

**THE ONCE AND FUTURE NERD**  
**Book II - MYTH MADE FLESH**

Chapter 9  
"A Handful of Bodyguards"

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## PART FIVE:

23 EXT. HILLTOP CEMETERY - DUSK

23

NARRATOR

The sun was at its peak in the lands west of the mountains, as Vanderberg, Weston, and Billy crested a small hill topped with scrubgrass, into an old forgotten cemetery. The day had gone by with no further physical attacks as the journey had quickly begun to take its toll on the travelers.

VANDERBERG

Seems as good a spot as any for you to meet your end.

WESTON

Ha. You couldn't beat me in a fair fight and you know it. But when our duel comes, know I'll leave you out for the birds. 'Bout all you're good fer...

NARRATOR

That isn't to say the two gang leaders didn't continue to spar with one another. Their day-long trip had included many colorful insults, threats, promises, and descriptions of what would happen to each others' bodies after they died.

VANDERBERG

How much further, boy?

NARRATOR

For his part, Billy was uncharacteristically quiet. At current, he was taking the opportunity granted by higher elevation to look over the ground they had covered.

WESTON

What's the matter? Someone following us?

BILLY

Huh? Oh, uh, no. But, uh, we're here! This is the spot!

WESTON

What?

VANDERBERG

This is where we're meeting your man?

BILLY

Yup. Well, actually, not exactly. This is where we're getting the statue though.

VANDERBERG

I don't follow.

BILLY

Oh, uh, it's already here.

NARRATOR

At this, both men looked at Billy curiously, then started to scan the old headstones for a flash of white, eager to have their prize.

BILLY

Oh you're not gonna see it. It's buried.

VANDERBERG

What?

WESTON

Huh?

NARRATOR

Billy began walking through the cemetery.

BILLY

You know, I kinda thought one of you would've taken out the other one by now. I know once either one of you gets this thing, I'm gonna be useless to you. So I'd rather you two have it sorted who is getting this thing before I tell you where it is.

VANDERBERG

You know, Cliff, I'm fixin' to just kill this little shit now and get it over with. What do you think? Then we can just dig up every grave here until we find the Lady.

WESTON

Doesn't sound so bad, Les.

BILLY

You could try that. So long as your men are on board playing fifty two pickup with grandpa's bones. And so long as you think you can fill the graves back in before the Elves get here.

NARRATOR

Both Vanderberg and Weston squinted at Billy warily.

VANDERBERG

How do you expect us to do this sorting?

BILLY

I thought maybe you could wrestle for it.

WESTON

You want us to just brawl for the right to run our town?

BILLY

Not brawl, wrestle. And not the kind with suplexes and piledrivers either. I'm talking Greco-Roman wrestling.

NARRATOR

The gang leaders, for possibly the first time ever, looked to each other for guidance.

BILLY

You guys don't have wrestling here? Oh man, this is great! Plus now you can totally have a fair fight.

VANDERBERG

How you reckon that?

BILLY

Well, neither of you know the rules so you'll both be starting from scratch. Plus, added bonus, we'll do rounds so you can talk shit. That's half the fun honestly.

WESTON

Wait, how do you mean rounds? Doesn't one man win and the other is either dead or dyin'?

BILLY

No, but that's also great, cuz you get to shove it in their face that you won. You've got a clear winner at the end. I figure, whoever loses has to dig. Cool?

NARRATOR

Vanderberg and Westond glance toward each other, then looked at the collection of headstones, searching for any tell for the location of the statue. Finding no answers, they looked back to Billy.

WESTON

Well...reckon I could use a break after that hike.

VANDERBERG

You can rest after you've finished digging up my prize.

BILLY

Cool! So here's how you wrestle.

(MORE)

BILLY (cont'd)

(long long beat)

...Ok there's actually a lot of different rules, but I think for you two the basic thing is gonna be pinning your opponent's back and shoulders to the ground for three seconds. Also no nut shots or hair pulling or anything like that. Also no weapons. You guys aren't hiding any weapons are you?

A beat of silence

BILLY

Who are we kidding, of course you are. All right, gimme your clothes.

VANDERBERG

Are you out of your mind?

WESTON

To Selbirin with that!

BILLY

It's gotta be a fair fight if it's gonna decide who runs the town. Unless you're both too chickenshit to fight with bare hands like real men.

NARRATOR

At this, both allegedly real men instinctively grabbed and unsheathed hidden blades from within their clothes.

Two knives come out.

VANDERBERG

I'll gut you like a fish!

WESTON

I'll skin you like a hog!

NARRATOR

And then, realizing the other's transgression, they turned their gazes on each other.

VANDERBERG

You cheatin' bastard.

WESTON

You lyin' son of a bolt.

BILLY

See, that's what I mean. Can't trust either of you. Strip down and leave your clothes over here.

NARRATOR

Both men glared at Billy, before spitting on the ground...and then reluctantly beginning to disrobe.

BILLY

And hey look, I'm not trying to see your old ass balls and taints and stuff so - show of good faith - while you two get bareass, I'm gonna write the name of the grave on this rock, okay?

NARRATOR

A few minutes later, Billy used his toe to draw a large circle in the ground around two nude men.

BILLY

Here's your ring. You'll need to stay in here while you wrestle. Ready to do this thing?

NARRATOR

The two opponents squared their shoulders, and locked eyes as they began to circle each other. The waning sun sent an orange pall over the match.

BILLY

*(a la Good, Bad, and the Ugly theme)*  
Wah wah wahhhh.

NARRATOR

Vanderberg and Weston sent a dubious look toward Billy.

BILLY

Oh, uh, it's a traditional wrestling song. Okay, ready?  
Aaaaand wrestle!

**VANDERBERG AND WESTON SHOULD AD LIB. GRUNTS AND CUSSES  
THROUGHOUT THIS.**

NARRATOR

Both men appeared to be hesitant to make the first move until, suddenly, Weston rushed Vanderberg, tackling him to the ground. Vanderberg, to his credit, took the tackle in his center mass. As they went to ground, Vanderberg managed to keep his torso upright to keep his shoulders away from the ground. Weston lunged for both of his opponent's shoulders, but Vanderberg managed to tuck it sideways, ending up with Weston laying on his stomach. Vanderberg pounced on Weston's back, shoving his head into the ground. Desperate to get out from under his opponent, Weston threw an elbow into Vanderberg's ribs to create some space, before scurrying forward. Vanderberg caught his breath and reached out to grab Weston's foot to prevent him from getting too far, but rolled to the side as a rock whizzed past him.

VANDERBERG

Hey! That's against the rules!

WESTON

To hell with the rules!!

VANDERBERG

Fine then!

NARRATOR

Vanderberg grabbed a handful of grit and dust and threw it in Weston's eyes.

WESTON

Shit!

NARRATOR

He then sprinted to the rock which Billy had written on and left on the ground.

VANDERBERG

...What in Selbirin?

NARRATOR

But as he puzzled over the writing thereon, his opponent snuck up behind and clobbered him with two fists balled up together.

VANDERBERG

Gurgh!

NARRATOR

This blow floored and stunned Vanderberg long enough for Weston to pick up and read Billy's rock.

WESTON

...What in Selbirin? Hey Kid!

NARRATOR

Weston glanced to where Billy had been standing ..... but Billy was gone. Along with both men's clothes.

WESTON

Oh THAT LITTLE SHIT!

24 EXT. WESTERN DESERT BELOW CEMETERY - CONTINUOUS

24

Billy sprints furiously.

BILLY

Wah wah wahhhhh!

NARRATOR

Billy was running as fast as he could back the way he had come, searching the fairly barren landscape for any sign of life.

BILLY

Really....don't....want....to run....all....the way....

NARRATOR

Just then, Nia appeared as a Billy crested a dune.

BILLY

Oh fuck yes!

NARRATOR

Billy trotted up to Nia and threw his arms around her.

NIA

Oh! I'm....pleased to see you too, Billy, but you are  
...sweating quite profusely.

NARRATOR

Billy released Nia and doubled over, breathing heavily.

BILLY

Where's Jen?

NIA

Just over there, but she requested to not be bothered.  
Summoning a sandstorm is not an easy task.

NARRATOR

Billy turned to see Jen lying on the dune, staring in  
the direction Billy just came from.

BILLY

(quietly)  
You got this, babe.

NARRATOR

A sudden wind picked up, and a storm began brewing...

25 EXT. THE TOWN OF PACIFIC RIDGE - ESTABLISHING

25

We hear the hubbub of the town under the  
narration.

NARRATOR

Meanwhile, back in the now leaderless town of Pacific  
Ridge...

26 MONTAGE OF RUMORS SPREADING

26

LULU

You know both of them have a hold on the third floor  
when there's no Elves in town. That costs a pretty  
penny, I'll tell you that...



O'AN

Been hearing they have an agreement with the Elves to keep this place in check. You ever think they're working together?

JANEY

Well I hope I'm not talking out of school but by now you'd expect one to have pulled ahead of the other. Unless they've been splitting jobs. Or skimming more off the top than they let on. But they wouldn't do that, would they?

NELSON

I heard they play cards together. And this whole feud is over one hand a few years ago.

BRENNEN

Been gone a while. Could be they've already left this place behind and took their bloody man-geld with them.

YELLOWYYN

It is the nature of Memyet with power to deceive those without.

JANEY

If it ain't too personal a question, Liam - what was your share of the last contract?

BAKER

Heard maybe they've been working together this whole time. Skimming off the top even.

STABLEHAND

Could be they've already left together, off to run this ruse on some other poor town.

RANGER 1

No way they've been working together, boss wouldn't be caught dead working with--

RANGER 2

--That's just it, they've killed each other out on the sands. They ain't coming back.

RANGER 4

Y'all are talking crazy!

RANGER 3

Are we? How much you take home from the last contract?

We should hear some continued murmurs and ad libs in the background under this next bit of dialogue.

NARRATOR

It was the evening after Billy had left that he, Jen, and Nia returned.

REGAN

How'd it go?

BILLY

I trolled them so good, dude. They're BIG mad.

NIA

*('awesome' isn't necessarily a good thing)*  
Jen's sandstorm was an awesome sight.

JEN

Yeah I kinda can't believe how big it got once I got it started. I feel bad for those guys to be honest.

NIA

That is good, Jen. Your powers are...

REGAN

Needed. You did what had to be done.

JEN

How's the plan going here?

REGAN

We're getting there I think.

RANGER 4

But without them two, who'd set up our contracts?

BLACKSMITH

Who's running the damn town?

RANGER 1

Who's in charge?

RANGER 2

Who?

BAKER

Who?

STABLEHAND

WHO?

ALL

WHO?!?!?!?!?

REGAN

So everyone here seems to love Janey, huh?

RANGER 3

Boss always said Janey's the only person in the whole town can keep a secret.

STABLEHAND

Good head on her shoulders, that Janey.

BAKER

I know I'd be lost if Janey didn't keep my books.

BLACKSMITH

Janey!

RANGER 1

Janey!

RANGER 2

Janey!

ALL

JANEY!

27 INT. LULU'S ALEHOUSE - MORNING

27

Murmur of a crowd waiting for something to begin...

NARRATOR

In a small town like Pacific Ridge, the stories spread like fire, stoked as they were by the work of the group residing at Lulu's Alehouse. In the course of a day, about every conceivable story had been spread around, from Vanderberg and Weston had been lovers and run away to spend their life together, to they had killed each other on the sands armed only with a deck of cards, even one about how they were specters sent to Pacific Ridge to make the town pay for the past transgressions of their ancestors.

STABLEHAND

(from outside)  
Where's Janey!

BAKER

(also outside)  
Yeah get her out here!

JANEY

I can't believe I let you talk me into this.

REGAN

I was just asking questions and letting people know how things work in this town, who's really keeping them fed. You really don't need to do much different.

JANEY

Except go be in front of them.

REGAN

You think that's a big crowd? You should come back east and see the mobs we have in the cities. Trust me, this is nothing.

JANEY

Never going east, got it.

REGAN

Ha ha. Go talk to your town, then we'll discuss whether or not you'll ever come east.

NARRATOR

Janey nodded, turned toward the door, took a deep breath, and walked out.

28 EXT. LULU'S ALEHOUSE - CONTINUOUS

28

THE CROWD **CHEERS** FOR JANEY AS SOON AS SHE EMERGES.

JANEY

All right, y'all, settle down. Settle down.

THE CROWD STARTS TO **SETTLE**.

JANEY

I ain't never done anything like this before. But since my best efforts to talk y'all out of it have failed, I'm gonna do my best.

RANGER 1

But Janey, that Elf is here! Ahead of when we heard.

We should start to hear a horse-drawn carriage approach.

RANGER 2

That's his carriage rolling this way!

RANGER 3

What are we gonna tell him?

JANEY

That I can handle.

NARRATOR

At this moment, it would have been impossible not to notice the ornate carriage approaching Lulu's alehouse by way of Pacific Ridge's main thoroughfare.

The carriage comes to a stop dead-center in our sound field.

We hear the driver hop down, scurry over to the cabin, and open the door.

NARRATOR

From this carriage emerged a finely dressed Elf. He was new to the town of Pacific Ridge, but you dear listener, are already acquainted with him I believe.

Two feet step down from the carriage.

TYYMOS

Greetings and salutations, my good woman. Tyymos lo-Jyf. At your service. Am I to presume you're the proprietor of this inn?

JANEY

No, sir, she's inside. But I think you'll want to speak to me anyway.

TYYMOS

Perhaps I will once I've arranged for my lodgings, But if you'll excuse me--

JANEY

--Am I to presume you wanna talk to Lester Vanderberg or Clifford Weston?

TYYMOS

Why, yes. Do you know where I might find the gentlemen?

JANEY

Well see that's the thing. Both of them have...taken an indefinite leave of our town. I've recently been appointed to fill both their roles.

TYYMOS

Hmm. Well I must admit it puts me ill at ease to hear that. In my correspondence with them, I was assured a certain...continuity of leadership here. Dependability, if you like. And while I've no reason to doubt your leadership abilities...well, I mean no insult but I've also no reason to trust them.

JANEY

No insult given but I hope you'll let me give you a reason.

NARRATOR

At this, Janey reached back inside the door of the alehouse, and produced a cloth-wrapped bundle, which she hastily unwrapped. And lo-Jyf's eyes widened when he saw what it contained.

TYYMOS

...Is that what it looks like?

JANEY

If it looks like the genuine and original White Lady, then yes.

TYYMOS

My, my, my...

JANEY

The trick of course is that everyone you ask would say it's priceless. But I'm sure we can agree on *something*. I look forward to negotiating that with you, alongside the contract I've heard you brought.

TYYMOS

Subject to a proper appraisal, I look forward to that as well. I must admit you've made a tremendous first impression upon me. But now you truly must excuse me - I am tired and frankly dusty from my journey. We shall begin our discussions in earnest at dawn tomorrow? Assuming of course that the storied Rangers of Pacific Ridge trust you to bargain on their behalf.

NARRATOR

As if to make one final assessment of his new negotiating partner, the Elf made a show of scanning the gathered crowd.

ALL

*(building chant, one by one)*  
Janey...Janey..Janey...Janey. Janey. Janey. JANEY!  
JANEY! JANEY!

JANEY

There you have it, sir.

TYYMOS

Dawn it is.

**CHEERS AND APPLAUSE.**

NARRATOR

But just then, amidst Janey's moment of triumph, did two new waves of dismay begin to roil from two different sides of the crowd.

From the left and right rears of the crowd, we start hearing concerned murmurs which slowly spread towards the center.

A FEW PEOPLE ON THE LEFT

*(ad lib. e.g.)*

Vanderberg! Is that Vanderberg?

A FEW PEOPLE ON THE RIGHT

*(ad lib. e.g.)*

Look, it's Weston. Weston's back!

NARRATOR

Upon realizing that Vanderberg and Weston had returned, Janey reflexively concealed her precious statue once more. But the two men now stumbling, delirious, through the crowd were not the same men who departed.

Shambling footsteps wade through the crowd on either side.

VANDERBERG

*(barely conscious, panned left, ad lib. e.g.)*

Deece. Who here's got the family name Deece? Do you know the Deece family?

WESTON

*(barely conscious, panned right, ad lib. e.g.)*

I'm looking for Tuov. What's your grandpappy's name? Anyone got a forebear named Tuov?

NARRATOR

They were naked from head to toe, and every inch of their respective bodies was either caked in a thick layer of dust, furiously sunburnt, or both. And as they shambled among their former underlings, barely able to stand, they were muttering two names with feverish obsession.

VANDERBERG

*(slight left now)*

Deece. Deece? Anyone called Deece?

WESTON

*(slight right now)*

Tuov. Tuov? What do you know about Tuov?

NARRATOR

And in fact they were not shocked back into coherence until they reached the center of the crowd and saw the Elf Tyymos beside his carriage. Both men jerked up straight and hastily covered their privates.

VANDERBERG

Mister Jyf! Welcome!

WESTON

Didn't expect you so soon, sir!

TYYMOS

*("what the fuck?")*

Mister...Vanderberg, I presume? And Mister Weston. Can you please explain...the state of you?

VANDERBERG

Uh, well, sir, we were out looking for a...a fabulous treasure to make you a welcome gift.

TYYMOS

A treasure?

WESTON

We got waylaid. But don't you worry, that treasure's just within reach.

NARRATOR

As if just now remembering the circumstances that brought them to this moment, the two men turned towards the alehouse with unbridled fury.

VANDERBERG

BILLY!!

WESTON

SEND THAT LITTLE SHIT OUT HERE!!!

NARRATOR

Billy emerged from the alehouse, with a flagon of ale in one hand and a stew-filled corn cake in the other.

BILLY

Oh hey guys! Who won the wrestling match? I split when I got bored with the storyline. It's like ugh I saw that heel turn coming a mile away.

VANDERBERG

WHERE'S THE GRAVE, YOU SHIT-ASS LITTLE FUCK?!



WESTON

We searched that whole graveyard in a GODS-DAMNED SANDSTORM and didn't find jack shit!

VANDERBERG

He knows, Mister Jyf! He knows where it is!

TYYMOS

The...treasure?

WESTON

It's buried in the grave of a man named Deece, first name Tuov. But we can't find the grave. And he knows where it is.

VANDERBERG

And if he doesn't tell us right the fuck now I'm gonna pull all his teeth and shove 'em up his ass!

WESTON

Tell us you little prick! WHERE CAN WE FIND TUOV DEECE?!

NARRATOR

The giddy grin on Billy's face threatened to cleave his whole head in twain.

BILLY

Awww, buddy. They're right here.  
(*beat for dramatic effect*)  
TUOV DEECE NUTS!

**BILLY LAUGHS LOUDLY AND HYSTERICALLY AT HIS OWN JOKE, AND THIS CONTINUES UNTIL SPECIFIED OTHERWISE. NO ONE ELSE DOES.**

NARRATOR

Billy notwithstanding, the gathered crowd was completely silent. Even Vanderberg and Weston were too dumbfounded for rage. Inside the ale house, Jen buried her face in her palm and massaged her temples. Nelson placed a comforting hand on her shoulder.

TYYMOS

This is a...Memyet joke?

BILLY

(*still laughing*)  
Yeah dude, I got them so fucking good.

TYYMOS

Explain it to me please.

(Billy's laughter settles but he keeps on having the giggles for a good long while.)

BILLY

Oh, yeah, so see...I made him look for a guy called Tuov Deece so then he asked me where to find Tuov Deece and I said Tuov Deece nuts. Like how it sounds like "two of these nuts." Like balls. Gonads. Like he wanted me to put my sweaty 'nads in his mouth or something.

TYYMOS

And I take it this is meant to be humiliating to him?

BILLY

Yeah, I mean...nobody wants 'nads in their mouth, right? Well...I guess some people do. And if you do that's cool, like no judgment or anything. If you're consenting adults or whatever. Now that I think about it, I guess it is kinda...what's the word? Is it homophone?

NELSON

*(shouting from inside the inn)*  
Homophobic, Billy!

QUICK CUT:

29 INT. LULU'S ALEHOUSE - CONTINUOUS

29

NELSON

*(still shouting but present in our sound field now)*  
The word you're looking for is homophobic!

JEN

It's actually both, if you think about it. It's a homophobic homophone.

QUICK CUT:

30 EXT. LULU'S ALEHOUSE - CONTINUOUS

30

BILLY

*(shouting, to Nelson)*  
Thanks Nelson!  
*(to Tyymos)*  
Anyway, you get it?

TYYMOS

Thank you, I understand perfectly well now. Mister Vanderberg, Mister Weston? It's clear to me you've been outsmarted by an imbecile.

BILLY

Haaaaa, get wrecked dipshits!  
*(barely half a beat)*  
 Hey, wait...

TYYMOS

As you've clearly misrepresented your own abilities,  
 please consider this a termination of any implied  
 agreements we might previously have had.

VANDERBERG

What?!

WESTON

Who in Selbirin are you fixin' to contract through,  
 then?

TYYMOS

This woman here has proven herself quite competent. I  
 see no reason not to deal with her.

VANDERBERG

Janey?

WESTON

Janey?

VANDERBERG

Y'all just gonna stand by and let the town fall apart  
 like this?

RANGER 1

Sorry, Les. We all just got to thinking that Janey's  
 the only one that's got everyone's best interests at  
 heart. Just makes sense to put her in charge.

JANEY

It's no hard feelings. Just business.

WESTON

No hard feelings my ass! Y'all are getting played for  
 fools by those outsiders he brought in! Lemme inside  
 and I'll tear them apart!

JANEY

No can do, Cliff. That there's my inner circle. Now  
 would you all do me a favor and see these two to the  
 outskirts of town before they do anything rash?

31 INT. LULU'S ALEHOUSE - CONTINUOUS

31

YELLOWYYN

Everything seems to have gone according to plan, Your  
 Grace.

BRENNEN

And Janey seems to be settling into her new role well.

REGAN

I know. I'm kinda waiting for the other axe to fall.

O'AN

Well, it's coming from one of two places you ask me. One is Bill. He ain't bright, but he can be one mean son of a bolt when he's got egg on his face. And far as I can tell you egged him good.

REGAN

I've known plenty of men like Bill. I'm *hoping* he gives me cause to end him.

O'AN

The other one to watch for will be that Elf. If he's staying here, then that's my cue to leave. But you be wary of him. Elves have this way with words. They dress up the vilest things you can imagine all fancy and call it "the law."

REGAN

Yeah, we know a thing or two about that.

O'AN

I mean it.

REGAN

So do I. Believe me, if we liked licking Elf boots, we wouldn't have walked our asses all the way under the Black Mountains.

O'AN

You still owe me that long story, but time's short. I'll see you around, Aeron Regan. Miss Lulu. Miss Janey.

We hear him walk about the back door.

NARRATOR

And no sooner did the back door of the alehouse close than the front door swung open.

Janey and Tyymos walk in.

JANEY

That's them, Mister Jyf. Nicked that statue from right out under the White Forest's nose.

TYYMOS

Well. I'll be very interested to speak with you all come the morrow.

(MORE)

TYYMOS (cont'd)

(to Lulu)

Miss Louise Beauregard, I presume?

LULU

You can call me Lulu, Mr. Jyf. Your quarters are waiting for you. Third floor is all yours.

NARRATOR

And with that, the Elf tipped his cap and headed up the stairs.

One graceful set of footsteps heads up the stairs.

NARRATOR

And of course porters came scurrying behind him with a truly outrageous amount of luggage.

A bunch of suitcases clomp unevenly up the stairs for the next several minutes.

*The following are all semi-private conversations that we can place at different points in the sound field.*

*Conversation A:*

REGAN

So. How's it feel to be in charge?

JANEY

Feels like I need some more help with my rabbits.

REGAN

I'll take a bath and meet you upstairs?

*Conversation B:*

JEN

I'm glad you're safe, babe. You did a good job.

JEN GIVES BILLY A **KISS**.

BILLY

Did you hear when I made them ask where to find two of deece nuts?

JEN

*(trying so so hard to keep up the positive reinforcement)*  
Yeahhh. Yeah I did.

*Conversation C:*

NIA

Did you learn anything? Talking to that Orcish man.

NELSON

Yeah. I learned I understand this place better than I thought.

NIA

Come. Perhaps you can enlighten me.

*Conversation D:*

YELLOWYYN

I never thought I'd see the day, Brennen. But with every new challenge our Queen impresses me more and more.

BRENNEN

There is no blade so blunt it cannot be honed, under the right conditions.

*This is to everyone:*

LULU

I reckon this calls for a round on the house.

**CHEERS ALL AROUND.**

NARRATOR

Lulu filled a flagon to its brim and raised it up high.

LULU

To a *truly* Pacific Ridge.

EVERYONE

*(ad lib., e.g.)*

Cheers! Hurrah! To Pacific Ridge!

*Sounds of general merrymaking continue, as we...*

DISSOLVE TO:

32 INT. A SHACK ON THE EDGE OF TOWN - SIMULTANEOUS

32

*A small campfire crackles.*

NARRATOR

But there was considerably less merriment in a small shack on the edge of town, where the man called Bill removed an iron from a fire, bit down on a strip of leather, and held the iron to his suppurating arm.

**BILL SCREAMS A BITTER AND WORDLESS CURSE. BUT WE HAVE A PRETTY GOOD SENSE OF WHO HE'S CURSING.**

DISSOLVE TO:

33 EXT. OUT ON THE PLAINS - EVENING

33

The insects are just beginning to sing.

NARRATOR

And there was perhaps even less merriment still, on the outskirts of another town, several miles to the west...

A mule-drawn cart rolls up to us.

STEADY RIVER

Woah, Daffodil.

The cart slows to a halt.

FIRST SNOW

Why are we stopped?

STEADY RIVER

I thought you might appreciate a moment to collect yourself before we crossed the bridge.

FIRST SNOW

Oh. I mean...I would, but...you're right. Bad news is best delivered as soon as possible.

STEADY RIVER

It's not *all* bad news. You've secured us quite a few blankets and logs and bows.

FIRST SNOW

Do you really believe the things you say?

STEADY RIVER

Well I'd like to believe I'm not a habitual liar.

FIRST SNOW

You just always find the good in the most dire situations. Do you really feel that way? Or do you just say it because it's what you think people ought to hear?

STEADY RIVER

I find the good when I talk with you because it's what you need to hear, First Snow. When I talk to someone who is prone to unfounded optimism, I politely remind them of costs and dangers. Everything is about perspective, girl. You'll never know the shape of a stone unless you look at it from several sides.

FIRST SNOW

Sometimes it feels like you try to talk me out of sadness. And I don't think that's what we should do with sadness.



STEADY RIVER

Hm.

She considers for a good, long moment.

STEADY RIVER

Sometimes, perhaps that is what I'm doing. You have my apologies, dear. You see? Sometimes even I don't look at the stone from enough sides.

FIRST SNOW SUDDENLY LETS HERSELF **WEEP**.

FIRST SNOW

Auntie - I'm so frightened. Without the Federation we'll never hold the town, and everyone's going to hate me for challenging the Elves.

STEADY RIVER

No one will begrudge you challenging the Elves. We know their treachery all too well.

FIRST SNOW

Then they'll hate me for bearing the news that we're doomed.

STEADY RIVER

You're right that our chances of holding the town are slim. And I don't ever mean to get in the way of your grief. But I need you to know that a great loss is not the same as doom.

FIRST SNOW

Auntie, you're doing it again!

STEADY RIVER

I am not. There is a difference between allowing a fire to run its natural course and throwing fuel on it. There's enough to grieve without making things out to be worse than they are, yes? Now will some of your neighbors be angry with you? Sure, but they won't hate. Do you really think they'll hurt you? Cast you out? Never forgive you?

FIRST SNOW

...No.

STEADY RIVER

Then let them be angry. Just as you let yourself be sad, or frightened.

FIRST SNOW **CONTINUES TO CRY** FOR A WHILE LONGER.

Until eventually...

THE FEELING RUNS ITS NATURAL COURSE...AND **STOPS**.

FIRST SNOW

I think I'm ready now.

STEADY RIVER

Only if you're sure.

A beat.

Some wooden objects clatter around.

FIRST SNOW

These are fine bows. The Elves and their lapdogs will come to hate them.

Reins snap.

FIRST SNOW

Giddup, Daffodil!

The cart begins rolling away from us.

FIRST SNOW

(quieter)

Before I lose my nerve.

The cart soon crosses from grass and dirt onto a wooden bridge.

We just sit in the moment as the cart rolls away from us.

It takes a while...

...but eventually it's gone. And all we're left with are the evening sounds of the prairie.

**END OF CHAPTER.**