

TWO

*How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is to have a
thankless child.*

—SHAKESPEARE, *King Lear*

“Hey, Pete—get your ass in gear!”
Ariel and I traveled along the abandoned Interstate. We usually didn’t say much as we walked; there didn’t seem to be a need to. But today I was lagging behind somewhat. I was footsore and fatigued; she was eager and almost hyper. I got the feeling she was a bit apprehensive about going into Atlanta; she was in a hurry to get there and get out again.

I walked with my head bowed, watching the pavement seem to flow beneath my feet. Every so often one of Ariel’s marvelous hooves slid along the asphalt and a stream of sparks scattered. The novelty of walking on paved road never seemed to wear thin on her.

A unicorn is a rare enough thing to see; burdened ones are unheard of. But she never complained about having to carry one of my packs and whatever weapons I happened to possess at the time. Today I carried the blowgun, broken down and slung onto the magnesium frame of my backpack where I could get to it quickly. Two bags were slung across

Ariel's back, and the handle of a pair of 'chuks dangled from a pocket. Poking from the top of her pack was a crossbow, which I'd use only if all else failed. It was powerful and good for long distances, but unwieldy and time-consuming to reload.

Ariel looked at me as I caught up to her. "What's the matter?" she asked. "Tired?"

I nodded.

"How much farther?"

I reached back and dug out the map from a side pocket, unrolled it, and traced a finger down a line marked *US 23/41*. "Let's see.... We left Macon when?"

"Two days ago."

"Right. We've been doing a little less than twenty miles a day, and it's about thirty miles as the crow flies. We ought to be in Atlanta sometime tomorrow afternoon."

"Shit—another night on the road." She had picked up many of my speaking habits. It's strange to hear a unicorn swear. Come to think of it, it's strange to hear a unicorn talk at all. "Hey, it's not so bad," I told her. "We could be spending the night in a city." Cities are where all the rejects hang out.

"Where, no doubt, you'd get us into another test of our defense capabilities."

She wouldn't leave me alone about Jacksonville, no matter how much I insisted it wasn't my fault. I'd gone to a trading bar to look over some equipment and weapons. I was always on the lookout for new things I might need.

Trading bars are nasty places. They serve as a combination bar/whorehouse/trading post/news center, and are mainly frequented by inner-city dwellers and loners "just passing through." Some loners have "buddies"—animals held to them by loyalty spells. Occasionally you see somebody with a Familiar—a person with an almost symbiotic relationship with a magical animal—like Ariel and me. As Familiars will fight ferociously to protect each other, and

spellbound buddies will die to protect their masters, they aren't allowed in trading bars, so I had to leave Ariel outside. I didn't like it one bit and neither did she, but those were the rules and everybody abided by them—or else. She stood in front of a furniture store across the street, well away from a buddy-lion crouched beside the entrance to the trading bar. It watched us warily.

There were a few people inside, mostly loners, it seemed, looking at the weapons-display tables. Over to one side was the dark entranceway to the bar. I walked among supply aisles, looking for anything that struck my fancy. There were no prices on any items; you had to negotiate with one of the dealers. Haggling had become a fine art again.

At the end of the aisles was a guard shouldering a cocked crossbow, expressionlessly watching the customers. Nobody stole from trading bars.

At one aisle I reached for something—I think it was a small, folding camp stove—and picked it up to look it over. They'd want an arm and a leg for it, but it might be convenient sometimes. It was the only one on the shelf.

Somebody snatched it from my hand. I turned to see someone huge and hairy and looking like an almost human grizzly bear glaring down at me. "Hey, little fuck," he said, holding up the folding stove, "this mine. Saw first." His teeth were rotted. He stank. He wore a black leather vest, cut-off blue jeans, and combat boots.

"Sure, fine," I told him. "I was just looking at it. If you want it, go ahead."

"I want, I take anyhow, little fuck," he growled.

Since he already had it and I didn't really want it anyway, that should have been the end of it. But he just stood there like an oak tree, as if he expected me to say something.

I turned and walked into the bar.

It was lit by a few candles scattered here and there, and the air smelled heavy and pungent like a barn. I dropped

my pack beside a barstool and sat down. The bartender came over to me.

“Yeah?” he said.

“Uh—” I hadn’t wanted anything; I’d just come in to get away from that gorilla. “Do you have any Coke?”

“Coke?” He smiled a left-sided smile and I felt stupid and started to tell him never mind, but he bent down behind the bar. I heard a rattling as he unlocked something.

“It’ll cost you,” he said, straightening back up. “This stuff don’t grow on trees.” He held a small cellophane packet of white powder between thumb and forefinger.

I flushed. Cocaine! I’d wanted a Coke, you know—Coca Cola.

“Where—where do you get this?”

“Guy comes in from New York twice a year, regular. Rides a griffin.”

New York! I’d heard things about what New York was like now. They were horror stories.

He put his elbows down on the bar and leaned toward me “Just drops off these little bags and takes one of them.” He nodded toward one of the three women sitting toward the rear of the bar. When she saw us looking her way she said something to her companions, stood, and walked toward us.

“You still want the coke?”

“I—well, no. I doubt I could afford it.” I stood to leave and felt a light tap on my shoulder. It was the girl.

“You like me?” she asked.

I started to reply but she cut me off. “A half-pound of dried meat, any kind, in advance. Or if you don’t have any, we could make a deal.”

“No,” I said, moving away.

“What’s wrong? You queer or something?”

“No, just selective.” I picked up my pack and walked out of the bar just as the big gorilla-type walked in. He stopped and started to say something to me, but I just kept walking through the trading area and out the door.

Ariel was across the street. She faced the buddy-lion, regarding it with what looked like tolerant amusement. She turned to me as I hurriedly approached her. "This lion is stupid. It can't communicate with me at all."

"Of course it's stupid. It's just an animal."

She blinked once and stared at me. If she could have smiled I'm sure she would have.

"You know what I mean—it's a dumb lion under a loyalty spell."

"Wonder who it belongs to."

"I don't even care. Look, let's get out of here."

"What's the matter? Trouble inside?"

I shook my head. "Not really. I just don't like cities. Creeps everywhere. Come on." We turned to leave just as the gorilla-type walked out the door, arm around the whore I'd turned down. She pointed at me. Shit.

He began walking across the street toward me, talking as he came. "Little fuck, I kill you. You and your horse, too, hah-hah-hah."

Ariel gave me a sidelong look as he lumbered toward us. "No trouble, huh?"

I shrugged out of my pack. "That's the reason I wanted to get out of here."

"Looks like a pretty good reason to me."

"Right." He had stopped in the middle of the road, expecting me to step out and meet him halfway. I had a better idea. "Let's run away," I suggested.

"Too late. Look."

The big yotz had turned to face the buddy-lion. He pulled something out of his leather vest, held it between thumb and forefinger, and pressed it. It was one of those cheap metal clackers that make an annoying noise like a cricket on speed. He clacked it three times and the lion rose.

"Come on, Rasputin," he said. The lion licked its chops, shook its mane, and blinked. We couldn't run away now; the lion would catch us before we got ten yards. Before I

could get ten yards, rather; I wouldn't put it past Ariel to outrun it.

Then they were both coming toward us and everything happened fast. The lion stopped in front of Ariel and gathered itself for the pounce, relaxing and looking lazily up into her eyes.

"Come on, come on," said Ariel impatiently. "You might as well pounce now; you're going to sooner or later."

Then I could no longer pay attention to them because this huge, hairy arm swung around like a shaggy club and broke my nose. I went down onto the sidewalk, eyes blinded by sudden tears. Warm wetness flowed onto my lips. I saw the blur as he bent down to finish me off and my right foot lashed out, heel hitting his kneecap. He yowled as it snapped. I got up as fast as I could and punched him in the throat. He went down choking.

I looked toward Ariel. Blood dripped down her horn and the lion lay in a pool of red at the curb. Her lover's eyes were black and soft. "You look awful," she said.

I tried to smile. "I thig by nothe ith broge," I said.

Remembering Jacksonville as we walked down the Interstate, I reached out and stroked Ariel's shimmering mane. She shivered. "Do you want to call it a day and set up camp, horny-horse? Leg still hurting?"

She gave a gentle laugh like wind chimes tinkling. "No, I'm all right. We'll camp at sundown, same as always."

I agreed and we continued walking. I thought about her slowly healing leg as we plodded on. It had been over a year, and it still bothered her. I'd asked her about it, when she'd learned enough words to answer, but she refused to talk about it.

"Sunset, Pete," she announced after a while, knowing how much I liked the sunset effect.

I looked up at the horizon. Sunsets were bright and dazzlingly beautiful since the vanished air pollution had taken with it all the dim reds and burnt cinnamons. I looked away, and melted at the sight of Ariel. The fading light sent rainbow ripples spreading everywhere on her body, sweeping prism-broken light from neck to flank. Her spiral horn caught the sunlight and her tail looked like my memory of a fiber-optics lamp. I watched until the sun disappeared and all that remained was the faint glow of her horn.

We set up camp beside the Interstate. I unslung my sleeping bag and unrolled it on the grass. Ariel struck sparks on the road and I got a fire going. I opened a can and was soon eating hot beef stew. Ariel didn't eat anything. All I'd ever seen her eat was peppermint candy, and that only because she liked it. I don't think she needed to eat. I'd asked her, once, what kept her alive.

"I'm not sure," she'd answered. "The light from the stars. The music of crickets. Clean living."

"I'm serious. A creature can't live without some kind of sustenance."

"Those are the old rules, the ones that don't work the way they used to. Magic is what works now, and I'm a magical creature. You might as well ask why guns or electricity don't work anymore. You've told me that the world doesn't work like it did before. It's magic, and that's all there is to it."

The world doesn't work like it did before. Wasn't that the truth.

I lay on my sleeping bag, staring at the night sky and remembering. *The light from the stars.* When had there been so many stars in the sky? Before the Change the city glow pushed them back and the cities were cut off from the rest of the universe under their own domes of light. Now the Milky Way spread out above me like a band of chalk dust.

The ghostly form of Ariel stirred beside me. "Pete?"

"Yeah."

"Is there any special reason we're going into Atlanta?"

"We've gone over this before. I want to go to a library. We haven't been to one since Jacksonville."

"Oh."

"What's the matter? You don't want to go into Atlanta?"

"Cities make me nervous. But whither thou goest...."

Silence for a while. Then:

"Hey, Pete?" Softly. "Mmm."

"Sing me that song. You know, The Song."

"Sure."

Music was something I missed with a quiet pain, and I tried to make up for it by singing. The lyrics of the songs I liked had stayed with me, and I would sing them as Ariel and I walked the roads from town to town. But there was one song—I'd forgotten where I'd first heard it, or even what it was called. I just called it The Song, and I sang it whenever I was afraid of what might be waiting at the end of the road. I sang it to Ariel:

*"So we'll go no more a-roving
So late into the night,
Though the heart be still as loving,
And the moon be still as bright.*

*For the sword outwears its sheath,
And the soul wears out the breast,
And the heart must pause to breathe,
And love itself must rest.*

*Though the night was made for loving,
And the day returns too soon,
Yet we'll go no more a-roving
By the light of the moon."*

A cry came from far overhead.

“Roc,” I said. “Usually don’t see them around here.”

But Ariel was asleep.

I rolled onto my side and soon I was asleep, too.

We reached downtown Atlanta about five o’clock the next afternoon. The gold dome of the state capitol building gleamed from between the tall skyscrapers to my right. To the left was the squat, brooding shape of the Fulton County Stadium, where the Falcons and the Braves used to play. It reminded me of pictures of the Coliseum in Rome—a deserted, dead arena. I wondered who—or what—might be there now.

“Sure feels empty,” observed Ariel, glancing around.

“Yeah.” I smiled. “The whole world feels empty.”

“We’re being watched.”

I looked at her. “From where?”

“Overpass. About a mile away, straight ahead. Three people. One of them is looking at us through—what do you call them? Bulky black things, make things far away look closer.”

“Binoculars.”

“Right. One of them’s using binoculars. There’s something perched on his shoulder—some kind of bird.”

“A Familiar, maybe?”

“How would I know? Looks like a regular bird from here.”

“Well, we’re headed that way anyhow. We’ll worry about it when we get there.”

In ten minutes I could see them fairly well. One wore a shirt and blue jeans, one was decked out in a fancy assortment of knives, and the third wore a leather jacket on which the bird—a falcon, I now saw—was perched.

As we neared, the leatherjacketed one raised something to his lips and blew. I didn’t hear anything, but Ariel’s ears

twitched and the bird flew straight up and began circling.

“Buddy,” I said.

“They keep their bases covered.” This from a creature who hadn’t the vaguest notion of what baseball was.

“Yeah. Let me do the talking, okay? They may not have seen a unicorn before; we don’t want them knowing any more than they have to.”

We stopped, looking up at the three men on the overpass.

“What’s your business?” asked Leatherjacket in a mild Southern accent.

We seek the Holy Grail—it was tempting. “We’re trying to get to the public library,” I said.

“Public library. What’s there?”

“Books.”

He flared. “Smart guy.”

“No, really. I need to look at a road atlas and some maps.”

They stared at me. “Whyn’t you go to a gas station?”

“I want old maps. I’d like to make it to the library before dark, if you don’t mind.”

They were silent.

“Well?” I demanded.

“That yours?” He indicated Ariel.

“We’re Familiars, yes. Anything wrong with that?”

“Don’t be so defensive, son. We just like to keep track of what animals come and go in our fair city, both four- and two-legged.”

“Besides,” broke in the one wearing knives, “unicorns are pretty rare. They’re supposed to have a gift for healing. They say if you grind the horn into powder and mix it with—”

“That’s enough,” said Leatherjacket.

The man in the T-shirt and jeans tapped him on the shoulder and whispered into his ear. Leatherjacket’s eyes widened and he seemed to want to laugh. “That right?” he asked.

T-shirt nodded.

Leatherjacket looked at me. "Does your Familiar let you touch it?"

I flushed. Damn! "Yes," I admitted.

"You've never had a woman?"

Now it was my turn to stare.

"You'd best be careful around here," said T-shirt. "There's some awful mean women around, hide in dark places and grab you just like that." He snapped his fingers. The other two snickered.

"Well, I can't see any harm in letting them go to the library," said Leatherjacket. "Long as you don't wander around the streets. It'll be dark soon. Ain't safe."

"I'll remember." I took out the city map I had obtained from an abandoned gas station and unrolled it.

"Don't bother with that," he said. "Just take this exit. Turn left at the second red light and go on down the street until you see it on the right side. About a mile."

"Thanks."

We started to walk on, but he yelled for us to stop before I had taken two steps. I halted and looked up at him.

"Don't move until I call Asmodeus," he said, pointing toward the hunting falcon circling overhead. "She'll rip your eyes out otherwise."

"Don't bother." I looked at Ariel, who nodded. She snorted, tossed her head, and looked up.

The falcon settled gently onto her back.

Leatherjacket's jaw dropped. The other two looked at him wide-eyed, almost as if they were afraid for him.

"No one—I was told nobody could order that bird but me!"

I just smiled.

Leatherjacket's eyes formed two slits. He lifted the whistle to his mouth and blew. The bird didn't move from Ariel's back.

"Let her go, Ariel," I said.

Ariel tossed her head and snorted. The bird flew off and glided to Leatherjacket's shoulder. He was still glaring at me, and the other two looked on with their mouths pressed into angry lines.

"Let's go, Ariel."

We went.

That was a damned stupid thing to do," observed Ariel once we were out of earshot.

"Sue me."

"I'm serious. Let me do the talking, you said. We don't want them knowing anything more than they have to, you said. So what do we do? We show off! Now there'll be talk, and if word gets around that we bypassed an obedience spell—even if it was just a bird—people will get curious."

I said nothing.

"It was a childish thing to do."

I glared at her but remained silent.

"Well? Why'd you want to show off like that?"

"I was embarrassed," I muttered.

"You were what?"

"I was embarrassed, dammit!"

"Why? What was there to be embarrassed about?"

"I'm a virgin."

"So am I."

"That's different. You're not a human. You aren't a man. See, human males have this ... this.... Oh, forget it."

"Pete, there is great virtue in being pure. If you weren't a virgin, you couldn't have me."

"Look, just drop it, okay?"

"All right." She fell silent, and neither of us said another word until we found the library.

The library was of ultramodern design—few windows and now-useless electric glass doors. I looked around for something I could break in with.

“Don’t bother,” said Ariel sullenly, and she ran for the glass front door, head down and horn aimed straight ahead.

“No!”

But I was too late. She had already bolted up the steps, sparks streaming from her hooves, and leapt into the air. Her horn hit the glass and shattered it; her momentum carried her through.

“You idiot!” I ran up the steps to find her standing quietly amid the broken glass. “What are you trying to do, turn yourself into hamburger?”

“I got us in, didn’t I?”

“So what? You could have waited another two minutes while I found something to bust it open with, rather than jumping through like some comic-book hero. You could have cut yourself badly. I don’t have any way to treat you if you ever really hurt yourself, you know that? What if you snapped your horn?”

“It can’t snap. Not while I’m alive. Besides, unicorns avert harm. We rarely get injured, and when we do, we heal fast.”

“Oh? And how, may I ask, did you manage to get your leg broken nearly in two, despite all this ability to avert personal injury?”

Her nostrils flared. “I don’t want to talk about it.” Her coal eyes blazed.

“Why not?”

“Why don’t you want to talk about your virginity?”

“Oh, go to hell.”

She snorted and walked farther into the library.