

“Who do we have up next, Emma?”

“One Grapnel Skullcrusher. Claims it’s not an emergency, has a stomach complaint, I gather. Can’t get much else out of him,” the plump, pink clinic receptionist replied, handing over a new manila patient folder with all of one sheet in it.

Young Sam took the folder, flipped it open, looked at it and scratched the bridge of his nose while crinkling it in thought. There was little on the paper beyond a name, address, age and a few other bare facts. Somehow, that expression and the faint freckles across it made him look younger than his nineteen years. Even with a broad build tending more toward the Ramkin side of things[1], he still looked like an overgrown boy sometimes. “I’m going to go out on a limb based on the name and guess that’s the very traditionally dressed dwarf I spotted over in the corner earlier with the extremely shiny axe?”

[1] He was easily a head taller than his mother by fourteen. By the time puberty had completely caught up with him, which took some doing, people that didn’t yet know him very well sometimes made the common mistake of assuming that being built like an ox meant the same thing as having the brains of one. They didn’t usually make that mistake twice. Not once he had gone all polysyllabic on them. And possibly explained what *polysyllabic* meant.

“Got it in one. I put him in exam room three, shiny axe and all. By the way, Doctor Madison clacked in sick, too.”

“Hurrah,” Young Sam said flatly. “Flu epidemic. Nothing like it. Don’t suppose I can claim I’m sick as well?” He shut the folder.

“Not a chance. I’m looking at you and you’re healthy as a mule. You’re also the only one left for clinic duty unless you want us to go rousting old Mossy out of his office. He would just spend the next four hours grumbling about it and cussing the patients.”

“Nah. We need him administering things, anyway. Let him cuss the paperwork and the bills, I’ll cuss the patients. Exam 3 you said?”

“Exam 3,” Emma confirmed.

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Young Sam raised a hand and gave a polite knock against the door before stepping in. As expected, the contents of the room included one stout looking dwarf, heavily armored and dressed in even more layers of mail, leather and cloth under that, round face under an equally round iron helmet mostly obscured by eyebrows and a thick beard, but exposed enough to look vaguely worried. That expression more or less came with the territory in the exam rooms. Exam rooms usually brought back the ghost of every questionable health decision you had ever made and reduced even the best of people to the same state of mind as being seven and getting stared down by the headmaster or headmistress. The mail and armor was reasonably dressy and well kept, as was the smallish jeweled pick-axe, and the other visible dress had a richness to it that suggested a dwarf doing fairly well for himself. The mail was more ornamental than practical. Upper middle class and probably still upwardly mobile, at any rate. The richness of girth and the handsomely, neatly trimmed beard suggested the same. Young Sam gave the dwarf a broad, friendly smile and stuck out a hand in greeting. “Grapnel Skullcrusher? Young Sam Vimes. I realize this is a little presumptuous of me, and you’re well within your rights to

refuse, but for my own comfort and convenience, would you mind terribly if I put your axe in the umbrella stand over there? It makes it easier to assure nothing gets damaged. Namely me. You're going to laugh, but large, sharp things I'm not holding tend to make me nervous. I blame heredity and hanging around far too many watchmen."

The dwarf gave a slightly sheepish smile, completed the handshake and handed it over. "They let you out without a nanny? You look like you're still wet behind the ears." It wasn't a native Ankh Morpork dwarf accent. It had the lilt of Cheery's Uberwaldian accent, only much thicker. You could almost float a boat anchor in it.

Young Sam had been ready for this. It was a common enough complaint among the human patients he ended up with during his usual days at the clinic, especially the ones who had known him all his life and remembered him as being permanently about seven or eight and full of earnestly nosy questions when said nose wasn't buried in a book. But dwarfs, who were still rowdy adolescents at seventy-five, apparently, made comments every time. Not that dwarfs of any age came in very often, at least to the walk-in clinic. The Critical Care Center saw its fair share, especially when the quaffing got out of hand or a dwarf officer ended up in the middle of a melee gone bad, but it was rare they admitted to being ill, much less needing the more mundane services of the free hospital or the free clinic, at least while they were still upright. They tended to get carried in when they were in an especially bad way, boots first, instead. "Dried back there very well last time I had a bath. It was even in the last twenty-four hours. I'm nineteen, in case you were wondering, and even Doctor Lawn grudgingly admitted I was trained enough to be set on the patients in the walk-in clinic unobserved without causing more havoc than strictly necessary when I took the clinical exam two years ago. And by the way, he gave me a different test than the standard one, yes, but it was *harder*, because he's a pretty devious old goat and he wanted to make sure no one cried favoritism, least of all me. Or Dad. Or Mum. *Especially* Mum. Sorry, you haven't much choice, today. I am, in fact, *it*. On account of not having the flu. Normally I could very likely offer you an exciting range of demographics, genders, shapes and species and at least a third of them would actually be on duty, though, to be honest, none of them would be dwarfs. We've tried recruiting, no one applies, so if you know someone who might be interested, point them our way. We could probably learn a thing or two from the Watch on that score. Maybe we should allow armor with the fetching uniforms. Today I don't even have a nurse. They're all out on the floor of the Lady Sybil or working the Critical Care wing, those that haven't clacksed in sick. They're extremely short-staffed. We've got an Igor that works the morgue..."

"I'll stick with you, if it's all the same," the dwarf said hurriedly.

"I thought you might. So, now that we've gotten past the inevitable discussion about whether my mum still packs my lunch and ties my shoes and wipes my nose when I go to work in the building with her name over the door, what might your actual complaints be? At least the ones I might be able to do something about?" Young Sam straddled the adjustable stool next to the exam table and sat, shifting to the politely interested expression that his mother tended to use to invite people to fill her in on how their families were and what their children were doing these days. Combined with the old copper trick of being chatty and then suddenly opening up a great, big, patiently gaping silence just begging to be filled, and acting as though you could keep it up all day if necessary, it usually got patients confessing to even the most embarrassing of ailments and symptoms inside five minutes.

There was some hemming and hawing, an embarrassed cough, then, "This is going to sound ridiculous. Stomach cramps. Been having them since early this morning. Won't go away, no

matter what I take.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that’s ridiculous, I’ve got a wealth of embarrassing stories about what things people put up their... Anyway, stomach cramps doesn’t even register on the ridiculous scale. I see. Any nausea or fever?” Young Sam glanced down to scribble a note on the chart.

“Felt a little sick earlier, just for a few minutes. No fever,” the patient allowed. “I should just take another damned stomach powder and go home. It’s probably breakfast at Gimlet’s Delicatessen coming back to haunt me.”

“Oh. I see Emma took your temperature earlier. Could be nothing. Or it might be something that needs to be looked into. Since you’re here, might as well, eh?” There was a distinct absence of argument. “Sharp pains or dull ones?”

“Dull.”

“May I have a listen to your lungs?” Young Sam asked, holding up the stethoscope. Mindful of traditional dwarf modesty and comfort in layers, he added, “The mail will have to come off, and the leather jerkin, but you can leave the shirt on and buttoned for now. I can hear well enough through that. I’ll put those over by the axe.” The usual ritual of urging deep breaths and listening took place. “Good breath sounds. No crackling. That eliminates pneumonia, at least. Would you mind lying back and letting me feel your abdomen and maybe having a listen? That helps me eliminate things like a ruptured spleen or gallstones, among other things.”

“I suppose...” Grapnel said warily, lying back reluctantly and rigidly, as though having been invited to stretch out for a nap on a marble slab.

“Let me know if anything I do hurts or feels uncomfortable or even just tender.” Young Sam pressed gently, working his way up and down, then across, with spread fingers. The stethoscope came out again. “Good belly and breath sounds. No sharp pains or new aches when I pressed?” There was a shy shake of the head. Followed by a tense grunt. “Having them now? Show me where you feel it the worst.” Grapnel laid a hand somewhere around navel level. Niggling somewhere at the back of Young Sam’s brain, what seemed to be the loose end of the knot flapped free. It was waving somewhere just at the edge of seeing, not quite in focus, and if you tried to grab at it too fast, it might disappear or you might just end up with a bigger tangle of knots. Sometimes even doctors needed to have something silly and mostly pointless to keep the greater part of the brain occupied while the rest of the brain got on with the important business of putting the clues together and handing you the answer. “Anything changed in your diet? Eaten anything out of the ordinary lately? Any known allergies?” There were, again, three barely-there, eyes-not-quite-meeting-yours head shakes in response.

Normally, this might mean the patient was being less than honest, but these were three totally innocuous questions. Most patients wouldn’t so much as bother lying about them. There was a word trying to form back there. He tried some more time filler. “Haven’t been traveling abroad within the last four months, have you? Anywhere further than Sto Lat? Or been in close contact with someone that has?” Another of those denials. And then the adjective that had been genteelly clearing its throat in hopes of being noticed came to the front of the queue.

*Demure.* That was definitely a demure denial. He had a closer look for the little telltale signs in the face. Width of the jaw, prominence of the cheekbones, the thickness of the brow bone, the roundness of the cheeks. The differences might not be as obvious as they were in humans,

because dwarfs usually had skulls that could put a rock slide to some trouble, but if you knew what you were looking for and were a decent anatomy student or someone with a talent for or a vested interest in recognizing faces, like an artist or a watchman, you could spot them even if you couldn't describe them in words. Well, you could if you cultivated the ability of looking past the beards and the eyebrows to the facial structure underneath. Female dwarfs that announced it loudly and proudly were far from a rare sight in Ankh Morpork these days. Cheery, for example, had a lot more company in the high heeled boots and leather skirt department, and there were plenty of dwarfs that went to the salons on a regular basis for fetching Quirmian braids and ribbons in their beards and had dainty little beaded handbags or sequined carryalls hanging on their belts alongside not so dainty axes. But you also still had communities of dwarfs that were fine with jobs outside of mining, daylight in moderation, and who would choose patent gas exploders over sending knockermen to their deaths in a heartbeat, but who definitely drew the line at the female pronoun and the evils of eye shadow and lace. They might have children who were born in the city and never saw the inside of a mine, and might even grudgingly tolerate "that sort of thing" as long as it wasn't happening in their neighborhood or under their roof, but they wouldn't admit to having daughters of their own. And there were still some dwarf women who would secretly just as soon someone else take care of this uncertain business of women's lib and send them a postcard when it was over. There were still professions where the boss lady definitely would not earn as much respect as the boss man... Even the Low King had kept most of the dwarfs guessing on that score, at least officially, for years on end, before finally showing up to an official reception in a very official dress. And even then she didn't take the Madam Sharn route of declaring herself Queen or referring to herself as "she". Or even answering to it. Some cultural movers and shakers wisely rattled foundations only a few centimeters. My grandfather's axe got refreshed, one tiny thing at a time, which is what allowed it to still be my grandfather's axe.

"May I ask what you do for a living?"

There was another polite, slightly embarrassed cough. "Training to be a brag. Soon, anyway. I've been on the waiting list to go back home and train there. My parents have insisted for years. For now, I work setting type for the magazine presses at the Times when they're busy and full time doing fine detail work at my uncle's leather shop, to send some money back home. Decorative tooling, mostly. Press isn't bad work. I really like the shop, I've been in the city for almost a year," Grapnel added, sounding very nearly apologetic. *Ah*. Well, he had always had what his mother referred to as the Vimes tendency to niggle at things and the Ramkin tendency to meddle in them. If he were going to gamble on top of it, he might as well metaphorically bet the farm<sup>[2]</sup> on a pretty solid conclusion based on the evidence.

[2] He had, thankfully, not inherited the Vimes tendency to get drunk off your arse and the Ramkin tendency to follow up any getting drunk off your arse with *literally* betting the farm.

"This may sound a bit invasive, but... I'm a guild member, I had to swear to uphold patient confidentiality and all that. Doesn't leave this room if you don't want it to. The only way I can break it is if I'm presented with a very specific legal warrant, and I doubt the Watch is going to be interested. And keep in mind, how you answer is going to determine what I do next. Would you... personally prefer that I address you as ma'am for the rest of the examination?" There was a definite blush and barely perceptible, slightly miserable looking nod. "Then I think you're going to need to lift your shirt a few inches or unbutton a few buttons. And let me have another feel and listen. And maybe a quick look. I'm almost positive I know what's causing your cramps." But there was no point prying at the lid on that particular can of worms until he was absolutely positive.

It took a few more minutes to go through the motions of pulling the exam sheet up and stepping to the other side of the closed curtain for the duration of the unbuttoning. Silly as it might seem, most patients appreciated having a modesty shield close to hand, even if there weren't truly anything to be modest about on the other side of it. Sometimes there had to be an unspoken agreement that what happened on the other side of the sheet or the curtain hadn't really happened. Or at least hadn't happened much. Sometimes it just functioned as a mental security blanket. Problem was, one dwarf's abdomen tended to look pretty much like another. All dwarfs tended to be built on the stout side, and while dwarfs might look like humans on a smaller vertical scale to the untrained eye, there were some distinct differences when it came to basic anatomy. The female dwarf officers in the Watch often opted for breastplates that had been hammered out in a way that, as his dad put it, hinted that the chest underneath wasn't *quite* the same sort of chest you got on, say, Nobby Nobbs [3] or even very-definitely-Mr.[4] Corporal Thorin Rocksmasher, but you didn't often see a dwarf that could be in any way be accused of looking terribly buxom. The hourglass figure wasn't what you would call common, either. The dwarf high fashion industry might play that sort of thing up on the models, but the models were usually either short human girls wearing false beards or there was a lot of complicated and possibly padded corsetry doing yeoman's work under the expensive clothes. Some degree of the whiskey barrel figure was generally what you got, and anyone trying to gut a dwarf of either gender with a dull knife could potentially get a tired wrist before doing a great deal of damage[5]. Dwarfs had incredibly thick layers of muscle around their middles.

[3] Granted, you didn't often see a Nobbs-shaped chest on much of anything other than Nobby Nobbs. He could be described as pigeon-chested, only pigeons took offense.

[4] It can be noted that the relatively mild hazing ritual of "relocating your uniform and your towel to the front desk while you're in the showers" became a lot less popular among some of the dwarf officers after Thorin called their bluff during his first week with the Watch. It was the sort of thing that became immortalized in Watch legend, and about two-thirds of the Watch still swears to have been on desk duty in that nick on that day. Thorin, on the other hand, became a lot more popular, particularly among the female dwarf officers. Fish stories aren't the only thing that grow in the retelling.

[5] Your tired wrist was then the least of your worries, coming in well behind the now-enraged dwarf very likely wielding a sharp axe and probably a blood-freezing battle cry along the lines of the sentiment that today would be a good day for you to die or at least have your knees very definitely chopped off and stuffed in your ears.

After announcing his intentions, he folded the exam sheet down slightly. The dwarf's abdomen, now bared between shirt and low-riding belt, as he had expected, was of the sort of shape that might easily pass for the slightly rounded potbelly that came with middle-aged spread, too much dwarf diner food and easier living combined with less swinging of a miner's pickaxe, but the number in the folder had been several decades short of middle age for a dwarf. "You've put on weight recently." There was another reticent, answering nod. He knew better than to put it in the form of a question, that left open the option of lying, besides, the belt was fastened in the last available notch and it was slung low. The trousers obviously told the same tale, too. They were reasonably new looking, but couldn't be fastened any higher than they were. He had another feel. The thick wall of muscle made it much harder to detect, of course, but probing fingers eventually pushed up against the sort of mass he was seeking. Young Sam warmed the end of the stethoscope by rubbing it on the inside of his elbow for a few seconds and then listened. It took a while and no small amount of trial and error, but he finally located the fluttery-fast



whooshing noise he was expecting to hear, low and slightly to the right, dampened mightily by all that dwarf anatomy in the way. In the midst of searching, he kept one eye on the minute hand of the clock, mentally noting the time as another cramp arrived, probably right on schedule. He straightened up and pulled the stethoscope out of his ears.

Young Sam worked his mouth soundlessly for a few seconds, wondering how to begin. You had to tread carefully with this subject, particularly with dwarfs, he knew. They were intensely private, even under the best of circumstances. And here was one that probably hadn't openly admitted to being female to anyone of her own species before, much less anyone outside of it. *Correction. At least one dwarf in the city definitely knows she's female...* "Er... I've just confirmed my suspicions. So... we're going to need to have a serious talk and not mince words much, because we may not have all that much time to mince words. Please don't take offense, but I'm going to need the honest answers to some very personal questions, so now is not the time to be shy." *And that's maybe not the half of what's going to get personal.* Young Sam pulled the sheet back up and settled back onto the stool.

"Is it serious?" Grapnel squeaked, paling. "I mean, I'm not dying?"

It was the sort of badly timed, misdirected patient question that made you want to break out in nervous laughter or simply break out an absurd answer along the lines of the infamous "Bet you a dollar you're the widow Jackson" incident if you weren't careful. *No, ma'am. You could not currently be doing anything more the exact opposite of dying, in fact. Hoo boy, no indeed. Incidentally, do really traditional dwarfs happen to have any traditions involving a potentially embarrassing talk with an older relative in which they usually attempt to emotionally scar you for life regarding the opposite gender and thoroughly confuse you about where all the parts go? Because I think maybe we could have really used a little bit of that several months ago.* Instead, Young Sam gently bit his lip before answering evenly, "No, you're not dying. And nothing I've discovered is what I would exactly call a threat to your health, either. It's just... you might be in for a bit of a serious surprise. And you're probably going to be here for a few hours unless you want to make other arrangements. Maybe even overnight. Do you have a spouse I can contact to come be with you?"

"No. I'm not married." Grapnel hesitated, looked like adding something else for a few seconds, then shut her mouth again.

*Of course. That would be too simple.* "Are you perhaps promised to be married?" Vigorous head shake of denial. "Someone special at least? Maybe you met someone since coming to the city?"

"No. No one." The lips pressed into a thin white line.

"Ah. I see. Would you care to elaborate on that answer?" It was what he thought of as his mother's "I see what you just did there and you're fooling no one but yourself" tone and it worked wonders. It had the sort of timbre that could probably convince hardened bank robbers to roll over on their accomplices because you sounded like you already knew where the money was hidden or even make his father unthinkingly confess to having eaten a covert bacon sandwich, and Young Sam shamelessly trotted it out for occasions like this. His father, on the other hand, usually just told you he already knew where the money was, straight out. Mostly because, nine times out of ten, he did.

There was an uncomfortable shifting on the exam table. "I don't have anyone special. I... met someone I liked here... but my parents didn't approve. So we broke it off."

“Oh. There was talk of getting engaged, then. An offer for a formal marriage contract?” He was probably belaboring the point, but it wasn’t as though he could just launch straight into the *I hope you got the young dwarf’s name and address...* speech, after all.

“I would have liked to. Yes,” Grapnel answered in a small voice. “He’s a jeweller. Does lovely, intricate work,” she added with just a hint of proprietary pride. “He put the sets in that axe handle. We talked about opening a shop together.” *Aha. Got more than his name and address, then. Well, obviously. Or we wouldn’t be having this conversation.*

“He sounds very special, indeed,” Young Sam said, taking a huge breath before plunging on, “and I imagine he offered what I am going to, for expediency’s sake, refer to as a proper dowry, and your parents put the stopper in it because they didn’t want you backing out of becoming a grag and maybe because they thought you were too young to be getting married. Nonetheless, I think maybe we had better set about contacting him and getting him here, because unless I’m very much mistaken, and I don’t think I am, you two did something a lot more involved than talking about getting married and opening a shop together. Somewhere *private*, I should think.”

The dwarf’s face turned beet red with mute, hot embarrassment. “How could you tell?”

Young Sam tried to channel the determinedly blank expression that had earned his dad the recycled nickname of Old Stoneface and succeeded. Barely. Off somewhere in the privacy of the back of his brain, he was currently giving this dwarf’s parents a good shaking for being small-minded idiots who believed in the protective power of ignorance, or possibly just the magic of closing your eyes and ignoring things you didn’t like, such as the unavoidable fact that you had a *daughter*. He might have his mother’s open, honest nature, but even she had the ability of the totally well bred Lady-with-a-capital-L to put on an iron hard smile and pretend she absolutely hadn’t heard what she had just heard for all she was worth[6] when necessary. He cleared his throat. “First of all, you’re about as good a liar as I am, which is to say, don’t enter any lying contests unless you’re aiming for dead last or I’m also competing, because I usually go all pink when I try to outright lie. Never try to be a professional card sharp, either. You are an easy to read book with small words and great big colorful pictures. Second, this is a bit late, but I think it might have been a good idea to discuss the importance of the approval of your parents and how it might not be a given before the gent in question took their approval as read. You’re young, a long way from home for the first time, and I’m going to guess maybe you were a little too caught up in things to be thinking everything through totally rationally and then they laid the guilt on you with the old ‘we’ve worked and scrimped and saved so we could be proud of you being a grag, we’ll be damned if you marry one of those hedonistic big city dwarfs’ routine. Third, I take it maybe your older relatives didn’t have any very important talks with you about what can lead to hanky panky and what hanky panky can lead to before you left home, but I just diagnosed you with a medical condition that couldn’t possibly have come about any other way than committing hanky panky. I think I can very safely assume the two of you did not put the brakes on at just hanky. I expect the two of you got a touch overexcited and celebrated the engagement a tiny bit prematurely.”

[6] Roughly speaking, a pretty big chunk of the city, even the bits of it that didn't, technically, always exist in the strictest sense of the word. And a considerable portion of the countryside, all of which existed all the time, at least as far as anyone had bothered to determine, but cabbages, sheep, cattle and country estates don't usually have much in the way of obvious existential crises.

The worried, questioning eyes peered out at him from beneath the helmet and eyebrows and Young Sam gave up on subtlety. Instead, he went for straightforward, lobbing it across as kindly and gently as possible. "You've put on weight the last few months and you're having abdominal pains because you're currently in the process of giving birth to a baby. It's not entirely unheard of for a pregnant dwarf not to know she is until she goes into labor. Especially if nobody ever bothered making sure you understood how you get that way, how to recognize you got that way and more importantly, how to keep from getting that way in the first place, but everyone's different. Several witches around the Ramtops have a story about the bellyache that turned out to be a surprise bouncing baby dwarf instead of too much quaffing or a bad rat, and many Ramtop dwarfs are nothing if not practical when it comes to the facts of life and even of gender, from what I understand. You lot are pretty hardy and the signs aren't as obvious, and even humans do that, sometimes. Denial's a marvelous thing. You're about to make your very special jeweller a father, is what I'm trying to say. Probably in a matter of a few hours. So, if you want to make this official before the birth maybe we had better be rounding him up and making some kind of arrangements. You wouldn't happen to have an aunt or similar you might want here with you? A female friend, maybe?"

"I'm so ashamed," the dwarf moaned into her hands. "My whole family is going to disown me! My p-p-parents will probably have me declared *D'hrarak*..."

Young Sam patted a shaking shoulder sympathetically, then gave it a heartening squeeze. "I'll take that as a 'no' on the trusted auntie. Look, there isn't much point in worrying about it or upsetting yourself, now, what's done is done and it's not as though you can undo it. You're not the first... girl... this has happened to, and I'll bet you won't be the last. All we can do is make the best of it, and thing is, Ankh Morpork is really good at making the best of things. I think you might find even some grags are surprisingly flexible about the *kruk*." Anybody with any sense knew the Law needed to get bent now and again, otherwise it didn't work, and when bending didn't work, you often needed to break the rules good and hard. It was a definite bonus if you could find someone who knew when to just bend it and when to snap it across your knee. Young Sam heaved a sigh and switched to patting between the shoulder blades. "One thing at a time. How many months since you talked to him?"

"F-f-five..."

"I'll go out on a limb and figure you have a full name and a current work address that you can give Sergeant Littlebottom so she can go fetch him here so you can have a word with him? Or several words. Or if you like, Sergeant Littlebottom can probably have a few choice words with



him right off the mallet[7], which might save time all around,” Young Sam offered.

[7] Young Sam had never had the patience to be much of a crockett player, since you could play a decent game of football plus take a brisk cross country run in the time it took to explain the rules, pick teams, get the game started and argue with the hat man about the last fifteen calls and five of the rules, but at least the lingo made for a higher class of metaphor and you could often catch bits of the same match as you were roaming around the countryside all day without having missed much or participate in one without having to break a sweat. He preferred to participate in the sports where coaches shouted things like “Get in there and get some ball, you bunch of soft nellies!” or “Run like you stole it!”. Nature and nurture being what they were, the latter phrase made it a hell of a lot easier for him to chase down the bugger what stole it down, for one thing.

The dwarf stared at him in fascinated horror. “You can’t have a Watch officer go and drag him out of work...”

“Oh, I most certainly can. If anyone can ask the Watch for a favor like that, I can. Half the senior officers across the disc probably gave me a piggy back ride or let me wear their helmet at least once and they know there’s a very good chance it’s going to be me on call for the trauma room if they get brought in here after an arrest or a mob gone bad. I also frequently deliver and treat their kids, make house calls at all hours whether I’m officially on call or not and make sure this place bends over backwards for the members of the Watch as a matter of civic duty and as a happy consequence, this also prevents both my parents from going totally Librarian-poo on us about not doing it.”

“Then *everyone* will know... about the... I mean... that I’m a...”

“Not if you don’t want them to. I mean, not for sure, unless your young dwarf is built like a toast rack. They can suspect all they want, but they can’t prove it. Most dwarfs don’t exactly show a lot. Besides, Sergeant Cheery Littlebottom is a dwarf, one of the finest sergeants my dad has got, the soul of discretion, and is very decidedly still a ‘Miss Littlebottom’ even after many years of being happily married to Hrolf Thighbiter, who is, I think it also bears pointing out, openly male. Cheery is not afraid to wear high heeled iron boots and a skirt while on duty, and maybe some satin ribbons and accessorize with a tastefully done axe. She worked straight through her... well, I’ll let her tell you about that. She is openly female, she is most certainly open-minded and progressive, she’s not much of one for conforming to any expectations she doesn’t want to conform to, and she is not apt to get all judgemental on you. She commands quite a bit of respect in the local dwarf community, and when that fails, she commands a pretty mean tastefully done axe and has gotten a lot less shy about shouting at people over the years. She should be a captain already, but she’s a little too modest for that. She’s technically a Sergeant-At-Arms, but that’s because Dad wanted to finagle her a higher pay rate and hopes to convince her to take to being a captain sooner or later. I believe you will find a solid friend in Sergeant Cheery Littlebottom more ways than one at this point in time. If she is on your side, she will indiscriminately prod buttock and take names on your behalf. Besides, she can tell him and his

boss, assuming he's got one, that he's got a family emergency he needs to attend to, which, strictly speaking, he does. Nobody argues when a uniform shows up and tells you you've got a family emergency. And family emergencies can be anything from 'there's been an accident' to 'he would like for you to come post his bail'. He takes a couple or three days off, comes back to give his notice, tells them he's ready to move out to his own family shop, potentially with space for a playpen in the back room and a little apartment over... I mean, under the shop. Who's to know? I would bet any amount of money that I could clacks our family estate agent and he could find a suitable empty property just hanging around. You can barely throw a rock in this city without hitting something Mum and Dad own and are willing to let you have on trial rent free for a few months to get established. They don't gouge on the rents, either, and they keep the gutters repaired and the walls painted. No one has to know which of you gave birth to the baby if you don't want them to."

Grapnel looked a little dazed at the usage of so much female pronoun in relation to one dwarf. *My gods, they really did keep you sheltered and busy, didn't they, if you didn't know about Cheery after a year. I thought everyone knew about Cheery, even if they didn't strictly approve. Maybe especially if they don't approve.* "Sh...she could do that? You could do that?"

"Gladly, I imagine. On both scores. Just let me step out, get Emma to send her a clacks that I need her to get over here, and assuming it's not an especially hopping crime day, I expect she'll be right over. We'll tackle some of the other issues later."

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"You want me to what?" Emma asked, looking at him incredulously.

"Keep Exam 3 closed for the patient currently in there, and keep out of Exam 3, don't ask. Distribute anyone else I see to the other exam rooms and send a clacks to Pseudopolis Yard marked for the attention of one Sergeant Cheery Littlebottom. Tell her I need her assistance with something slightly delicate. Ask her to come to Exam 3 and give the policeman's knock. I've got, what, one rubber stamp 'yep, he's technically alive, so you owe him life insurance' physical for a job, probably a cold over there and an ear infection waiting on me? I can work them in around checking on Exam 3. Thank goodness it's slower this afternoon. All the really sick people have either been admitted or have the good sense to stay home because they already gave the plague to everyone who works here."

"Actually, I think the kid's got a bean up his left nostril. Is this some kind of coded plea that you're being held hostage at axe-point, or something?" Emma asked, dashing off a note on the pad in front of her.

"No, it's just a slightly tetchy dwarfish cultural thing, and maybe I could use someone functioning as Cultural Attache, here. The medical books and Mossy don't really cover this one."

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“Look,” Young Sam began again with the deadly patience of someone being reasonable and prepared to go on being reasonable and filling dead air with polite noises until the other person cried ‘uncle’ out of pure exhaustion if nothing else worked, “I can’t really say how your parents will react even if the two of you get married properly. I mean, what constitutes ‘properly’ anyway? The then-Dean of Unseen University stood in front of my parents and said, more or less, ‘Oh, all right then, if you really must’[8] and they consider themselves properly married. I suspect if his parents were fine accepting your marriage a few ago, they still will be. And as a bonus, maybe you can sell them on the fact that there’s none of that messy waiting around to be made grandparents. I’m not exactly a wealth of in-law advice, though. Haven’t got any of my own, and as my dad points out, he and my mother had the amazing foresight to wait until all the potential in-laws who hadn’t gotten old enough to be a tad gaga or were less than twice removed were dead before they even met. My paternal grandmother died ten years before I was born. My maternal grandfather died not too many years after that, but I heard a lot of colorful stories about him. Dad swears my granddad would have shot him on sight if he had so much as looked sideways at his only daughter. Mum says that’s absolutely not true and Dad usually replies that if he had caught him in a really good mood, he *might* have given him a sporting chance and a thirty second head start. I gather that the two sides of my family might have been even more different than what you’re dealing with. I think my parents may have been born in circumstances so completely inverse they might have more or less actually approached each other going opposite ways on the backside of the continuity curve. On another subject, I really *do* need for you to change into the gown. For one thing, I can’t deliver a baby if you’re wearing trousers. More importantly, and I can’t emphasize this enough, *you* can’t deliver a baby while still wearing trousers. It’s not as though I haven’t seen -”

[8] The Dean had very carefully made up a ceremony with slightly more frills and gravitas and longer words for the occasion, Ankh Morpork having no formal civil wedding ceremony, but that had been the executive summary. And it would almost certainly have been the verbatim ceremony if Archchancellor Mustrum Ridcully had been making it up. The senior wizards might be more sentimental than they usually let on, but there was no point letting sentiment lengthen the wait for the roast ox at the reception.

There was a smart rat-a-tat-tat of knuckles against the door and a familiar voice on the other side saying, “Open up in the name of the law,” without any rancor.

Young Sam slipped into the hall and pulled the door shut behind him. “Cheery, thank you so much, I’ve got a bit of a situation. Er... long story short....” And a long story was made somewhat shorter, in quiet, murmured conversation. The more vital facts were related, a few interjected questions were sprinkled in and answered.

“I see... so the main problem is that the baby’s currently on the way, they’re not married because her parents want her to be a grag instead and he doesn’t know he’s going to be a father?” Cheery asked, twirling a strand of her beard thoughtfully with a finger.

“To be fair, the mother didn’t know about the baby part until I informed her. First baby, the pains are still fairly far apart but they’re getting closer, probably have a few hours at most to get things arranged more favorably. While I’m asking you to work miracles, might as well be greedy. She could probably use a friendly female ear of the dwarf persuasion and a little of the voice of experience pretty badly right about now. And if you’re aware of one, possibly a marriage loophole you could put Detritus through. Or Bluejohn.”

“Would you say she’s more in need of a mum’s voice of experience or a girlfriend’s voice of experience?”

“Currently, I would say a mum’s voice of experience, more ways than one, but I leave that up to your better judgment. How’s Hrolf, by the way?”

“Stitches are healing up nicely. You can hardly see them. Igor said he couldn’t have done a nicer stitching job. He approves of the thinner, curved needle. Makes tiny stitches easier.”

“Well, he taught me. If Igor doesn’t beat me to it, I’ll take them out tomorrow. And tell him to keep his eyebrows out of biting distance when he’s arresting his next number fifty-six.” He grinned widely. “How’s the half-pint?”

“Rhys is into everything and he’s already crawling everywhere.”

“Time flies. I don’t think Dad’s recovered from you being off for maternity leave, yet. Come to that, I don’t think he’s recovered from being *asked* for maternity leave, yet. Look, if you could just get her out of her trousers by the time I get back and get a name and address out of her, that would be immeasurable progress. You’ve got however long it takes me to go to Exam 1 and fish a bean out of this kid’s nose and assure Exam 2 that her precious little flower’s ear isn’t going to explode. Or the other way around.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

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Young Sam knocked a second time. Cheery stepped out and closed the door. “She’s getting changed. She’ll let you know when you can come back in. We had a *very* informative chat. I’m off to a jewellery store down on Tenth Egg to fetch one Boddony Albrechtson, whose ear I intend to bend on the way back, between my fingers, if necessary. She won’t budge on being admitted to the Lady Sybil proper, comfy bed or no comfy bed. Ankh Morpork wasn’t built in a day. Well, certain parts of it probably took at least two because the building supplies kept getting nicked. I’m going to optimistically assume he’s still as overeager to get down to the business of being married as he was when they got themselves into this mess. Should I complete the set by bringing a brag, too?”

“I’ll gladly hire you a carriage and you can rest your feet and bend his ear as loudly as you like.

How much good is a brag *actually* going to do, though? How are dwarfs on technicalities when it comes to the question of legitimacy and marriage? Is it going to be a matter of 'in before the finish, no matter how eleventh hour' or lots of sniffing about how someone is 'no better than she should be' instead?"

"Oh, dwarfs usually like a technicality if it's in their favor. Most dwarfs recognize a waiver of buying a dwarf off his parents as the same as having done it. It's just one of those things that you do for weddings because everyone else does it, like throwing bouquets and the first dance at the reception. Only *our* traditions actually make some sense. You pay off your partner's parents for the cost of raising them so you can start married life with a fresh conscience and to prove you're responsible and hard-working enough to be married and set up house together. And the parents make you a present of that much or more as a way of showing they believe you're responsible and hard-working and to help you get a start in setting up house. Waivers used to be done only when the parents were dead, but that's not actually written down anywhere as a requirement, it's just traditional. And tradition is really only what you did yesterday. And tomorrow, today will be yesterday. Nothing actually says your parents have to be dead for a waiver. Maybe given the circumstances her parents will just accept it after the fact to save face, but that's probably the least of her worries at the moment. You know, Bashfull Bashfullsson, there's a brag who knows the value of an honest mistake on the date when filling out the paperwork. Especially when it comes to waivers. Or so I hear," she added in a low voice.

"Wait, that works? Backdate the right piece of paper and suddenly everything is all... properly beamed and whatnot?"

"Correctly beamed and propped, actually, but yes. It should still be done up right before the birth happens, because, well, some things are *important*, and *they'll* know, and it will certainly be a load of spoil off her mind. The first thing Tak did, he wrote himself, and maybe a few days later after he wrote a geode, he went back and fudged the original records just a little. We're *dwarfs*. What gets written down is accepted as what *is*. If you go questioning what's written down, you're not being a proper dwarf and have no right to be sniffing at what other dwarfs do in the first place. A good brag knows what to write down," Cheery pointed out, hooking her thumbs in her belt. "Within reason."

Young Sam squinted as he tried to follow this. "I see. I think. It gets written down because it's the truth, or at least what *should* be the truth, and it's the truth because it's written down. The same way a smart copper knows when it's a good idea to lose the paperwork or the evidence?"

"It has unfortunately been known to happen in certain cases where it's obvious charges shouldn't have been laid in the first place. Learn when to carefully file things in the fireplace, lad," Cheery advised, patting him companionably on the hand. "If I were you, I would start with her patient folder as soon as you're done with it. Otherwise, it could lead to a whole lot of inconvenient questions about what else got written down."

"I'll... take that under advisement. Have Emma call a cab. There's always a handful hanging



around close looking for a fare this time of day. I'll owe you and Hrolf a nice dinner out for this, at least," he added, pressing a couple of bills from his wallet into her hand. "Thank you," he added, stooping to give her a quick hug.

"Oh, we couldn't let you do that," Cheery demurred. "Or this," she added, offering the bills back.

"You could and you will, but I'll argue that with you later. And take a cab on me, it's the least I can do," he replied, pushing her hand away.

"If you're sure."

"Consider it perks. Or at least partial repayment for motherly advice."

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"If I'm going to be doing anything in the way of helping to deliver this baby, I need to have a look so I know how you're progressing. The pains aren't the only thing. I don't work so great blind. You can certainly opt to have this baby unassisted if nothing goes wrong, or we can call a midwife... in most cases, things go fine and all you do is make sure you don't drop the baby, maybe give them a welcome smack and clean things up a little. To be honest, I don't know what most dwarfs do, but I don't think they often need serious medical intervention. All I know is I never met a dwarf who gave their profession as midwife, and it's not as though lady dwarfs discuss options in the streets, even here. Up in the Ramtops your outside options are usually the local witch-slash-midwife and in Uberwald, I suspect it's the local Igor, but only when things go really bad. Maybe an Igorina in some of the more forward-thinking corners. I have no idea what they do in Llamedos. Keep in mind, most of the dwarfs I know personally are great at discussing the finer points of getting the cuffs on as quickly as possible or the best way to cut off a suspect running up King's Way. Not so much with birthing techniques. On the extremely rare occasions I've done this for other dwarfs, they weren't so interested in telling me exactly why they chose our fine establishment."

"*How* extremely rare?" Grapnel asked suspiciously.

"The whole hospital has had maybe five. I'm the only repeat offender I know of for sitting in on two. That's just because Doctor Lawn was meeting with a vendor when the second one got here and there wasn't exactly time to go get him to help me out. Cheery saw Igorina and me for her checkups, not that there was much to them. I usually just took her vitals and weighed and measured. Igorina was her fallback option for delivery. I know Cheery's mum and dad came to visit when it got close to her time and stayed for a while. Maybe that's the usual way of it. "

"It is," she said in an extremely small voice, staring at the peaks in the starched sheet that represented her feet.

"Oh. I'm sorry."

“Why would you be sorry?”

“For being a poor substitute, I suppose.”

“Had they gone really bad?”

“Had what gone really bad?”

“The ones that came in.”

“The ones that came here to get help with the babies? Fairly bad. They all turned out more or less all right, though. Dislocating a baby’s shoulder with the forceps is rather small potatoes compared to the alternative.”

“Forceps?”

“Latatian for ‘tongs’. Although, really, even the new and improved versions look more like big, curved sculpted paddles with funny aspirations and a hinge. Or something you would use to serve salad. Doctors like to give everything Latatian names or Latatian derivatives, like ‘mallet’. They’ll tell you it’s because of Sceptum[9], the founder of modern medicine, but really, I think it’s mostly to keep people from being too alarmed when they hear you’re about to literally go at them hammer and tongs. By the time they’ve finished wondering what a forceps is, you’re finished.”

[9] Sceptum also famously said, “Am I going to get paid for this?”, which may be the most modern thing he ever did for medicine.

“Why would you need tongs?”

“Sometimes babies just get hung up in a bad position or they’re a bit too big or they try to come out backwards or feet first. And some mothers get in a bad way by the time they need to really push and can’t help much, especially if the labor goes on a long time or they lose a lot of blood. To quote Doctor Lawn’s favorite saying when he’s lecturing on the subject, giving birth is not like shelling peas. Er... My mother and I are quite literally the textbook case when it comes to forceps and prolonged labor combined with bad positioning, large baby, heavy hemorrhaging, late stage anemia, severe exhaustion, failure to progress and shoulder dystocia. I suppose you could say things definitely went Rimwards fast there at the end. It’s a bit weird to sit in on group lectures detailing exactly how you came into the world. But no odder, I expect, than knowing the classroom you’re sitting in is located in a building named after your mother, and all of the above might not be there if the story in the lecture hadn’t gone the way it did. If it’s any consolation, let me point out again that we’re talking about five dwarfs in a city of millions.”

“What if he doesn’t even want to talk to me? Sergeant Littlebottom left a long time ago.”

“He wanted to marry you not that long ago, didn’t he? There’s a lot of traffic this time of day. You have to go halfway down Kickleberry Street before you even hit Tenth Egg.”

“Maybe he’s changed his mind. Because I...changed mine.”

“We are here and this is now. And right here, right now, you can’t do thing one about the state of his mind, just yours,” He waited a few beats. “Or as my mother would say, stop flapping around uselessly like a big girl’s blouse.” There was a weak twitch of the mouth under the beard that might have been a suppressed smile. “How about I promise that this is not going to be at all painful. At worst it will be only mildly embarrassing, and that’s a better offer than you’re going to get on the rest of the experience.”

“Promise?”

“I am continuing to bear in mind that you own an axe and know how to use it. Outright lying would not be in my best interest.”

“What do I have to do?”

“Basically, lie there and be looked at, though it does help make things easier on me if you can draw your knees up, scoot down closer to the edge of the table and not laugh yourself sick at the sight of me putting the thin rubber gloves on,” Young Sam replied, fishing a couple out of a crock on the counter, pulling them on. “And the easier it is on me, the quicker it’s over and done with.” There was the usual awkward shuffling and repositioning, followed by a performance that would not have been out of place at the All World Championships Ceiling Inspection Finals for several moments. “You can stop holding your breath, now, I’m done. Sheet’s back down, everything looks completely fine so-”

There was a noise not unlike the persistent trickling of a kitchen pump after the handle has stopped as a thin stream dripped onto the floor. “What is that? I... I mean...” The dwarf flushed bright red again.

“Your bag of waters just broke, it’s fine, that’s supposed to happen. Nothing to be embarrassed about. Sorry, I should have warned you that was coming eventually. This is a one towel job, dwarfs evidently don’t need much in the way of amniotic fluid for cushioning. By comparison, humans are a regular tidal wave. Believe me, I’ve been on the actual receiving end of far worse than that. More times than I care to count,” Young Sam said, grabbing a couple of towels, handing one to Grapnel. “You might leak a bit for a while. After I get things mopped up, we can put the other towel under you. It’s completely clear. That’s another good sign. No excessive bleeding and the baby’s not in any apparent distress.”

“How can you tell? About the distress?”

“You probably don’t want to know, and I have a big mouth,” Young Sam said, putting the sodden towel into the laundry hamper.

“Maybe I could do with something else to worry about,” Grapnel snapped. He couldn’t help but notice the anxious checking of the clock.

“Let’s leave it at what I found out at age six, which is ‘fish do not get out of the trout stream to go to the lavatory’. Neither do unborn babies and that can be a sign of distress. The average person would be amazed how much farming and medicine have in common.”

“Such as? I can’t say I’ve had much experience of either.”

“Well, for a start, they’re both quite often about sex, having babies and poo. Though not necessarily in that order. And the metaphor doesn’t stop working when you get away from the animal husbandry, either. Pretty much any kind of farming is about sex, babies and poo.”

The astonished look he got in return was a picture worth framing. “You’re going to tell me the vegetables and fruit and things get up to... to... shenanigans in the fields, next? Get away.” “I spent an instructive and eye-opening day in the orchards when we were on holiday in the country once, following the old gardener that went around with a little camel hair brush and very carefully transplanted pollen from this particular tree to that particular tree to get a better tasting apple a decade down the line. When you get right down to it, fruit is nothing but a way to make babies, since they’re mostly a clever if tasty way to distribute seeds. I certainly never looked at apples and apple orchards quite the same way again. So there’s your sex, babies, and the fertilizer generally involves poo. I’m convinced that if Ponder Stibbons up at the University ever nails down his Theory of Everything, it’s still going to boil down to sex, babies and poo,” Young Sam said with a shrug. “Possibly with something about turtles thrown in there somewhere for good measure, but probably only for reason of the previous three.”

“Well, there’s something-” Grapnel began, then sucked in her breath sharply and screwed up her face in pain.

Young Sam timed silently until she relaxed. “They’re getting closer and lasting longer. The good news is that means things are moving along. The bad news is that means things are moving along. So you might keep your word fairly short when he arrives.”

“You mean *if* he arrives,” Grapnel said grimly.

“It’s heavy traffic this time of day. I’m sure if there were a major snag, Cheery would have sent word by now. If we haven’t heard anything by twenty minutes from now, I’ll see what I can find out. They could have walked back by that time.”

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The knock came well after Emma had already gone home, and it was all Young Sam could do not to race to the door to the hall. The expected quantity of dwarf in the hall was short by two thirds. "Please tell me you have got company," Young Sam hissed.

"Around the corner. Bashfullsson's having a word with him, after having a word with his parents earlier," Cheery replied. "And don't think I didn't have a time finding Bashfullsson. I had to put several of the street squad on that. He's only got to read the ceremony and do the paperwork but you try running down a particular grag on short notice."

"He's not trying to back out, is he? I thought dwarfs had a thing about responsibilities."

"Dwarf parents also have a thing about not having their children show up with unexpected spouses and babies before they're ready. He's nervous and scared. He's only just in his eighties. She's still in her seventies. Got a pretty level head on his shoulders for that age and his parents were definitely willing enough a few months ago, but he wasn't going to be supporting a family right away, then. Let me put it this way... there are humans in this city perfectly happy to have their teenager get married, particularly if it's not because someone's dress is getting tight and the parents have had a quiet word with everyone, yes?" Young Sam nodded. "Now, imagine how spare your parents would have gone if you just showed up out of the blue with a wife and baby a couple of years ago, unannounced. Oh, and she's only just this side of legal. That might give you an idea of how big a shock that is for them even with a bit of forewarning. Dwarfs have a thing about getting established before starting a family, too."

"I see. I do not think there would be enough spare in the world for how spare they would have gone," Young Sam said woodenly.

"Exactly. There's still going to be a bit of cursing, that's for sure, and dwarfish is a good language to be annoyed in. I think his parents will come around from the shock soon enough, though," Cheery murmured as Bashfullsson and a rather nervous looking dwarf still clad in a cloth apron with a wealth of pockets holding small tools such as hammers, tweezers and screwdrivers, ranging from the delicate to the downright tiny, rounded the corner.

"You must be Boddony? Good," Young Sam said in response to the anemic nod, "Grapnel wants to have a word with you first. I don't want to alarm you, but I would get right down to the brass tacks pretty quickly if I were you."

"Brass... tacks?"[10]

[10] Irony and metaphor is lost on some people. For dwarfs, irony and metaphor have generally been blindfolded, tied together at the wrists and ankles, twirled around a dozen times and shoved out the back of a speeding cart in the middle of a dark, unfamiliar forest without a map or compass.

"Talk fast and say what you've got to say or Bashfullsson here is going to have to take a speed



reading course,” Young Sam explained, steering him toward the door. “I hope it’s a short ceremony,” he added in Bashfullsson’s direction after the door had snicked shut.

The grag stepped forward and looked up, hands amicably tucked behind his back. The lack of the typical axe and clang<sup>[11]</sup> most dwarfs sported made him look almost somberly dressed. Young Sam had the curious sensation of being studied intently by a neatly trimmed brown beard and the top of a helmet for a few moments before the dwarf looked further up, revealing bright eyes and an equally neat little smile that gave him the air of being faintly amused at something he wasn’t inclined to be in a hurry to share. Bashfullsson rocked back on his heels slightly. “You’re the Commander’s lad. There was less of you to look up at last I saw you. Are you half as impatient as the Commander is about getting the job done when it’s *important*?”

[11] Like bling, only louder. Also, noisier.

Young Sam considered this carefully, watching Cheery’s expression over the top of Bashfullsson’s helmet. “Not... unless I have to be. People who might be dying usually don’t appreciate you taking your sweet time, but it doesn’t do to rush some things. However, in this case, there’s a baby being impatient enough for all of us put together, and while I get the feeling you’ll happily backdate what amounts to a marriage license, I’m guessing you’re not going to be as flexible about post-dating or even fudging the time a little on a birth certificate. And that it wouldn’t matter even if you were. Because *they* would know. And that’s important.”

Bashfullsson looked pleased as a schoolmaster. “You pick up on clues like a policeman, at least. Don’t worry, I shall read *extremely* fast, Doctor.”

One eyebrow went up slightly at the use of the little-used title. “Or I just know when to call in an extremely good cultural advisor, because you can’t know everything,” Young Sam said, pointing to Cheery.

“Diplomatic, too,” Bashfullsson said approvingly. “That would be your mother. And if you’ve got her ability to negotiate a trade deal, the local medical supply companies are probably complaining that you’re begging them.”

“I appeal straight to a higher authority. I still get her to talk to them on the rare occasions when old Mossy can’t get them to budge.”

“Fighting dirty. You *are* your father’s son, too, then. I think there’s our cue,” the grag said, inclining his head at the opening door.

“Cheery? Coming?” Young Sam said while turning on his heel.

“Right behind you,” Cheery replied.

“I was afraid this might be a solo job, so I already set up the rolling cart with a basin of hot

water, gloves and some towels. If you need to wash your hands, the tap over there is hooked up directly to the boilers. If you use it, be sure to turn on the cold water tap, too. They get blistering hot. In a pinch, you can scald the instruments in it,” Young Sam explained, pulling the cart in the corner over beside the stool and table once more.

Bashfullsson paused in opening a small, leather bound book that he had slipped out of a pocket. “Must use a ton of coal...” he marvelled.

Young Sam ducked to peer under the sheet. “Not directly. My mother breeds dragons and helps run the Sunshine Sanctuary. They have to eat coal anyway and happy dragons flame. The unhappy ones go boom. Does them good to be useful and have a change of scenery. You do the algebra. No offense, but I would prefer you do the algebra after the reading, because the baby’s probably about to crown. You’re dilated all the way, won’t be long at all now.” Seeing the blank look from the grag, he added, “Read *extremely* fast, the baby’s just short of the finish line. And stay up at the head of the table.” With a start, the grag flipped the pages and began reading something that sounded like a symphony duet composed for a cat with a severe hairball problem and gravel pile. “It’s crowded enough already down this end. Cheery, at worst, I might need some more towels or the instrument tray. The instrument tray is in the cabinet on the left, they’re wrapped in towels soaked in rubbing alcohol. Towels are on the right. Don’t push just yet.”

“And what am I supposed to do?” Boddony ventured over the headlong, breathless recitation of the grag.

“Traditionally, fathers often like to wear a hole in the carpet somewhere nearby. In this case, maybe we could settle for holding the hand Cheery hasn’t already got hold of and being encouraging and mostly out of the way. Maybe even being useful. Do a little propping. Okay, bear down. Easy does it, like we talked about earlier. Save some strength. Incidentally, what’s the point where that had better be done?” Young Sam asked, jerking his head in the direction of Bashfullsson.

“First breath,” Cheery supplied.

“Can I suggest either reading faster or pushing slower, then? I doubt this is going to take two minutes. Actually, ease up just a second and take a few breaths.”

“I really feel like I need to push...”

“I can appreciate that, but I need to get a couple of things organized, first, and let’s just say this stage is something you would be better off not to rush. It’s usually better to just let things... happen. This is not breaking down a locked and barricaded door. It’s more a slow and steady wins the race situation.”

“But it hurts...”

"I'm given to understand it hurts a lot worse if you try to force it too fast and, say, I have to stitch you up, and I'll say no more. Less than a minute, I promise. Take deep breaths and try to relax as much as you can. Easier said than done, I know, but you want to let your body adjust first." Young Sam unrolled one of the white towels on the rolling cart.

"What's that?" Grapnel asked.

"A rubber bulb to suction the mouth and nose so the baby has an easier time getting its first breath, a clamp for the cord and scissors to cut it with. Don't worry, I think you're going to be just fine without having to haul out any of the really scary clanky things out of the cabinet. Actually, I think you could bear down a little now." There was a brief pause. "Head's out. Rest just a second and let me use the bulb, then you can push as hard as you like as far as I'm concerned. Is the officiant just about done?"

Bashfullsson nodded without pausing in his reading, blurted out a hurried sentence, then slammed the pages shut. "Done."

Young Sam put the bulb back. "Congratulations, I hope you're both very happy together. Now push and I can say it again," he added. Grapnel bore down, gripping the hands clasped in hers tightly. Shortly thereafter, there was a wet, choking cry that changed up through the gears to spirited, ear-splitting, indignant howling. "Congratulations, you've got a healthy baby boy."

"You're sure?" Boddony asked anxiously, peering over the sheet to watch the baby being rubbed down with a towel.

"About the boy part or the healthy part? The boy part is pretty obvious, even total amateurs with no training can usually get that one right. And they make sure you can count up to ten before they let you start the medical training."

"He's fine?" Grapnel insisted.

"He's got the prescribed number of standard equipment, no more, no less. Ten fingers, ten toes, two of everything you want two of... and all attached in the right places. Give me a second to get him wrapped up and he's yours, free and clear. And then you can check my counting skills. It doesn't matter how many times I do this, most new mothers and fathers do."

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Young Sam turned the key in the lock of the clinic door and checked the knob before dropping the bundle of keys into a trouser pocket and taking a deep breath of the night air. He suddenly felt bone weary and the owner of a head full of cotton wool. "So... what happens now?"

"They stay the night with his parents, take the letter you wrote to Morecombe, talk to the estate

agent, get sorted about what they want to do from there and get on with doing it. And I promised to go inform her uncle after all of this was over.”

“And how’s that likely to go, Cheery?” he said.

“She’s been gone several hours. She told him she was just going to the apothecary a few streets over, didn’t even mention the clinic or the hospital. Either he’s so relieved I’m not there to inform him that she’s dead that he’s grateful and in a really forgiving mood, or he starts thinking of her as dead because that’s better than being what they consider a disgrace,” Cheery replied softly. “At best, you see, he’s going to chalk her up as going against her family’s wishes by not being a grag, even if he accepts she is married and the mother of one extremely legitimate baby. That’s to say nothing of the fact that anyone outside the family knows she’s... well... a she. That’s... probably not going to sit well. For a while, anyway.”

Young Sam stuck his lower lip out and blew upward in exaggerated fashion. “*D’hrarak.*”

Cheery nodded.

“Share a cab? They’ll all be packing it in, soon. I’m too tired to walk home. Besides, Kipper’s down at the end of the street and I would hate for him to have to follow me all that way.” He put his hands in his trouser pockets and idly jangled the keys as they walked past a parked cab toward the corner of the building, turning it in search of a different cab.

“What makes you think he would follow you all that way?” Cheery asked innocently.

“Whoever is patrolling the Nonesuch beat near the Ankh bridge is going to be at the other end by the time I get there. I may not *be* in the Watch, but I still grew up on it. I *do* notice how the timing of the beats always seem to sort of conveniently coincide with my way home. And how there’s always a watchman on this street or the cross street no matter what time I get off. Also, Detritus and his delicate surreptition stick out a mile, not that this is a bad thing, entirely. Only an utter idiot with a death wish would look sideways at someone Detritus was following, and news like Detritus gets around fast, even among newcomers. I did actually pay attention during all those how to put off being dead lessons. What makes *you* think Dad and Willikins didn’t throw in a lesson or three on dirty fighting and standard equipment?” He pulled the heavy bundle of keys out, flipped them around and let them dangle from the thick, smooth metal loops around all four fingers before slipping them back into the pocket. “I got a fairly good grounding in anatomy long before I decided on medicine. Now I know how a knee is put together and how to take one apart. Bit of a shame it’s so much easier to take one apart. All you need is a boot and a rudimentary understanding of physics. And even Nobby knows never to take the first cab you see. You want some company when you talk to her uncle?”

“No, he’ll be polite. He just won’t be *friendly*. Let’s just say he probably won’t invite me in for tea and a bun or shake my hand. You’ve been on duty longer than I have, go up Scoone Avenue first,” Cheery added this last to the nearly-nodding cab driver sitting a few feet behind a nearly-

nodding horse.

“And how do you know that?”

“Because you passed presenting a ‘good example’ and headed into ‘horrible warning’ about an hour ago.”

“Thanks. I got called in to look at a patient in a bad way at the crack of dawn. Spring flu’s left us on a skeleton crew.” He held open the cab door for Cheery, then clambered in after her. “If I snore... let me. Shove me out when we pass the house.”

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“There’s a plate in the kitchen if you care to eat something. The Commander and her ladyship are in the drawing room,” Willikins said, taking his coat.

Young Sam winced slightly at the thought of cutlery. “I could probably just about work a sandwich and a banana. I’m not so sure about the banana.”

Willikins deftly reached into his own jacket pocket and handed over a yellow, lightly freckled banana. “Would chicken be acceptable for the sandwich?”

Young Sam goggled at the banana for a moment before starting to peel it. “Willikins, if you reach in the other pocket and pull out a chicken sandwich, I’m going to be convinced I’m still in the carriage home and dreaming.”

“Nonsense. The sandwich is in the cold room. I could take it up on a tray if you prefer to dine in your room. Milk? Tea?”

“Just milk, please. Yes to the tray. Thank you.”

“Besides, if I had the sandwich in my pocket, there wouldn’t be room for the pint of milk,” Willikins said, pushing the ice cold bottle into Young Sam’s free hand on his way past to the kitchen.

Young Sam wandered to the doorway of the drawing room. “Just checking. Am I actually standing here, eating a banana and drinking milk?”

His father peered at him over the top of the evening paper. “The eating and drinking aren’t in doubt. You’re swaying a bit, lad, but I’ll even allow you the standing. Barely.”

His mother put her lap desk and a pile of papers down on the floor by her feet. “When was the last time you had any proper sleep? That’s the second day in a row you’ve been called in early. Did you even eat lunch? There’s a plate from dinner if you’re hungry.”



“Willikins is taking a sandwich up. I don’t trust myself to work cutlery right now. I got something from the hospital canteen. Tuna salad. I think. Smelled fishy, anyway. And an apple and orange, which actually smelled of apple and orange. I’m pretty sure Cheery can attest I snored at least three quarters of the ride home. By the way, I stole Cheery for part of today.”

“Any particular reason you’re pinching my officers?”

“Because there was a complicated dwarf thing and I needed help. It’s not as though I have any colleagues I can ask even on a good day. Gender politics and dwarf law,” he added by way of explanation.

“Enough said,” his father allowed.

“Also, it probably didn’t hurt that Cheery’s a mum now. I’m finding about half of life’s problems that end up in the clinic could very likely be headed off if only someone’s mum had been listened to in the first place.”

“Oh? And what sort of great wisdom should they be listening to?” his mother asked with a smile.

“In one case, ‘Stop putting things up your nose, already. Either it goes in and it comes out and that’s it, or it ends in tears.’ would be favorite. And some days I think ‘You should be totally sure before you decide to be a doctor. Keep in mind a lot of days are more about cleaning up the mess than curing anything.’ might have borne repeating a few dozen more times,” Young Sam complained.

“I told you it’s a lot like being a mum, only the hours are better. File that away for the next time you’re tempted to complain. Bad day?” Sybil asked.

“Not so much *bad* as long and messy and understaffed. On the other hand, I learned something useful and helped neaten up a mess somewhat, so it definitely wasn’t a waste. And filing... that reminds me... are you two going upstairs soon?”

“Likely won’t be too long. Why?” His father folded up the Times.

“If you are, I’ve got something to throw in the fireplace. Burnt paper. Sorry.” Young Sam unbuttoned the top of his shirt, reached down it and pulled out a thin manila folder with all of one sheet in it. He crossed the room and tossed it between the guttering logs. Catching the looks on their faces, he explained, “Technically, I’m releasing patient records exactly as requested. The patient just requested I release them over a fire. I’m not only allowed to do that, I’m required to, by guild law. Members must, upon request by the patient, release copies of all patient records within a reasonable period of time as requested. Besides, Cheery suggested it.”

“Let me guess. That’s the only copy?” His father pointed. “Was, anyway. Fudging it afterward

wasn't enough?"

"This one was sort of fudge-proof by definition, Dad. I was advised to lose the paperwork. That's about all I can say. I'm going to eat my sandwich and go to bed, assuming I can find it." He kissed his mother on the cheek, then offered his own. "G'night, Mum." He snuck a quick peck onto his father's cheek as he went by. "Don't threaten to arrest me. I swear I put Cheery back mostly undamaged when I was finished, hardly know she was missing, and what I just did was totally not illegal. Or even unethical. It's just the sort of thing lawyers usually advise you not to do."

One eyebrow, the one with the faded white scar that extended through the middle and down below the eye, raised at the mention of lawyers. "That's a definite point in favor of it, then. Good night. Maybe you could try actually sleeping through it this time, eh?"

"Do my best. Good night, love you," Young Sam called over his shoulder on the way out the door.

Sam Vimes reached over and laid a hand on Lady Sybil's knee. "I keep telling myself at least he works a job where he's usually the one holding any sharp things and no one is trying to get him down and kick him in the unmentionables on a regular basis."

"Is it working at all?" she asked, putting her hand over his.

"Right up until I want to yell at him to go to bed at a decent hour or he's going to stunt his growth, which is what my grandmother used to say when I tried to get out of going to bed. Then I have to bite my tongue. Hard to fault the lad for working too hard when most young idiots his age are out drinking themselves sick, drawing bad graffiti, fighting each other and running from the Watch. And at least if he were doing the graffiti, the graffiti would be anatomically accurate and the spelling would be correct, which is more than I can say for most of it."

"Takes after his father." She leaned out and looked at the blackened scraps of folder in the grate. "Particularly the way he does his paperwork."

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"So... let me get this straight... you would not be able to help the Watch with their inquiries for the sake of patient confidentiality? You would let a bank robber get off completely Feegle free?" Sam Vimes scowled as they made their way up the sidewalk through the after-lunch crowds, while Young Sam cradled a full, steaming cup close to his chest.

"Er... it depends. Is this theoretical bank robber theoretically obviously a theoretical bank robber? I mean, is he or she wearing the official theoretical bank robbing uniform, Dad? How am I supposed to know in the first place? Aside from being bitten in the arse by a guard dog or getting caught by a moonlighting watchman that gets a little heavy handed with the truncheon

or trips him on the way to the cells, there's not much in the way of well known occupational ailments for theoretical bank robbers. It's not like they get theoretical bank robber's elbow," Young Sam argued, trying to keep a straight face and failing miserably.

"Be serious. What if it's a Tanty offense? I mean, hypothetically, he stabbed a watchman."

"Most of the time that means the hypothetical watchman's just going to be theoretically cussing them from the other side of the trauma room, Dad, because if he got close enough to stab, he was close enough to nick and any watchman worth the name is going to nick him good and hard at that point."

"I'm serious, there's nothing in guild rules that allow you to, or better yet, *require* doctors let the Watch know you suspect a crime's taken place? Wait, I need to stop in here," he added, darting up a couple of shallow stone steps and pushing a shop door open, setting the bell to jangling.

"Are we talking domestic disturbances, now? We encourage them to file charges if we suspect a wife or a kid's living in a house with really dangerous doors or stairs. We've also been known to give some of the doors a pretty spirited talking to on the quiet and threaten to find some new uses for some of the more alarming looking tools or, say, favors owed by people in the Watch. Igorina left one needing to wring out his socks and pour out his shoes by the time she drew him a mental picture about what she could do to a flight of stairs with a clamp. But we can't force anything, Dad, any more than you can." He paused and took in the contents of the shop. "Jewellery? Was this one incredibly colossal bacon sandwich you snuck?"

"Be there in a minute!" a muffled voice from the back called out.

"No hurry! And you hush, I bet I eat better than you do, these days, all that coffee you're drinking can't be any good for you. I dropped your mother's bracelet off to be fixed the other day. And no, domestics are a whole other mess. Let's say it's a citizen murdered, even the Times knows there was a struggle and someone shows up with a probable defensive wound that fits."

"Have you got a search warrant or arrest warrant, yet?"

"Let's say no."

"Not sure I can just call you up and hold him for you under current guild rules. Maybe I could sort of nonchalantly step outside and invite the pair on the Goose Gate beat inside for a chat if he's still bleeding all over the waiting room. That's open for discovery and the waiting room is a public place. No expectation of privacy. And it's not like I'm drinking the straight Klatchian stuff. Dad?" Young Sam fingered one of the jewelled axes hanging on the far wall. "You and Mum own this building?"

"The whole block, I think. You watch that stuff, my lad, or you're going to be so awake you're

seeing next Tuesday from the other side with all the mental filters off. And what good does that do us if you're not even in that day or the paper hasn't printed it yet? Why did you ask about the building?"

"Just thought I might know who was renting it is all. Don't pretend something like that wouldn't be on the short range towers and across the city before the paper got finished taking notes. You could have it on the big tower and in Sto Lat before they even got the presses started up. Anyone on exchange with Quirm would be on it before the ink was dry." He sighed. "Anyone treating your hypothetical murderer would probably trip over half the Watch on the way to get the bandages and sutures. I suppose I could bring up an amendment at the next guild meeting. Something along the lines of allowing for the breaking of patient confidentiality without repercussion in the interest of reporting suspected offenses to the Watch *at the discretion of* any medical personnel involved in treatment. You know most of them will be perfectly happy to do that and people are happier if they think it's their choice. The ones too ornery to do it are going to be twice as ornery if you try to make them. Possibly we can start with Tanty-level offenses and expand it later. Does that make you happy? Happier, anyway?"

The door to the back opened and a familiar dwarf stepped through, leaving it ajar. "Less annoyed," Vimes conceded. "I left a bracelet here to be repaired with someone else. Should be under-

"Vimes. I know, I'll fetch it from the safe in the back room," Grapnel said, flashing Young Sam a brief look before stepping back through the door. A few moments later, the dwarf laid a small velvet box on the counter, top off. "Have a look at it and see if it's been repaired to your liking."

"Nice shop, sir, I didn't even know it was here. I particularly like the pocketknife display," Young Sam volunteered. "I could probably use a new pocketknife. The wee scout model's a bit on the small side these days and there are a million and one uses for a good pocketknife."

"Stay away from them until after your birthday, then. It looks good as new to me, if not better. How much do I owe you?" Vimes said, reaching for his wallet.

"On the house," Grapnel said, waving it away. "You don't owe a thing."

"What? But it's got all tiny fiddly bits on. Had to have taken hours of squinting," Vimes protested.

"You let us have this place rent free to get established. I think it's the least we can do."

"Cost of materials, at least," Vimes insisted, obviously a little taken aback at the rare sight of a dwarf in trade refusing payment.

"Won't hear of it. Keep us in mind next time and maybe come back to look at the knives. I'll charge what it's worth then."

Young Sam stepped over and prodded his elbow as Grapnel closed the lid and pushed the box across the glass counter. "I wouldn't argue, Dad. Go on out, I'll be with you in a minute." Seeing the questioning look, he added, "I'm going to pick you out a lovely necklace and I want it to be a surprise." Vimes shook his head, tucked the velvet box into one pocket, pulled a small snuff box out of another and stepped out the door, setting the bell tinkling again. Young Sam watched his father settle shoulder blades against the corner of the brickwork near the doorway and fairly melt into the shadow around it. "Actually, now he's out there, I wouldn't mind asking what the pocket watch chains go for, he scratches the hell out of his even when he's in dress uniform... oh, there are tags. How much extra for the engraving? The sign says to inquire about that."

"A dollar. *Sir?*"

"Always assume a dwarf in trousers is to be addressed as 'sir' or 'mister' until corrected. I'm fairly sure Lady Deidre Waggon included that in the last edition. I notice you didn't correct me."

"Well, no, I *don't*, but he's your father, I figured..." Grapnel trailed off in confusion.

"It's actually none of his business unless he's got a warrant or you decide to make it his business, remember? Not that he probably hasn't spotted it on his own, he's the one taught me what to look for first and he's extremely good at it. He tends to make a game of it, same way he tries to figure out what everyone is guilty of. He's had a lot of practice and coppers are naturally nosy. But that's a totally different thing than me telling him he's right. I see there *is* room for a bassinet and playpen in the back. How are things?" There was a pause. "Sorry, doctors are naturally nosy, too. Or maybe it's just Vimeses that are naturally nosy. I'm not just being polite, I actually want to know."

"We fixed up the rooms in the basement. We're building up a fairly decent trade here, already. Good foot and carriage traffic from up Goose Gate way. Rent's more than reasonable even after it goes into effect and I hear the landlord keeps things up. Shop's in good repair, just needed a good sweeping. Boddony's family gave us the money to get some inventory together. Mine... still aren't speaking to any of us but at least the last letter I sent hasn't come back Return to Sender yet. Weather's been unseasonably chilly, maybe they're burning them. Or maybe I wear them down sooner or later and they open one." Grapnel added a little shrug and a sad smile. "Parents."

"Parents," Young Sam agreed. "Mine's currently slightly miffed at me because I didn't hypothetically turn in a theoretical bank robber right away. Or the other way around." Young Sam took a sip from the steaming paper cup in his hand. "Baby still incredibly cute?"

"I'm biased." She still looked pleased.

"So are most grandparents, so there's still hope. Or maybe you decide to start correcting people eventually. Maybe they come around a little at a time *and* you decide to start correcting people. Maybe it's a case of my grandfather's axe."

“How do you even know that saying?”

“I’ve heard Cheery use it plenty. Even my dad uses it, sometimes. I really will come back and look at the watch chains when I’ve got time. He won’t want anything too pompous, but the fob with the royal hippos, the ankh and the morpork on it is extraordinarily good work. Any possibility of, say, a custom job about the same size or a little bigger that looks like the old style copper’s badge, number 177? He would wear that if I get it for him.”

“Get us an iconograph to work from and we can do it.”

Young Sam extended a hand across the counter. “I’ll do that. Hopefully your family business does well enough that you can consider passing it on.”

Grapnel completed the handshake. “I might encourage him to go to medical school instead.”

“Fair enough. At this rate, he might be our first. I should be heading back to the hospital. I’m just supposed to be playing hooky from rounds long enough to have lunch with Dad. I should collect him off your front stoop there before he starts giving unsuspecting old ladies heart attacks by saying hello from the shadows or he gets buttonholed by a concerned citizen. Lovely job on Mum’s bracelet. You can’t even tell it was repaired.”

“That’s the point.” There was the noise of a fussing baby from the bassinet in the back. “I have to go check on the boss,” Grapnel said, pushing the door behind the counter open.

“Me, too,” Young Sam said, pushing the front door open. “Dad, let’s go. I hope you’ll be very pleased with the pink princess cut diamond we’ve just decided on. Very dainty. I’m thinking of trying to convince the patrician to reinstate fancy helmet plumes and bright pink dress tights to go with it, too.”

“Very funny.”

Young Sam fell into step alongside. “I thought it was, but you didn’t even have the decency to crack a smile.”

“I don’t want to accidentally encourage you. And don’t you ever give me a hard time about Watch coffee being sludge again when you’re drinking that stuff they have to perk through a steam engine and usually serve in those dollhouse cups. How is it not eating straight through the paper?”

“Look, we’ve all got our vices. Mine’s coffee. I figure as long as my heart isn’t actually trying to pound its way out of my chest, I’m probably fine. Anyway, it’s got possibly one tiny speck of Klatchian roast in the whole lot. The rest of it’s Quirmian roast, and you drink that stuff at Harga’s. I’m betting he hasn’t cleaned the coffee urn or even changed the grounds since before



I was born. Have you ever tried this?"

"I've had their regular coffee. It hasn't got any character. It's love in a canoe coffee. That stuff's just asking for trouble, though. Especially when you're drinking that much of it."

"If by 'character' you mean a decades-old patina on the inside of the coffee urn, sure. If you want bitter enough to dissolve the spoon, it's not the place."

"I do not need fancy coffee."

"You're just afraid you might have to admit you actually *like* fancy coffee. Fancy, nobby, elitist, stuck up, coffee-snob coffee that looks down on good, honest, solid, working class proletariat coffee that's been boiled in a boot. His Grace or Sir Samuel might like fancy coffee, and that's just not going to sit well with the Blackboard Monitor. One of the former might be forced to steeple their fingers and *pontificate* on the merits of fancy coffee. The Commander and Sarge probably aren't going to like liking fancy coffee either. Then the boy from Cockbill Street is going to be forced to weigh in on this sooner or later. We might even be forced to drag the Duchess and Mister Vimes into the middle of it just to moderate."

"I think that fancy coffee's going to your brain. I'm sorry you have to keep dragging all of me into the middle of your unfortunate coffee problem." The corners of his mouth had begun to twitch by now.

"Liking fancy coffee is practically as bad as liking *plumes* and gold braid. Look, if you want to feel sorry for someone, feel sorry for me and Mum. We have to live with all of these people and sometimes it gets a little crowded and you almost need a scorecard to keep track. Let's not get too high and mighty about my tastes. I've eaten myself literally sick off of things that came off of street vendor carts, remember. I will refrain from pointing out that you stood there and let me and paid for things onna stick, to boot. I think they can revoke your parenting license for that. I've also eaten wild snails and, okay, fine, Harga's does the best egg, soss, bacon and a fried slice even though I'm fairly sure the fat and some of the brown crunchy bits in the pan are old enough to vote in Ephebe. I'm not much on their coffee, though. You want to know why I really drink this stuff? Because it's got more staying awake bang for your dollar and it's not so bitter that you have to put four spoons of sugar in it just to stand it. It's just strong. You also don't have to stand around ages while they brew a fresh pot. That's the sort of thing you learn to appreciate when they introduce you to double shifts. The patients get kind of stropy if you start snoring out loud in the middle of their procedures when you're supposed to be in charge. On the other hand, I've also cultivated the ability to fall asleep just about any-" Young Sam pulled up short as a harsh siren sounded from several blocks away. "That's the Trauma siren. If they got forewarning enough to put on the siren, the Watch is sending it in and doing the transport. Hope it's not a uniform."

"Haven't caught wind of an 'all officers', so, not likely. Bluejohn's on up ahead at the main intersection. Probably to handle the traffic when they bring it through. There... the transport is on

Short Street, don't know which end, yet, headed toward... Ettercap Street," Vimes elaborated, eyeing the top of one of the short range towers.

"Here, I'm on call. Drink it or pour it out, it's all the same to me. If I really leg it, I can probably beat them by a minute or two. If I'm lucky, I can catch the butcher's wagon as it comes through the next intersection over and hitch a couple of blocks, if not, I can cut across up by Spiteful Sisters. It's quicker."

"Butcher's wagon?"

"They do a regular delivery about this time every weekday up at the charity school cafeteria. Started about a month ago. Bye, Dad. See you at dinner." Young Sam turned and ran toward the intersection, elbows pumping, picking up speed when Bluejohn stepped out into traffic and waved him through.

"Oh! I see Bluejohn's already got this one covered! Was that Young Sam?" Cheery shouted over the din of the siren from a few feet behind Vimes.

Vimes nodded. "I guess running all that track and cross country with the Watch School paid off!" He lowered his voice somewhat as Cheery stopped alongside him. "You know, sometimes I think it's a shame to waste being able to run like that, being able to read without moving your lips, having neat handwriting and knowing every shortcut in the city on someone who is not a sergeant," Vimes said, jerking his head up the street toward the figure veering to cut across an alley, still accelerating. "Then I remind myself it's indoor work with a mostly clear set of ethical codes where you almost always want people alive when you've finished with them. And a wealth of opportunities for exciting clinical trials and probably very little asking yourself in the dead of night if you're getting too good at thinking like the common cold. What's he running to beat?"

"I heard it was Detritus with a pedestrian versus runaway cart. Report I got was that he got lucky and it's probably only ruined his chances for a professional ballet career or upped his odds in a backside-kicking contest if they get him there fast. Crushed his leg between the cart load and a wall. Would have been a lot worse for more than his leg if Detritus hadn't slowed down the cart as it went by."

Vimes made a face and winced. "As in there wouldn't have been enough left to pick up and run in?" He absentmindedly took a sip from the cup in his hand, made a different face, bent and very carefully and deliberately poured the contents into the gutter.

There was a pause in the crowd chatter as Bluejohn blocked the intersection again and Detritus thundered through it. "Sir?" Cheery prompted.

Vimes peered into the empty cup. "Maybe it's just as well the lad never seriously wanted to be in the Watch."

“I think he would have managed just fine if he had wanted. Doctors have to make rough decisions and deal with gray area,” Cheery pointed out. “I suspect it’s also very hard to completely stop being a doctor just because you’re technically off duty, too. The only difference is there isn’t much in the way of a uniform, unless you count the rubber apron.”

“He couldn’t have managed much on *this* coffee. Let’s go get some proper Watch coffee, wait an hour and see if they’ve gotten the pedestrian out of the surgery.” The distant siren wound down into silence. “Cheery, do you ever think about whether you want Rhys going into the Watch?”

“Recruiting a bit early aren’t you, sir?” Cheery said lightly, falling into that rhythmic, easy walk commonly known as proceeding.

“I’m serious. Ever think about it?”

“I don’t know that I would object. It’s a job you can be proud of having. Good pension and time off, you get well trained and get decent equipment now. There *are* people with knives, but it *is* Ankh Morpork, so there are always people with knives. Equal opportunities for advancement, fellow watchmen always have your back, we prod a considerable amount of buttock and we’ve got a wonderful medical scheme nowadays, even if you’re afraid of Igor. And there are other things besides Street. He might like alchemy and want to go into Forensics. Maybe he develops a talent for self-defense and does some training at the Watch Academy. Or likes accounting and becomes an Inspector. Maybe he likes theater and ends up going into the Cable Street Particulars for undercover work. Or he takes to structural engineering and goes into mining and doesn’t want a thing to do with the Watch. As long as he’s happy doing something he can be proud of, I suppose, that should make me happy.” She drew a deep breath. “If it’s all the same to you, I think I’ll put off worrying about what he wants to do until after we’ve covered teething and potty training, Mister Vimes. Or at least until after the coffee. Besides, Young Sam makes a good doctor because he puts his mind to it and works hard at it, and somebody who cares about the Lady Sybil and can look at the bigger picture is going to have to keep the hospital and the clinic and the medical school going after Doctor Lawn. He’s good with people. He can have a shout at them or jolly them along if they need it like any good sergeant. He hasn’t wasted what the Watch taught him. Medicine’s all sort of about clues and forensics and interrogation, too, isn’t it? I imagine he would have made a fine watchman of some sort if he had wanted to put his mind to it and work hard at it.”

“Willikins had me half convinced the lad might want to be a wizard some day, when he was about six or seven. Or Archchancellor. Mustrum and Sybil don’t come from that different a background, you know. Ridcully shouts a lot and prefers the country and likes to shoot things and gets up early to jog in the courtyard for his health. Sybil’s dad evidently shouted a lot and liked to shoot things and preferred the country. Young Sam... okay, not so much with the shooting things, but he wanted to dissect everything unfortunate enough to die anywhere within three miles. He still loves going out to Ramkin Hall. And runs. For fun.”

“I could point out somewhere else he might have picked up the love of running. Ponder Stibbons does most of the natural philosophy up at the University and he’s often a one wizard show. I can’t really see Young Sam being content with a job where you mostly aspire to eating big dinners and having the biggest pointy hat and beard and being the shoutiest while totally avoiding teaching the students. Can’t see him liking having to sit around, twiddling your thumbs while you wait ages between battling things with tentacles, either. Not with you two as parents. He’s more the up and doing every day type, and he can hardly stop himself from explaining how things work when there’s someone around to listen. Most things work out how they’re supposed to. I wouldn’t worry about it one way or the other, sir. We are here and this is now, like Washpot always says,” she added with a shrug.

“In that case, I think I’ll take some very sage advice someone recently gave me about the wisdom of listening to someone’s mum and not worry about it one way or the other. And go get a decent cup of coffee. The lad may know medicine but he knows *bugger all* about coffee.”

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