimarico rubbed thumb against first two fingers. "Money answereth all things."

"You bribed everyone?"

"No, no — don't get such an idea. It's simply that if you refuse to be slowed by obstacles money will get you past... These people didn't want to let the Petrel go — it was still being refurbished. And you can see our skipper isn't too happy shipping with us. But once the owners became convinced I was willing to make it worth their while, after a couple of hours and a long wet lunch they came around. Of course, in other cases some greasing of palms has been necessary.

"I've been preparing this for more than two years now — the English end of it — the coins, the permits for scientific experimentation from the Home Office, the relationship with the fellow who rented us part of his estate. Without a generous application of cash many of these things wouldn't have happened, but bribes weren't a big part of it.

"Here's the thing, Jack — when people know you have money, you'd be surprised at how many of them become real helpful. It puts you in the position of the centurion in the Gospels. *I say to this man, go, and he goeth, and to this man, come, and he cometh.* It's almost enough to make you despise the human race, and you can see why many of the

rich — instant celebrities, more than any — get used to having their way at all times."

"The *Don't you know who I am?* attitude."

"Precisely. There are several types of hangers-on — the poor saps who think a plea for help will be enough to gain them largess from your limitless store of wealth, the demanding types who resent the fact you won't shower them with gold simply because you have it and they don't, the flatterers who kiss up to you in the hopes of being offered a reward, and the plain thieves and con artists, of course.

"The most common, however, and in certain ways the most irritating, are those people who have no hope — maybe even no desire — for a handout, yet offer you undue respect by virtue of their adoration of wealth. They have no expectation of a payoff yet it's, *Yes, Mister D*, and *No, Mister D*, and *May I dust your shoes with my shirttail, Mister D?* Irrational and discouraging and very, very useful."

This gave Swann his first laugh of the day.

"Fortunately, plenty of people are like you, Jack. They take it in stride, and treat rich and poor pretty much the same."

"Like me, huh? That's where you're wrong. I envy and resent your wealth but it's evenly balanced by my hope of reward. In fact, I look upon you much as I did the Marine Corps. An unending supply — albeit metered — of the where-with-all to let me travel in style and play dangerous games."

Dimarico smiled, and for a while they studied the scenery before Swann started discussing personnel again.

"I'm surprised The Perfesser agreed to go. He doesn't quite seem to believe in this himself."

"I gave him no choice — made it clear he would go, willy-nilly, if Saipele had to carry him. Also, he wants to play the intellectual conqueror when he returns in glory."

"Who are you counting among the initiates — Lachey?"

"She's scared but game. Dale is pretty close to a true believer, I think. Sutton is following my lead as Pierce and Gephart are following yours. And Sheila, of course, wants to make sure we don't use the secret password to keep her out of the clubhouse."

"Tobie?"

"You'll have noticed he's always near half-soused. Probably doesn't believe anything's going to happen, but in the meantime he's satisfied with the free booze."

"Why the devil do you want him?"

"Medical assistance. Oh, yes — don't be surprised. Might be a simple chiropractor but he's got a surprising store of knowledge. Could have been an MD or DO if he'd been a teetotaler. He'll be useful if we can keep him fairly sober."

Swann simply shook his head.

"What do you think of our Englishmen?" Dimarico asked. "Small took it in stride but Brixby looked as if he'd swallowed his gum. What do you think of that one?"

"Better he hadn't come along, perhaps."

"I suspect he's skeptical enough to think it's all moonbeams, and we Yanks are going to have egg on our face."

"The problem is it can take one or two good men to cover for a bad one. We can't afford dissension in the ranks. I warn you now, Cam — we might have to get rid of him sooner or later, if the jump is successful and he's truly unhappy as a result."

They watched the coastline pass by. Swann had managed to get through to Jeff last night, and spoke briefly to Ashleigh. Her voice caught in her throat, proving to him she retained feelings for him. Had there been any way he could have honorably deserted he would have done it then. A sense of foreboding built in him, and he toyed even now with the notion of diving overboard and swimming for shore.

Dimarico broke in on his thoughts. "Tell me how you figured this out — our destination."

"When we went to England, I figured even a mind as tortuous as yours wouldn't have us move again — so it must be here, and the coinage shouted Medieval. Simply a case of figuring the exact period. Therefore — as I said before — when could a few good archers have the most effect upon history? In other words, a process of elimination."

"So, can we do it? Can we turn around the course of history?"

"Assuming we make it and can raise a couple hundred archers, I give us a fighting chance."

"Good! I'll see to it you don't lack resources."

"Now you tell *me* something, Cam. Why England and not Italy? Why not even the Ostrogoths in Italy?"

"Italy's a great nation, Jack — the Romans, the Renaissance cities, the music and culture of later times... Of course, the area my grandfather's people came from — the Sicilies — was one of the most backward and corrupt in Europe, but that's not the point.

"The point is this — the US Constitution is the finest design for a government the world has yet known, and the United States is arguably the best place to live in the world today. To whom do we owe it? — the English. Not the Scots nor the Welsh nor the Irish... certainly not the Italians, Germans, French or Spanish."

"And the Normans had nothing to do with it?"

Dimarico merely grimaced.

"You've got a lot of gall, Cam, to try to change fundamental English history, with all it means for the future United States."

"And to attempt to right a great historical wrong, as I see it. For better or worse, that's my goal... Well, there's the high-sign from our fierce Captain Hannaford. Let's hop into the boat."

* * *

Swann stood rigid, braced hard against a stack of coffers, all too aware of the

doubts and unknowns in this potential fiasco. A woman laughed softly — LeeAnn. He thought, *If you knew what I know, girl, you'd be sobbing instead.*

Dimarico said, tension plain in his voice, "Minus nine forty-two, Evan?"

"Nine forty-two it is, less one half and a whiff extra for luck."

Nothing but compressed exhilaration now from Koskinen, his hypothesis soon to be conclusively proven — or disastrously disproven — after years of struggle and frustration and professional disdain. The Professor looked round with an exultant grin, index finger poised.

Swann also glanced around but registered little beyond his own apprehension. The sun gleamed through thinning layers of cloud to dimly light waves and beach. A zephyr dried the sweat springing out on him, bringing a shiver. He stared fascinated at the control console, willing the finger never to reach its target.

* * *

Blind! His gut tightened and wrenched, twisting his torso. The platform plunged and side-slipped, an acute shock struck up through feet and knees and hips, and somewhere someone shrieked...

~

Chapter 18 ~ When?

Swann's hands and knees and face hurt, and he seemed to be kissing a boulder. Something hard and heavy pinned his left leg — a money coffer. He worked it loose. When he moved his right someone shouted in pain. He cautiously slid free and pulled himself to a sitting position.

In the dark he heard a chorus of groans, cries and profanity. Under him he felt nothing but rocks — dry rocks. While he'd been unconscious, the others had managed to beach the craft and drag him onto land.

The light increased as a sliver of late moon slid from behind broken cloud.

"Mister Cam?" Manaea called, but Dimarico didn't answer.

"Sergeant," Swann called. "Take the roll. See who's conscious and who is hurt."

"Yes sir. Mister Dimarico?" Again no answer. "Doctor Koskinen?"

"I'm *here*, you dullard!"

Swann came to his feet, ankles and knees protesting, then bent and felt for the person who'd lain on his leg.

"Who is it?"

"Me — Edith. My ankles... Don't think I can get up."

He knelt, hurting his knee anew, got his arms under her and lifted. She was skinny, a light enough burden. He stumbled toward the black bulk of cliff, reached a smoother

area and laid her down as gently as he could.

Manaea was still going through the roll, so Swann merely called out, "Whoever's able, grab a mat and drag it here."

In a few seconds Pierce arrived with a section of matting, and Swann moved Lachey onto it.

"Where's Tobie?" he asked, but Pierce couldn't say.

A candle lantern flared. The beach had altered from the one they'd surveyed, this one consisting of rocks the size of softballs. From the feel of his knees and hands — not to mention his face — he must have been thrown onto it. He made it over to the wreck of their *boat* right as Manaea ordered silence.

"Sergeant, who's with us and who's hurt?"

"Miss LeeAnn, she's fainted or something — was awake before. Mister Cam, he's there."

"And who's that?"

"With him? Doctor Tobie, Major."

"This beach — was there a current? How'd we get ashore?"

Manaea stared at him for a moment. "We're ashore all the time, Major. Something blows us up — like a mine, it felt."

Swann wondered if his mind was working right, or whether his half-joke about their brains being affected had some truth in it.

"You sure?"

"Yes sir, Major. We're either dropping onto these rocks or something blew us up, and I didn't feel no drop."

Conversation rose again, entirely too loud for Swann's comfort.

"OK, Sergeant. Have the troops get their arms, and let's start unloading. Find a spot near the cliff to put the gear."

"Aye-aye, sir."

Swann went to Tobie. "How's he doing?"

"Alright, I'd say... a light concussion, perhaps. Say, can you break out the supplies? I need a drink after this fiasco."

"Sorry, Doc — no time. You've got to look at Miss Dasczo over there, and Miss Lachey's over by the cliff. She's got a problem with her ankles."

"I'm alright now, Major," LeeAnn sang out. "I must have flopped from all the excitement."

"Hey, good! OK, Doctor, you see Miss Lachey, then we'll need to check everyone over for cuts and whatnot."

"I'm gonna need a drink," Tobie grumbled, as he headed for the cliff.

Swann said, "How do you feel, Cam?"

"Woozy and sick to my stomach but not too bad. I'm going to sit here awhile. And we need to burn this stuff — the boat and everything."

"I'll take care of it. Can you stand? How if you go lie down near Edith? We'll get a mat for you, and you can take it easy."

He helped Dimarico rise and make his way over to the cliff, going back to drag another mat for him. Manaea sent Gephart and Pierce down the beach each way to stand guard, while ignoring a stream of demands from Koskinen.

The others carried equipment and supplies from the ruined boat up to the cliff base, Sheila and Brixby bickering all the while. Manaea went to help the workers, whereupon Koskinen tried to buttonhole Swann, who brusquely ordered him away.

Swann broke out his bow and a sheaf of arrows, shucked off his life jacket and located his backpack. North on the beach he found Pierce standing a casual sort of guard duty. He ordered him to string his bow and nock an arrow, and asked where his pack was.

"Back at the boat, Jack."

"Great! — until you need it. Get it and keep it with you. *Not now*, for God's sake!"

"I'm sorry, Jack," Pierce apologized, "I didn't—"

"Never mind — we didn't get around to some of the fundamentals. Now listen. Take your spot down near the tide line. Sit or kneel so you won't be silhouetted against the water. Have your weapon ready, and keep your eyes on the beach, yes, but mainly on the skyline at the cliff. Shout if you see anything — call for Manaea or me. And don't simply say, *Hey, somebody's here*. Give us intelligence — how many and where. Got it?"

"What if they walk up to me? Do I say, *Who goes there?*"

"Yeah, if you're in the movies. Simply say, *Who's there?* Your most important command, though, is *Halt!*"

"But... are they gonna understand?"

"Say it loud and firm, and they'll catch your drift. Now, are you hurt anywhere?"

"Shook-up, maybe, but I'm OK."

"Good. Go on down there, and don't fall asleep on us."

Hurrying back, he found the main group loafing after having completed the unloading. Tobie leaned over a sleeping Dimarico, shaking and speaking to him.

"What are you doing?"

Tobie said in a husky whisper, "I need a drink."

Swann lost control but managed to keep his voice low.

"Get your worthless butt up and start doing your job, you stupid souse! I want you to examine every person here, and if you don't jump to it I'll throw every lousy bottle in the sea and kick your behind on top of it."

With a frightened yet half-defiant look Tobie slunk away.

"Start with... Who's hurt or cut up?"

"Not me," Sheila boasted, "I fell on top of fathead here." She indicated Brixby.

"Better a fat head than a fat bum, you stupid tart."

"I'm sure you both got a thrill," Swann interrupted. "Sheila, you make us something

to drink. Brixby, go look for firewood."

"I didn't sign on to be a cook, Jack."

"Oh, you *didn't*!" He could feel his temper rising by the second.

"I'll do it, Major," LeeAnn said.

"Good. Heat water for tea or chocolate. As for you, Brenneman, it's *Sir* or *Major* now — we're on alert. And if you won't cook you can collect firewood. You two head south, and don't go far."

"Right-oh, Commodore, we're on our way," Brixby said — adding under his breath but loud enough for Swann to hear, "I reckon he needed a promotion, poor excitable chap."

Sheila giggled.

"Sergeant! Check on Gephart. Make sure he knows how to mount guard, and have him keep a good eye on the cliff. Small, Sutton! Look for a path up the cliff. Stand guard at the top, and let us know what you see. Professor, Kinnard! Head north for firewood. Let Pierce know you're coming up behind him."

He felt greatly on edge, dumped into an unknown environment with too few troops, and those under-trained. Missing the steadying influence of Dimarico, he felt responsible for the whole shooting match.

Koskinen stalked over to him.

"You seem to be operating under a misconception, Swann. I'm not under your command, and I don't fetch and carry at your whim."

Swann grabbed the shoulder of the man's jacket and pulled him closer, gritting his words between clenched teeth.

"Understand *this*, Perfesser. I *am* in command while Dimarico is down, and it is my judgment we need all hands working. If need be I'll assist you in obeying my orders by having Sergeant Manaea kick your sorry butt every step down the beach. Now you go over there and use your superior intellect to select the absolute best firewood you can."

He ended with a shove that sent the man stumbling.

Had looks been able to kill, Swann would have collapsed in his tracks.

"We'll see about this when Cameron recovers," Koskinen hissed.

The moon, flickering in and out of clouds, now disappeared behind a solid bank, dropping them into full darkness except for the lanterns.

"Tobie! Where are you? Who have you treated so far?"

"You've sent them all away," Tobie complained.

Swann mentally kicked himself. *Better slow down and think.*

"Right... Well, you assist with the drinks."

"Take water with tea bags and chocolate mix around to everyone. If they don't have their mess gear they'll need to wait until they get back here — everyone should be carrying his knapsack. As you see them, check for injuries, and patch up as you go."

"Sure! Should I sprout a couple extra pair of hands while I'm at it?"

LeeAnn was heating a pot over a camp-stove, with another waiting beside her.

"LeeAnn?"

"I'll go with him, Major."

"Great!"

The moon broke from the clouds and a figure loomed up from the south — Manaea.

"Sir! Gephart's hurt — his ribs."

"How badly?"

"Can't use his weapon, I think."

What next? "Small!" Swann yelled. "Where are you?"

"We've found a path, Major."

"Come on back — I'm going to need you. Barry! Give a shout when you get on top.

Let either the Sergeant or me know what you see."

"What about that drink?" Tobie asked.

"Absolutely. When the water is ready, you and Miss Dasczo may have the very first hot drinks."

"You're a real smart-ass bully, aren't you? I'm going to ask Cameron to straighten you out good."

"Fine — but until he wakes you *will* obey me. There'll be no drinking until the work is done, and we're safe as we can be. Remember — we don't know where we are or even *when* we are, or who we might be up against, and we *will* treat this seriously."

"I could wake him right now," Tobie threatened.

"Don't do anything counter to good practice, I warn you. Why is he unconscious?"

"I told you — he has a concussion, and sleep is common afterward."

"For how long?"

"Who knows, you blockhead! Could be an hour or ten hours. Find a hospital and maybe *they'll* know." Tobie ranted on, detailing potential life-threatening outcomes. He became contrite. "I'm sorry — I really need a drink."

"First things first."

Swann was tense. The thought of losing the one man who knew what they were facing, the single person who might be able to communicate with the locals, the only one who could, in the long term, control Koskinen and Tobie sent a chill up his spine.

"What do you recommend we do?"

"We probably should wake him to see if he's got any confusion or motor deficiencies."

"Forget the drink!"

"I'm not thinking of that," the little man spat. "We need to check to see if he needs further treatment."

"Such as?"

"Well, there's not much we can do for him except make sure he rests sufficiently, and if there are problems with coordination or weakness we should try to immobilize

his neck and head in case of spinal cord injury. Give him some acetaminophen."

"This is just *great* — more bad news! Let's see if he wakes up."

Blankets covered both figures. Dimarico seemed asleep, but his eyes sprang open as Tobie touched him.

"Uh?"

"Lie still. Can you tell me your name?"

"I know my name," he grumbled.

"Well, what is it then, Cameron?"

"Cameron... Smith."

"*What?*"

"Dimarico! What's going on? Are you organized, Swann? Where's the fire? How long have I been bonkers?"

"Maybe a half hour. We're getting ready now."

"Where are you, Cameron?" asked Tobie, trying to get his attention.

"Southern England, you'd better hope."

"And what day, er... what year is it?"

"The sixty-four dollar question, isn't it, Bob? Jack, have you got guards set? And where's all the equipment?"

Manaea now arrived with Gephart in tow. Tobie tried to test Dimarico's reactions, and Dimarico tried to rise and get back in control, while Koskinen attempted to gain his attention. Confusion briefly reigned until Dimarico shuffled off to organize the burning of the boat and mats, Koskinen trailing in his wake and talking a mile a minute. Tobie stood forlorn, not even having a chance to ask for a drink.

"Well," he said in resignation, "He seems alright."

"Take a look at this guy. Early-bird, how are you?"

It soon proved Gephart suffered at least one broken rib, not too severe according to Tobie, but he needed pain killers and would be unable to use his left arm much for two weeks.

"Out of action two weeks?" Swann exclaimed.

"At least! Pushing on the bow would be a tremendous strain."

"Aren't you going to tape him up?" Swann asked.

"Just on the one side. Better to keep his lungs working — unless you prefer pneumonia. Of course he could have a slight internal injury. No way to tell yet without some kind of scan."

~

Chapter 19 ~ On the Beach

They waded thigh deep in the sea to present a suitably salt-stained appearance in

line with the cover story of stranding. A bonfire of driftwood and plastic roared. From a distance it could have passed for a beach party, sans bikinis and surfboards.

Kinnard kept Sutton company up on the cliff, while Brenneman and Brixby took over beach guard positions, with Manaea regularly checking the three posts. The pads used by Dimarico and Lachey had been consigned to the fire, and she lay in a sleeping bag.

Dimarico and Koskinen concluded the breakup of the boat and their resultant tumbles had been caused by its regeneration in the same space as one or more of the higher rocks on the beach. Koskinen's delay circuitry assured rejection of the lighter object by the more massive, rather than the potential high-order explosion which might have occurred with instantaneous transmission. They'd been catapulted with force equal to a drop of eight or ten feet. All in all, three injured was getting off lightly.

* * *

Swann bent over Lachey. "How are you feeling now?"

Surprisingly, she smiled.

"Pretty well. I've had cocoa, and I'm nice and warm. Doctor Tobie gave me aspirin and wrapped my ankles."

"What's the prognosis — the outlook?"

"He said it's — the worse one — a grade two sprain, and there might be minor fractures. We should have iced it but... So I have to stay off my feet for as long as possible, and it might be as much as two months before I can do any real walking."

"Doesn't sound great, but I think you're looking as happy as I've seen you."

"I was terribly scared. I never truly believed we'd make it safely."

"Ah! Another wise soul. I felt like a condemned man myself, waiting for the axe to fall. Next question — where and when are we?"

"Pretty certainly in the same location where we started, but we don't know *when* until we can check with the local people."

"And you plan to stay."

"Yes."

He knelt and spoke more quietly. "Go on."

"There's... there's not much for me back there. I wanted to get away from — from a lot of..." Her voice quavered.

"Never mind — I shouldn't have asked."

After a moment she said, "What of you? Are you staying or...?"

"Well, as I get it, by the time we get through screwing-up things around here it probably won't be worth returning. Besides, though my life wasn't bad, exactly, I was lonely. Not much to go back to."

"So you'll be staying, too. I wonder who else?"

"Wait a minute."

The discussion between Dimarico and the two doctors was getting animated as they tried to convince Dimarico of the need for immediate return — Tobie on the basis of required medical care, Koskinen arguing that having proved the concept, Dimarico could return at a time of his choosing, and with more and better personnel and equipment.

Swann stepped in front of them, and Koskinen glared.

"This thug of yours, Cameron," he snarled. "You'd better instruct him that while I might give *him* orders, he is in no way to consider me one of his peons."

Dimarico declined. "When I'm *compos mentis* I'll be directing things, Evan, but if I'm not, then Major Swann is in charge. There's no other practical way."

This went over poorly.

"Let's be clear on one thing — I'm not going to be his hewer of wood and drawer of water, no matter what anyone says."

Dimarico made no reply. He stood and said, "Help me down to the water for my baptism, Jack. I don't want to slip and scramble my brains any further."

Koskinen lurched to his feet.

"What of this—?"

"No more tonight. When we find out whether we've made the right year we can discuss it, but until then let's hear no more. We've gone over this from one end to the other, and none of it matters if we aren't in the right year — so *enough!*"

They headed toward the water, Dimarico hanging onto Swann's arm.

"Everyone understood we'd be here at least six months," Swann said. "What difference does it make if he can set the return dial for whenever he wants?"

"Exactly. He could wait ten years yet return one minute after we left — in theory, of course — and land right on the deck of the Petrel. But he's in a hurry to get back to fame and fortune, as he sees it, so he wants to immediately start building a new and stronger boat. He wasn't thrilled at making the trip in the first place, and now he sees all sorts of drawbacks — sickness, discomfort, deterioration of equipment. He's right, of course, but I didn't come here for a week's excursion."

Coming to the high water mark they stepped cautiously over wet rocks.

When they reached the breakers Swann told him, "Squat down, Cam, so I can avoid another soaking. Uh! OK, this should do it. Let's get back. Tell me, though — why is this so deserted? Don't they fish? There were houses right along the beach in our time."

"Think, Jack — any Vikings in two thousand eight?"

"Hmm, raiding. Should have realized. Well, let's go."

"Wait. Stop up here a ways." They cleared the tidal zone. "Look, Jack, I'm counting on you for support — can I expect it?"

"What's your concern?"

"Koskinen. Candidly, there's no reason for him to return unless he does so

immediately, before we cause significant changes in history. But I can't afford to have him take his knowledge, because who knows what he'll get up to? You understand, don't you, he's a near sociopath — has no concern whatsoever for the damage he might do either to history or to us. I know I haven't much room to criticize — I'm planning a huge bit of damage myself."

"Yes, aren't we all guilty of history-cide? Except *he* gives the impression of having no sense of responsibility at all. And you seem to despise the guy."

"Afraid so, though I try to control it. All he considers is his own ego and his urge for a kind of vengeance on his previous colleagues. He's going to show them up — triumph over them no matter what. They're the people who matter — his peers. The rest of us are pawns at best.

"The ironic thing — and it's according to his own theory — he might well return to an entirely different milieu where they don't even exist. What I fear is he'll start bouncing around from year to year, decade to decade, always looking for — creating — a branch of history where Evan Koskinen can be a star. I hope I'm not treating him too unjustly out of spite. The fact is I've loathed him since our second or third year of collaboration. Believe me, Jack, seven years with him equals a century in hell."

"And he knows the longer we stay here the less chance—"

"Certainly! As I've said. He might be psychotic but he's far from stupid. If we succeed, he could return to a North America where they speak Icelandic or Cherokee, and where electrical power hasn't been invented, making it impossible to recharge the capacitors with anything but the generator, for which there might be no fuel available."

"Is it even possible to go forward in time? I mean, have you proved it?"

"There's that, of course."

"*Good Lord*, Cam! None of you have any idea if this can work?"

"I've ignored the question, Jack, because I never intended to return. As far as Evan, I've no idea what his theory is, or whether he's overlooked this tiny detail."

"Tiny detail!"

"He's somehow convinced himself it can be done — I don't know his basis for optimism. You can see the danger this poses, not to us alone but to the future."

"You've never tested this? Not at all?"

Dimarico paused. "In fact, we have."

"You sent stuff forward? How strange, I never thought to ask before. Too taken up with the idea of going back, I guess."

Dimarico didn't respond, so Swann repeated, "You sent things forward, right? What happened?"

"They disappeared.

"And...?"

"That's it — they disappeared.

"And when did they reappear — on time?"

"See, it's then we... This came fairly early on, right after we'd succeeded in sending things back — back from our point of view. Well, at any rate—"

"You didn't get them back, did you? They never showed."

"...No."

"You merely adapted your theory to take this into account, not having the slightest—"

"Keep your voice down, for God's sake!"

"So this is where we stand. *Man!* I can't see how I could have been so careless, so thoughtless as to let you talk me into this hare-brained—"

"Wait a minute! You're here, aren't you? *That* worked, didn't it?"

"Assuming we *are* here — if *here* isn't somewhere or some-when else. You guys didn't have two clues. You went ahead based on—"

"Now hold on, Jack — let me talk! OK, I agree the, uh, the experimental backing was weak — hard to deny it. Yet can't you see this ties in perfectly with the idea of branching timelines? In fact, it's what caused us to develop—"

"Us?"

"Primarily Koskinen. In other words, every operation of the transporter seemed to be... shielded, let's say, from our present timeline, as if mere use of the device was sufficient to change history. Think about it."

"I don't even *want* to think about it. But I can see two things," Swann grumbled. "I see where this is leading, and I see you preparing your justifications."

"I'm sure you can. I've said right along you were too logical for your own good — or maybe *my* own good."

"You might at least have asked. I can't help but be frosted by this little surprise."

"I haven't lied to anyone, Jack."

"Nor killed yourself striving for candor, either... You ready for a mutiny?"

"I plan to be persuasive, and I hope to have a few on my side — you, at least."

Swann's head spun with the implications of Dimarico's confession.

"I'm not happy with it, but it's the only rational course. If we have no idea what might happen, how can we even *think* of a return?"

"You didn't intend to go back, did you?"

"No, Cam, but the others... I can't help but feel responsible."

"Can you bring along your recruits?"

"Two will stick, I expect. But Brenneman and the English guys — they're another story. You have Lachey — what of Kinnard?"

"Passive acceptance, I imagine — and there's Saipele and Barry."

"LeeAnn?"

"Hysteria, perhaps. We'll need to see. Tobie — maybe I can quiet him with a good stiff drink before the confrontation."

"I'll tell you, Cam, I'm almost glad we didn't get additional recruits. This is a real

poke in the eye. To have to convince even more people... And what if we aren't *when* we want to be?"

"If so, we'll have to try again. Bet that thrills you."

"Then there *will* be a mutiny, Cam — with me as ringleader."

* * *

The fire still smoked as false dawn arrived. A few identifiable objects remained, scraps of plastic and partly-melted fiberglass. More wood was called for to make a better job of destruction.

Tobie again examined Lachey's ankles but refused to express a definite opinion. Gephart hurt but was able to move, Dimarico showed no symptoms.

The women were to wear feminine clothing suitable for the era, but Sheila, not surprisingly, failed to do so. Swann had let her disobedience pass, but now ordered her to change with LeeAnn's help, or to *be* changed with the assistance of male volunteers. Cursing and sullen, she complied. In minutes she became the old Sheila, prancing and parading her finery, happy to be the center of attention one way or the other.

As it brightened they moved their gear to the top of the cliff. Their funds alone made up forty-eight small boxes weighing near forty pounds each, plus tenting, food and drink, weapons, and the time console and capacitor rack. The path proved too difficult for heavy loads, so they hauled up what they could using ropes — two or more men heaving at the top and one person handling a guide-rope from beneath.

Gephart was helped up the path, then sent forward through a growth of grass, bracken, and shrubs for sentry duty on a small knoll. Beyond him was a range of hills, limiting his view to a mile in front, a couple to right and left — moorland with trees clustered in the folds. Sheep and a few cultivated fields decorated lower slopes.

Before they had finished — with Lachey and Dasczo still on the beach — Gephart signaled.

~

Chapter 20 ~ Preconceptions

"Get your gear! Line up here!" Swann swung his arm. As the riders walked their horses down the knoll, he got his crew armed and in order — the archers in line to one side, the others in a knot by the fire.

The Saxons reined in fifty yards off.

Some of Swann's preconceptions now proved faulty. Except in one case they were not bearded but mostly sported luxuriant mustaches. Far from the drab shades he'd recommended to his troops, their clothing was colorful, some garments woven in stripes or checks. They bore mostly spears and either round or kite shields, many with

helms. A sturdy man near the center, dressed in a short reddish cloak over a *byrnie* — mail vest — and with striped blue and gray leggings cross-strapped up to his knees, advanced his pony a few paces.

Dimarico, sheathed sword suspended from a baldric, strode forward a few steps. Manaea, spear in hand with the butt grounded, followed behind and to his right. Dimarico removed his hat and raised his right hand palm outward.

"*Hal!*" he called.

The lead Saxon dismounted and paced forward, calling a question.

Waving Manaea back, Dimarico spoke and advanced farther, as did the Saxon, until both were halfway between the forces, a few feet apart. The Saxon appeared cautious, faced by a considerably larger man and an armed array. The conversation continued for several minutes, Dimarico gesturing at the sea or his people, and inland.

"Major! Ask Sheila to come up to me."

Swann called, "Brenneman, here's your chance to charm the Old World." In response to her gesture he said, "Yes, take your bow, but don't look too Amazonian."

She strode forward, neither shy nor lacking courage. Dimarico barred her with an outstretched arm, speaking briefly. Holding her bow and nocked arrow in her left hand, she swept off her sombrero and pulled down the bandanna under it, shaking out her mane. A couple of comments came from the Saxon ranks, and their commander showed a surprised smile.

Sheila grinned as she once again found herself the target of all eyes.

Dimarico turned again. "LeeAnn, too."

"Tobie," Swann decided, "go down to Lachey, and send Dasczo up here — quickly."

"By myself?"

"Barry, escort the good doctor to the head of the path, and if need be, kick him down it. Call to Dasczo and make sure everything is OK. *Tobie!* Hurry up, man!"

Sheila at his side, Dimarico and the Saxon waited. LeeAnn appeared on the crest, and at Swann's signal advanced to Dimarico's other side. If the Saxon had doubts as to the pulchritude of Brenneman, carrying a weapon and towering over him by one or two husky inches, he need have none for the petite Dasczo, standing five-foot four and looking distinctly feminine.

She had ignored the recommendation to dress conservatively, and wore a Kelly green jumper over a frilly white blouse, topped by a fitted dark blue jacket and her white sombrero. She'd rid herself of studs before the trip, her tattoo hidden by a high collar.

On the other hand, the Saxons sported plenty of tattoos themselves.

* * *

Dimarico brought out wine for drinks all round. He offered ten pennies to the

Saxon leader, which were accepted with thanks. Since warriors on *fyrð* were paid two pennies per day, this constituted a respectable bribe — or would it be considered a tip in this culture? Payment of a landing fee was postponed, in part because Sheila's status as warrior or woman couldn't be settled.

Dimarico claimed to argue this point to avoid being thought of as a soft touch, but all knew how he hated to *waste* money.

The date proved to be a month and a half after *Geol* — Yule — late February in the first year's reign of the Godwinsson. In the opinion of the Saxon leader, one Ecglaf Pallissuna, they had arrived at an evil hour, since a *Francena eorl* — French earl — was threatening war.

From Dimarico's point of view all was well — this was the moment he wanted.

The Saxon leader and three men rode off to obtain wagons, leaving the rest. By offer of another bottle, these were convinced to retire to the knoll to watch from a distance.

* * *

Lachey came up on a jury-rigged stretcher, and they scavenged the burn site for metal fasteners and fragments. Whether bronze or iron, metal held significant value here, nor did they see any need to present artifacts to the curiosity of the locals.

As a misty rain drifted off the sea they set a fire blazing. Kinnard connected the console and capacitor rack, and started the generator. Manaea set down a cooking pot full of liquid, then stood in watchful silence. The Professor renewed his arguments.

But it seemed Dimarico now had heard enough from him.

"OK, Doctor, you've thoroughly made your point. We'll settle this shortly." He ordered Kinnard to detach the generator leads, then lifted the tarp off the console while Koskinen clutched at it.

"Wait, Cameron! Keep the protection on."

Dimarico nodded to Manaea, and the big man grabbed Koskinen, pulling him back. He demanded his release but Dimarico cut him off.

"Is this charged?"

"Not even half, man! What the devil are you after?"

Dimarico flicked the on-switch and waited a few seconds, ignoring Koskinen. With every pair of eyes now on him, he lifted the console's cover, then picked up the pot and dashed its contents — seawater — into the works. They were treated to a brief but intense display of sparks.

Koskinen bellowed, while the others added to an explosion of noise.

Dimarico slammed the console shut, and roared, "Quiet! Shut up — all of you! You'll get your explanation soon enough."

Koskinen ranted on, struggling against Manaea's grip and yelling incoherently until Manaea swung around and propelled him away, stopping his return with a raised

hand.

The Professor regained his composure, adding portentously, "You'll never prevent me, Cameron."

Dimarico stretched out a hand. Manaea reached into his jacket and handed over a large automatic pistol, a piece of supposedly proscribed gear. Before shocked eyes Dimarico ejected the magazine, checked and clicked it back in place, then worked the slide.

Koskinen backed slowly away while all held their breaths.

Dimarico gazed at him for a moment, then turned and placed a round through each of the four capacitors.

~

Chapter 21 ~ Crude

They distributed their gear among a wagon and two ox carts, the Saxons escorting before and behind.

Beaten down by rain, fatigue and negative news, few were effusive despite new scenes striking the eye at every hilltop or turning. Except for the occasional animal path or skimpy set of wheel tracks, their way led over a rough moor dotted with bushes and trees growing in sheltered spots. They topped a couple of rises, and in the distance spied through dimming light the fields and huts of their destination for the night.

The oxen strained with the heavy load of silver plus the time console and other gear, so the group — excepting Tobie and Koskinen — when needed, put their shoulders to a cart or wagon to help it out of a rut or over a rock. Though but a few miles to the settlement, both they and the beasts would be worn down getting there.

Dimarico and Swann walked apart from the rest, Swann speaking.

"Except for the cursing, screaming, crying, threats of violence and so forth, they took it better than I expected. Maybe you should have considered politics."

"Never fear, Jack, we'll be getting plenty of politics before we're through. I feel bad for LeeAnn, and for Tobie, too, but I'm surprised at Dale. Thought he'd be up for the adventure. And Brian got somewhat excited, of course."

"I liked Brixby thinking you'd cheated him out of his money."

"His money is as untouchable by me as it is by him. What truly bothers him is the idea of his *old trollop* getting it. Better he'd left it to his cat."

"What'd you work out with *whatsisname*?"

Duke William's claim to the English throne had intensified Saxon concern over raiders landing on their coasts. Dimarico's narrative was that his party were losers in a war far to the west of Britain, stranded on the English shore. Rather than bloodily fight his band, the winners offered exile, but transported the Americans much farther than

expected. Possibly the English — these *Englisc* — had heard of Vinland, settled by the Norse for sixty years now, for the tale seemed to be accepted.

"I told him we wanted to head easterly to look for an estate to lease, and I volunteered we were willing to help defend the kingdom. He'll try to get instructions from the king's reeve regarding what to do with us."

"Does, er, Pallissuna know we're carrying a lot of money?"

"He guessed it, so I owned up. No point in trying to kid him about those heavy iron-bound boxes. He was surprised our enemies let us keep it."

"How'd you get around it?"

"Another tall tale, of course."

"Between the two of us, Cam, we've told enough lies to qualify for Congress."

"Maybe the UN. The money is one thing which has me worried, though. I'm sure we can give a good account of ourselves, but if we were to be hit by twenty or thirty men of the stripe of our escort, I'd be concerned for the outcome. Wish I'd accepted your offer to recruit Marines. Even if they couldn't handle a bow they could have learned the spear, and having some tough-looking guys might scare off robbers."

"Any doubts regarding these particular fellows?"

"Pallissuna strikes me as honest, and England in this era owned a reputation for good order — virgin traveling with a bag of gold, et cetera. What I'm afraid of is we'll be left to forage on our own once our good intentions are assured. If it happens I'll hire help, preferably like these *thegnes* — thanes, trained warriors."

"You've got the forty-fives for backup. Anything else?"

Dimarico's voice dropped. "An OD box slightly longer than the coffers, next to Edith. Double twelve-gage with buck and slugs. The stock has to be mounted, but I can get it into action in a quick minute."

Swann gave a low whistle.

"I don't want to use firearms unless it's an absolute necessity. For one thing, they'd probably want to hang us for witchcraft."

"Are these Pallissuna-troopers trained soldiers, do you think?"

"Semi-trained. National guardsmen and sheriff's posse rolled into one. The great men — *eorles* and *ealdormannes*, and the king, of course — have the equivalent of our army, the *huscarles* or *heorthwerod* — hearth-men. Same social rank as the thegnes but employed by the higher-ups. Full-time soldiers and state policemen, tax collectors and so forth. They formed the core of Harold's forces at both Hastings and Stamford Bridge."

"What's his job, exactly?"

"Pallissuna? I gather he's a hundred ealdor — the leader of the folk from an area of one hundred hides. You know what a hide is? — land measure for taxing. Each five hides is supposed to pay for the upkeep of one man-at-arms and one backup, plus their horses and weapons. Probably this is a pickup group for our reception."

"Hmm. What of our mission and what's happening here?"

"We didn't go into it much. You could probably see even with my so-called knowledge of Anglo-Saxon, communication wasn't easy. Partly dialect, I imagine, since we're a good distance from *Witanceaster* — Winchester — but also my skills aren't the absolute highest, and back uptime we only *think* we know what pronunciation was back here. It's based on deductions from poetry and analogies with other Germanic languages and later versions of English."

"Are we likely to be drawing pay or expenses from the state or king?"

"I've no idea at this point."

"Will we be an official part of the English army?"

"Doubtful."

"Can we recruit trained warriors?"

"We'll know when we try."

"You've no clue as to where we'll settle nor how we'll be received?"

"Not as yet."

"Is our transportation going to stay with us?"

"Hasn't been negotiated."

Swann mulled this. "So all we know is the approximate date, and that William is presumably due several months from now, when we'll be facing the fight of our lives."

"Uh... Right."

* * *

LeeAnn felt sick at heart at the idea of losing her companion, Tony. She loved him, and she felt he loved her, despite some of his behavior. He needed her for support and assistance, and if he often took her money while rarely earning his own, it was only that he was unable — because he *couldn't* hold a job, not because he wouldn't.

Sure, Mister D meant well — she acknowledged it. But he'd no right — no right at all! What would Tony do without her?

She knew exactly what had brought this on, despite the fairytale about escorting Sheila. He knew Tony got physical with her. Even long sleeves and high collars let bruises show from time to time, and Mister D had seen them.

She'd said nothing — ever. Then came the time Tony lost control and marked her face. Her fault, in a way, because she'd decided to take a stand against giving him drug money.

Next day had been Friday, so she needed to go in to pick up her check. Dimarico saw the damage and got so angry! *He* hadn't lost control — he never did, no matter what. Still, he insisted on taking her to the emergency room for treatment. Ridiculous!

He'd given her a big lecture, wanting take her home and have Tony arrested or toss him through the window. A knight in shining armor! Exactly what she needed — *not*!

Tony would one day improve, she knew. Certainly he looked better since she'd taken him in and made him eat regular meals — and got him to cut back on the alky. The one serious problem was drugs. Poor Tony was a sucker for any new sensation, always looking for a magic potion to make him feel on top of the world with no bad side effects. Cockamamie, of course.

Tony needed her — that was the critical thing. And she needed someone to cherish. She was as bad off as he, in a way.

As they trudged along her mood lifted, despite rain and the wet brush they struggled through, and she began to criticize herself for being so involved in her own problems, neglecting the needs of others. Poor Edith, for instance — in pain, riding in a horribly bumpy wagon under a jury-rigged tent she couldn't see out of, with no one to talk to.

She worked her way over to the tail of the wagon and tried to jump up. The English guy, Small, gave her a boost with his hand on her butt, probably trying to get a free feel. She didn't much mind, and gave him a quick grin of thanks.

"Edie! Is there room for me in here? Let me get away from the rain for awhile. How are you feeling? I'm so sorry for you, cooped up in here. What do you think of these Saxon guys, huh? Kinda crude, I think. Did you notice how they blow their noses? Eeww! I used my handkerchief in front of one of them, and you'd think I pulled a magic trick."

Lachey gave a wan smile and LeeAnn's heart bounded. It felt so good to help someone who was hurting.

"Is there anything I can do for you, Honey? Well, let me know. And if I'm blathering too much, say so. I know it's my weakness."

* * *

The townsfolk — if one could call this hamlet a town — were informed they'd be supplying food and shelter for the party. The Saxons took over the largest house, allotting a modest-sized barn to the uptime men. For the women, they peremptorily displaced a family.

LeeAnn ran up. "Mister D! We can't kick those people out — where can they go?"

"With someone else or into a barn."

"Well, that's not fair!"

"Don't worry, they'll be compensated. In fact..." He handed her some silver. "I intended to give everyone a few pennies for pocket money."

"Five dimes!" she wailed. "I can't offer them this!"

"Right, LeeAnn — you'll give them only one or two *peninges*. Money here is worth a lot more than you think. Go on, hand it to them."

She doubted, but upon slipping two pennies into the hand of the wife she received

smiles and bobbing that in turn buoyed her up. After hugging the children she skipped back to Dimarico.

"Did you see that? What gratitude!"

"Sure. You probably gave them the equivalent of a week's wages."

* * *

Darkness closed in, and while they ate in the drizzle Dimarico gathered them around the wagon. The townsfolk had retired, but from the sound of it Ecglaf and his merry men had a drinking party going in the big house.

"I'm going to give you each five *peninges* — silver pennies — for walking-around money."

A few jokes and satirical looks met this distribution.

"You may laugh, but this is significant money here and now. This stew and tomorrow's breakfast cost me two and a half, plus a half I gave as a tip. I've rented the barn and whatever other services and usages we'll need for two pennies more. Try that in London or LA. I advise you to make it last, and don't let these people take advantage once they see you're rich... Yes, I mean *rich*, by their standards. LeeAnn, here's the two you spent."

Manaea caught his attention and flicked a finger toward one side. Dimarico looked and saw one of the Saxons peering at them with a rapt expression.

"*Ic greet the* — I greet you," Dimarico said. "*Hwaet eart thu* — Who are you?"

The man stalked rapidly away, Dimarico staring after him.

"OK, back to business. I realize you're tired and want to sleep — no surprise, so do I — but first Doctor Tobie will give us some good advice."

Tobie advanced with an expression compounded of resentment and irritation. His evening drink depended upon completion of this duty, and he didn't care for the compulsion one bit. And the blasted rain!

He handed out small cardboard shakers.

"Flea powder!" someone exclaimed.

"Yeah, it's flea powder. What'd you expect — sachet? Sprinkle this around where you plan to sleep and where you put your clothes. Also, you'd better rub a little on your pants up to the knees, cause they can jump a foot. What? No, I am *not* kidding. And you'd better also remember they can carry bubonic plague and a couple other diseases."

"Plague!"

"Lucky for us, plague hasn't appeared in Europe yet, far as I know, but you've got typhus and tularemia. Well, mostly irritation from the bites is the problem, but—"

"We'll spray the buildings before you settle in, to thin the wildlife," Dimarico said.

"Jack, I'd like someone to check on this — see it's done right."

Swann passed the buck. "Sergeant, will you and Kinnard take care of the spraying

and see things are orderly? Keep the cans hidden from the locals."

"Aye-aye, sir."

"You better not waste these, either," Tobie went on, "cause there's not much more than what you have."

Some muttering greeted this remark.

"Folks," Dimarico interjected, "we've got some long-term flea preventative as well — rotenone and such. Still — waste not, want not. Go on, Doctor."

Tobie grimaced at the interruption. "Better remember lice are another problem, and flea powder won't do anything for them. Think of that the next time you're hugging and kissing these people."

With a little sneer he looked at Dasczo.

"You're mean!" she exclaimed.

"I'm only —"

"You're only trying to be obnoxious and mean! You're mad because you didn't want to be here, and now you're taking it out on us."

"I'm only... What I said —"

"I heard what you said, and you're mean and sneaky and obnoxious!"

Tobie's obvious discomfiture drew laughs. Quite willing to cross swords with Dimarico or Swann, he was at a loss when attacked by a woman, particularly one with justice on her side.

He looked to Dimarico. "Cameron...?"

"Go on, Doctor. Keep to the script."

Glancing at LeeAnn then down at the ground, he began again.

"The, er — the water here — you'd better not drink it. Either boil it or... well, you can use those pills but boiling is better. If you put a pill in your canteen make sure it dissolves, and don't drink any for at least fifteen or twenty minutes. And... and make sure the water looks clean. I mean, if you get water from somewhere, make sure there's no mud or anything in it — and if muddy water's all there is, let it settle before you fill your canteen, cause disinfectant won't work well in dirty water.

"You might be tempted to drink from a nice clean-looking pond or stream — well, don't! I bet there's not a quart of water anywhere around here uncontaminated with E coli and God knows what else, and you can't tell by looking at it. You'll come across a little rill trickling over moss and rocks, thinking it's pristine, but sure as anything there's some shepherd upstream who's squatted down next to it. Or if he hasn't, his sheep have, or maybe a deer or duck or turtle. And you'd better believe me, every one of them is a reservoir for intestinal disease."

"What about the meat?" someone asked.

"Make sure it's well-cooked — pork above all. In fact, don't eat anything that hasn't been cooked good and hot clear through. Don't drink fresh milk. Stick to cheese and butter — and aged cheese is safer than new. If it's a fresh vegetable or fruit, you'd better

peel it yourself rather than let these people do it — there's precious little in the way of hand sanitizer here."

"Don't they even have soap?" Brian asked.

"No."

"Yes, they do," Dimarico corrected. "They should have soft soap, but how common it is I don't know. We'll look into it soon as possible."

"Soapwort, too."

"What, Edith?"

"A plant you can make suds with."

"OK, better yet. Go on, Bob."

"Well, er, guess that's it. All I can say is, don't get sick. I've only got horse antibiotics to treat you with, plus disinfectant and painkillers and such."

He seemed to take pleasure in giving out this bad news.

"Why in Christ's name haven't you brought some decent pharms?" Brixby said.

"You think it's simple to get these things? I can't write prescriptions like an allopath or osteo! Same thing with insecticide. Best thing would have been DDT, but try to lay your hands on that! And I wasn't expecting to spend forever in this Godforsaken barbaric hole."

He was becoming maudlin, in need of his drink.

"OK, good enough. Major, your turn."

Swann stepped forward as Tobie, still muttering defensively, edged away to his accustomed place beside Koskinen.

"Our gear, except for what the women need, goes into the barn." Some groans attended this announcement. "Also, we'll put... say, eight coffers into their hut so they can block the door. You and Brenneman can handle them — right, LeeAnn?

"We'll mount guard duty tonight — two hours per. How many of you, in direct contravention of our instructions, kept your watches?" Several hands tentatively rose. "I figured — and with luminous dials, I hope. Gephart and I will take the first, Sutton and Brixby the next, the Sergeant and Kinnard, Small and Pierce, Gephart and me again, and so on."

"What about me?" Sheila asked.

He ignored her. "We'll watch from inside unless we need to check the women's hut for any reason."

"Jack! Why aren't you including me?"

"It's *Major*. And you'll be guarding your own hut. Take a spear. Stay awake until the others drop off, and I'll expect you to wake at first light. Sleep with your clothes and shoes on. If anything startles you — regardless of what — you are to wake up completely, sit up and grab your weapon, and listen for a few minutes before lying down again. If anyone tries to break in, raise a shout so we can hear it — make it loud. That clear, Brenneman?"

"Yeah, whatever."

"You other two are to arm yourselves, but you can take your shoes off, at least."

Sheila didn't respond to the humor.

"All this is serious. Security is not some useless caper."

"You don't want me to take a turn?" Dimarico asked.

"Old men are exempt," Swann joked. "You'll be immediately wakened if anything needs your attention."

"By the way, all of you, if anything happens on your watches — other than a direct attack, of course — you are to wake me or the Sergeant before attempting any action. We'll pass judgment on whatever it is. Night guard is going to be standard operating procedure while we're on this trip, so get used to it."

* * *

Kinnard hated the loss of sleep. Besides, this idea of scanning for trouble was a farce. He couldn't see a thing on this dark cloudy night, and he couldn't hear anything except rain dripping from the eaves, and the snoring of those enjoying delicious sleep.

The idea of Dimarico pulling this trick! Pretending they could go back to 2008 when all along it wasn't going to happen. This wasn't the future he'd planned. He already felt homesick for his previous life, even having to abandon his poor dog, good old Plugger. Well, *dogs*, actually.

He'd enjoyed his hobbies, and he'd dealt with the new library aide whom he might try to talk to one day. Pretty sure she was single, and she didn't seem an outgoing and popular type of girl with whom he'd never have a chance. And the friendly clerk at the convenience store.

Now he had something else to worry him. Bad enough he'd abandoned his models — and surely someone would break in and smash them for the fun of it — but he'd forgot his last library books. Why the devil hadn't he thought to take them back? The girl would think him a real fool when they stayed overdue for months and years.

But here came Manaea whispering something concerning staying awake. Have to stand up straight and not slump over the boxes they'd stacked up in the opening. He'd try to think about the present to pass the time and take his mind off his troubles.

The Saxons seemed interesting, he guessed. The carts and wagon were crude, although he'd been surprised by the running gear of the wagon — the front axle pivoted. Somehow he hadn't expected it back here. The wheels appeared odd, though — tilted out at the top, and the spokes not square between hub and tire. He couldn't make sense of it. Badly made? Seemed unlikely.

The carts were clumsy — wheels made from three boards held together by cross pieces. And screech to wake the dead. But the wagon's wheels? What was going on there? He tried to make a comparison to autos — caster, camber, toe-in. The wagon

seemed to have only camber.

Good grief — Manaea here again to bother him. Oh! His shift was up.

~

Chapter 22 ~ Better Than None

Before sunup, Manaea came to Swann as he supervised loading.

"Major, you notice the escort?"

Swann took another look at the Saxons moving back and forth from their quarters.

"They've added spare mounts and some horse-holders."

"One's missing."

Swann didn't ask whether Manaea was sure. "Which one, and why?"

"The one guy who spied on us last night, pretty sure."

"Is Cameron aware? Has he questioned the Saxon?"

"Came to you first, sir."

"Tell him, and ask him to ask Ecglaf what the reason is. Suggest he observe him closely, because in case he sent someone off to get help in dealing with us, a clue would be useful. Understand?"

"Absolutely, Major."

"Take a good gander at the others. See if they're on edge — getting nerved up for something, or arming up. For now, don't let on to our troops."

"Aye-aye, sir."

The sergeant strode off, and Swann tried to keep his mind on the job at hand but couldn't keep his eyes away from their escort. He saw Manaea converse with Dimarico, then stroll toward the Saxons, head swiveling to take everything in. After a suitable pause, Dimarico walked toward the Saxon chief, calling a greeting.

Sutton and Small now carried Lachey to the wagon, handing her up to Pierce, who helped her into her shelter. As the men walked away to help load other gear, Swann stuck his head over the side and whispered to her as she lay with her head by the open end of the tent.

"How do you feel? Enjoy your first night in a hut?"

"Pretty well — it wasn't bad."

"No fleas?"

She gave a thin smile. "I didn't feel any bites."

"Do you know how to use a firearm?"

"What! Are you expecting trouble?"

"Maybe — but don't let on to anyone yet."

"I've never fired a gun — do you want to teach me?"

He liked this apparent show of spirit. "No. Take too long, and we don't want to

display them. What do you have for a weapon?"

"Only this camp knife I was given."

"Well... Look, it's not raining today yet. And if this mist cooks off... Can you sit up comfortably?"

"I think so, if I can prop my legs on something."

"After everything is loaded, I'll have Small and Pierce — they'll be the guards up here — arrange the boxes and such. I want you to sit facing backwards so you can keep an eye to the rear and sides. If there's trouble it'll probably be from behind, and everyone else will be facing forward. OK?"

"Yes, I can do it."

"If you see something, direct your call to me or Saipele or Cameron. Raise your voice so we can hear, but don't screech and get everyone shook up."

"Yes, I... Yes."

"Call out a name, and when you've got his attention briefly describe what you see — such as, *Two men on the hill at eight o'clock*. You know the clock system?"

"I think so."

"Which way's twelve? Yeah, head of the parade. What about six? Good. Where's four-thirty? OK, that's a trick question — use whole hours."

She nodded, face tight with concentration.

"I'll talk to you again, and you can call me over anytime I'm not busy."

He noticed Dimarico had left Ecglaf's side.

"See you."

He started to jog toward Dimarico, but immediately dropped into a walk. No need to excite the spectators.

* * *

More oxen pulled each vehicle, so they needn't push today. Dimarico walked on the left side of the treasure cart, conversing with Ecglaf. Swann gave the Saxon a sharp look but saw nothing threatening as yet. The *fyrðing* — militia band — trailed loosely behind, and last came a dozen or so ponies led by three youths.

Dimarico, Sutton and Manaea — the latter walking on the near side of the column — each wore hauberk and helm, and a shield slung over the shoulders by a strap round the neck.

He started with the rear cart and its guard — Brenneman and Brixby with bows, Gephart and Kinnard carrying spears. What a crew! He hoped Brixby's military experience and Gephart's natural phlegmatism would keep them cool in an emergency. Once again he longed for men with combat experience.

"We think there might be trouble today, and we don't know from whom or where. Without making it too obvious, I want you to keep your eyes open for any movement

off our flanks."

He drilled them briefly in clock orientation and signals.

"After ten minutes or so I want somebody sitting on the cart-tail at all times, ostensibly taking a rest but actually watching our rear. Take it in turns, starting with you, Dale. And watch our escort back there. At this point we don't know whom we can trust, so we won't trust anyone. String your bows whenever there's potential ambush concealment within a couple-hundred yards — even when we halt to eat. Don't relax or let your guard down if nothing happens for awhile.

"If a fight looks to start, get behind the cart or oxen — don't leave yourself open to direct attack. If they come round the cart at you, the spears will have to keep them away while the archers pick them off, even though you guys don't have armor or shields. That's an oversight we'll correct as soon as we can. Stay together and don't run — you'll be picked off individually if you do."

"Major, have you noticed the wagon wheels?" Kinnard asked.

"What?"

"The wheels on the wagon — they're crooked. Did you notice?"

"No time for that now."

He moved up the column, easily passing the slow oxen. He merely nodded at Manaea — they'd gone over contingencies before leaving camp.

According to what Ecglaf had told Dimarico, the missing man was Wulfnoth Aelfcild — the nickname translating to Elf's Heir, signifying he was weird and unpredictable. A landless thegn, he'd lost his property after getting crosswise with a deacon or some such in a quarrel over the rights to fish in a stream bordering their two properties.

Regardless of whose part ideal justice might have taken, Aelfcild's defense of his claims included an attack upon the deacon's men, and the hundred court laid a heavy fine. He'd lost his land and nearly lost his freedom. Resentment hung heavily upon him. Ecglaf reckoned theft of Dimarico's treasure might be a way for Aelfcild to recoup his fortune, even at the risk of outlawry.

This, at least, was the story he told. To Swann's suspicious mind, the Saxon chief might instead have sent his minion away to gather reinforcements before both attacked the American column.

At the wagon, LeeAnn now sat next to Lachey.

"How's it going here?"

"Real swell, Major, but I can't get her to face around frontwise. She wants to look at those English guys. Must be sweet on one of them."

Swann felt a rush of warmth toward Lachey. Told to keep things to herself, she'd obviously obeyed.

"That's because, young Miss Dasczo, we're expecting trouble, and you two are our rear lookouts."

"We are?" LeeAnn's eyes bugged wide. "How do we...?"

Swann turned away to avoid laughing.

"Sit here and look normal, but keep a good eye to the rear and on either side, say from four to eight o'clock. Do you know...? Well, you explain it to her, Edith. The main thing is to watch those behind us, but also to the sides in case someone joins them. I'm worried these guys — our escort — plan to make their fortunes as pirates."

"You're kidding, aren't you? Oh my God! This is so exciting! Edie, did you know this? What'll we do if they come after our scalps?"

This time he did laugh. She showed no fear, only enthusiasm. "Edith'll explain," he said, and reached up to give Dasczo's cheek a little pinch — she looked so cute in her excitement — then continued toward the front of the column.

LeeAnn leaned toward Lachey. "Oh dear — I think I've been sexually harassed."

Lachey's eyes widened. "What! Did that bother you?"

"Hardly ever does, Honey." She winked roguishly.

* * *

Tobie and Koskinen sauntered along forty feet in advance of the lead oxen. As Swann neared they stopped talking but ignored his presence.

"Listen up, you two."

Koskinen sneered, "I don't involve myself in your directives, Generalissimo."

Tired from lack of sleep and stressed by the responsibility of attempting to organize their protection with few resources, this impertinence enraged Swann. He grabbed Koskinen by the shoulder and balled his other fist.

"Listen to me, smart-ass, or I'll tie and gag you, and drag you behind a cart." Koskinen hardly flinched but Tobie attempted to interfere, earning a shove that sent him staggering.

While the two glared with indignation, Swann growled, "We're expecting to be attacked. If you've got half the brains you think you have, you'll move back into the column. These people," He flicked a thumb toward the Saxons. "...would happily cut your throat in order to strip the clothes from your body."

"Do you expect us to believe—"

"Believe what you want! And believe this, too — my job is to protect the column. If you want protection, you'd better be in it!"

He stomped off.

* * *

They rolled steadily for two hours through open country offering little concealment for a large party. The track ahead, however, led across a stream, and beside it through a wooded pass between two hills. Swann moved next to Dimarico.

"Cam, when we pass the stream, let's stop for a break. See if your boy is willing to scout the wooded area for bandidos."

"As suspicious as you are, you'll trust him to give an honest report?"

"Let's see how he reacts. We've got nothing to lose, and if their plan is to trail behind us, I'd prefer to force them in front. Whereas if he doesn't want to go..."

"Fair enough — when we reach the stream."

"Where's the smoke-pole?"

"Under the air mattress in the tent."

"Assembled and loaded?"

"Of course."

"Anyone see you?"

"Edith — I did it in the tent."

"She know what to do?"

"Hand it to me, you, or Saipele when we ask."

"Better you or him, since I'm not familiar with it."

"Two triggers. Safety lever on the left side — down is safe, up is shooting. You'll see red when it's up."

"OK, back on patrol."

"You're going to be worn out, Jack. Sure you don't want Saipele to do the prowling?"

"I want three Saipeles — one for each cart. But this is bound to be the main target, and I think having you two together will be more effective than if spread out. You holding up alright under the armor?"

"It's not too bad, but hot with the padding. The main irritation is the skirts dragging on my thighs. We ought to be able to pin them back the way soldiers' coats were in Revolutionary War days."

"And paint them in contrasting colors, I suppose."

When Swann reached the rear he evicted Sheila from the cart-tail and rode it himself until they reached the stream.

* * *

As the Engisc jogged slowly away, leaving their horse-handlers behind the column, the uptimers reconnoitered the stream, then forded and camped to brew tea. Dimarico invited the three young Saxons to join them but those worthies declined to break from their duties.

Showed good discipline, Swann supposed. Either that, or squeamishness about socializing with future victims.

Kinnard moped around as if he hadn't a friend in the world, and Swann recalled not simply snubbing him this morning but giving him a hard time before making the

jump. He mulled exchanging the interest of a discussion with Dimarico for the boredom of a lecture from Kinnard.

"What were you getting at with the wheels?"

Kinnard brightened and jumped to his feet.

"Look at them, Major. Notice how the spokes are at an angle to the plane of the rim — like dished in — and how the tops of the wheels tip out?"

Swann failed to share the enthusiasm. "Don't they all, more or less?"

"Hmm? What do you mean by *all*?"

"I haven't exactly made a study of this, but I've seen carts and such in backward countries before, and kind of remember the same thing. I mean, when they have spoked wheels instead of boards."

Kinnard was struck by this. "What did they use to do in America? If we knew, we could at least know whether it's on purpose or bad workmanship."

Swann shrugged. "Bet they have a reason. Good luck figuring it out."

He escaped to get a cup of tea with Dimarico.

* * *

"Sit, Jack. You still convinced we need to take wagons with us to the big one?"

"Sure am. This idea of going to war with a bag of flour, a jug of ale and a chaw of jerky might be romantic, but we're looking forward to a day-long battle, tired hungry thirsty wounded troops, and probably thousands of arrows shot."

"Why so many arrows? William's expected to have barely six or eight thousand troops, and you aren't going to be responsible for all them."

"Look, Cam — in an archery contest, it's at least seventy-two arrows. If we manage to recruit as few as a hundred men, it would take more than seven thousand arrows."

"If! And if it were a contest."

"And on future marches we won't want to be wearing armor and carrying knapsacks and blanket rolls and shields, so they'll go in a wagon. We'll also want to take our own food rather than depend on buying or stealing it on the way, and we'll probably need a half-gallon of water per man per day."

"Still —"

"And firewood — because the countryside will be stripped bare by those ahead of us. Plus medical equipment, and extra tack and fodder for the horses."

"You plan to take hay? Can't they get by on grass for a few days?"

"The old-timers took horse-feed. It was a limiting factor as much as food for the men. I'm telling you, Cam, good logistics is what makes for success on campaign."

"Several *thousand* arrows?"

"This battle, assuming it goes according to history, will last from near sunup to after sundown — maybe ten hours. During that time William is supposed to make what —

four, six, eight attacks? Say he makes only four — I'm being conservative — and let's say each lasts half an hour — ten minutes each for archers, infantry and cavalry. A hundred-twenty minutes, and a good archer is capable of making ten aimed shots per minute."

Dimarico snorted.

"Oh, I agree. His arms would fall off if his fingers didn't go first. So let's say, due to lack of good targets, fatigue, need to replace bowstrings... instead of one shot every six seconds he makes one every twenty — a lifetime during battle. Still three hundred-sixty arrows!"

"But Jack," Dimarico said in a deceptively mild tone, "that's umm... thirty-six thousand shots for a hundred archers. Wouldn't you think when half his army is down, the Duke might be inclined to call it a day?"

"Ah! Now I see your problem. How many shots do you think it'll take to put an enemy out of action?"

"You tell me."

"OK. Let's say one of three hits its target."

"I hope you're kidding, and you mean *two* of three."

"Nope. The excitement of battle, moving targets, a lot of shots at maximum range or beyond. Next, figure most of those will get stopped — or at least slowed — by shields and armor, and simply inflict nicks and cuts which won't sufficiently injure a man."

"You think a minor wound won't at least slow a man down?"

"Oh, maybe. But there have been modern cases... One I can think of at Chosin, where our guy took five bullets while running around barefoot in the snow — took his boots off while sleeping — and still kept fighting."

"Good Lord!"

"None of those shots hit the head or abdominal cavity, I imagine, but you can see why the occasional flesh wound isn't going to take a man down, particularly using these bodkin tips. And how many rounds do you think it takes to cause a severe casualty in modern combat?"

"Go on."

"I've seen — taken part in — combats where a whole platoon empties its weapons, perhaps more than once. And when you take the objective all you find is one or two bodies... or sometimes none. Sure, maybe the wounded were helped to escape. Maybe they even carried off some of their dead. Still — a thousand rounds or more, counting automatic weapons, and that's what you have to show for it."

Dimarico shook his head, saying, "Well, I'll tell you one thing, we can't use these lousy slow oxcarts that look ready to break down and hardly go two miles an hour. We need to have draft horses and the best wagons we can find."

"I agree — Conestogas or similar. And if they don't know how to make them, we have to show them."

Dimarico laughed. "Do you realize what you're asking? Poor Dale is going to have to sharpen his pencil and go to work. No computer or CAD — he'll be a nervous wreck!"

Considering Kinnard's recent enthusiasm, he might be fine. But before Swann could share this insight, the Saxons came into sight.

* * *

Ecglaf grinned as he spoke to Dimarico.

"He says they found nothing, Jack — no signs. And he adds you needn't be scared — he'll take care of us. I'm not sure whether he means to be insulting or merely boastful."

Swann frowned. "You tell him it's better to look and find nothing, than not to look and have something find you."

Dimarico composed this, then passed it on. Ecglaf listened and broke into loud laughter, adding a phrase.

"You speak truly, Jack — that's what he says."

Swann smiled grimly. He now took his place on the right side of the column. The stream offered many potential hiding places as it cut a deeper ravine nearing the hills.

In time they entered a low pass. The trail compressed between hillside and gully, becoming steeper and rougher. Many places needed attentive monitoring — copses and small woods, patches of rocks and bushes, folds and cuts in the hillsides — but nothing seemed likely to hide a large group of men and their horses.

Swann relaxed slightly. Perhaps it would take more than one day to organize an attack, and every day gained meant increased experience for his force. And who knew? Perhaps there would be no attack — perhaps this Aelfcild had simply gone AWOL.

Yet he wouldn't be passing such a hopeful thought to the troops.

Early afternoon they reached the top of the pass, negotiated their way around the bog which sourced the stream, and started a gradual climb leading to a heavily wooded area. On this nearly level stretch they stopped to rest and eat again. The fyrd rode before them since rejoining, although the horse-holders still trailed.

The two parties mingled at this lunch, as Dimarico broke out his stores of food.

Swann stayed alert and counseled the others to do likewise. Some, at least, heeded his advice. A thought came, and he told his two shield-less spearmen to wrap cloaks around their left arms once travel resumed — poor protection but better than none.

~

Chapter 23 ~ It Won't Kill You

"A few miles and we'll sight Ecglaf's village," Dimarico announced. "Perhaps three

hours, considering how the oxen are dragging."

Pallissuna ranged ahead reconnoitering the wooded area. An excellent place for an ambush, Swann thought, but the nearness of the settlement reassured him.

At the end cart Brixby greeted him with raised arm.

"Hail, Caesar! *Morituri te salutamus!*"

Sheila gave a big guffaw and Kinnard tittered nervously.

I wish! Swann muttered, thinking of the *mori* part, but otherwise ignoring him.

"Let's continue to stay alert, folks — we're not home yet."

"And likely never to be," Brixby added.

More laughter from the two main suspects but Gephart's face stayed stony. He didn't like Brixby, and sure didn't want to see the Major putting up with the clown. As for himself, he treated this as serious business, the way Jack wanted them to. Why couldn't these fools stick to it for a few more hours? His arm felt hot and heavy under the blanket, and his side hurt plenty — must have strained it more during the uphill march.

And look at Kinnard, the dork, undoing his blanket again to give his arm some relief. *Put up with it — it won't kill you!* What if somebody came running at them right now? Probably drop the thing and trip over it.

* * *

As they approached the wooded area the fyrding formed in front of them, but you could see they hadn't gone far into the forest — too thick.

Swann examined either side. They marched on a slightly raised path, while trees filled the lower areas to right and left. Elm, beech, ash, linden and others towered above. The track, a good sixty feet wide here, showed evidence of long maintenance, at least in the cutting back of trees and bushes. Branches were trimmed high on the trunks, perhaps to supply firewood, but giant limbs drooped to hedge in the sky.

To the right the woods were open. To the left — which faced southerly — saplings and bushes grew thickly between. Most were leafless but some appeared half evergreen and others — the beeches at least — retained many of last year's faded leaves. In this tree-lined corridor the breeze hardly blew, but scattered clouds scudded across the sky, shadows mottling the caravan. The effect was beautiful yet hinted a threat.

Down the wide aisle they silently plodded, oppressed by the lowering sun's dim light, peering apprehensively from side to side, their rear-viewing sentinels — the two women, at least — straining their eyes toward where the remounts maintained position.

A couple of hundred yards from the end of this mile-long passage Dimarico noticed a stir ahead as the Saxons reined in. Other horsemen moved to block the path where it entered a clearing. The Saxons moved forward again, Ecglaf shouting a challenge. The strangers turned and raced away, and the escort charged after with a roar, abandoning

the Americans.

Dimarico looked for instructions. "Jack!"

"Keep moving," Swann replied. He shouted to the convoy, "Nock arrows! *Everyone* — draw your weapons and get ready." His instincts shouted ambush. The escort had either been suckered or were part of the plot.

On they went. Two hundred yards to the open, one fifty, one hundred — Swann began to hope.

From bushes on the left at the opening plunged an armed man — byrnie, helm, sword and shield. Two bowmen followed, and the chieftain flourished his sword and shouted. The lead wagon halted, and although the other carters had been instructed to close up, their instincts took over — they stopped and took cover.

"Jack!" Dimarico yelled. "He says our lives are worth more than our wealth, and we should —"

"Brian — kill that man for me."

Pierce raised and drew, but as he released could predict a miss, the swordsman already running for the bushes. The two bowmen replied.

Swann shrank within himself at the sight of arrows arcing down but shot simultaneously with Small. One of the swing oxen on the treasure cart plunged and bellowed, struck in its hindquarters. As Swann nocked and drew again the outer bowman doubled over and staggered toward cover. The second enemy released an un-aimed arrow and leaped behind the brush.

Sutton heard rather than saw the attack from the side, his attention riveted on the drama at the head of the column. By instinct he raised his shield in time to intercept a javelin, the shock startling him with its force. He hacked at the shaft in an attempt to rid his shield of the drag, but spearmen were charging and there was no time. He backpedaled until he struck the cart, realizing how frighteningly this differed from their games back in the US.

The move saved his life, for he faced three attackers, and ideas of scientific swordplay evaporated.

When Gephart saw attackers pouring from the woods near the last cart he stepped toward them and raised his spear. Immediately recollecting the major's instructions, he pivoted and ran around the rear of the cart. As Kinnard moved off the cart-tail like a man in a dream, he grabbed him with his left hand, encumbered though it was by the blanket, dragging him behind the cart and dropping him at his feet. A mis-aimed spear snaked across the cart at him — striking the wicker side.

Brixby was too battle-wise to direct all his attention to the action at front, and managed to glimpse the start of the Saxon charge at their cart. He drew and released a quick shot, then turned to run around the oxen to the right side, nocking another arrow as he went. But as he reached the lead ox, a man armored in leather, one of Sutton's attackers, spotted him and turned, raising his spear. Should he continue his run, Brixby

would be forced to turn his back on a likely attack. He froze.

A sudden realization shocked Brenneman. Swann was right — they were in a serious situation, and she should have been paying attention. When the side attack started she crouched down near the front of the cart, unsure what to do. As Gephart and Kinnard appeared and stood at bay she rose to peek over the cart sides. What she saw didn't encourage her — several men were reaching for Gephart with their spears. And here came one running wide around the back of the cart!

At the challenge in front Lachey and Dasczo turned to see the action. As the bandit arrows rose Dasczo yelled, "Duck!" and they slid off the boxes to cower on the floor. Lachey's feet struck the tailgate, and she groaned in pain.

Dimarico sensed the Saxon charge in time to duck a javelin which flew over his head. He started toward the front of the string so as to get behind the wagon per Swann's orders, but the attackers closed in — he would be cut off and speared from the back. He tried to get between the wheel and swing oxen to jump the cart tongue, but the plunging of the hurt ox on the other side prevented it. He turned at bay, shield and sword raised, his backside precariously nestled between the head of one ox and the rump of another.

Immediately judging the Saxon arrows would strike nowhere near, Manaea tore his eyes from the front to scan his side for a threat from the right. Shouts and a javelin striking near spun him around to left, and he saw half a dozen men racing toward Sutton and Dimarico. Although ordered to defend from behind the train, the situation had changed, and he bolted for the front of the ox string to come to his employer's aid.

Pierce cursed himself for his bad shot. To the front he saw nothing. He spun left toward the attackers, unsure what to do — they were too mingled with his own people to pick a clear target. He looked to Swann for guidance but got none, and pivoted back to the front, his bow half drawn. An arrow came from behind the bush where the Saxons had gone to earth, striking a high stalk and deflecting wide. He drew and shot back, knowing as he did it was another wasted missile.

Small, his attention on the attack from in front, was surprised when men burst out of the wood near the treasure cart. He raised and drew but could see no clear shot, took a couple of hesitant steps away from the column to get a better angle, drew again... Wait! Here came the big Sergeant charging past and blocking his view.

Swann caught the action starting at the treasure cart and stepped that way, drawing full for a careful shot. As he did a movement from the tail caught his eye, and he saw one of the attackers swing wide to come down the near side of the column, ready to take their defense in the flank. He turned to this more critical threat, aimed and released. To his horror he saw Sheila jump out as his arrow left the bow, and feared she might take it in the back.

Brixby shot on the run without drawing fully. The arrow took the Saxon in the hip and he stumbled, spearpoint dropping. Brixby scampered past the oxen and halted,

irresolute whether to move forward to the treasure cart or back to help the rear.

Sutton managed to deflect a couple of thrusts with shield and sword-flat, but one from the left drove through his shield and pricked his forearm. He quickly pivoted to his right, trapping the spear before the point could be withdrawn. He deflected another thrust from his right, sliding his sword down the spear-shaft. A weak stroke, but the tip gained sufficient momentum to cut through his attacker's gauntlet, slashing knuckles and almost severing the man's little finger. The fellow leaped back — but no joy.

My God! Sutton thought as he struggled with the man whose spear stuck in his shield, *Here comes another one!*

Kinnard, sprawling next to Gephart's legs, scrambled to his feet, almost losing his grip on his spear. The enemy facing Gephart saw an easier target and aimed a thrust at him. He tried to dodge but bumped into Gephart, the point grazing his head. The Saxon thrust again, this time tangling his spearpoint in the blanket trailing from Kinnard's arm.

Stung by his wounds, with some of the desperate courage of his Highland ancestors Kinnard scythed at the man's unprotected legs, slashing him at the knee.

With sudden inspiration Brenneman hopped from behind the two men and shot full at the Saxon running to get behind them. The attacker took two more steps before veering off the track, stumbling and tripping to sprawl on his side. *Yes!* she exulted, skipping back behind the men. Peeking over the cart while nocking, she ducked to avoid a spear thrust aimed right at her face — a weird thrill ran down her spine.

Dimarico found his hands full with an attack by an armored swordsman and two spearmen. The swordsman alternated strokes at his head and legs while the spears drove at his head and chest. A spear caught him with startling force on the right side of his coif, almost knocking him out. He stumbled against the wheel ox, which flicked its head, pushing him toward his enemies. He retained enough poise to take two quick steps and thrust at the nearest spearman, catching him in the forearm, then recovered to drive the swordsman back with a heavy cut at his shield. He saw the second spearman pull away to the right, giving him time to take a breath before the two remaining renewed their attacks.

The thrusts over top of the cart no more than inconvenienced Gephart. He had stepped far enough away so they barely reached him at the limit of their strokes, dealing light pricks at worst. The Saxon to his fore, however, got a partly-blocked thrusts past his flimsy blanket shield, piercing his upper arm and chest — making it difficult to keep his guard up.

The man now stumbled from Kinnard's slash, stretching his shield out in an effort to retain balance. Gephart thrust full force. His spear glanced off the shield to strike the man's leather helm, snapping his head back. He fell flat, but another stepped up to take his place.

Manaea charged down beside the ox string. A Saxon turned to face him, lifting his

shield to cover his face and thrusting blindly. Manaea brushed aside the spearpoint and crashed down an overhand blow, cleaving the shield and crushing the man's helm.

Without missing a stride he went for the next spearman, who backed rapidly away, his spear still extended from the last strike at Dimarico. Manaea cut at the shaft then drove into him, forearm and sword hilt smashing the man's shield into his face. The Saxon lurched back and fell.

Brixby saw an opening for a shot at a couple of the Saxons who were thrusting across the cart at Gephart. Checking to see his right side was clear, he stood upright, quickly aimed and released, then bent down to use the oxen for cover once more, glancing yet again toward his right to be sure he wasn't being flanked by a crafty opponent. Something was developing there. Weapons glinted as several men thrust and slashed, shrank back and advanced. Closely watching the action, he retreated to be sure no one could come round and flank him.

Sheila crept farther from the cart, then stood and peeked once more. A spear again flashed toward her, and she ducked. She drew as far as she could while bent over, then stood again to tempt the spear thrust. It came, falling nearly a foot short. She instantly raised her bow, releasing while the man recovered. She ducked once more and missed the result, but when she re-nocked and looked again, no thrust came.

Sutton took a hard spear strike on his shoulder, not penetrating his mail but temporarily numbing his sword arm. The Saxon raised his spear to thrust again but whirled to his left as Manaea charged at him. The man staggered from a blow that knocked the boss off his round shield, breaking the handle. He drew his spear back to ward Manaea's next cut but it was hacked down, the sword slashing into his biceps. He backpedaled and dropped to his knees in surrender, his shield rolling away.

Sutton managed to get inside the guard of his remaining assailant, and with his arm coming back to life, slashed at the man's legs. The fellow jumped back. Seeing the odds, the man turned and fled into the trees. Barry sagged in relief.

Dimarico thrust at his assailant, recovered and cut deeply into the man's shield, freeing his sword with difficulty. His opponent slashed back, cleaving Dimarico's shield, the sword only stopping when it struck his chain-mailed arm. Dimarico thrust at the man's face, then again, pricking the arm. The Saxon scrambled back and stood on guard, shield up and sword raised. Dimarico, feeling sick from the effects of the blow to his face, declined to pursue, lowering his sword-point.

The Saxon turned and slipped away between the trees. Brixby shot at him as he ran off, the arrow zipping past Manaea with inches to spare. He got a hard look from the Sergeant but nothing else for his effort.

Across from the wagon two more Saxons burst from the woods, a full-armed man and a bowman — the ones who had earlier blocked the track. The bowman stopped against a trunk and shot, the arrow striking Dimarico's uplifted shield. Small and Swann replied, and the next arrow slipped from the man's fingers. The swordsman ran

a few steps into the clear while assessing the situation, halted and immediately turned. As he slipped back into the trees an arrow from Pierce followed, piercing his hauberk and striking through to his buttock. The bowman joined him in retreat.

Gephart still faced three enemies, trading thrusts with one of them. Brixby shot at the two Saxons behind the cart, hitting the shield of one. They looked at one another, came to a decision and quickly departed. Kinnard dashed blood from his left eye and began to circle Gephart's opponent, his spear held underhand and stuck out as far as it would go. The man stepped back, undecided whether to attack or run. Gephart retreated, leaning on the cartwheel and lowering his spearpoint. Kinnard followed his lead.

Quick as a flash the Saxon flung away his spear and shield. Leaping forward, he grabbed a coffer from the cart, grasping it amidst the other gear, and ran toward the woods, cradling the heavy box. Swann drew and took aim, taking care to apply the proper lead. He loosed, and the arrow sank to its fletching in the man's near thigh.

The Saxon tripped and he fell hard on the box. Getting to his knees he again gripped the box, rose and tripped once more. A third time he struggled, and tripped again, sprawling over the coffer.

Brixby shot and the arrow skipped off the box's banding. This finished it.

Dropping the box, the man leaped to his feet, flapping his arms and taking prodigious jumps to clear the arrow stub, like a startled ostrich with the gout. Sheila raised her bow but broke into laughter and couldn't aim. He disappeared into the dim forest.

Swann lowered his bow and shook his head. The attack seemed to have ceased. He felt drained, though he doubted this concentrated display of violence had taken three minutes. He'd not thought once of the shotgun.

~

Chapter 24 ~ A Christian Deed

"Corpsman! Doc Tobie!" Manaea shouted.

Swann stared — he saw neither Sutton nor Dimarico. "Where is he, Sarge?"

"Down here, sir — hurt but alive."

Tobie stuck his head out from under the wagon, where he, Koskinen and the driver had sheltered. Hesitantly, he crawled into the open. "Do I need my bag?"

You idiot! Swann strode toward the wagon. "Girls?"

Two heads appeared.

"We're OK," LeeAnn chirped, "but I think I need to change my panties."

Everyone nearby — even Manaea — broke into tension-relieving laughter.

You aren't the only one, Swann thought. "Colin, Brian — get on guard. Sergeant?"

"All set, Major." Manaea faced outward, scanning the darkening forest.

Tobie, his kit retrieved, approached Dimarico with a shocked look. "Cameron!"

Dasczo scrambled off the wagon and ran to Tobie's side.

Swann scanned three-sixty, startled to find horses and holders gone, either down the trail or into the woods. His gaze fell on the last cart, and he broke into a run.

Blood soaked Kinnard's head and upper body. He lay on the ground, face on his right arm, while Sheila tried to stanch his slash with material ripped from her skirt.

She squealed, "He's bleeding like a stuck pig!"

"Use plenty of pressure."

Gephart slumped against the cartwheel, his face scratched and pale, eyes closed. Blood welled slowly from his chest and stained both arms and shoulders.

"Earl!"

"I'm hurtin', Jack. They chewed me up pretty good."

"Jesus!" Swann turned and ran through the gap to the other side of the treasure cart. He scanned Sutton, sitting with his head down beside the cart tail. "Barry?"

Sutton's head jerked up. "OK, Major — only smarting here and there."

"On guard, then."

He studied Dimarico, sitting with mail, pads and gauntlets beside him, Tobie and LeeAnn hovering.

"How is he?"

"Feeling rather poorly, I assume," Tobie snapped. "Broken jaw."

Swann could make out a large contusion on Dimarico's right jowl.

"Anything else?"

"I would think it's quite enough!" Tobie rasped.

"Very well — get down to the last cart. You've got two there."

"And I've a patient right here, you buffoon!"

Swann resisted the impulse to drag him to his feet by his thinning hair.

"Get up and go!" he shouted. "It's not a suggestion, blast you!"

Tobie gave him a full look now, opening his mouth to deliver a retort, but Dimarico clutched his arm and grunted, "Go!"

The doctor slowly rose to his feet, anger and resentment radiating from every pore. He gathered his kit and stalked off.

Swann, overcoming a mighty impulse to speed him along with a kick, took a deep breath and blew it out, noticing LeeAnn staring up at him.

"You, too," he said. "Run — it's serious."

As she went off he said, "Sorry, Cam."

Dimarico indicated acceptance.

"Major?" Manaea said, indicating a Saxon sitting on the turf a few yards away, head lowered and in obvious pain, left hand clamping his right upper arm, blood dripping through his fingers and dribbling down the arm.

"Jesus H...! How many of these do we have? We need more help. Colin! Do you know any first aid?" Small looked askance. "No? Brian! First aid? Come on over here."

Pierce arrived and Swann indicated the injured man. "Put your bow down and see what you can do for him. Signal him to come over here if he can get up, and be real careful in case he still has any fight left in him." A groan came from another figure, Manaea's second victim. "Sergeant?"

"I'll see what I can do with this one, Major."

"Jesus!" Swann said again. "How many are there?" Not expecting an answer, he turned and headed toward the back, stopping and shouting back to Small, "You've got the front and right side, Colin."

He still held a nocked arrow. He put it back in his quiver and slung the bow over his head. At the rear cart Gephart's shirt and undershirt were stripped off, blood trickling from several wounds.

"This man is *very* seriously hurt!" Tobie huffed, as if it were Swann's fault.

Ignoring him, he asked LeeAnn, now working on Kinnard's gash, "How is he?"

"I think we're stopping it, but he's gonna need stitches, and he's got other cuts, too."

"Is he conscious?"

"I can hear you — hear you," Kinnard slurred.

Swann looked a query at LeeAnn.

"I think he's not too bad," she said.

"Take it easy, Dale," Swann said. "You're in pretty good hands here."

He turned to Gephart and noticed Sheila hovering over the two casualties, taking everything in.

"You're not doing any good here — get on guard."

She straightened, immediately irate. "Well, that's a fine —"

"Gutsy work, by the way."

She stared at him for a second. "Where do you want me?"

He swung his arm to cover the entire rear and turned back to Gephart, only to have another thought strike. "What the holy...? Where's Brixby?"

"Right over here, Gen'rul," came a voice from the other side of the cart.

"Get on guard," he growled.

"Don't get in a lather, Chief. I *am* on guard, protecting you from the bandits of Jolly Old England."

"Then get up where I can see you!"

Brixby gusted a sigh and nonchalantly arose, a cigarette hanging from his lip. He cast a merry eye at Swann, supremely sure of himself.

"Get rid of the fag, and re-string your bow! It's still not party time," Swann told him, getting hotter by the second.

"None but good lads over here, Commodore," Brixby told him, taking another drag on his cigarette.

"Any Saxon casualties there?"

"There's a live Englishman — who would be me — and there's a dead one a few meters off, with my arrow stickin' through him."

Swann looked and — sure enough — a body lay near the edge of the woods.

"And there are a few more in the wood, I reckon, also carrying my mark," Brixby continued.

Thoroughly disgusted, Swann strode to Sheila's side.

"Did you really think that — what you said?" she asked.

"Certainly! I meant when you jumped out to down the one who was circling."

"I shot another one, too — across the cart."

"Good work — especially for a recruit." He could see her blush, even in the dimming light. "What the...? Here's another one."

"I think Earl must of got him."

Swann went over and cautiously knelt beside the man, ready for any movement — but the fellow seemed unconscious. "He's alive. Tobie!" he called. "You've got another customer here, and a couple more up by Cam."

The doctor replied with a wordless exclamation of disgust.

Manaea now shouted, "Major!"

Their Saxon escort was returning. Swann ran forward.

At first merely jogging along, the Saxons cantered up when they detected signs of the battle. Ecglaf leaped from his pony before it halted, tossing his shield and spear on the ground to kneel beside Dimarico. He and the others shouted queries.

"OK," Swann whispered to Lachey, "I guess we can put this away. They look pretty tame."

She pulled herself off the wagon floor and back on her seat. He emptied his pocket of shells, surreptitiously handing her the shotgun to hide.

"Stay watchful."

Despite his rapidly stiffening injury, Dimarico managed to communicate with Ecglaf, and the Saxons searched the woods, bringing back three prisoners in the failing light. One was the bowman Small and Swann first shot at. He had a wound in the flesh of his left side and low in his right abdomen. Another was Aelfcild himself, his backside drilled by Pierce's shot, but his escape primarily foiled by a twisted ankle. The third showed a wound in his hip that had downed him within fifty yards, his right leg cramped in pain.

The one Swann hit in the thigh had managed to bound away and hide.

Swann and Sheila rigged a couple of stretchers from hauberks and abandoned spears, and by means of gesture and example chivvied the carters into helping as bearers. The carts were pulled up to the wagon, a campfire started, the wounded and dead moved to an improvised aid station. As a light rain fell they decided to spend the night where they were, setting-up tents and tarps.

Tobie was so agitated Swann allowed him the drink he kept demanding, and promised another for later. The man directly calmed and went to his duties. Besides four Americans, he had eight Englisc to care for.

Two he washed his hands of. Manaea's first victim he diagnosed with severe concussion — breathing raggedly with an erratic pulse. When Swann asked what could be done, Tobie responded, "Keep him warm, and bury him in the morning."

The Bowman's chances he also disdained. "Blood loss and a gut shot — gone in a week." He removed the arrows — not an easy job with the one stuck in the pelvis.

"He's got holes in the intestine. And don't expect me to go in there and operate, cause I'm not up to it."

When Swann inquired as to how many drinks it would take to make him *up to it*, he got a dirty look in reply. Under pressure Tobie administered antibiotics, claiming Swann *wasted them on a barbarian* merely to salve his conscience.

Manaea's second casualty suffered a broken nose and cheekbone — possibly a fractured orbit and damaged cervical spine. Although a chiropractor, Tobie was unwilling to assess the latter injury. He attempted to stabilize the facial bones, making many excuses to cover possible failure.

Swann wondered how much his lack of confidence related to insufficient knowledge and skill, and how much to years of alcohol overdoses.

The man with the slashed arm had it sanitized and sewn up, then bandaged and tied across his chest. Tobie fretted over how well he'd made the repair, claiming his anatomy courses were far in the past. Gephart's foe was concussed and wavered in and out of consciousness, but would probably survive.

The man Swann and Brenneman shot at had taken an arrow through the neck, piercing his windpipe and severely interfering with his breathing. Tobie expressed surprise he lived. He performed a tracheotomy which gave a lot of relief — removed the arrow and bandaged him up.

"Won't be singing much opera, I guarantee." He again refused to operate on the internal damage. "I'm not a surgeon!"

The dead Saxon was claimed by Brixby. An arrow in the face had penetrated his brain-stem.

The Englisc were astonished at the charity shown these enemies who were destined for hanging or slavery. These were not honest foes who faced one openly! That it might be claimed a Christian deed failed to overcome Ecglaf's wonder. They were impressed by Tobie's leech-craft, as well as by his lovely helper, who received many admiring looks.

Sheila continued to fascinate them, more so than ever with her new pose as man-killer and hardy warrior.

While Doctor Evan Koskinen viewed all these proceedings with the deepest cynicism, moving not one finger to assist or encourage his erstwhile comrades.

~

Chapter 25 ~ Your Duty

Swann had caught his second wind, while Dimarico — despite oxycodone and acetaminophen — hurt too much to sleep. Everyone else was dead to the world or making a show of it, doing their best to stay sheltered from the drizzle.

By firelight and lantern they reviewed the day, Dimarico using pencil and notepad. The fire hissed and flared, and behind them shadows danced on wagon and carts.

SCARY TIMES 2DAY

Swann admitted it almost brought tears to his eyes to think of how well their rookie crew had performed. He'd even gained respect for Tobie.

TERRBL FIGHT, THEM US BOTH — BAD STUFF

"Yeah, this up-close and personal combat seems worse in certain ways than our warfare, though no one gets blown to pieces. A continual bayonet charge, all compacted into a few minutes. Makes me cringe to think of that cold steel coming at us."

PEOPLE DID OK

"Darn near every one. LeeAnn is truly amazing. Better than a USO troupe for morale, and a real worker as well — and gutsy."

BETTER THAN I KNEW WHEN HIRED HER

"Right! This one's OK, too." He indicated Lachey in her tent next to LeeAnn. "Can take orders and stick to them."

SHEILA?

"Did her job today, certainly. Maybe she'll straighten up now."

E. P. WANTS KNO WHAT SHE DID

"Shot twice, claims two hits — maybe so."

WHAT U THINK

"Can't be sure, but it doesn't matter. She didn't flinch under attack, and that counts most. Gephart was outstanding, considering lack of gear and training — needs a medal. Screwed-up his rib more, of course. Brixby seemed to handle himself well, though he's more arrogant than ever. Small kept cool. Pierce didn't, but he got in one good shot and should be better next time. Kinnard took his punishment and came back for more. Sutton you saw."

NO, BUSY

"He held his own, and he'll improve, too. Manaea, of course, saved the day — without him both you and Barry might be hash."

I KNO, ALWAYS GREAT GUY — U TRUST E P YET?

"His actions so far tell me I should, and logic tells me I should, but instinct is holding out. He's got too much to gain by robbing us... You know, Cam, in the old days

if you saved someone from shipwreck or they washed up on your beach — unless they paid a big reward — a ransom, in fact — you could enslave them. If he looks upon us in that light..."

SO NO TRUST?

"Some trust, I'd say. Or, as a great man once said, *Trust but verify*."

HA! — DONT MAKE ME LAFF, HURTS — E P SAID NOW KNOS Y WE SHIPT AWAY, NOT FOUGHT

"You mean our story about getting here? We live up to our legend?"

RESPECT GOOD

"Right... How long for the jaw to set up?"

MAYBE NOT BROK ONLY JOINT INJY — LOOSE TOOTH

"Ouch! I see you managed some liquid tonight. Hope you can get by for awhile. Here's another matter — we need more armor, the sooner the better. Mail and a proper shield for Gephart would have prevented his worst wounds—Dale, too. And the archers must have something better. I'll tell you, I felt naked when I saw those arrows coming."

I KNO WE NEED — BUY AT E P TOWN

"Not only more but better gear. I'm afraid of these helmets with nasals, though — they look like an accident waiting to happen. I'd prefer full-face protection with only the eyes uncovered. Also, I prefer their kite-shields to these flatirons you have."

HOW MANY BADDYS 2DAY

"Fourteen or sixteen, perhaps. And if those last two had got into the fracas a few seconds earlier, we'd have had a worse time of it. Their attack wasn't properly planned and coordinated. They should have had more javelins, their archers should have shot from behind cover, some should have got between the carts and around our flanks rather than going straight at the defenders. We could have been a whole lot worse off. Next time we have *got* to be more prepared, and we absolutely need more men if Ecglaf abandons us."

* * *

Lachey wasn't asleep, but not due to the constant patter of raindrops on her tent. The day's events filled her mind like a film strip in a loop. Some of the people, such as Sheila and Ian, were too superficial and self-centered to be affected. Some, like Gephart, were sufficiently stoic to be undisturbed in spirit by the violence. Yet others, she felt, must have difficulty sleeping, just as she.

Swann's compliment pleased her, little though she'd done to deserve it. Despite his bluff exterior and ready anger she suspected he was a decent man when free of pressures. He displayed quite a temper, was often sardonic or even satiric, and lacked patience with the hesitant.

He disliked the doctors, possibly due to feelings of intellectual inferiority. Nor did he care for loud-mouths or shirkers — an intolerant man. Still, she could see good in him, and they clearly needed his war experience. Was it similar to the Pilgrims and Myles Standish — him hot-tempered but hired for his skill at soldiering?

He and Dimarico got along well, acting quite man-to-man toward each other, with Swann even confronting Cameron at times — a good indicator of future success. Too often Dimarico over-awed people — his size and bearing, his intelligence and charisma, his wealth above all. He was a man too used to getting his own way, although he wore what she thought of as his *mantle of power* lightly indeed, compared to many in similar circumstances.

Still, it was much a case of him saying *Jump*, and everyone asking how high. The major wouldn't do that, and Dimarico already shared power with the Marine as with no one else.

Coiled in the bed of the wagon she'd seen nothing of the action through the few chinks unblocked by gear. But the sounds — the curses, shouts and screams, the clash and clatter of weapons, the groans and cries of the wounded — those were, she feared, imprinted on her brain, and what her eyes missed her imagination freely supplied. And the sprawled and bloody bodies after, the gory agonized wounded — horrid, horrid!

When she slept — if she slept — the dreams would start. Men looming over her with violence mirrored in their postures, stinking of sweat and lust and alcohol, her dread magnifying their frightfulness.

Oh God! She had hoped a new time and place, new concerns, a more elemental society would flush those hideous memories. They wouldn't go away and she couldn't forget. They were part of her, and every new terror increased the ghastliness.

* * *

Swann stood his watch with Brenneman, partly to assure no unwanted Saxon attentions bothered her, partly in the hope of mending fences — a mistake.

She wanted to know if he honestly meant she'd done well — been gutsy.

"I say what I mean, and I mean what I say."

His self-satisfaction set her off.

"Oh sure, and you talked straight concerning this brief jaunt."

"That's different — I was playing Maxwell Smart."

"Maxwell...? What're you talking about?"

"My mission was to mislead you — simply doing my duty."

"Tell me you didn't enjoy it plenty. Didn't... didn't revel in it. I think you love to lie, to bamboozle women."

"Let's be formal, Private. Make it *Major* while we're tactical."

"Tactical, my fanny! You switch it on and off whenever you want. Well, get this,

Major — I'm as good as anyone, no matter what you or the dumb Limey or anybody thinks. You men figure you can lead any woman around like a fool, but I don't fall for it. You tried to keep me out—"

He cut her off with a gesture and glare.

"Enough! Do your duty. Get on guard, and don't afflict my ears any further."

She flounced off, and they spoke no more.

The Engisc lay curled up in their cloaks, evidently used to sleeping rough. Their sentry — assuming they'd posted one — couldn't be seen, probably fallen asleep on duty. Swann didn't consider it his problem.

He checked on the bandits. Aelfcild was tied to a wheel spoke by a rope round his neck, having been warned of dire consequences should he attempt to even touch the bond. He awoke when Swann examined the restraint, observing the American expressionlessly. Swann in turn kept alert for any attempted attack, considering it at least possible the man had a friend among the Saxons who might have slipped him a weapon. But nothing overt occurred.

The other prisoners seemed asleep. Too injured to offer much of a threat, they were unbound. The concussed man had passed — no breathing and cool to touch. Swann knelt by him, a lump rising in his throat, his eyes blurring. Why he felt such sympathy for an unknown enemy he didn't understand, other than innate fellow-feeling between warriors.

He sighed, then rose and resumed his watch.

Sheila pointed silently to the women's tent. Lachey twitched and gabbled softly — in the grip of a nightmare. Swann bent and touched her calf. She instantly rose on an elbow, one hand raised to shield her face.

"You OK?" he whispered.

She remained rigid, and he saw a glint — the hand held a knife.

He leaned away, poised to jump. "It's Swann. You were dreaming. Take it easy."

She lay down with evident caution, tucking her hand — still holding the knife — under whatever she used as a pillow. He rose and shook his head. Evidently they had a hyper-sensitive one here, not the best choice for this kind of adventure. He'd need to watch her in the future.

He looked at Sheila but she simply shrugged, either not interested or still angry.

~

Chapter 26 ~ Runaway

Pierce — stuck with the last watch — saw the world brighten. A chilly breeze had replaced the rain. He ached — stiff from lying on the ground with almost nothing under him, muscles and mind protesting a lack of sleep. His feet were wet and his clothing

damp.

He felt he'd been chosen for the double watch as punishment for his behavior in battle — as if he needed more criticism than he'd already directed at himself. Out of spite he decided to wake Swann — let him suffer too.

He kicked the Major's boot.

"What?" Swann whispered throatily. "Trouble?"

"Getting light."

Swann stretched his own tired frame. "Where's a spear?"

Pierce pointed.

"Lord!" Swann protested. "What a way to earn a living."

They peered through the dimness for awhile, Pierce becoming reconciled to his commander as they shared the misery. He approached Swann and whispered, "The fight scared me stiff. Could hardly think or... I went rigid."

"Join the club."

"I mean, it felt like I couldn't move — seeing things wrong way through a telescope. I knew my first shot would miss but couldn't hold back. Didn't know what to do."

"Made a good shot at the end, though. *At the end* — get it?"

Pierce almost smiled. "Mere luck — he ran into it."

"Always a good idea to shoot the pirate chief, luck or not. Next time you'll be more relaxed — not though you ever want to relax in combat."

They stood quietly several minutes, Pierce feeling better but still worried.

"Even Sheila did better than I did."

"She tell you so herself?"

"Well... yeah. Don't you think she did what she said?"

"Might yet make a good Marine if she manages to get over herself — realize it's about the Corps, not her. She kept her head, got off a couple shots at the right time." Swann studied him. "Good advice for you, too. In fact, while I've been after everyone to take things seriously, it was inadequate. I unconsciously assumed we big bad modern guys would walk right over these poor backward pig farmers. Turns out not so simple. These people are fighting fools, and with less luck we'd be in a bad way."

"Our training's been deficient in realism, and even more in mental preparation. We didn't rehearse enough for a route march, nor for a mass attack at close quarters. And none of us, including me, was ready to have steel poked in his face by someone in earnest. Good thing this happened before we got tested by real professionals in a real battle."

"How's it going to be at... what d'you call that place?"

"*Sandlacu* — Sandy Water. The Normans distorted it to *Sanguelac* or *Senlac* — Blood Lake. Lasted all day, from mid-morning to late dusk. In October that's maybe eight, nine hours or longer. Of course, they spent a lot of time standing and waiting, I figure — getting ready for the next assault."

"Imagine the scene. Around eight or nine o'clock you've got enemies lined up fifty, sixty, eighty yards away, and they start shooting at you. You cover up with your shield, hearing an arrow thunk every few seconds, hearing someone yell in pain when he gets hit in the foot or elbow or scalp. You peek with one eye every once in awhile, or maybe watch the arrow flights and cover up as needed.

"When the archers stop you see the infantry coming through and forming ranks — four, six, eight deep. They start marching up the shallow rise, possibly breaking into a run for the last twenty or thirty yards. You hurl javelins, and they do, too. You saw what happened to Barry — even if you catch one on your shield it's a problem. Then they're all over you, stabbing at your face with those spears, some maybe hacking with swords or axes. This goes on for ten, twenty minutes or more, until your arms feel ready to drop off, because you're slashing and stabbing back as hard as you can.

"When they fall back you have time to count your casualties, maybe take note of your own wounds. Some men have gone down but the front line is filled in from the rear.

"You have a longer rest this time, because it takes more fiddling to get the cavalry through the foot ranks.

"Then *they* form up and start to charge your line, relay after relay, either casting javelins and turning away, or coming closer to trade spear thrusts. They won't attempt to crash through the line yet — can't hope to penetrate unbroken infantry. We assume they turn away to their right, so as to keep the shield toward you.

"This lasts for maybe half an hour. Because they don't come in a continuous wave you have time to rest and catch your breath between each attack, but it's still life and death every minute. When the horses withdraw it's back to archery again.

"So it went for hour after hour — one of the most stubborn battles fought in the Middle Ages. Neither side would quit, and they used hardly any tactic beyond frontal attack. A couple times the English wings charged, and the Normans cut them down once the shield wall had broken. The first was after a rout of William's Breton wing, the second a faked rout by the Fleming wing.

"Otherwise it was pure attrition, except for breaks while the Normans re-organized. What they did for water and food we don't know. How they still managed to lift their shields and weapons by the time nightfall approached, we can't guess. My belief is the real killing came late, when fatigue made defense difficult. Perhaps cavalry had an advantage in stamina then."

An audience gathered as Swann's voice rose and the light increased. Small, Brenneman, Manaea, and Sutton joined Pierce. Tobie and Lachey sat under shelter, straining their ears. Some of the English watched. Brixby stood a few yards off, his face turned away, pretending interest in the horizon.

Swann cut it short. "At the end, the English line shortened — the flanks came open to attack. Cavalry charges might now isolate small groups, and the king and his

brothers were cut down. The English broke, and in the dusk ran down the rear of the hill. Some Normans followed and were trapped in the muck at the base, the English turning back to get in more licks. Then it was over."

Manaea broke the silence with a question, knowing the answer but feeling the troops should be informed. "Major, what we gonna do to change this?"

"Our job will be to neutralize their archery and punish the cavalry. We expect to be able to out-range their bowmen, and we know what the later English did to French cavalry at Crecy and Agincourt. The horses won't be wearing armor and are big targets."

"Won't they have extra mounts?" Sheila asked.

"Yes, and we'll have extra arrows. Remember, putting a horse down also puts the rider afoot, at least for a time."

"What of the infantry, sir?" Small wondered.

"We'll undoubtedly give them attention, but they'll have shields, and many will have armor, so they're less attractive targets."

"How many will there be — archers, I mean?" Pierce's voice sounded husky.

"There's only conjecture. Each army has been claimed at anywhere from five to fifteen thousand, but most believe between six and eight thousand on either side. If true, perhaps one or two thousand archers at most."

"And how many will we have?"

"We hope to have a couple hundred. Enough to make a difference but not too many to train, equip and pay. This is where you folks come in, of course..."

"OK, enough for now. Let's stir up the fire, get breakfast, brush pearlies, wash, change socks, tend the wounded. Sergeant, feel free to set people to work, and let's keep a sentinel on duty."

* * *

Dimarico was giving him a questioning look, although with jaw and head wrapped up, it was hard to tell what... But here came the notepad.

WHATS UP

"Cluing in the troops. We'll need to do a more thorough job sometime in the future."

OK — TRIP TO TOWN, HOW?

"Bit of a problem there. We know how badly the wagon rides. Some wounded won't be able to take the jarring, but they can't very well walk — Gephart, maybe you."

I CAN WALK

"Maybe. We've got those badly hurt English — the one died, by the way. I think we need to use stretchers for at least three, maybe four people or five. Aelfcild can possibly ride the wagon, Kinnard I don't know — depends how much blood loss."

* * *

Another day in camp. With Lachey's aid Dimarico managed to communicate their intentions to Ecglaf. Besides Latin in high school and German in college she'd taken a course which attempted to read Beowulf in the original. Though years ago, when she paid attention to Saxon speech, part of it came back. She had already figured out greetings and a few other phrases. Dimarico guided and corrected her as best he could with his jaw bound tight.

He followed Swann's advice and gave the Saxon a gift of two hundred pence for his troubles and expenses. Ecglaf and his men rode off, having promised to send food, and would return tomorrow with *ceorles* — churls, commoners — for stretcher bearers. The two corpses went with them for disposal.

Running short of firewood, the damaged shields were burned, and they seized the arms of their prisoners as righteous booty. The few pieces of ring-mail would fit none of the men but Kinnard, so husky were Dimarico's band compared to the folk of this day.

Swann took Small and Brenneman with a cart and carter to fill their water containers from the stream on the back trail, while Manaea sent Pierce, Brixby and Koskinen foraging for wood. Sutton became chief fire tender, while Tobie and Dasczo would be responsible for medical and cooking duties.

The usual suspects protested these arrangements.

* * *

The oxen plodded slowly, as usual, and on the return Swann hurried ahead to get things moving. The day gleamed bright, the fire burned briskly with a stack of branches beside it. All looked to be in order.

"Barry, can you handle the pots — boil the water?"

"Sure, Major. I'm sore but—"

"LeeAnn, how about chow? Tobie! I want a medical report."

But here came the Sergeant, speaking quietly. "Major — Professor's missing."

Swann was caught unaware. "Whadaya mean?"

"Getting wood with Brixby and Pierce. Wandered off and they couldn't find him."

"Huh! They call?"

"Yessir, but no answer. Don't think he's lost — either left or captured."

"You do a search?"

"Negative, sir — didn't want to leave the camp unguarded."

"How long ago?"

"Good hour or more."

"Talk to Cam?"

"He said wait for you."

Swann considered his options.

"We have to look. Can't abandon him, no matter how much I'd prefer to. Have you

seen any signs of visitors?"

"No, sir, and we've been looking sharp."

"I'll do a quick patrol."

Brixby and Pierce guided him into the woods where they'd worked. Not far — within sight of the camp. They'd noticed Koskinen wandering farther in and to the right, so now searched that way, looking for footprints but alert for intruders.

Duff covered the forest floor, not wet enough to show much despite yesterday's rain. They saw no signs of struggle, simply a few footprints and slide marks — none similar to distinctive modern cleats.

* * *

WHAT THINK

"Voluntary, most likely. You see him? How was he equipped?"

Dimarico hadn't seen, but Lachey noticed Koskinen wore a pack.

"Could he have got any money?"

ONLY IF KNO COMBIE

"We'd better do inventory. My bet is he struck off on his own — but if he hasn't, how much ransom are you willing to pay?"

RED CHIEF

Swann was mystified.

"They'll have to pay *us* to take him, he means," Lachey supplied. "It's from a story."

"He's left his machinery, though. Has he given up on traveling back? And how does he hope to communicate?"

"He might be able to speak the language to an extent," Lachey said. "He kept his ears open, I know, and he's asked me what some words meant."

"You two are picking it up so quickly?"

"He's very bright and knows Latin and Greek, so he could have a facility for language."

* * *

Sheila and Brixby argued over their scores, Brixby having lit her off by claiming he'd shot four or five of the bandits. She interviewed the other archers in a search for witnesses, and Swann waited for his turn, ready to give her a severe put-down. But another remark from Brixby pulled her back.

"Yeah, I saw it," she scoffed. "Too bad you aimed at the box instead of the guy."

"*That* shot was rushed."

"Bet any number were rushed."

"You ignorant trull! Part of the proof lay right in front of me."

"If you're bragging about the one who took it in the face, I'm the one who got him."

"Six arrows I shot, and near every one went home."

"Sure — some found a home in the clouds, some in trees, some in —"

"What a bloody brainless bitch you are!"

Sheila stepped close to him, face tight and eyes narrowed. "I warn you, Binky — you talk to me that way and you'll be yodeling falsetto the rest of your useless life."

"You're a mannish slut but not quite man enough to take me on."

"Well, if I can't, Bilbo, maybe my fiance can."

"And who might he be — our saucy Captain Jinks of the Horse Marines?"

"No, it's the large gentleman, the one they call Killer Whale. Want to go a few rounds with *him*, Bixbo?"

"The bigger they are, Sheila-me-slut."

She glared at him. "OK, Brick, OK... Hey, Saipele!" She waved her arm.

Manaea started her way, and Brixby turned to leave with mock casualness.

"As if you're worth the trouble."

"Hey, wait," she said. "Going to the loo or something?"

As Brixby departed she turned and signaled Manaea to forget it. *Great!* She could play up to the big boy and trump that brain-dead lime-sucker every time.

* * *

The casualty report showed Gephart in poor shape, in part because he'd worsened his ribs. He'd be of slight use for *at least* two weeks. Dimarico might be able to open his mouth sufficiently to talk in a matter of days, but must go an indeterminate period without chewing. Sutton's problems were minor, although his shoulder displayed a spectacular bruise. Kinnard had lost a pint or two of blood.

"As for the cow," Tobie concluded, "I can give no definite prognosis."

In fact, the ox was hardly hurt — not worth the weak joke. Of the troops, most suffered at least sore muscles. They welcomed another day of loafing.

Their prisoners presented a different matter. Tobie showed resistance to *wasting* pharmaceuticals on the Saxons — seemed to resent them. Swann found this attitude surprising, having figured Tobie for a bleeding-heart type. Perhaps the doctor selfishly wished to save these things for his own potential needs.

Aelfcild would soon recover since the arrow's small point had damaged little flesh — even his sprain appeared fairly slight.

"Be walking in a week or so."

The bowman with the abdominal wound would die — period.

"He doesn't look so bad," Swann protested.

"You wait. One way or another he's gonna get infected, and there's not one single thing I can do to save him."

Or are willing to do, Swann amended. Yet the man looked and acted healthy.

Tobie was adamantly negative.

Swann learned Tobie and Dimarico had managed, by one means or another, to acquire quite a few prescription drugs — penicillin, ciproflaxin, tetracycline, hydrocodone, oxycodone extended release, topical analgesics and considerably more. Swann assumed the two of them had faked symptoms to obtain prescriptions from sympathetic doctors, among other methods. These drugs Tobie intended to fiercely hoard, since they now looked at a far longer stay in the *Dark Ages*, as he put it.

Tobie spoke a quiet word in Swann's ear when he finished with his patients.

"I'm going to remind you of something, John Wayne — with all your abuse and bluster, and ordering people around. Someday you'll probably want doctoring help from me, and I've got a real long memory. Maybe my hands'll be shaky when I get around to you. Think of *that* for awhile."

Swann couldn't help laughing at the feisty gamecock.

"Then let *me* remind *you* of something — when I'm gone you'll have the Sergeant to take orders from. Think you'll be any better off?"

~

Chapter 27 ~ Numero Uno

Ecglaf's town appeared more of a metropolis than their previous stop. The main houses were timber-built, only the out-buildings made of wattle-and-daub, and even those having frames, crudely resembling what Americans referred to as *English half-timber*. Most of them straggled along the narrow road, with byres and barns and other outbuildings behind.

Two adjacent houses were cleared, with secure doors and a window apiece, the men's boasting a puncheon floor. Gear was stowed, billets assigned, watch assignments set, a meal begun.

The prisoners were consigned to a stable — a filthy one at that. Manaea supervised the stretcher-bearers in its refurbishing, including a thick layer of straw for the floor. Ecglaf shook his head at these further evidences of outland soft-heartedness, while Swann shook his head over the need to mount guard on the stable as well as their houses. The able-bodied numbered only eight.

* * *

Ecglaf approached Dimarico soon after their arrival, his face and posture conveying self-consequence. He signaled behind him, and a knot of fyrdmen parted to reveal Koskinen. Dimarico's surprised look was well-received.

"Belongs to you this man?"

Dimarico ground out between clenched jaws, "My thanks, Ecglaf Pallissuna. Ours

he is," He motioned the doctor to stand beside him. "Where found you him?"

"Here, in sooth. Surely lost, was he not?" This said archly.

The Saxon considered Koskinen a runaway from his lord, an exceedingly disloyal act in English law, no matter that the professor was a free man of high status.

After a few remarks the hundred-ealdor took his leave, a flinty Koskinen shuffling off to find a corner in which to nurse his wrath.

* * *

Once everyone settled in, Dimarico again motioned to Swann.

HAD IDEA — NEED MEN — HOW ABOUT AELFCILD & OTHERS?

"The prisoners? What do the Englisc want to do with them?"

NOT SURE — MAYBE HANG — ENSLAVE — OUTLAW?

"Are they likely to be interested? And can we *trust* them?"

ASK THEM — SPLAIN DUTIES

"Don't think I'd want someone who'd recently been trying to kill me. And they're a drag on us until they heal — assuming they won't desert along the way."

DONT WANT THEM HUNG — U LOOK OVER, TAKE EDITH TO TALK

"Fine, Cam, but we still need immediate help. We've only got eight reasonably capable people, and it's simply not enough to handle matters. We need people *now*."

GET ECGLAF, HIRE HELP

"He's already gone. Have you been able to figure out who's the second in command — or the headman, here in the village?"

IM BUSHED — YOU, EDITH DO IT, BRING TO ME

* * *

"So we find out who's in charge," she said, "and bring that person —"

"Right."

"...to Mister D so he can make sure we've picked the right one?"

"And maybe to give authority to our request. Is your Saxon up to this?"

"Marginally, perhaps. I tried to practice on the way here with one prisoner but he... Well, he seemed like the village idiot. I didn't make much progress."

"This is swell," Swann carped. "I guess I'll put Manaea in charge here, and get us an escort — see who might profit from listening to the language. Do any of our people, as far as you know, have any training along those lines? And can you hop around if I give you a hand?"

Manaea, he knew, spoke at least two languages, but was needed to organize their new quarters. Some of them he wouldn't want along — Brixby, for instance, even if he spoke everything from Afrikaans to Sumerian.

He interrogated Pierce. "Spanish, huh? Have you picked up any of *this* lingo?"

"Honestly, Jack — er, Major—"

"Never mind, Brian — let's see what we can do. Shoulder a spear. And as soon as we can work up a schedule we're going to start lessons. We're half crippled this way, fumbling along without the ability to communicate."

Swann requisitioned two ceorles from the Sergeant to carry Lachey seated upon a bench — a somewhat precarious arrangement, but more dignified than having her hop on a crutch while he supported her other side. He instinctively felt dignity an important asset in this culture — dignity and a strong sword arm.

* * *

"Lord love me!" quoth Sheila, sitting on a stool and leaning against the wall. "I was beginning to think I'd never be clean and stink-free again!"

"We're also happy you're de-stinked, aren't we?" said LeeAnn, winking at Edith.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Why, we're real glad for you, is all."

"Yeah, I'll bet! The worst of it is, now we're gonna smell those dirty Saxons even more. Why can't they take a bath every week or so? Wouldn't kill them, would it?"

LeeAnn rolled her eyes. "Did you see how much work it took for *our* baths? Not only getting the water, but having to rustle up a cart and go into the woods for something to burn? Let's face it, Honey, it's a major project."

"So what! After kidnapping us, and scaring the crap outa us with that fight, you'd think Big D would take better care. Lousy sponge baths! And another thing—"

"There's *another* thing," LeeAnn whispered behind her hand to Edith.

Sheila frowned. Somehow this little skag always managed to get under her skin.

"And another thing — I don't see why we needed to wait until those POWs got cleaned. You bet if the shoe was on the other foot — if *we'd* been captured — hell would've frozen over before we got a bath or even food."

"Oh, let's face it, Sheila — in that case we'd probably be raped and our noses cut off by now, so why not be happy with what you've got? Or maybe you'd want *our* wounded to wait, too?"

"It's a sloppy messy way to wash — look at the wet floor! And I'm not gonna smoke us out by starting a fire to dry it, neither."

"If you hadn't swung your big mop all over the place."

"Mop, huh?" Sheila tossed the hair that cascaded below her shoulder blades.

"Should I maybe wear it like yours or hers?"

"A lot more practical."

"Practical! Is that what men tell you? *I love your hair, it's so practical*. Well, they tell me something different."

"At least I don't have to shake myself dry like a golden retriever."

Getting hotter, Sheila got up to pace. She wasn't finished complaining yet, not by a long shot.

"A mud floor, no less, while the men get boards. How does that work, I wonder? Do we always get second best while Cam enjoys the luxuries? He's got plenty of cash — why shouldn't we be in the best place in town?"

LeeAnn flashed Edith a swift grin before composing her face and saying, "Gee, I hate to hear you be so petty, Honey. Let's face it — the men do the heavy work, they take on the responsibility and danger, they protect us... And what's more, they're designated by the Bible to be our lords and masters. Why should women expect the best when men deserve it so much more?"

"What absolute *bull!*" Sheila flung open the door and stormed out.

LeeAnn enjoyed a good laugh, and Edith smiled as well.

"The way you rouse her... I'm afraid some day she might go after you."

"She's more talk than action, and she'll have a lot more trouble pulling my hair than I will hers... Course she's right, Edie, concerning a few things. The English here are far from clean, and you see boils and sores and rashes. It's kind of creepy."

"I know, but look at their situation. As you said, they've got to carry water by the bucket, they've got to scavenge for firewood — which appears to be in short supply. I wonder if they aren't allowed to cut down trees? That was the way in Norman times, I believe — many forests reserved for hunting or other use by nobles. I'm not even sure if the poor have enough pots and basins to both cook and bathe at the same time."

LeeAnn laughed at the image this presented. "The houses aren't so bad as I expected," she said, "even those with dirt floors. I thought we'd be seeing stick huts. And some of the clothes and fabrics are pretty. Have you noticed? They're spinning and weaving their own cloth. All natural, too."

Lachey gave a quick sideward glance. Did LeeAnn expect synthetics in this age?

She said, "I've read these English were noted for what we'd call textile arts — weaving, embroidery, and so forth."

"Uh-huh. But if Sheila... See, I've got Sheila on the brain. If she could start thinking of these things — something other than herself — she wouldn't be so hard to put up with. She always thinks the world revolves around herself."

"And the problems she has with certain of the men..."

"She doesn't actually care for them — not any, I don't believe — just wants them all panting after her. It's why she resents the Major — he won't put up with her BS."

"She doesn't try to attract *all* the men, LeeAnn."

"No, you're right. She doesn't go much for Dale — he's too nerdy. Gephart ignores her. Barry? Well, she's after him, and he pretends he's interested — but he isn't, I'll bet. And Saipele she pretends to play up to lately but you can see it's an act... Her heart isn't in it."

"Mister Dimarico?"

"Hmm. I'd say that's an act, too. She's going through the motions more for our benefit than her own. She knows she'd never get anywhere with him. Then there's Brian, and I don't know *what's* up with that. He brought her in, so there must be a connection — romance or something. Except I don't think she's got it in her to love anybody but *numero uno*, and he sometimes glares at her like poison."

"The doctors?"

"Old Kosky could be a robot for all the attention she pays to him. He saw through her from the first minute and didn't mind letting her know, so she steers clear. She works on Tobie, now and then, but she'd rather chase manly men, if you know what I mean."

"You make it sound like a TV drama."

"Well, isn't it? I mean, couldn't you make a soap opera from this? Better yet, a reality show, except it should have a few more women."

"You've forgot one man, though."

"I've bypassed plenty. She plays up to the Saxons, too. One of these days she's going to find herself in big trouble behind a barn, because they sure don't think the way we do. They don't realize it's a game, and if they did they might not care."

"We ought to warn her."

"Would she listen? Probably go at it worse, simply to show us. And there's one more, as you say — the Loopy Limey. What's with him, Edie?"

"They're always fighting."

"Well, love is close to hate, you know. No, don't look at me that way — lots of women go for bad boys."

Lachey maintained her stare, and LeeAnn blushed and chuckled.

"I know — you think I've got first-hand experience."

"Yet it might make sense, LeeAnn. After all, she's as close to a warrior as a woman can be — a Brunhilde, GI Jane — and he's a storybook hero in some ways with his military experience. Look at what he did in the fight. They match up."

"We-el-lll... I talked to Brian..."

"Go on."

"Brian has grave doubts regarding this claim of five *kills* or hits. By the way, did you hear the good one Sheila got on Ian? He bragged he ought to be called an ace — because of the five-count — and she says, *Aren't you mispronouncing it?* So he falls for it and says, *What are you babbling on about, you silly so-and-so.* And she comes back with, *Shouldn't it be pronounced ass?*"

Edith enjoyed her best laugh since landing. "What'd Brian say?"

"He says Brixby's claim of five hits with six arrows is total bull by his own story. His last shot hit a money box not the guy who carried it, and one of his others almost hit Saipele, nowhere near the bad guy. Another Sheila claims as hers not Ian's."

"Brian suspects he was rattled and shot all over without aiming. He says even the

Major got off only three shots, so how could Ian manage five good ones?"

"Yet him with all his experience in the SAS — it doesn't make sense."

"What *is* that, anyhow?"

"Oh, it's similar to Green Berets or Seals, I think — an elite unit."

"Interesting, because I overheard the Major saying to the Boss he now doubted it.

Six months, maybe, before they caught on to him. What do you think, Edie?"

~

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Chapter 28 ~ Less Confusion

Bloody trees! Huge boles, tall and close-set, hiding potential attackers — he could do without them. And becks and rills and slow deep streams, and marshes and mires! Not a decent road to be seen — mere rutted track, as per usual. He'd be glad to see civilization — see anything, in fact, in the way of a city. Couldn't be too soon for Ian Brixby.

He couldn't believe the way this clot of an officer had them trekking as if they were bloody holiday tourers. They needed mounted scouts to get deep into the forests to flush out lurkers, not simply peer round like boobies. He plainly wasn't up to his job.

Now came another order. *Stand down!* As if they hadn't just stood to! Every time the fool got his knickers in a twist they must string their bows and nock arrows, the spearmen take shields in hand, everyone put on a helm. Foolishness and poor planning, and making their bows take a set! He'd seen too many bloody Yanks, both before and lately, and he'd heard of this American Corps of Marines — vastly overrated, they were.

He owed the Yank another favor. Trying to help the greenhorns, he'd been relating his experiences to Small and Pierce when Swann sauntered by. *Five for six! What do you think of that, Major? Simply fabulous!* the man had replied. *See lads, our Fuehrer thinks it's*

quite keen work. Oh no, the bloody fool had said. I meant, like the unicorn's a fabulous beast.

They'd laughed, of course, making up to the brasshat. Worse yet, the big wench pretended it the most comical quip ever made. He'd not soon forget.

Fiasco, that ambush. When the escort left they should have buttoned up and waited. Instead, the gudgeon led them straight into it. Look what happened — the clumsy Hun cut to pieces, injuries to their two swordsmen, and Swann soiling himself, no doubt. If he himself hadn't saved the day with quick shooting, Gephart might have been slaughtered. And his work had thinned the number the big wog dealt with. *Fabulous, eh? Unicorn?* He'd soon enough show them.

He didn't much mind the Eyetie Don getting hurt — no, not at all. Teach him to take better care, and trust the fool major less. Gawd! Didn't his face look a right mess? Hardly able to talk or eat after a full week. Good. The way he treated the rankers, holding back on money and feeding swill.

A right crew of buggers — inexperienced kids, the most of them. Not even Small — English or not — was any great shakes. The wog now, give him his due. To those measly Saxons it must have seemed a maddened bull charging. But the rest — not much.

He'd flat leave this mob, and the sooner the better — set up on his own to the far west or north, even in Ireland or Wales. Not Scotland, though, not with the weather there! And not yet — not before he knew the gabble and gained enough coin for his purse. Aye, take off on his own, set up a trim little kingdom like those two fellows in Kipling. With some silver and modern knowledge you could live like a king... or a duke, or a bloody count — what matter.

Still, with Kipling it took two. Gawd knew it wasn't much of a prospect for a lone man. He'd need help, but who in this crew? He ran over the possibilities and came up with only Sutton. Easy to deal with and a swordsman to boot — but so loyal he squeaked. He'd never hare off.

Who then? Aelfcild would have done — having shown the right attitude, so to speak — but the Eyetie offered to take the man's whole family — his old mum and three kids. Look at him there, hopping along with his boy chasing him. He envied them, he did — would liked to have a brat of his own.

* * *

Dimarico, with Swann's reluctant assent, had offered Aelfcild a job, and he — nothing loath to turn his coat — had agreed, leading to a long negotiation over pay and privileges. Standard pay for a *fyrdrinc* was twenty *scillinges* — two hundred-forty silver peninges — for two months' service. For this he must to feed and clothe himself and a backup, and maintain four horses, two saddles, two swords, a hauberk and the other gear of a fighting man and his number two.

Dimarico enjoyed driving a hard bargain and felt it wise to conserve money, so he'd argued him lower, with food and a set of clothing and arms. He needed to supply new arms in any case, because Aelfcild's battle-gear, including horses, belonged to the king, and could not be kept if he joined another's *heorthwerod* — Dimarico's hearth-troop.

But the man required an advance — part signing bonus, so to speak, and part to come from his pay — to support his mother and children whom he'd be leaving behind. His wife was out of the picture, having died years ago. More, Aelfcild wished to supply his own *hyse oththe esne* — youth or servant. His esquire, in effect, in the person of his eldest son, a lad of full ten winters.

After more bargaining, Dimarico proposed Aelfcild's family would leave their house and join the trek — bag and baggage. Aelfcild would be paid two scillings a month plus bed and board for all, and Wulfbald Wulfnothssuna would trail after his father.

The wounded bowman who, to Tobie's disgust, still lived and flourished despite his abdominal wound, also joined them.

* * *

Look at him, Brixby thought. The boy stretched his short legs to keep up, draped round with a too-long cloak, two javelins across his shoulder. A fair-looking lad once cleaned and fed up — tow-headed and blue-eyed, flushed from trying to maintain a man's pace.

Aye, he'd wished for a brat like him, but the sow he'd denned with would have none of it, the worthless old... Well, no matter — put it behind him and plan ahead.

Aelfcild and the boy... they might prove out.

* * *

Late afternoon they slogged through a petty hamlet during misting rain. Swann and Dimarico consulted, deciding to stop for the night on the far side. Having planned ahead, they were carting firewood, so a fine blaze soon flared. They spoke with folk while passing through, and a few wights appeared with foodstuffs for purchase. Tents and tarps were set-up, cooking started, their defenses arranged.

Dimarico and Swann sat on packs to keep their hinder parts off cold damp earth, an occasional whiff of smoke from the fire making them duck and hold their breath.

Out of the corner of his eye Swann observed Tobie lingering, waiting for his crack at The Chief. He stood and gave way, ignoring and being ignored by the Doctor.

"How you feeling, Cameron?"

"Could be worse, Bob."

"How's the pain?"

"Significant when I'm careless — but endurable." Dimarico could un-bandage his

jaw and speak, so long as he remained careful with volume and animation.

"Want something?"

"Can we afford it?"

"Well... not exactly, but I can spare naproxen."

"No, I'll hold off."

"OK... Uh, I wanna ask you something."

"You want Swann's wrist severely slapped. Hey! I could be an Old English poet.

Now for a line with W-words."

Tobie leaned nearer. "I'm serious, Cam'ron."

"Wait, Bob — you've been drinking. "Where'd you get it?"

"Didn't raid your wine cellar, if that's what you're thinking. They got a kinda pub in the village there."

"In that burg? How'd you skip away without our noticing?"

"Who pays attention to me? I'm merely part of the servant class around here. If I fell down a well nobody'd notice till you had a hangnail for me to treat."

"Not going on a crying jag, are you?"

"I'm not *that* drunk, for gawd's sake! I only want to ask something."

"First, tell me what you've drunk."

Tobie put on a stubborn expression that mutated into a smirk.

"Well, when I spotted this place I dropped outa our percession, and here's this dim joint with a few benches and a couple kegs at the far end, so I knew. And I said *Drink?*, and by golly they knew, cause I guess their word is *trinkas* or something."

"*Drinca*."

"Yeah, that's it. Didn't get the pronunciashun quite right."

"Perhaps you should stop avoiding the classes."

"Maybe... Well anyways, he hands me a wooden cup filled with this slop that passes for beer, here — and I'll say one thing, it's pretty strong. So I give him a penny, which he examines real close, I can tell you. Then I drink it, and I'm sitting there, and he comes over and refills it. How about that!"

"Good Lord, Bob! *That's* your triumph?"

"I sipped another one or two or... And then I thought I'd better get back here, so I signaled him I wanted to take the full cup, and he gives me the high sign, and off I go, none of you the wiser."

Tobie was quite pleased with himself, but Dimarico gave no plaudits.

"So this is what you've got to show for your penny — four drinks and a cup."

"Pretty good deal, I'd say."

"Where have you been the last week, Bob? You gave a man the equivalent of a skilled workman's daily wages for a couple of pints and a crude cup. Does that strike you as a bargain? Not to mention the fact you're half-soused."

"I don't care! You make a big deal outa a lousy penny."

Dimarico answered quietly, "If I may say so, Doctor Tobie, this attitude helped ruin your marriage and almost destroyed your practice. On the positive side, it helped me justify your abduction."

Tobie frowned. He should be angry at Dimarico for his sarcasm and criticism, not to mention rubbing it in about this jaunt into the Dark Ages. But he was enjoying a light buzz, and pleased with putting one over on his controlling friend.

"I still gotta talk to you, Cam'ron, old buddy."

Metaphorically gritting his teeth, Dimarico said, "Go ahead."

"I need a helper. The work's too much for me."

"I'm going to treat this request seriously, Bob, and ask you how you can sneak off without being noticed, and in the next moment complain of being too busy."

"That's not what I mean, for gawd's sake! I'm sayin' when I *am* busy, I'm *too* busy. After that fight I was runnin' around like a chicken with my — I mean, *it's* head cut off, and I couldn't hardly get around to those Anglers until they were half-dead. And now you got more men, and probably all of them have lice and fleas and cuts and blisters and whatnot. And you took on women and children, and we sure oughta help these towns we go through. I mean, give some gratis medical care."

"You've got LeeAnn."

"She ain't got the innellecshul capacity."

"She's no dummy."

"Oh no, oh no! No, she's not — no. She's a great nurse — real great. Catches on fast. And she's a worker, too, and cute as anything—"

"Keep to the point, Bob."

"See, here's the thing — let's say she's got a IQ of one-ten, one-twenty. Now that's good — it's real good. But to be a doctor... See what I'm after? Someone to train for a legistamat doctor."

"Similar to you, with an IQ of one-fifty or so."

Tobie gave him a morose look. "Now that's just cruel, Cam'ron."

"Forgive me, Bob. I see your point, but who—"

"Maybe the boy, Wolf-somethin'?"

Dimarico struggled for the proper answer to this bit of idiocy.

"He's *got* a job."

"What — gettin' killed the next time we have a fight?"

"Their full-fledged warriors — knights, so to say — have a *geoguth*, a follower who holds their weapons, helps them get suited up in armor, cooks and scavenges for them, guards their backside, drags their body away from the battle — a combination servant and wingman. It's tradition and practical, too."

"Ten years old!"

"Young, I agree, but... Besides, how're you going to check *his* IQ?"

"Well, I thought since he's here, and he seems a nice clean-cut kid... What'd you call

him — a *youkth*?"

Dimarico spelled the word. "Might be the ancestor of *youth*. Remember, G here is generally unvoiced, so although sometimes it's similar to our G, often it sounds like Y or the German CH. You'd better start attending the language classes, Bob."

"Yeah, I s'pose... On'y I still need help."

"I'll think on it, Bob, but for now you'd better hit the sack. You sound as if you've gone through more than four small drinks."

"It'za pretty big cup, Cam'ron."

"Go lie down, Bob."

~

Chapter 29 ~ No Return

Wulfnoth Aelfcild, his garments half dry after they'd forded a rain-swollen stream, walked to where his family sat, his limp exaggerated by fatigue and chill. His mother handed him a bowl of stew, holding out a slab of bread.

"Good health, my son, and may these outlanders not by overwork slay you."

Putting down his spoon, he broke the bread and scooped the stew with a fragment.

"Not today, Mother, nor any time soon."

"Well for you, and may you not starve, either."

"The bearnes are fed?"

"Yes, and to bed, though they fight sleep." Her voice dropped. "The *dryhtweas* — chieftains — bend their brows this way. Be still! Our tongue they learn. The dark hag always questions."

"Fear them not, Mother. On greater matters have they their thoughts."

"Great matters? Yes, matters too great for gifting you rightly. You who are of birth more high than they, have no doubt. See! Their women's hair goes uncovered, and near as short as theowes. And the *here-maegden* — army-maiden! Though her locks be long..."

He ignored this refrain.

"You," she continued, "who gained four peninges a day on fyrd! No *beah-hroden cempa* — ring-laden champion — while *cniht* to this *dryhten* shall you be."

As they ate, two youngsters — four or five years old, barefoot and shabbily dressed — sidled into camp. LeeAnn smiled and tried to see if they were hungry, asking in questionable grammar, "*Etan thu* — Eat you?" Gestures followed, and soon they were greedily filling their bellies.

As the children gobbled their food with stainless spoons from aluminum mess gear, Aelfcild's mother renewed her refrain.

"See you, my son?" Eormenhild whispered. "Ceorles eat from pans of silver while you gain but measly *sceatt* — money — for your shield-work."

This hit home with the Saxon.

"Wealth they have, and tight fists, too. Yet for my sins must I thus strive. I shall every penny hoard, and spoils gain in battle. Landed man again shall I be, *Modor*. Aye, and a wealthy — or in a far field leave my bones."

He spun around as Brixby murmured while strolling past.

"What spoke he?" Eormenhild snapped, while Aelfcild squinted after him.

"Only *Good eve* — but meant more, I take oath."

* * *

"Dale! How are you — your head?" Koskinen asked.

Kinnard gaped, for the man had hardly spoken to anyone but Tobie since being returned like an escaped felon.

"Not too bad, Professor, but good and sore."

Koskinen bent and murmured, "It's a travesty they risked someone of your talent in battle. No surprise in Swann's case, but I thought Dimarico wiser. You're one of those too valuable to lose. Of course, it's difficult to determine *what* is valued around here now, with Cameron acting the part of a megalomaniac."

Kinnard was ambivalent. Truth be known he felt proud of his upcoming scar as any nineteenth-century Prussian student. Gephart had stated, *He and Dale* had taken care of one attacker. Doctor Tobie had called him a crazy fool — left-handed praise — and his young peers offered attaboys. Dasczo still checked on him every day, and he felt even Brenneman now looked *at* rather than through him. Nonetheless, it was difficult to break the habit of deference toward his former superior.

"Right then I guess my best value was to distract the attackers."

"Nonsense, Dale. People such as you and I and perhaps Tobie are ultimately going to improve the world in these times. Long after these so-called warriors have died with their boots on, we're the ones who'll bring civilized values to this benighted era. None of them is going to invent any steam engines or telegraphs, much less sanitation systems and... and other amenities. You and I, Dale — we need to stay alive for the good of everyone."

Kinnard hesitated to agree, but said, "I see what you mean, Professor. Er... does this mean you've given up on the transporter?"

Koskinen's voice hardened. "Dimarico so thoroughly and stupidly damaged it... Many prior technical accomplishments are going to be needed. But let's keep this under our hats, eh? No need to talk of it yet."

He patted Kinnard's shoulder, stood and left with a conspiratorial smile.

Kinnard hardly knew what to think. Naturally the technical people were ultimately going to be important, and it was pleasing to be alluded to as one of the elite. As to society-improving inventions, this place could certainly use some. Look at the houses!

Dwellings were often house *and* barn, with a partition across the middle to keep the animals at one end, adding to the warmth and sheltering the beasts at the same time — practical but plenty gross.

Technical advances aside, survival constituted the immediate problem, and as far as he could see, Swann and Manaea and the other fighters must assure that.

He liked being almost a hero. All his life — in high school, certainly — he'd been considered a nerd, accepting the designation with what grace he could. Slight of frame, gangly, neither athletic nor glib nor possessed of girl-attracting looks — studious and technically-inclined. He'd slid through without making any waves. He commuted to a nearby college, easily gaining his BS Industrial Technology, a sort of lazy man's generalized engineering degree.

After three years as a contract designer he left the Midwest for romantic California. His family willingly saw him go, and he hadn't been homesick. Yet California offered small excitement for one on a limited budget, and jobs were in short supply. After a couple months an agency found him an on-campus technician's spot. He took it, still hoping adventure awaited.

In less than a year he decided he belonged back in good old Ohio, and began saving for the move home — not so easy, for West Coast living was expensive and his wages below what a college grad should expect. Professor Koskinen, although a brilliant man, was hardly the ideal employer. Absorbed in his own conjectures, he tended to treat his assistants like animate plants.

The takeover by Dimarico saved Kinnard from quitting.

Cameron Dimarico differed entirely from Evan Koskinen. For a rich man he was remarkably approachable — not only polite but cordial, showing interest in his employees as individuals. Kinnard and Lachey gained immediate motivation to work harder and more intelligently, as Dimarico frequently engaged them in shop talk and asked their opinions as to means and goals.

Their pay and benefits also improved, although Dimarico would never be regarded as excessively generous. When it came to equipment and supplies, however, he didn't stint, and responded speedily — a far cry from the university purchasing department.

Some drawbacks appeared. They moved from attractive and comfortable quarters to a stripped industrial building in a shabby commerce park. They put in full eight-hour days with sporadic unpaid overtime, and were sworn to secrecy.

So Kinnard became a contented employee, full of practical ideas and ingenious artifices, a critical pinion in the gear set, happy in his work and associates — particularly due to occasional contacts with the delightful LeeAnn Dasczo. When the chance of further adventure offered, he accepted without reservation, convinced the device on which he'd expended several years' effort would work flawlessly. Only one or two small clouds spoiled his sunny outlook.

Some months before departure he'd stopped at the local convenience store — as he

did once or twice a week — and found a new clerk on the late shift who, after greeting him, extended the conversation. He paid no attention, assuming she felt fidgety in her new job and needed to chatter. The same thing happened a few days later. Perhaps it hadn't been nervousness but a certain fellow feeling... Even attraction?

He soon found himself stopping often, noticing that while friendly with other customers, she was — could it be? — perhaps more friendly toward him.

She said, *You're certainly a good customer*. He fibbed and claimed it his favorite store.

She wore no ring on her third left finger, and after weeks he became bold enough to ask whether she had a family. One child, she told him. And when he hesitated to ask the next question she supplied the answer. Poor little girl — her father had run off.

Their banter dilated, often ending only when another customer appeared. She wasn't beautiful, she wasn't slim nor was her hair particularly well-done. Her intelligence was modest and her range of interests limited and plebeian.

One great virtue outweighed all else — she acted fascinated by him and his life. There could be no greater flattery. By time of departure he had almost nerved himself up to ask her out.

Then they'd arrived in 1066, and weren't returning.

~

Chapter 30 ~ Our Other Problem

Near dark, a *ceorlisc* woman crept into their encampment, peering round. The Saxons, seated together across the fire, spotted her first. One of the carters called out, his sally eliciting rude laughter and causing the woman to cover her face.

Dimarico frowned. "Quiet those people down, Jack, and see what she wants."

Swann rose and stalked toward the men. The carter glowered but slumped back, and Swann called, "Edith? Here quickly, please."

Lachey limped over with her cane, immediately comprehended and spoke to the woman. Following a few words, Lachey pointed to where the children lay half-hidden on a groundsheet. With full stomachs they'd fallen asleep in the warmth of the fire.

The woman put the younger child on her hip and grasped the hand of the elder.

A thought came to Swann. "Sergeant, pick a few men to escort this woman home, and make sure one of them is the Saxon who spouted off."

Off they went — the woman and children, the carter, Small, Pierce, Brixby... and Sutton in charge of the detail.

Within minutes they returned, and Sutton came over to report — first to Manaea, then the two of them to Swann, sitting next to Dimarico.

In a discreet tone Sutton said, "We ran into a problem, Major."

"Yeah, I can see... Brixby again, and Pierce?"

"Yessir. On the way, Ian started whining about the errand and how you make so many bad decisions — you probably know how he goes. So Brian says, *Don't worry, Mister SAS — we'll keep you safe*. And Brixby drops a few choice words, but we pretty much ignore it.

"Then at the hut Brian feels sorry for them, and offers the woman a penny. Well, she must have thought it a prostitute's fee maybe, and shrinks back all horrified. Brian shoves it into the boy's hand, and pivots right around and takes off.

"So this is the chance for Brixby to lay it on Brian, and he laughs a fit, and has some cute things to say, and Brian whaps him on the shoulder — like pushing him, you know, with the heel of his hand — then Ian whips around and gives him one in the gut and one in the face, and Brian goes down. Strictly sucker-punches, sir."

Swann blew out his cheeks, not eager to handle another shade-of-gray problem. "Where was his weapon?"

"Brixby? Slung over his head."

"And Pierce?"

"Holding it. Couldn't much defend himself, if that's what you're getting at, sir."

Swann turned to Dimarico, who said, "Your call, Major."

"OK, call it I will." He turned back to Manaea and Sutton.

"Sergeant, I'm going to pass the buck to you. Had we been acting more militarily I'd charge Brixby with dereliction of duty or something. But there was no formation, and while Sutton was in charge he has no rank. In effect we haven't established formal discipline, so I want to handle it informally. Have a private talk with Brixby, and make it clear if he wants to punch someone he's to issue a challenge and have a stand-up fight in front of witnesses. Otherwise you'll kick his butt as it's never been kicked before.

"And Barry, this is confidential — not one word to *anyone*. Clear?"

"Yessir."

"When should I have the talk, sir?"

"Your call, Sergeant."

"Then it'll be tomorrow — catch him by surprise."

"Good enough, and Cam and I will stay shy of it for now."

The two men left, and Dimarico asked, "What'll you do if they go at it again and Brian gets the worst of it? Brixby can still ride him until he blows up."

"Can't protect him — he'll have to take his medicine. Once Gephart is mended I might have him challenge the Limey."

"And if Brixby comes out the winner of that?"

"There's always Lord Sappy, but I'd rather not go inter-rank on this. Maybe the best thing would be to treat him like Bathsheba's husband, except I suspect he's too cagey to go into the forefront of battle."

"How far are you willing to go?"

Swann paused. "Considering what we've put into this, I'll do whatever it takes to

keep one misfit from ruining our chances."

"And what of our other problem?"

"Sheila? Maybe pay this nunnery to keep her. How much you think it'd cost?"

~

Chapter 31 ~ Wherwell

Around the impressive edifice of Wherwell Abbey a haphazard community had grown, taking advantage of whatever business a house of forty nuns plus staff might offer.

Dimarico slipped into lecture mode.

"This place has quite a history, Jack. It was founded by the stepmother of a king, who assassinated him so her biological son could get the title. A payoff to Heaven for a secular crime."

"The proverbial government of *women* not laws, eh? What's the plan?"

"They're sure to have many holdings. I'm hoping for a manor far eastward — the nearer to Hastings, the better."

It took until early evening to find a building to settle in. The two-room hut — cruck-framed, walled with wattle-and-daub and redolent of livestock — they needed only for short-term storage, plus shelter for the women.

Eormenhild at first refused to enter, fearing the pagan rites Kinnard used to purify the place, but her son explained bug-spray was merely *wealh* incense. They'd inevitably grown careless with showing their technology, and something that hissed and spit and made eyes water frightened her more than the wrist-sundials and fire-twigs she'd already taken in stride.

* * *

Dimarico went off early next morn but returned within a couple of hours.

"Her reeve isn't there, so nothing can be done."

"Can't negotiate herself? What's she like?"

"Didn't let us in, so I can't say. This would be a noblewoman, though, so she should be used to authority."

"Have to be a hardy bunch of nuns to invite your crew in."

Dimarico smiled but worried at the delay.

"Two days to wait. Hate to waste the time, because who knows if they even have anything? I'll go look for someone else to talk to — outside the abbey, I mean, in order to try for news."

"I don't mind some rest — do us good, both man and beast. We can pick up more supplies, and maybe let your friend go on a toot."

"Don't let him free without a keeper."

* * *

Dimarico, Manaea, Ealhstan and Wulfnoth Aelfcild left early next morning, planning to check at the abbey once more, then start inquiries in the community.

Swann led the remaining troops in weapons exercises until near noon, when he gave liberty to Tobie, Sutton, Small, Brixby and two of the Englisc, giving Sutton and Small the duty of keeping Tobie clear of trouble and halfway sober.

"Two hours max, and keep alert. One apiece for you two — no more."

He set sentries before settling down to catch up on sleep.

* * *

"Gang-hlaford, Gang-hlaford!"

Swann awoke hard, still tired. "Mmff? What?"

The sentry spit a string of Saxon too fast for him to follow, with gestures to match. He saw the liberty party coming at double-time, followed by a mob of Englisc.

The wagons formed a semi-circle before the door of the rented house, with a gap for entry, the oxen grazing in a nearby common area. Swann directed the sentries to the opening now, and roused up his other troops. As the liberty party clattered through he blocked the gap with spears — he, Brian and Sheila taking positions behind with arrows nocked. Gephart watched the far corner where one of the wagons stood a couple feet clear of the house. Between the others, only the wagon tongues, angled high, acted as barriers.

The mob halted, shouting their displeasure, while more of the locals came trailing up. It appeared they would soon have several dozen would-be guests.

Sutton started an explanation but Swann cut him off.

"Edith! You guys stay in the house, and keep your ears open for someone trying to break through the wall or roof. And get our special device ready. Can you do it?"

The noise rose so he could hardly hear Barry, but it was clear Brixby had created a problem. And here came Tobie to put his two cents worth in.

"Later! Get in the house, Doc. Break out your tools, just in case."

"Yeah, but I'm telling you—"

"*Git!* Barry — everyone in war-gear. Hurry up."

Saxons with spears and improvised weapons pushed to the front of the mob — none with armor or shields yet.

Lachey came to the door bearing the shotgun, and he angrily waved her back.

"Get the thing covered! A blanket or something. Is it loaded? Buckshot — hurry!" The mob began shaking and pounding the wagons.

He grabbed Pierce and spun him around. "Watch the gaps between the wagons,

and back up Earl."

"Should I shoot, Jack?" he quavered.

"Absolute last resort. Yell and threaten."

Lachey limped out with the covered shotgun. He slung his bow and took the gun from her.

"Come with me." Holding the weapon at port arms he stepped forward, nudging two spearmen aside. The noise was overwhelming. "How do you say *Silence*?" he shouted.

"I — I can't think."

"C'mon!"

"Try *secgan*. No *secgan*."

"Saykyan?"

She nodded.

"*No secgan!*" he shouted. "*No secgan*." He waved a hand downward.

"Try *noht* or *nic*."

It sounded right, similar to German. "*Nicht secgan! Nicht sprechen!*" he mispronounced, mixing two tongues.

She joined in, splicing off phrases, and the noise fell to a dull roar.

Now Barry was at him again, attempting to explain how Brixby had started a fight.

"Shut up and organize our defense to the rear. When you're done, come stand near me, and I'll talk to you when I'm ready."

"What?" Getting edgy, he'd missed what Lachey had said.

"They want the peace-breaker turned over to them — Ian."

"Well, it's not going to happen. Tell them I'll hold a hearing right here and now."

She stared wide-eyed, then turned to speak, receiving a number of shouts in return.

"They want him turned over for the *hundredgemot* — hundred-moot or court. They'll keep him prisoner until it meets."

"Tell them I want to talk to their headman — their ealdor."

More two-way gabble.

"They don't have one. The abbey reeve speaks for them."

"And he's gone. OK, tell them to choose a spokesman — right now. I'm not going to deal with a mob."

She looked doubtful. "Are you sure?"

"Absolutely!"

"There must be a hundred, furiously angry."

"Not even fifty, and not as angry as I'll be if you don't do what I say. I'm not kidding around — there's no way I'm turning anyone over to a mob that... Why, they're not even a mob! A mob has a leader — they're a herd! Get me one man to deal with. Tell them if they don't have a leader they should be ashamed. Get one here now!"

She spoke at length, her voice gaining strength. They argued back and forth. Fists

were shaken, and weapons, too.

Swann shouted to be heard over the mob. "Hold it! You tell them they are to show respect. You are a high-born lady, and I am *frea*. The next man who yells an insult shall be punished, and the next to shake his spear in my face will have his weapon broken, and his arm, too!"

"Oh!"

"Do it, Edith! I know what I'm doing." He glared coldly at the men to his immediate front.

Again the mob quieted as they digested this latest, but still surged and pushed, if less strenuously. He now turned his back to them.

"When they've selected their leader, we'll speak. Tell them."

The crowd seethed and muttered, the more aggressive or stronger pushing forward. He sauntered away to inspect the enclosure. Behind he heard calls of *Grista*.

~

Chapter 32 ~ One or Two Cuffs

Behind a waist-high barrier of money coffers, Swann motioned the newly-chosen spokesman near.

"This is Grista the *seamere*," Lachey explained, anxiety in her face and voice. "They elected him by acclamation, I guess you'd say."

"What's he?"

"*Seamere*. Grista the seamer or... clothier, tailor."

Before them stood a sturdy man of medium height, with a luxuriant mustache like many among the lower classes. He wore the usual belted tunic over loose hose strapped below the knee, and ankle boots closed by leather ties. His head was bare with hair starting to recede. He looked to be forty or more.

"Tailor! He's a pretty lusty looking tailor."

She spoke, and the man threw back his shoulders.

"You told him what I said?"

"Yes."

"Well, no harm, I suppose."

"His name might mean *grinder*, I think. A nickname, of course."

"Yeah? Well, at least we know what we're up against. Ready? Translate me as we go." He held up the shotgun, covered by its blanket. "This is the mace of justice," he called out, and waited for her. "When there is good order the mace is covered."

"I'm having to make up some of this. I called it a club because I don't know the right word."

"No problem — keep going. When there is disorder, the mace shall be uncovered."

And if that happens, wise men shall bow their heads and be quiet lest there be danger."

He brought the butt of the shotgun down onto the bench with a good thump.

"You loaded this, right? Is the safety on?"

"I..."

"Which way is safe?"

"I can't..."

"Lord help me, neither can I! Well, on we go... Let the complainant be brought forth." He almost laughed — his language resembled Hollywood's version of a judge.

"Prisoner, stand forth!" And he pointed to a spot beyond Lachey.

Brixby began to bluster and Swann yelled, "Silence!"

Brixby's muttering continued, including the phrase, "...kangaroo court."

Swann turned and scanned behind him.

"Gephart!" he shouted. "How're you feeling?"

"Pretty good, Jack. I pulled a bow a few times today, and —"

"You're master-at-arms. Get rid of the pig-sticker and grab a club."

Gephart leaned spear and shield against the house. He hefted a couple of lengths of firewood, selected one and moved forward.

"Earl, you're responsible for order on this side of the bench, and the prisoner is in your custody."

Brixby started another complaint over his fate.

"The prisoner is to be silent until addressed. Master-at-arms, you keep him still. If he speaks out of turn you may use the Vulcan death-grip..." He mimed pinching the shoulder tendon. "...and if it doesn't work, apply the club to a tender place."

"You, *wiga*," Swann said to one of the Saxon troopers, "back up Gephart."

Lachey translated his words.

"You explained his function?" Swann asked. She nodded.

"Brixby! You've been warned."

To Lachey: "Alright, let's go."

"They're not ready." She indicated Grista and the locals. "They have to line up the swearers — the oath-helpers."

"The what?"

"The men to swear to the... this fellow's truthfulness. His character witnesses, sort of. It's partly how the jury system began. They go for a dozen, I think."

"So he lies, and they swear to it?"

"Not exactly."

"Edith, you'd better explain we don't need that arrangement. The actual eye-witnesses alone are wanted."

"It's not what they're used to," she protested.

"Nonetheless, it's the way it has to be. We can't get into their involved procedures."

More townsfolk trailed in by ones and twos, crowding up. She looked concerned

but went ahead. An extensive discussion resulted between Grista, Lachey and many of the other locals. When it slowed, she reported, "They want to take him to the hundred again — they can't agree to a foreign method of trial."

"No way!"

"I can't tell them that — they won't understand. Put yourself in their place."

She looked quite worried, and it made him pause and think.

"Tell this Grista I'll hold the trial. If he disagrees with the outcome — with my decisions — when we leave I'll either turn over Brixby or pay a bond — a ransom — to assure he stands trial back here."

"I don't know..."

"Try it."

More discussion.

"He wants to know how they can be assured you'll do it, rather than run off."

"The so-and-so! Tell him I'll swear on a Bible if he has one handy. Either that or he and I will have to fight it out over his doubting my word. Or..." He spotted Dimarico and party coming at a run. "Or he can name a champion, and I will, too. Go on!"

Lachey had reached the hand-wringing stage by now, but Swann gained confidence from the sight of capable reinforcements. She spoke at length, and the crowd again erupted in debate, Grista barely able to control them.

While they quarreled Swann climbed on the boxes to wave his reassurance to Dimarico, indicating they should go round behind the house. The Englisc were so involved in the argument that few paid attention to his actions.

"Grista says he doesn't want to fight trained warriors, but they don't swear our way, and they have no saint's bones. Would you be willing to swear by God and His Son?"

OK! Swann held his face rigid to avoid a grin of relief. Jumping down and taking a breath, he faced the crowd and raised his right hand.

"I swear by God Almighty and Christ the Redeemer I shall turn over the wrongdoer if my judgment is not accepted." He left it to Lachey to explain.

Brixby chose this moment to start shouting, claiming double jeopardy. Disdaining the *death-grip*, Gephart swung his club at the man's lower back. Brixby gargled a scream and went down to his knees, and the spearman stepped forward ready to thrust. Gephart judiciously applied the club again, ending the tirade in a groan.

"Ian," Swann advised Brixby in a conversational tone, "if you interrupt once more I'll have you hogtied and gagged. And if you think I'm kidding..."

Lachey plucked at his sleeve. "He wants to know if you're a true Christian, though I think that," pointing to Brixby, "probably reassures him."

"Christian? At the remove of a thousand years, I say yes."

He expected her to simply tell Grista *Yes*, but she went on, saying something of *thusend geara*. He frowned.

"I told him you're a thousand-year Christian. I'm not sure what it might mean to

him, but he accepts it."

"Wonderful! OK, on we go."

"I'm getting sick."

"What! You can't do that now."

"The smell and..."

She was right. The mob carried evidence of its various occupations, not to mention lack of recent baths — and plenty of dust arose, as well. Rancid sweat, the stench of barn and slaughterhouse, beer and baking, and odors probably relating to tanning, dyeing and soap-making were near overpowering, even to him. Yet he figured part of her problem was fright — not only of the mob but of the responsibility she faced, and he could surely sympathize.

"You've got to stick with me. Tell our boy to push them back five paces, and I'll do the same here." He turned to Sutton. "Get everyone except them," indicating Brixby and the guards, "back several feet. Go! And keep your eyes open for Cam, coming from the back. Help them, if need be."

He turned to see the English unmoving — their rear ranks pressing the front forward, and Grista not trying too hard.

"Hurry and say something, because you've got to stand by me."

He shouted, "Back, back!" and gestured with his free hand. "Have him get up on the boxes, so they can see him."

Grista climbed on the boxes to shout, and the front withdrew a yard or so.

Lachey looked shaky, Swann thought, and he turned again in hope of seeing Dimarico, his other potential interpreter. No luck. What to do if she collapsed? He tried to gather his thoughts.

"Major! He wants to know what's next."

"Sorry. Where's our victim or whatever? Get him up here."

* * *

"Swear him. Do you solemnly, et cetera."

"I can't... You'll have to tell me. I'm blanking."

"Get his name... OK. Do you solemnly swear to tell the truth...

"...the whole truth, and nothing but the truth...

"...so help you God?"

The man looked puzzled.

"Did he say it?" Swann demanded.

"Yes, but it's not exactly what—"

"Good enough. Ask him what he said at the drink-shop or whatever caused... Hold it! Ask him what happened, nothing more."

After Lachey's question a long speech from the man resulted — complete with

gestures, plus interjections from the amen corner behind him.

"He says —"

"Wait. Ask Grista to keep the mob quiet while a witness is speaking."

She met this new demand with a piteous look, but he was adamant.

"Got to do it, Edith. Can't let them screw things up. They're a mob, and we need to dominate them."

She took a deep breath, then addressed Grista. Another rumbling dissent came from the English, but as they calmed the witness spoke.

"OK, what did he say?"

"Please, may I paraphrase? I'll never remember... In effect, he says he was quietly sitting there when our men entered, and he made a mild comment, whereupon Brixby hit and kicked him without warning."

Swann said with a droll tone, "And did it strike you he adhered rigidly to the oath he just now swore?"

"Not much."

"Ask how long our people were in there before he made his, uh... his critique."

"He says, not very long."

"Ask exactly what he said."

"Look at those foreigners with their unusual clothes."

"What did Brixby say to him? Go on — I know what he said before."

"The foreigner got wrathful and shouted insults."

"Does he speak our language?"

"He could tell because of Brixby's looks and gestures."

"Point out he previously claimed he got no warning."

"He says he didn't get a warning because he can't speak our language. He thinks he's put one over on you with that argument."

"Tell him he said he could tell Brixby's mood without knowing the language. Say: Which is it? Did you know or not know?"

"He knew Brixby was angry but he didn't know he would attack."

"Say he tells two tales, then dismiss him without letting him answer."

The witness backed away looking disgruntled.

"Are you trying to get Ian off?" she whispered.

"I hope to both *do* justice and have them comprehend I'm doing it. You'll see what happens. Now we want witnesses who were drinking with this guy — try for three."

* * *

The man's drinking companions stood forth, and the story became more reasonable. They'd downed a few and were feeling frisky, when in walked these weirdly-dressed outlanders, acting as if they were of some importance. The hittee resented this, and

spoke insolently, reinforcing his words with arm waving, although no rude gestures, they insisted.

The particular outlander responded angrily with words and aggressive grimaces, then suddenly attacked, knocking poor Eadswith over and toppling the bench on all of them in his pursuit. The outlander leaped upon his prey, striking him again and kicking his prostrate body. The shop-man tried to interfere, only to be thrown to the floor. Then the outlander's companions took him away, safe from righteous Saxon wrath.

The shop owner confirmed the latter parts of this story, although he claimed not to have seen the preliminaries.

In the middle of this Dimarico showed up, demanding to be brought up to date. Merely a little fracas which needed to be sorted out, Swann assured him, and reminded him Aelfcild's son — watching the oxen — might need looking after. Dimarico sent Ealhstan off with Aelfcild, but came right back.

Swann now suggested the goods in the hut might need looking after, what with Koskinen loose in there, and Dimarico then stayed off his back, the trial continuing.

"What a tale of rapine and desecration," Swann muttered when the testimonies ended, but Lachey declined to see the humor.

Swann asked Brixby if he wanted to testify next, and got an angry affirmative.

"I'll set these bloody lying fairies straight."

Brixby claimed the victim had used obviously obscene language and gestures. He knew enough Saxon by now to understand full well what the so-and-so was getting at. Swann invited him to tell his tale in Saxon directly to Grista, in that case, but Brixby excused himself.

During the first part of this exchange the mob reacted irascibly, and the last part brought scornful laughter.

Swann ordered Lachey to again remind Grista of the need for quiet, and suggested those who found it necessary to shout comments be sent away. Grista passed this on with additional strictures of his own.

Brixby's tale continued. "One or two cuffs, is all!" Two blows he'd given his victim. Then the owner attacked him, earning a small push.

He glared and sneered at the Englisc, at Grista and Swann — even at the inoffensive Lachey — declaring his full innocence, and resenting the conspiracy against him. As far as being dragged off, he had in fact dealt quickly and lightly with the foe, and willingly left, his task complete.

~

Chapter 33 ~ Roll Him Over

Sutton now got his say. Swann — with Lachey continuing to interpret for the

Englisc — led him through events from the time the liberty party was organized, the instructions given to the men and to Barry himself, and their walk through the settlement until they located the drink-shop. He told how they'd entered, conscious of the stares of the customers therein, and how they ordered the first round.

Before some had finished their first brew, the muttering of *that man* — pointing to Eadswith — got particularly noticeable. Brixby had quickly taken offense. The others tried to silence him, but as the Saxon became louder and more animated, Brixby stepped his way and shouted, then attacked.

As quickly as he could react, Sutton had lurched forward and grabbed Brixby's collar, jerking him backward. With Small's help he dragged him outside, the others preceding or closely following. Back they came, first at a brisk walk, then at a jog as the mob swiftly built.

During this testimony Brixby tried to interject a comment, but Gephart immediately reacted, poking him none too gently.

Next Small spoke, closely confirming Sutton. Tobie stated the early part of the story, but claimed to have exited before the fight — probably an evasion to avoid responsibility.

The two Englisc of the liberty party testified last — their words, spoken in understandable Saxon, carrying weight with the crowd. Swann and Lachey restrained their enthusiasm and kept them on-subject as they reveled in the limelight.

Their recollection of early events closely tracked the Americans. They claimed Eadswith greatly insolent, and had they been more senior, would themselves have called him to task. Yet *wiga* Ihn had responded too quickly, and without thought or judgment. They could not agree with his overreaction.

Swann excused them, and had Lachey ask Grista, "Would you hear from any other, or has enough been said?"

Grista turned to the crowd and stated his opinion — they'd heard enough, had they not? If no man else could add any new thing, he would tell the outland frea they were satisfied. After discussion and dissent it was settled.

Swann now called, "Hear my judgment! Eadswith the Drunkard..."

"I can't say *that*!" Lachey protested.

Swann glowered.

"I can't — I won't. These people... I'll say *drinker*."

"For insolence and for starting a quarrel, you are fined one shilling."

The mob erupted in a bellow of rage. Although one shilling was a minuscule fine by Saxon standards, the testimony had led them to believe their man would be found in the right, and they swung instantly to their original mood and beyond. They surged forward, pressing Grista and Eadswith against the barrier, while Swann's troops stepped up in response.

Grista, gripping a coffer to avoid being forced over, spoke in an urgent whisper.

"He says, *Why do you this — where is the right?*" said Lachey.

Behind Swann, Dimarico spoke in his ear. "Jack, let me take over."

Swann remembered Tobie's complaint upon landing, that he needed to grow extra hands, and now wished he himself had an extra head to handle the problems behind as well as in front.

"Stay back, Cam," he said. And to Lachey, "Tell him it's not over yet. There's more to come, and it'll work out."

The ready and silent troops behind Swann faced down the noisy mob, and Grista was able to force his people back half a pace. Swann confronted them with a stern demeanor, raising his hand for quiet. As the noise diminished to a rumble, Dimarico again tried to put his oar in.

"Jack—"

"Hold it, Cam. I know what I'm doing."

"They're going wild."

"Wait! Eadswith, pay your fine to Ealdor Grista." Upon Lachey's translation the mob swayed and muttered louder. Eadswith looked at Grista, and after a pause the seamere gestured toward the bench. With a sour look, Eadswith opened the *pocca* — poke or bag — tied to his belt, and brought forth two pennies and a half, slapping them down on the bench-top. Grista looked a question at Swann.

"Tell him it's good enough for now."

He waited for the translation, turning toward Brixby.

"Private Ian Brixby — for striking a man without warning or good cause...

"...and for harming him who tried to stop the quarrel...

"...you are fined ten scillings. Pay your fine to Ealdor Grista."

Before Lachey could complete her translation, the crowd — cued by Brixby's incensed expression — blared a shout of triumph and laughter. Swann nodded to Gephart, who forced Brixby up to the bench. Swann pointed at the coffer-top, and Brixby reached into his pocket, in turn slapping coins down.

The din rolled on, townsmen reaching across bodies to pummel a joyful Eadswith, happy as if he'd won a race.

Swann held his hand up for silence. "Ten *shillings*, Brixby, not pennies."

"I'm not to keep a bleeding penny?"

"Empty your pockets." Three more pennies appeared. Swann turned to Dimarico. "Can you get us the balance?"

Dimarico nodded and moved toward the house. Swann motioned Sutton over, and said quietly, "Get two more men on Brixby. Maybe yourself and Small."

"Brian?"

"Absolutely not! Keep them apart at all times. Get ready to drag him away."

The crowd loosened, showing signs of breaking up.

"Edith, only a bit more work for you. Tell Grista there's more to come."

Gephart still held Brixby at the barrier. Small and Sutton moved up on either side of him, Sutton signing the spearman to fall back. Dimarico came forward to count out the additional coins, and again the crowd raised their voices.

As good as a circus, Swann thought.

"Private Ian Brixby, hear your further punishment.

"For disobeying expressed orders regarding fighting...

"...and for harming would-be friends and allies...

"...for insolent and disruptive behavior before and during the trial...

"...and for multiple acts prejudicial to good discipline...

"...you are ordered to undergo corporal punishment."

Either side of the barrier became dead quiet now, waiting for the axe to fall. Brixby himself was miraculously silent, his expression an illustration of malice.

"You are to be tied to a wagon wheel until such time as you learn proper military behavior."

At his signal Sutton and Small each grabbed an arm, and with Gephart's ready assistance they forced Brixby across the compound to the far wagon. They tied his arms and torso to the rear wheel, forcing him into a squat with his head below the rim. Brixby was neither cooperative nor silent during this operation, attempting to break free and shouting imprecations.

On Swann's instructions Manaea and a couple troopers raised one corner of the wagon, while others rotated Brixby upside down. Shocked silent, he curled his legs over the wagon side to pull himself up, then renewed his cries and curses. This lasted only a few minutes. He started to tire, then vomited with a strangled croak.

Sutton and others jumped forward, not waiting for a command, lifting the wagon and rotating Brixby upright. He continued to retch — coughing and gagging.

Sutton gestured an apology. "I thought we'd better..."

Tobie ran up with his bag, casting Swann a dirty look as he passed, and calling for LeeAnn. Brixby was unbound, rolling face down on the ground. Swann walked away, only to have Dimarico maneuver to cross his path, saying nothing but giving an admonitory look. Swann gave the slightest of nods, then turned to check that the sentries, at least, still kept their eyes outward.

The Engisc nearly forced their way into the compound, lining the gaps between each wagon, crouching to see under, climbing the wagon sides. More women joined them, worming their way to the fore or stretching in attempts to see over the men's shoulders. Children were lifted up, youths tried to force their way through the crowd.

Grista remained at the forefront of the gap, almost spread-eagled on the boxes by pressure behind. Lachey motioned Swann over, speaking softly. "He wants to know what to do with the money."

"Ask him to come by tomorrow, and we'll speak of this and other things."

She said, "He asks if the punishment is over."

Swann shook his head.

Lachey translated, but gave Swann a look compounded of fatigue and despair — almost of anguish.

"Do you want to go in?" he asked. "Go ahead, and I'll get Cam."

Dimarico soon approached.

"This is Grista — a nickname, according to Lachey. He's been chosen ealdor — mob spokesman, but I figured the promotion would do him good. Should I introduce you?"

"I'll handle it. Are you through with our problem over there?"

"No."

"You going to kill him?"

"Not on purpose, but he's been asking for this a long time, and now he's going to get it good."

"I'm not eager to have anything else on my conscience."

"This one's on me, Cam. We're in kill or cure mode now. This discipline problem can't go on any longer without infecting the rest. That's my judgment."

"It's looking personal, not simply policy on your part."

"There just might be some of that."

Dimarico chose to say no more.

Brixby was now sitting but Tobie still hovered over him. Swann walked over to Manaea, watching everything from a point near the house.

"We could have used you here today."

"Mr Cam said you sent me with him."

"I did, because he's the key man around here, but I still could have used you. I'm thinking of promoting Barry. What do you think?"

"He makes a good Marine, sir."

"Anyone else?"

"Gephart is good man, but too soon, I think."

"Pierce is making the most progress with the language."

Manaea shook his head.

"Unfortunately, I agree. Needs a lot of seasoning."

"What you do, Major," he nodded toward Brixby. "Good thing for the men to see."

"Glad someone thinks so."

Swann moved on to the wagon wheel tableau. Brixby looked dizzy and breathed gustily, but retained enough energy for a scowl. His clothes were dusty and stained with vomit.

Swann looked at Sutton and the others. "Tie him back up."

Tobie jumped up but Swann forestalled him. "Keep your opinions professional, Doc."

Tobie glared, holding himself in with difficulty.

"Well then... Well, I certify this man unfit for further punishment."

"Opinion noted." He looked hard at Tobie, daring him to spout off.

"Sutton, what's holding you up?"

"All set, sir," Sutton said.

Swann glanced at Brixby. *If looks could kill...* "OK, roll him over."

~

~

Chapter 34 ~ All Keep Quiet

Movement was hesitant, but under Swann's stern gaze they lifted the wagon and began to rotate the wheel. Tobie could take it no longer.

"You idiot! Don't you realize you could kill him!" The wheel stopped.

Swann crossed his arms. "And your point is?" He nodded at Sutton's party to keep going. The wheel rotated and the wagon dropped. Brixby moaned, and again threw his legs over the wagon side. The English audience gave a mass sigh. Tobie ran to Dimarico, arms and jaw flailing.

Brixby got enough wind back to curse, albeit more weakly than before. Swann stood by him, wondering if the man could be this lacking in stamina and self-control, or saw an advantage in putting on an act. He soon turned away, now convinced the SAS story had been fabricated.

The boastfulness confirmed it. In Swann's experience heroes rarely felt the need to brag. As soldiers said long ago, once you had *seen the elephant* you no longer needed to exaggerate.

He felt uncomfortable. He didn't want to brutalize this man in cold blood — neither kill him nor destroy his spirit. Adding to the discomfort was finding himself — and Brixby — the target of all eyes, both among their crew and the locals. An officer always tended to be the center of interest, of course, with his men looking to him for an example in barracks or the field — or keeping watch so he wouldn't catch them at illicit behavior. Nothing quite so intense as this, though.

But the show must go on.

* * *

"I don't appreciate this, not one bit." Pierce spoke in a low voice.

"Why? Look what he done to you! He ain't worth worryin' over."

"Not the point, Earl."

"Ian's been a beast, fellows, I know, but still the Major shouldn't—"

"And the worst is..." Sheila crept up on them. "he went cliché. *And what's your point?*" she inaccurately mimicked.

They scowled at the interruption. Weeks of their putting up with foolishness had diminished Sheila's popularity, overcoming the effect of her physical charms.

Sutton said, "What you don't realize is he could do this to anyone — including you."

Her grin turned to a sneer. "He wouldn't—"

"He would. He let Brixby get away with plenty, but he's added it up, hasn't he? What's he got added up for *you?*"

Sheila glared daggers and stalked off.

Swann wouldn't dare. *He wouldn't dare!*

* * *

Dimarico stood impassive before Tobie's assault, and the doctor turned back to Swann, unwilling to give up without one more attack.

Trying to speak calmly, he stated, "You'd better understand something, Swann. He could throw up again and get it in his lungs, leading to pneumonia or even asphyxiation. He could have a stroke or heart attack. You could be killing him... and if you do," his voice rose, "everyone here will despise you for a coward. If I ever get a chance..."

He raged on but Swann had other things on his mind. Twilight approached, along with a light drizzle — they'd spent the entire afternoon on this useless affair. The locals had begun to straggle off, though many awaited the final curtain. Behind him Brixby stopped yelling imprecations or even cursing under his breath — only an occasional groan escaped him. The timing seemed right.

"Tell you what," he interrupted, "you've made your point. We'll put it to a vote."

"A vote! That's pretty stupid! Well, you know how I'll vote."

"Not *you*." He turned his back to Tobie. "Troops — Americans! Come over here." They came to stand in front of him, while Manaea moved up behind. "Scrape him off me," Swann ordered, nodding in Tobie's direction, and the Sergeant firmly herded the Doctor away, shushing him as he went.

"Sutton, tell me what you think."

Sutton didn't care for Brixby, although the man personally bothered him little. He'd

caused problems, and the Major had put up with an awful lot, yet all-in-all he'd rather not involve himself in this — not attempt to decide what older, more experienced men could better judge.

"I don't know, sir — you'd better ask the others."

"Come over here, Barry." Swann placed him by a wagon, standing in front with hands clasped at his waist. "Look at me, and I'll let you in on a secret. In the near future you are going to be promoted, and I need NCOs who aren't afraid to speak their minds. So give it to me straight — up or down for Brixby?"

Sutton looked at him for several moments. "I would say *up*, Major."

Swann pivoted to face the group. "Colin, how do you see it?"

Small hesitated. Brixby was a compatriot, and he considered him his mate, but friendship offered by the Americans proved more congenial. Right now he would prefer to be left out, yet he certainly didn't want the man seriously harmed.

"Well, sir, as I see it the man has—"

"I'm not after any justifications, and your opinion won't be held against you. Tell me what you think should be done."

"In that case, sir..." He looked over at Sutton for support. "Up."

"Gephart?"

"Leave him till he takes root, I say."

"Brenneman?"

She hated the stupid Limey, the most irritating and obnoxious jerk of the whole bunch. Little though she liked some others, she thanked her lucky stars there weren't two like Bilbo on this trip. But there was the threat by Sutton, and in a way she liked getting a rise from the puffed-up so-and-so.

"I..." She couldn't get it out.

"It's a start, Sheila, but not too helpful."

"I can't say, Jack. I don't know what..." And there she stuck.

"Where's Kinnard? *Dale!* Come over here." Kinnard slowly advanced. "You've heard this. What's your vote?"

"I'm not a soldier. I... Are you sure you want me?"

"Not one of the troopers? Didn't I see you shouldering a spear earlier? Isn't that beauty mark still on your head? You're in on this. Go!"

Kinnard had come in for a degree of attention from the obnoxious Brit, and he certainly wouldn't miss him. Still, he couldn't help resenting Swann's calm assumption of the power of life and death.

"OK, then... Uh, I vote to let him go."

"Not one of the options, but I'll take it as an *up*. Three to one — good enough. Rotate him, Barry." He walked away. "Let's get a fire going before the rain gets serious. Chow down."

"Mister Dimarico, would you ask Ealdor Grista to chase these people off — show's

over."

* * *

"I didn't get a vote!" Pierce complained to Sutton. "And I'm having second thoughts about Jack."

"Yeah? What do you think, Early-bird?"

"Shoulda let him stay till he turned blue, the SOB."

"I mean the Major."

"He's fine — don't want no wuss running this outfit."

They looked to Small. "I'm sorry, Barry. He has his winning ways at times, but at heart he's cold — an offish man."

Sutton backed up a couple of steps, and stood with his hands locked in front of his body.

"Look at me now." He mimicked Swann's voice, "*How do you vote?*"

They needed a couple seconds. Pierce reacted first, then Small. "You're kidding!"

"Barry, are you saying—"

"I've *said* nothing."

Gephart frowned. "I don't get it."

Barry wiggled his thumb again.

"You mean he..."

They broke into laughter, but Gephart got a puzzled look on his face. "Are you supposed to be tellin' us this?"

Sutton took a quick look over each shoulder. "I didn't *tell* you anything, so let's all keep quiet about this."

~

Chapter 35 ~ OK With That?

LeeAnn plodded back to the house, her spirits at low tide. She didn't care for Brixby, didn't enjoy working with someone's stomach contents, didn't appreciate the way the Major treated people — not only Brixby but the way he'd pushed Edith around. She guessed part of what they'd said to each other, and had read Edith's body language. Maybe, she thought, hard times brought out the worst in Swann's type.

The lantern cast a dim light. The modern ones were used in the compound, so they made do with a horn-paneled English model. It cast enough light to see Aelfcild's mother giving her the beady-eyed look. *Nosy old hag*. Maybe they'd better start whispering with her around. LeeAnn would bet the old gal knew more than she let on.

Of course, *old* was relative. She probably wasn't more than fifty — these people lived hard. Unfortunately the woman wasn't deaf yet.

LeeAnn knelt beside Lachey. "Awake, Edie? Should have eaten something."

Lachey weakly shook her head. "How's Ian?"

"Didn't you hear?"

"I've been napping."

"How could you sleep with that ruckus?"

"Not well, but I'm worn out."

"They took him down and dragged him to his bag. Couldn't walk."

"Brutal!"

LeeAnn stroked Lachey's hair. "Don't worry about him — you put up with enough abuse yourself." She considered. "We've misjudged the Major. He's not a nice guy who acts hard — more a mean guy who acts nice sometimes. I don't know what we've got ourselves into."

The more she thought of it — nearly killing Brixby and his harshness to Edith — the hotter she got.

"You OK here, Edie? I'll be back in awhile."

* * *

Dimarico and Swann sat under a fly with their backs against the house, the night mist cool on their faces. The oxen milled outside, herded by hired men and watched by a sentinel on one of the wagons, odors carried away on a slight breeze. Two lanterns on high poles lit the scene. Manaea watched from one side, his glances taking in the sentries.

The cooking fire served as the setting for a sing-along — the English chanting poetry accompanied by a zither, the Americans giving a performance of their own. A *Capella*, for no-one had thought to bring so much as a tin whistle to the year 1066.

Sheila, who had a halfway decent voice, sang a western song, and they got through one verse of America the Beautiful, the zither volunteering its assistance. Spirits rose high, and in all the group not one person thought of poor Ian Brixby or worried why Edith Lachey hadn't joined them.

Except for a petite figure who, hands on hips and voice throaty, blocked the two men's view, saying, "I've got a bone to pick with you, Major Swann."

Swann didn't know whether to cringe or laugh.

Dimarico slid over. "Sit here, and keep your voice down."

"How could anyone hear in *this* racket?" she asked indignantly. "How could anyone even sleep?"

"Doesn't seem anyone *wants* to sleep."

"Oh? What about poor Ian? And what of all the women who don't happen to be named Sheila?"

"Sit down, LeeAnn."

She didn't care for this. These two jokers wanted to overawe her with their big bodies, squeezing her between them like a kid.

"Get me something to sit on," she ordered.

On backpacks that put her higher than Swann, she started in on him.

"The way you acted today..."

Swann liked this girl whom he'd long decided to be much less of an airhead than she seemed — cute and sweet, a hard worker and always cheerful. But he'd no intention of letting a tattooed chit tell him how to lead troops.

"If it's Brixby, forget it."

"*Forget it!* After you nearly killed him?"

"LeeAnn," Dimarico said.

"Why did you do that to him? Haven't you ever heard of cruel and un-American punishment? Did you have to tie him up the second time?"

"And maybe tomorrow, too."

"What!"

"LeeAnn—"

"I can't believe any — Hey!" Dimarico gave her a nudge, nearly knocking her off her seat.

"What's *that* for?"

"Well, *listen* to me. What would you prefer — these people attacking us? Torches thrown on the thatch, wagons busted up? Having to kill a dozen to protect ourselves?"

"I can't believe they would —"

"Maybe not. Then also, maybe so."

"You couldn't think of any better method to handle this? No way!"

"I'm not saying I would have done it the Major's way. I might have tried to buy them off. And in a sense I did, paying the fine — which is coming from his wages, by the way." He gestured at Brixby. "But there's still the problem of what trick he'd pull in the next town. Jack's methods might be rough, but on reflection, it's for the best."

"Are you telling me you couldn't have taken care of him some other way, after you paid off the guy he punched?"

"To go that route, we'd have to consider what it would do to our reputation."

"Reputation! What's with that?"

"Right now it's merely a wild man attacking a couple of citizens, but these tales always become enhanced in the telling. Next month the story would be several of us breaking up a tavern, and eventually it'd be claimed we tore up the whole town. Instead, it'll be how we punished our man for misbehavior. We'll be the good guys."

"I don't think —"

"Keep in mind their traditions. The usual type of warfare in England — and throughout the Middle Ages in Europe — is the raid. A band of Vikings or a *here* — a raiding army — comes marauding in and starts destroying things. Defenders are killed,

the women they catch are raped, maybe a few likely youths of either sex are captured for slaves, everything of value is stolen, they burn down the village."

LeeAnn thought this over. "What's the point?"

"Of this type of warfare?"

"Yeah. Why destroy a place you want to capture? What's it get you?"

"Why did Sherman destroy swaths of Georgia and South Carolina? Why did the Allies bomb Germany to rubble? It's to break the will of the people — force them to change their allegiance. And get some loot, of course."

"What of Gettysburg? What of... you know, all those other battles?"

"Think of Indian raids in pioneer days. The level of warfare here is between that and more modern fighting."

"So it's like —"

"A protection racket in some ways. These leaders — *cyninges*, *ealdormannes*, *eorles*, *thegnes* — think of them as Mafia dons. You won't be too far off. And had Jack conformed to pattern, this tradition might have been applied to our affair. In other words, it would have gone down in legend as a raid."

She digested this. "Is it this way everywhere?"

"Or worse — tribal in many lands. England is in some respects the most advanced nation in Europe."

"Well... OK, then. So much for Ian, even though his penalty seems... But *you*," she turned to Swann, almost putting his eye out with her finger, "why did you have to treat Edith like that? How can you wriggle your way out of that one?"

"Treat her how?"

"Belittle her, demand things, made her uncomfortable, threaten her. And don't say you didn't, because I heard a lot of it, and I could see you yelling and criticizing."

"You're making a big deal of nothing."

"It's *not* nothing! She did her best. What'd you expect of her?"

"She did fine, but let me remind you it got tense out there."

"What do you mean, *She did fine*? You sure didn't act it."

"She needed some prodding, but overall she did her part of the job well. Her diplomacy, I'd call it, was probably as important as what I said. She undoubtedly made my words more palatable."

"You're accusing her of changing what you said?"

"I hope she did, because I've rarely been accused of tact. I'm quite sure she rephrased many of my statements — she said so."

LeeAnn couldn't believe her ears. She figured he'd be all aggravated to know Edith second-guessed him.

"So you're OK with it?"

"Certainly. I wouldn't have wanted it any other way. Of course I didn't want her to revise any —"

"And you're OK with it?"

"Yes! What d'you think I'm saying?"

The three sat without speaking for a few minutes, watching the party wind down.

"Well." LeeAnn stood. "Time for bed."

She sure hoped Edith was still awake.

~

Chapter 36 ~ Sleep It Off

Swann awoke with the birds, as usual. He couldn't wait until they got into permanent quarters with enough trained troops to allow him to sleep through the night. The birds got up far too early — with false dawn, a good hour before the sun showed its face. And if birds didn't wake you, the roosters would with their relentless crowing, or the pigs and cattle, or the locals themselves — slamming doors, yawning and groaning, calling greetings to one another.

Blast them all!

He rolled out and pulled on socks and boots, discarding the idea of changing underwear and bathing anything other than hands and face. Too much to do, and Dimarico probably waiting to hang more duties on him.

Blast all and everyone!

* * *

LeeAnn awakened to noise in the compound. *Swann again!* If it wasn't one thing with him it was another. And she'd so coveted her beauty sleep today. She couldn't believe getting up ahead of the sun was healthy.

Whoa! Never mind that!

She sat up and peered at Lachey. Wide awake, same sad expression.

"Edie — good news. The major isn't angry. He thinks you did a great job!"

Lachey took it in slowly. "Truly?"

"No kidding. I dragged it out of..."

Edith's eyes shifted, and LeeAnn snapped her head around. *Gotcha!* Aelfcild's mother made a picture of rapt attention — leaning forward, eyes wide and mouth half-open.

With a smarmy grin LeeAnn asked, "Are you getting all this, Lady Eormenhild?"

Eormenhild turned away, her face reddening. That these *ceorlisc wealas* — low foreigners — could mock a high-born — albeit she had wed beneath herself — Saxon lady! She roasted hot. And now they laughed!

She listened to their talk with all her might, trying to catch the meanings. They spoke of the one called the Swain — unlikely name for a thegn — and a blithe

happening.

To give early word to her son, to allow him to plan, to speed their gain of land and wealth — this was her hope, and Yellow-locks and Dark Hag her main sources. She listened again, but hard it was to steal meaning without having a blink of their faces and hands. The words sounded more outlandish than ever.

"Ee-hay ed-say underful-way ob-jay — er, iplomatic-day."

"Ar-yay oo-yay ur-shay?"

"Abso-yay utely-lay."

* * *

With abbreviated ablutions and breakfast done, and the sun a few fingers above the horizon, Dimarico and party left for the abbey and whatever other errands they could accomplish. No sooner were they beyond sight than Grista hove into view, accompanied by several men.

"Edith!" Swann called, and out she limped, looking a great deal better than yesterday. Merely needed a good night's sleep, he figured.

They threaded the gap between the wagons and went to meet the Engisc.

"Ealdor Grista," he hailed, "*Ic grete the* — I greet you."

Grista responded, with Lachey interpreting.

"Good health, and he brings free men."

"Let's talk with him alone first."

He and Grista discussed the fines. The usual division of fines from the hundred court was between the earl and king. Swann pointed out this had been an informal court, and the funds should go for local use, perhaps reimbursing the shop owner. But Grista hesitated to take so much on himself. Swann shrugged and told him to make the decision in confab with others.

That settled, they set up a testing area for would-be recruits. A crowd gathered to watch, and men and boys trickled forth to show their prowess.

* * *

Dimarico returned with bad news.

"They won't cooperate?" Swann said.

"No. Your promotion of Grista didn't help. Plenty of resentment over it. The reeve claims he's in charge of these masterless men. How many did you recruit?"

"Fourteen, but some might change their minds, and I'll probably drop a few."

"How many of those hold land from the abbey?"

"Don't know, Cam. Why?"

"If they've agreed with the abbey to work various plots or run abbey-owned mills or ovens and such, the reeve's not willing to let them off."

"You mean... They're tied to the land like peasants? I thought that came in later, with the Normans. These are all free men."

"Freemen aren't slaves — wealas or theowes — but they're not completely free by any means. There are *cotsetlan* — cottagers, you might say — who owe everything to their lord — hut, plot, animals, seed. They're total dependents, similar to serfs. *Gebures* — boors or farmers — have a status like share-croppers but aren't free to pick up and go, either, since they owe their lord a crop, and they might be tied up in a long-term lease. Next come *geneates* — renters of a higher class — who should be free to take themselves off whenever they want. The name means something similar to *companions*, so they're apparently considered fit for the shield wall — higher status, in other words."

"Which category do business owners — Grista or the tavern-keeper — fall into?"

"How dependent are they, Jack? Do they own their buildings, tools, stock in trade? Does Grista own or lease his gear? What of the cloth — is it supplied by the abbey? Because I would guess much or most of his work is done for them."

"Then we don't know if we have *any* recruits. What a treat this is!"

"I've explained part of this before."

"As if I'd paid attention... And what's with these horses?"

"For our cavalry, of course."

* * *

The sun touched the horizon, with mist coming on. Dimarico, Swann, Manaea and Lachey stood in the dusty compound entry after dealing with the prospective recruits, few of whom were of the highest rank of commoners. Dimarico had questioned each of the fourteen as to his circumstances, assessing mental stability and intelligence. Lachey took notes in a lined journal.

They huddled over the book. "Any comments, Edith?" Swann asked.

"This man," she pointed to an entry, "didn't seem to be making much sense."

"I agree," Dimarico said. "And we'd better scratch off this one, as well. Appeared rather shifty in some of his answers."

"Sergeant?" Swann asked.

Before Manaea could answer, Sutton — standing sentry — echoed, "Sergeant? Armed party coming — eight men."

Dimarico peered. "The reeve."

Swann took over. "Sergeant! Mount up — full battle gear. You too, Cam."

"Barry! You and he," Swann pointed to the other sentry, "get replacements — archers — then back me up here. Edith, you'll translate until Cam returns."

Manaea chivvied the troops while getting into his own equipment.

Sheila ran up. "What's for me?" she demanded.

Swann looked around as Ealhstan clambered into Sutton's place next to the entry.

"Get up there with him. Bows strung, arrows nocked. Don't draw, and keep the points down. No accidents! Don't even *think* of shooting without a clear order from me or Sarge."

He swiveled again to check the compound.

Manaea jogged up, shoving his helm into place. "Sir!"

"Get Brixby up with Small on the far side. Make sure they know to do nothing without orders. Pierce up here." He pointed to the wagon. "Civilians into the hut. Have Tobie and LeeAnn get set. Gephart..."

The approaching Saxons slowed, and the crowd of locals parted like an old movie scene when two gunfighters meet. They paced forward — the reeve in advance, his expression foreboding.

Dimarico came up, pushing between Swann and Manaea to greet the frowning Saxon.

"*Hu gaeth hit, Refa* — how goes it, Reeve?"

The man demanded to know what Dimarico intended. Taking on warriors, Dimarico told him. The abbey gave no leave for this, the reeve declared, and to Dimarico's stating he wanted free men, the reeve countered that none were free to go.

Dimarico briefly translated, and Swann said, "He's bluffing. They can't stand up to us, and he knows it. Look at his expression — tough outside but scared beneath."

"True, but we can't use violence, Jack. Don't even dream of it."

"We can't do without men, and if we run into this wherever we go, we're sunk."

"We can get them — merely need to fork over sixty shillings each."

"*Per man?* Ridiculous!"

"I'm not through yet."

Dimarico now declared the reeve's claim on geneates false, as was his claim on the sons of gebures. If these men hadn't taken an oath of fealty they retained their freedom under Englist law. Further, a price of sixty shillings for a ceorl's service was foolish because a slave's purchase would cost less. An argument and bargaining session ensued, primarily between Dimarico and the reeve, but with the Englist recruits and onlookers interjecting comments and claims.

The reeve demanded Dimarico halt these interruptions, failing to see that placing this order through the American harmed his own authority.

Swann and the others got translations and explanations from Dimarico when he felt able to give them, and from Lachey when he could not. They found it necessary to quiet their own forces a couple of times when the reeve's claims became outrageous to modern ears, and the sun went down with no progress made.

And afterward...

"Well, what do you think?"

"He's bluffing, and we should tell him to go pound salt."

"Saipele?"

"We scatter these people in a minute, Mister Cam — you say the word. Right, Major?"

"No, no, no! We're not going to do any such thing. They'll have the fyrd after us if we offer violence to representatives of a religious order. Look what happened to Aelfcild. Yet it can't go on this way. I'm going to invite these fellows in to parley. Give them food and booze — see what happens."

"Cam, we *must* have some people — definitely bowmen."

"I know, and I'm far from done. But I don't want to fight the law, not even in Medieval times. Let's try it my way for now."

The reeve accepted the invitation with ill grace, highly resenting the challenge to his authority by these foreigners. He longed to send them off, and to put the ceorl Grista back in his place. But the fyrdinga was not here to back him, nor would it be for a day or more. The abbey's men, who stood watching and would normally help defend the burh, could not be trusted to aid him now — had gone over to the outlanders.

And his mere *seofan hiredcnihtas*—seven hirelings — faced large stark warriors who seemed to fear neither God nor man nor devil.

* * *

The evening wore on — not near as jolly as the previous night despite some serious drinking on the part of their guests. Dimarico wore the Saxon down to thirty shillings, but got no budge from there, nor any easing of the claim on the gebures.

LeeAnn came up behind and whispered to him, receiving a nod.

The reeve sat close by the fire, his men a couple paces behind him. Fuddled with beer, he had enjoyed the better part of their last bottle of wine. Dimarico now poured the dregs in the man's cup, and as the reeve willingly drained it, LeeAnn came forth with a quart of bourbon.

* * *

"See this?" Koskinen hissed. "Cameron plans to bluff him but the Saxon is stubborn as ever, drunk or sober. So it starts. Swann will lead Dimarico into breaking their law, and soon we'll have them after us."

"Evan..."

"Go on — spit it out, Doctor! How you manage to get soused every night, I can't imagine."

"Evan, this ain't good. We don't want no more fights. Why can't we—"

"There'll be no fight. This Saxon isn't stupid, and he knows the hand he's holding. But he has a grudge since Swann appointed that clod as spokesman for the mob, so he won't back down. And Cameron can't compromise, not with Swann's pressure, so he'll lead off his peasant levy, and a few days down the road we'll have a small army on our

trail. *Then* we'll see a fight, and only fools will hang around for it. You hear me? Oh, *wonderful!* Sleep it off, you sodden fool."

Tobie wafted off to dreamland.

Evan Koskinen knew himself to have ethical standards far beyond those of this low coterie — indeed, beyond those of almost anyone he'd previously dealt with. The good of the human race was defined by the reach of knowledge. So he believed, and as he believed, he acted. Originally accepting Dimarico's financing despite knowing a selfish motive impelled it, he'd assumed he could channel the man's impulse toward the pure acquisition of knowledge for mankind's benefit.

In this he'd proved mistaken. So much for whatever idealism remained in his opinion of men. He didn't blame himself — he'd meant well and done his best, simply underestimating the greed and egocentrism of this scion of wealth.

None here were of any value to his aims, beguiled as they were by Dimarico's charm and daunted by Swann's tyranny. Hopes for an ally in Kinnard he'd earlier abandoned — and Tobie, besotted as usual, now clearly demonstrated his unreliability.

So be it. He was accustomed to acting on his own, and to an extent preferred it, never wishing to share either credit or responsibility with those whose contributions could but be minor. What to do at this juncture?

In the long run he must drag this society to civilization and scientific progress. His own comforts and position, his values and sense of personal worth demanded no less.

Development of a new Chronoporters was clearly infeasible under foreseeable conditions. No matter how it agonized to abandon his great work, realism must rule his choices. If successful in establishing himself as the Leonardo of the age he might at least leave clues for the advantage of a future investigator. Perhaps the name Koskinen, in whatever barbaric form it survived the era, would loudly ring down the corridors of time in this branch of history.

He had unwitting allies among these enemies. The sociopathic Englishman was certain to cause further problems, and the bizarre Brennen woman would serve to distract Dimarico now and then. His greatest hope, though, lay with Swann, whose megalomania might yet result in Dimarico's overthrow.

Those three would be useful. The others could be considered political neuters, too easily led by the smoothly charismatic Dimarico.

In the short run, escape at the earliest opportunity must be his goal. He'd not planned wisely in his first attempt. An accomplice or dupe in the Saxon camp was a necessity — someone of sufficient power and standing to thwart Dimarico and his brownshirts, and to demonstrate forever to them and any observers the unwisdom of mistreating a man of the intellectual status of Professor Evan Koskinen.

Was this the time — the circumstance?

{END}

But read on.

~

Conflict Resolution for Mercenaries [excerpt]

As Swann observed the new attack a boy came running.

"Frea! *Manig scotunge* — many shots. There!"

Swann looked east to the area they'd held before, and saw figures pulling back — a couple dozen. He hurried to the end wagon, where Small told him, "They made a go at us but skittered when we replied."

Yet as Swann watched, the figures came trotting back to within sixty or so yards and shot again, the missiles landing among the men of the shieldwall. Small's men crowded to the end of the wagon to respond. A few arrows again sent the French sprinting away, lingering beyond range.

"I see what they're up to! Give me a couple of men down here, Colin." He took the bow off his shoulder and started to string it.

"They're not bothering us much, sir."

"They're keeping you off your main job, aren't they?"

Shortly the French came back for more. This time they met three arrows before they got into position, and three more soon followed — but they came on and set up, shooting two volleys before retreating. The bolts caused some consternation among the Saxons, and one fell near the wagon. But one of the French staggered back with an arrow in his torso.

The next time they came forward protected by shield-bearers, twenty-five or thirty men in all, and more of their shots neared the wagon.

"Go under here," Swann told the boy, "under the wagon. Colin! We're going to need your help next time. I'll give a call when they approach."

He felt a hand on his shoulder.

"Let us in on it, Major." Manaea pointed to the far end of the ridge where several French climbed up to join the archers. "They're reinforcing. How about an ambush before they get too frisky?"

Swann considered. "Who'll you take?"

"Everyone."

"Be sneaky... And don't get trapped."

"No sweat, sir." He trotted off to gather his men.

The French showed signs of moving forward.

* * *

The Sergeant led the spears and darts back on the track north of the ridge until

hidden, down into a shallow ravine — slipping and sliding, grasping at bushes and tufts of grass. Forming a column of twos, they took their route farther downhill then up the opposite slope at an angle, moving cautiously, alert for forms on the skyline, staying in the long evening shadows.

A randwiga drew Aelfcild's attention to the sky. Nothing there but blackbirds — *hraefencynn* that had crossed this garth of death many times today, settling in trees near the enemy. Then he noticed a solitary form circling high above, almost to the clouds.

"*Earn* — eagle," he said, and the man nodded. "No matter. All shall get their fill today, unto starlings and sparrows."

On and up they crept, crouching as they neared the crest, freezing when they started a bird. On again till the Sergeant halted them, signing them to kneel and keep their spears down.

Manaea crept forward and peered through a bush. Back he came and led them lower and farther for a few rods before again going forward to scout. Skulking back, he gestured them into two ranks with the spears in front. Still crouching, they climbed until one layer of brush hid them from the ridge-top.

The French trotted back from their latest foray against the Saxon line, nearly coming within good javelin range when one of them stopped short, pointing and crying out.

Instinctively Manaea's force crouched more deeply, but it was too late. His mind took a couple of jumps before settling.

"Priceles, load! Randes, step forward!"

He lined the spears up beyond the brush-line.

Numbers nearly doubled by the trickle of men up the hillside, the French bunched, then shook off their surprise and formed into a line, advancing toward Manaea's force.

~

Appendix

For more information on Old English:

http://www.ling.upenn.edu/~kurisuto/germanic/oe_bosworthtoller_about.html

<http://www.ucalgary.ca/UofC/eduweb/engl401/lessons/pronunc1.htm>

* * *

For more concerning England circa 1066:

HAROLD The Last Anglo-Saxon King by Ian W. Walker

* * *

Internal sketches: These were dashed off by the designer while waiting for his computer to redraw. He claimed they were too crude to use, but I chose to include them

as one individual's impressions of how some of the characters might appear.

~

Thanks for reading TMfM.

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More works can be found at my site, including some in various stages of completion. And remember: No superheroes. Merely ordinary people, similar to you and me, caught up in extraordinary circumstances.

Dai Alanye

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