

For the times when you needed a bit of courage. For the times when you needed a bit of forgetfulness. For the times when you needed to drown the still, small voice that simply would not shut up and knock off asking you irritating things or calling into question why you hadn't worn a better shirt or better trousers even when you didn't OWN a better shirt or better trousers, never mind being able to afford them.

There was drink.

There was always drink.

The problem with medicating with Jimkin Bearhugger's Old Peculiar is that the dosages are so damned hard to get right. They go straight from Just Enough To Face The Day (Or Night) to Waking Up In The Gutter At About Three A.M. in a couple of pours. Or swigs. Or gulps. The bottles emptied themselves.

*You ought to turn around and go back. Right now. Go back to your room and shut the door and lie on the bed with the hard mattress with the springs that go \*glink\* and cover up your head so you don't have to look at the gods-damned yellow whatsit... sun and... what exactly? Tell the lad and old Fred and Nobby you're ill and couldn't go to dinner? Not even Carrot is that stup... er... trusting. No one would be daft enough to believe it when you can probably smell the stuff oozing out of your pores.*

*Alternatives? Admitting I'm too drunk to go to dinner? Admitting I'm too drunk to be trusted with an innocent, defenseless la- Okay, I can't even finish a sentence that ridiculous in my own head. I doubt it would fly back at the Yard. Besides, it would mean admitting I'm... I'm...having... thoughts. Good word. Thoughts. Some of them are even going on in my head. Thoughts. Of a certain... type. Nature. I couldn't even hint at it with Nobby and Carrot. Nobby would give me one of those horribly knowing grins of his, and Carrot... he would probably need a diagram and a manual. And old Fred... well, he's a married man, he's known me since... since... Since the only thing I had ever encountered that gave me an education about a woman was The Amorous Adventurs of Molly Clapper, the book with the interesting woodcuts and creative spelling that had already made a constant circuit for years on end through the lockers at Treacle Mine Road back when I was a new recruit.*

*At least by now you know that several of the things you learned from the woodcuts turned out to be wrong.*

*But I would sooner swallow my own sword than ask Fred for... romantic advice. Fred's a good man in his way, been married for years, but somehow, I get the feeling there's miles of difference, here. For a start, I'm no good at note writing, either...*

He was starting up to the higher part of the city now, letting his feet take out a bit of frustration on the cobbles.

*Who the hell am I trying to kid anyway? I mean, she's probably only putting up with me out of... of... thingy. Pity. Curiosity. Anyone who can put up with little bags of gas that can barely walk across a room without exploding and like it has serious issues. Of some sort.*

If it weren't that he knew for a fact that she had keen eyesight and an otherwise sensible character, he would suspect both of those for a start.

*Relatively sensible, anyway. I mean, she's too nice for her own good. Too generous. She actually likes people. She likes Nobby... Anyone who can like Nobby can like any piece of drunken gutter garbage... Even me.*

His treacherous feet slowed to a proceeding pace. Some fierce, near-drowned voice deep down under the alcohol haze whispered *But she doesn't smile at Nobby just so, like that, now does she? Or insist on just calling her by her first name? Or invite him over to dinner? Or make Nobby think about-* There are some places no imagination wants to go. Nobby Nobbs having Thoughts with a capital T about any female was one of them.

*Then, do I want to be having Thoughts with a capital T about a woman? Especially about one with more money than Creosote and... whosit... cizi... ciliv... cil...civilized things. Manners. And posh friends. And the things you inherit. Along with the posh friends and probably a white pony named Fidget. Breeding. That was it. Breeding.*

*And that was exactly the wrong word for you to think of... Breeding is usually preceded by Thoughts... Although, maybe people that rich hire other people to have Thoughts for them.*

He still wasn't quite sure what sort of niche to put Sybil in. *Was she his girlfriend? Could you say the word 'girlfriend' with a straight face when you were over forty? And what did having class actually mean?*

*I always took it to mean you couldn't say 'boo' out of line to a highborn lady in case she fainted, but Sybil's... well... practical. Matter of... thingamabob. Matter of fact. For gods' sakes, she laughs at Nobby's stories. Okay, she calls them 'colorful anecdotes', but still... there were probably a few sailors who wouldn't know where to put their faces after some of Nobby's stories. She seems fairly... unshockable.*

He was on the street now. On time, even, if he didn't dawdle. *Yeah. Unshockable. But that's just... words. She's never... Done It. You know that. Hell, the whole damn city knows that.*

*Not that I've got a lot of experience in that department either. I mean, take something as supposedly simple as kissing. Just kiss her, they had said. Like it was shaking hands. A man's got to kiss a woman after a while, or she's going to get the idea you don't like her.*

*But... where are you supposed to stop? Where are you supposed to start, for that matter? Knowing the nobs, you're probably supposed to send a calling card two weeks in advance to notify them of your intent or something... And even if you got to the actual lips on lips stage, and it somehow turned out not to be a disaster on greased rails, what if it led to... to... Thoughts?*

His finger was already on the bell. He floated past the vaguely disapproving aura of one of the butlers in a haze of alcohol. There were two, Forsythe was so old that he only worked a day or two a week, and neither seemed to care for letting him in the front door much. *No matter. Joke's on him. I know it's his early night, he'll be gone in a few minutes, anyway. He'll have to sneer at me from the other side of town.*

Dinner pretty much followed the usual pattern it took on the occasions that he showed up already some small number of sheets to the wind. They were getting rarer, but it was mostly because, some nights, he just didn't have the time to get good and drunk first. He felt like his brain was floating, pickled, in a jar, miles away, as he struggled to come up with some answer other than a grunt when asked about his day... or... night, rather. He eyed the array of cutlery and glasses and plates and serving dishes warily, trying not to embarrass himself too badly while using them. He mostly let Sybil do the talking, gratefully. Somehow, the world seemed a little less... *grimy* when she did the talking. Likely because her talking featured fewer people nicknamed "The Bull" or "The Auger" or "The Fill In Your Preferred Threatening And Ominous Nickname Here". Problem was, hers wasn't the only voice he was hearing.

There was always at least one more. Usually the one that kept telling him he must be mad to

think she could see anything of worth in him, or that she would just end up being hurt and angry by the time she figured out he wasn't worth the time he took. He was good at leaving women hurt and angry. It was just about the only thing he was good at when it came to women. Problem was, that voice was his. To make things worse, the longer he came to these dinners, the more voices started chiming in. His mother's, telling him to keep his elbows off the table and that he had damned well be minding his manners around a Lady-with-a-capital-L. Carrot's, nattering on at him about how it was going, like some little boy wanting to hear how the bedtime story from last night ended. Fred's, trying to casually inquire how things were going and expound upon the subject of women and romance. Fred was terrible at casual inquiry and dropping advice without it sounding like advice. The man's face was easy to read as a street sign before the graffiti artists got to it. And gods help him, Nobby's... well, Nobby was just mostly interested in whether or not the Captain had managed to kiss the Lady. At least he was sort of single minded about it. It was just as well. It kept him from being single minded about... other things.

And the damnable thing was, ever since the rank had, in their various ways, planted the idea of kissing Sybil into his head, that was just about all he had on his mind some dinners. And when a mind got on that track, problem was, other Thoughts and other body parts followed.

*And that's only natural, isn't it? It's been a blasted long time, after all, since I even seriously thought about it. With any woman. And we've been having dinners and breakfasts and things for... for months now. Weeks and weeks. People have gotten married on less courting. Granted, this being Ankh-Morpork, that's usually when some girl's dad shows up for a serious talk after he finds out the reason her dresses are tighter than they used to be all of a sudden... Still. It's not as though I'm some kind of a... a... mad sex fiend or something. That's why women dress up for dinner, isn't it? In dresses that left shoulders bare and did interesting things... in the... general... er... front sort of area? Isn't it normal for a man to start thinking about what might sort of... fit in... follow on... you know... sort of in the time between the dinners and the breakfasts?*

He realized that he had lapsed into just watching her mouth move instead of trying to follow the words. Well. Mostly watching her mouth. Okay, he was watching her mouth in between watching... other things. *By gods, that was an interesting dress. Just simply all kinds of... thingy. Lace. Around the whatsit. Neckline.*

"Sam? Is something wrong?"

He was aware his mouth was hanging open. He shut it. "Huh? Sorry. No. Why?"

"Well, you're hanging onto that wine glass like it's trying to escape. Did you want it topped off?" He looked blankly at his hand. Sure enough, he was white knuckling the stem.

The last thing he needed was more alcohol. He had had... what? Three glasses since he had arrived? He had lost count. It was something to do to keep you from doing or saying something incredibly stupid, drinking wine. And it was good wine. But he needed to lay off the wine. It was going to his head. And it was keeping company with the whiskey up there. Or something was going to his head, anyway. It felt funny. "No!" He yanked his hand back like he had been caught out at something, succeeding in tipping it right over onto the tablecloth. Of course, the wine *would* be red and the tablecloth *white* instead of the other way around. The other way around just made him look stupid and clumsy. This made him look destructive into the bargain. "Gods. I'm sorry... let me... clean it up..." He sighed and picked up the now empty glass and looked helplessly around the table. *It probably wouldn't be improving things to mop it up with the white linen napkins. I guess drinking wine only keeps you from doing something incredibly stupid up until the point it makes you do something incredibly stupid.*

"Nonsense, it's just a tablecloth and those glasses are top heavy. Be right back." She got up and walked through the dining room door which led to the kitchen for a few moments, coming back with a tea towel and a bottle of clear soda water. "Laundry girl does wonders with linen. Her mother used to get gods know what out of my grandfather's clothes when he had been hunting. Here. Would you be kind enough to get the top off that? Didn't think to bring the bottle opener back with me," Sybil said, carefully blotting up the little puddle, folding and refolding the towel to get a clean spot each time, leaning over the edge of the table to reach and shuffling a few things out of the way, unaware that Sam was arguing with himself. He stood beside her and watched, but inside, there was serious debate going on.

*You're about to do something even more stupid than spilling your wine, you know.*

*Am I? Really? Where do you go after that performance?*

*Well, for a start, you're about to try to be macho. That always blows up in your face.*

*How so? I thought I was just opening a bottle of soda...*

*With your bare hands? Why not go all the way and open it with your teeth? Or just smash the neck off on the edge of the table? Who are you trying to impress, anyway? She told you to go get the bottle opener. I'm sure she's not particularly swoony about a man who has shown sway over little bits of metal.*

*Already got it open, so, nyeh. My hand is killing me, but it's not actually bleeding, so, I repeat, nyeh. That's gotten me a beer or two in a few bets. It's all about knowing how to push and twist at the same time. Everybody thinks you have to built like a mule to do it properly, but you don't.*

*And what do you expect her to do, exactly? Buy you a beer? Hop on the table, shouting "Damn the tablecloth, take me, Captain!" because she's overwhelmed by your extreme prowess with bottle caps?*

*No! And you stop that! I'm just... helping. I'm standing right here in case I'm needed to go fetch something.*

*Helping yourself to a free show... You ought to be ashamed of yourself. You're smelling her perfume. And watching her lean over. And the way using that towel makes her-*

*Shut. Up. Shut up! Shut up shut up shut up.*

Blotting was evidently coming to an end. "Oh! You didn't need the bottle opener, then... thank you, Samuel." She smiled and took it from him. No one had called him Samuel since dame school and his mother, and he hadn't liked that much, usually because the employment of his full name meant he was in trouble. Somehow, he liked it when Sybil did it. He liked it when her fingers brushed his as she took the bottle. You probably couldn't pry the goofy smile off his face with a bottle opener right now. "See? Nearly gone. Then you put a little soda on it and some salt to soak everything up and you'll never know it was there by the time it gets washed. No harm done."

*You're about to do some.*

*Some what?* Sam thought, watching Sybil tap a little mound of salt onto the pinkish remnants of the stain from the fancy salt cellar.

*Some harm.*

Oh? How so?

"Now. All done. Dessert is-"

*Because you're going to kiss her. And you're probably going to muck it up. Because you always muck it up.*

*News to me that I'm going to kiss- Oh gods, I'm already doing it...*

And he was. He had gone straight from not even having the intention to kissing her, somehow. His mouth was on hers, he could smell perfume and powder, he saw the look of surprise just before and just after he made contact, at which point he shut his eyes, mostly in self-defense. If she were going to deck him one, he would just as soon not see that coming. Worse, he didn't want to see if she looked disappointed. After a moment, his brain managed to telegraph to the rest of him that it was, surprisingly, a good kiss. So good that the voice had shut up momentarily. It recovered enough to nudge at him that probably, his hands shouldn't be flapping around loose or they could soon get into trouble. He settled them on her shoulders and felt her relax slightly. Sort of... into him. Her shoulders were warm beneath his palms and fingers. Soft and silky skin. He hazarded coming up for a quick breath of air and slipping one arm around her waist to get a hand on the small of her back before kissing her again. His brain stopped handling words and opted for sensations instead, the equivalent of big, flashy, colorful pictures. Something... soft... two soft things, really...pressing up against him... a hipbone the other side of a few layers of dress... a palm laid against his chest... the pulse of her neck beneath his fingers... little muffled noises coming from both of them... something unfamiliar and probably made of whalebone under the other hand... something beneath it that definitely was not unfamiliar, exactly and definitely *not* made of whalebone.

Next thing he knew, he was kissing the hollow between neck and shoulder and letting that hand roam a little, up and down her arm.

*You hadn't ought to be doing this. You keep letting that hand go where it's headed and she's going to kill you when it gets there.*

*I don't know what you're talking about. Go away.* He moved his hand sort of... under her arm... along her side. He was feeling... well... mostly corset... some hip... his hand roamed back upward.

*I'm telling you, she's going to kill you... And she ought to. You're a filthy pervert. You go stampeding right from first kiss to practically molesting her. Anyone would think you were eighteen and had never seen a girl.*

*Then at least I'll die happy! And I'm not a filthy pervert. She kissed me back. And nudged me. With things.*

*Filthy pervert. And I should know...* Just then, Sam Vimes came to grips. With things. Well. Thing, anyway. You could tell by the way the whalebone changed, and the way there wasn't any whalebone once you got past a certain point, just warm, heavy softness on the other side of a painfully thin dress over a painfully thin corset cup that didn't leave a whole lot to the imagination once you started bringing hands into it. It would have almost been less frustrating to have four layers of tweed in the way. Sybil made a noise near his ear. Half surprise, half what he desperately hoped was pleasure. He kissed her on the mouth again. Having gone a whole minute, or possibly a small eternity, he wasn't sure, with his hand still there and attached to his body and, this was important, being operated by a brain that was still inside the skull, he was emboldened enough, or possibly just mad enough, or maybe even just drunk

enough, to hook a thumb barely into the neckline of the dress. He felt bare flesh, just against the edge of his thumb, but still...

"Sam..." It came out muffled. There was only so much you could say when you were in the middle of kissing.

He took the thumb away, but didn't move his hand.

"Sam..." There was a little note of warning. *Okay. Fine. I'll move it. In a minute.* He moved it down an inch. He felt her shoulder stiffen, felt her shift.

And then he felt a prick.

"Ow!" He jerked back, rubbing his arm. Mostly from surprise, admittedly, but still, there might be dents.

"Sorry! I didn't realize I had picked up the pickle fork... I thought it was the butter knife... I was just trying to get your attention."

"There's even a fork for the gods-damned *pickles*?! If you wanted me to stop, you only had to say! It was a fool thing to do, anyway, I never should have done it," Sam said miserably. *Damn it, I'm even slurring my words around the edges, now. I'm having to concentrate on moving my tongue. Ten more minutes and I won't be able to say either of our names. Perfect. Just what every woman wants. A kiss from a stammering, slurring drunk.* "I'll see myself out. Silly, thinking you would want me to... well... I'll leave. I won't bother you again."

"Sam, wait. What if I do? Want to, I mean?" He searched her face for some sort of sign she might be having him on. Or just humoring him until she could set armed men on him. Or, considering Sybil wasn't above taking care of her own problems, simply bash his head in with a silver tea service or something. Knowing a woman could wield a mean dragon keeping implement when she was of a mind to could put a real damper on a man's enthusiasm if he thought about it too much. Pitchforks and shovels were some of the nastiest weapons out there in domestic disputes. Kitchen implements weren't too far behind. Sometimes, being a watchman was a horrible thing.

"The... the fork... kind of said other... otherwise," Sam said carefully. Sybil flushed pink. Embarrassed pink.

"Sorry, I couldn't think what to say, I was just going to give you a little prod with the butter knife, only it turned out to be the pickle fork." She turned a brighter pink. And mumbled something. He didn't know what surprised him more. That he thought he knew what she had said, or that she was capable of mumbling.

"What was that?"

"And I didn't exactly want you to stop. I was... enjoying it." There was a moment where the entire disc seemed to be holding its breath. Sam forced himself to blink. "I want to... just... not like this. You understand?" Her voice was soft. Almost apologetic. And for just a second, there was the barest hint of quiet disappointment.

He wanted to pass it off. To make a joke about really messing up the tablecloth or it not being very romantic or something witty about interrupting dessert. Problem was, he couldn't. Because he knew it didn't have a thing to do with being clumsy at it or having bad timing or interrupting the flow of the evening or even rushing it and being hamfisted about it. He knew it was because he had shown up already smelling like whiskey. If she had let him go any further,

she could never be sure... "You could never be sure it wasn't just the Bearhugger's doing the talking," he said flatly. "I understand." He was pretty sure going pink was catching. His cheeks were on fire.

"This is just all a bit sudden," Sybil demurred. "I don't want to botch things up, Sam Vimes. That's all." She stepped closer. For a brief, horrifying moment, he was dead sure she was going to kiss him on the cheek. Might as well be the kiss of death if she did that. Instead, she put her mouth against his and gave him a slow, soft kiss. It was relatively chaste, as kisses go, but it wasn't wishy-washy. There was definitely the hint of a promise of something more there, if he was any judge, and he probably wasn't. "Let me get Willikins to see you back safely. It's his night off, but he won't mind driving you."

*Well. Either she doesn't want to see me falling into any pesky gutters or I'm reading this wrong and he'll be told to push me into a convenient one between here and Pseudopolis Yard.*

*And it would serve you right, filthy pervert. Filthy drunken pervert.*

"Okay. But... they don't call it liquid courage for nothing," he added weakly. "I suppose I'll have to work on getting up the nerve while sober. Sorry." He wasn't sure what he was apologizing for being. For just *being*, probably.

The corners of her mouth turned up. "You have nothing to be sorry about, but that might be a good idea. I'll be right back."

*I'm going to have a hell of a hangover in the morning. I just hope I don't get chatty after I've finished off the bottle.* His fingers practically itched, thinking about the bottle back in his room at the Watch house.

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Sam looked into the mirror. Unfortunately, the face looking back was his, definitely his, and looking worse for the wear after last night. What he could remember of it. He splashed water on it. It didn't improve things. Not for the first time, he wondered what the hell he might have said that he would come to regret when he had been reminded of it.

"Sam, maybe the meetings wouldn't be such a bad idea," Fred said from the doorway.

"Maybe not," Sam admitted. "What the hell did I do?"

Fred looked panicked for a moment. "Well... er... don't rightly know, Sam..." He let the 'Sam' pass because Fred looked worried. And he always lapsed into old habits when he was worried. And after all, it was, technically, the Captain's day off, wasn't it? He still glared at Fred until Fred pulled at his own collar and confessed, "Except that you were babbling something about going too far and a pickle fork and having done a bad thing. Nobby's on about whether posh people actually have forks just for pickles, now. He says it probably goes along with the teacups thin as paper. And something or other about not being able to get your nerve up, sober." He squirmed a little more under further scrutiny. Or it might have just been hungover, pained squinting, but Fred didn't need to know that. "You said something about kissing. That you didn't know why she would still kiss you after that..." Fred looked immensely guilty, as though he had been caught reading private letters.

And then it all came back in a rush. Sam felt all his color drain, probably down to his toes. "Damn it," he swore softly. There was, unfortunately, no rock to crawl under as last night flashed before his eyes. There wasn't a rock low enough, even if they had been down in the cellar. *On the bright side, you finally kissed her, and there's the first kiss out of the way, you*

*never have to do that again. And I don't remember her slapping six kinds of fire out of your face, so that probably didn't happen. And then... you touched her backside? Fine. Maybe she didn't feel that. Skirts. Petticoats. Slips. Frilly underwear. Bet she hardly noticed. You might have gotten away with it. But you grabbed... you ... you put her hand right on... her... um... and...* "Ye gods." His face couldn't be any more on fire if he stuck it in the hearth when that particular gem bobbed up from the depths of his memory.

And the problem with someone knowing you a long time was that they really *knew* you. Sometimes, all it took was a couple of swear words and seeing the look on your face to put two and two together and come up with something uncomfortably close to "you got drunk and groped her, didn't you?". In times of great stress, you could always count on Fred Colon to be a sergeant. Especially when his sense of dignity or propriety had taken a ding. "Look, sir, you know I don't like to speak out of turn, not me, but, begging your pardon..." Fred straightened up with an air of righteous indignation that would have done Hughnon Ridcully proud. "But, Captain, me and the rest of the Watch-

"All three of you? Or did you pull the Librarian in on it, too?" Sam groaned. If he had been a praying man, he might have prayed for the floor to swallow him up. Unfortunately, the house at Pseudopolis Yard was built solid.

Fred plowed on, undeterred. "... have been talking, and, well, sir, you would be a fool, a damned *fool*, to keep on this way. Lady Sybil's a fine lady, a real, actual lady, and she *likes* you. She's good to you, Captain. And good for you. Or would be, if you would just let her be. I think you might even be happy after you've been over there, every once in a while, when you forget about making yourself miserable all the time! But you keep dragging back in here every few days, moaning about how awful you feel because of the drinking and why would someone like her want someone who drinks like that. When there's things you could do about the drinking. Not drinking yourself horizontal every other day for a start. When-

"When I could do something about it," Sam admitted wearily. "Fine. I'm *going*. Sign me up."

Fred with a full head of steam was not easily turned aside, even by agreement. "Darned right, you could do something about it! You could do something about it other than moaning in your next drink about how you drink too much. Fine lady like that, willing to... Well, I wouldn't dream of telling you your business, Sam, you know that, but I've known you since you were just a lad and all. Watched you grow up, you might say, in a manner of speaking. Just some friendly advice, but you can't keep going the way you're going."

"I *said* I was *going*, Fred," Sam warned.

"And another- Going? Going where?" Fred deflated slightly, wind taken out of his sails.

"To the meetings. For the drinking. Or rather, for the stopping thereof. Not the way I've been going. I'm going to try the other direction. You're right. A man would have to be a damned fool to keep on this way," Sam admitted. "Good thing you're not one for telling me my business, hmm? Or you could waste a lot of time in the telling."

*And she does make me happy.*

*So maybe you could try doing something that just might make her happy. Instead of quietly disappointed.* He winced a little at that particular bit of memory. He could take anything but that little flash of disappointment. Give him any amount of shouting, slapping, throwing things and the like over *that*. It was like kicking a puppy with a steel toe boot and being the puppy getting the kicking, all rolled into one, somehow.



"You're going to the meetings, sir?"

"Yes, Fred. You don't have to shout it. *Please* don't shout it. Just now, I would prefer it if you got me a very quiet glass of water and a couple of very silent headache powders. Look... no promises. I'll try."

*I'll try. Maybe there doesn't always have to be drink...*

Fred Colon's round, red face lit up like the sun. "Right. Nobby's got the kettle on downstairs. Cup of sweet tea would probably do a world of good."

"Maybe, Fred. Maybe."