

Sergeant Fred Colon stood in the doorway and cleared his throat. It was the sort of throat-clearing that practically had capital letters. The kind that precedes things like marriage proposals, the delivery of nasty surprises and The Talk throughout the multiverse. Sam Vimes paused with a mug of bad Watch coffee<sup>[1]</sup> hovering halfway between desk and lips. “Yes, Sergeant?” Sam prompted.

*[1]-You could stand the spoon up in it, but not for long if you were terribly attached to the spoon.*

“They're back with lunch, sir. Best eat it while it's hot. It's no good after it goes cold. The cheese goes all manky.” Sam couldn't help noticing that Fred didn't move from the doorway. This was clearly a man with something weighty on his mind. The sergeant had definitely been jumpier than usual lately, since Vimes had come back to work. Besides, he looked a smidgen lost, what with Nobby being off for his quarterly grandmother's funeral.

*“Something the matter, Fred?” I would rather you didn't say 'yes', Fred. There's less paperwork than I expected after getting back, but there's still plenty. And this business with the Patrician having to be arrested again and de Worde. Maybe we ought to set aside a cell just for him. Now, by 'him', did I mean Vetinari or de Worde? Vetinari, probably. That de Worde boy's just going to get himself killed, if he keeps that sort of thing up, lawyer or no lawyer.*

“Nossir,” Fred insisted, flushed red face shiny with sweat from the climb up the stairs. “It's just... you didn't want something a little more substantial than a slice or two from a Klatchian hot?” the sergeant said significantly.

Sam decided it would be easier to rise to the bait and get it over with. The sight of Fred Colon trying to drop subtle hints wasn't a sight for the faint-hearted. He put down the chipped mug. “Fred, what do you say we go out somewhere for lunch, instead? I want to get out of here for a while and I need an update on the traffic squad, in any case. What did you have in mind?”

“All Jolson does the best hot lunch around. Good day for mashed potatoes when it's frosty.” Fred said, jerking his chin in the direction of the office window, slightly ajar.

Sam looked at the window pane. There were a few fine tendrils of frost on it. He shivered, involuntarily, not really as a result of the crisp air filtering in through the always-cracked window, but from the admittedly now fading memory of the run through the snow in Überwald. “I could do with mashed potatoes,” Sam admitted, fastening his cloak and pushing his helmet down low on his head.

The air was crisp and there was already a thick rim of gray slush and shiny patches of ice on the streets. Winter had stopped dropping hints and was settling in for the long haul, really getting down to it, even in Ankh-Morpork. Up in the mountains, it had already settled in weeks ago. Even the nearer Sto Plains had seen some heavy snow while they were on their way back. The two men walked in silence for several blocks. “Fred?”

“Yessir?”

“About Nobby's... traffic calming. There have been complaints,” Sam ventured.

“To the Patrician?” Sam slid a sidelong glance at Fred's broad, currently dishonest face.

“Yes, but I think the one you might want to worry about is the one *from* the Patrician. I think the outfit can be retired. Please. I don't want to see Nobby in his traffic calming outfit from here on out, and I mean that on a number of levels,” Sam grimaced. “The traffic might be

calm but the drivers aren't. I think people have gotten the idea. Signs might not be a bad idea. Give the graffiti artists a new medium to work in, at any rate."

"Yessir."

"Besides, I might just have a different project in mind for you and Nobby. We'll talk about it over lunch," Sam offered. They walked the rest of the way to the restaurant in companionable, easy silence. Sam finally ventured an experimental prod while they looked over the menus and finished ordering. "There wasn't as much paperwork as I expected when I got back. Good thing, too, what with that business with the Times. Didn't let it get on top of you while we were gone?"

Sergeant Colon's face went red as a sunset and a look of mild panic flitted across it. "Nossir. Just a matter of buckling down and doing something about it during the quiet times. And they was all quiet. Pretty much all quiet."

"Right." Sam decided to let it pass and not make him squirm further. He had a fairly good idea what that something was, given that Fred had a hard go of it reading paperwork especially if you tied a hand behind him. *And no one needed that many bits of paper for fire starters, even in a cold winter. The faint stink of it was still in the room, even after weeks.* "Well, we're going to need someone to be on top of training recruits, soon. I think Vetinari is definitely going to let us have the old lemonade factory renovated. Caught him in a bit of generous mood after getting back to the office. There ought to be room in there to set up the training school, and maybe several offices. Have to have the architect in to look at it and see if it's all sound and which walls we can knock out and where we need to shore up." *Maybe ought to have one come in and look at the house, come to think of it. Hasn't been anything but old furniture and dust sheets in the... the room down the hall in a long time. Might need to check the... joists and things. Make sure they're sound. Maybe he can recommend a carpenter. No, if I know Ramkin attics by now, there's probably a box upstairs marked 'Sound Joists, various' and enough furniture for all of Cockbill Street. Possibly even a box labeled "Carpenters, master". Well, maybe if the architect says we need to have men in...* "Look, you and Nobby, you're two of my most experienced watchmen. The Traffic Division is up and running on its own now, so I would like to move you two over to the training school. Not as trainers, exactly, more of a... high level thing. You wouldn't have to manage all the little details. Just sort of... relay things back and forth, not waste your time on paperwork. Might have you hand out equipment and sign up the Specials when necessary and so forth, but none of this fiddly business with patrolling. You would have your own offices. And I've put in to have the two of you be in new positions, Watch Liaison Officer, instead. Very important position. I would only want the two of you in it." *Where you can gossip like washerwomen and do what you're best at, telling me what's being talked about and which way the wind's blowing. I'll even buy the donuts and coffee. And that's unlikely to lead to any more clamped buildings or carters about to riot or drovers at my door to complain.*

Fred looked at least a shade less nervous. "An office... close to the nerve center of the Watch, as it were..."

"Definitely. Right near the hub of things."

"Close at hand. Trusted, experienced officers. Ready to... leap into action and... advise," Fred said, as though trying the idea on for size and looking vaguely pleased with it.

"Exactly. And you can still do head jailer duties," Sam agreed, picking up the cup of coffee that had just been poured and pulling at it like a lifeline. *There seemed to be altogether too much*

*work and not nearly enough sleep after getting back to Ankh-Morpork, Sam thought, staring off at nothing in particular, letting his mind slip into full parallel processing mode. He almost missed being away. Almost. It was good to be back, but it had been a pleasant three weeks with few worries after they had gotten out of Bonk. Sleighs were definitely better winter transport than your own bare feet and crispy frozen drawers. I knew it wouldn't last, but it was nice to pretend it would for a little while... damned de Worde business... I don't care if Sybil does say she feels sorry for him. Lots of people grow up with bad fathers or... no fathers at all and don't go around... writing things down at you all the while. And worse, using it against you... Unconsciously, Sam tapped the notebook in his pocket, then, slightly more conscious of the action, did a pocket check for the hated Disorganizer and finally, his cigar case, which he pulled out and turned over in his palm a few times before laying it down next to the plate that had just been delivered. Half the fun in an after-meal smoke is thinking about the after-meal smoke all through the meal. Even if you do damned near have to freeze to death out in back of some inn to get it in. Good for not thinking too much. Because thinking in too much detail about certain things, like why he should probably be smoking outside, still made large parts of his brain want to run off and cower behind other bits. Gibbering.*

Fred cleared his throat again after watching the waiter go. "Speaking... of advice... I understand you could use some," he said in a low, urgent voice, as though he were afraid of being overheard.

"Mmm? About what?" *Good to put off worrying about assignment rotas and room for training and heading off the enthusiasm of the Traffic Division and, ye gods, going up in the attics and fetching down boxes of things and arranging to have the... the... room painted and how much was overdoing it. Mrs. Content had said to be careful of letting her do too much, and, well-*

"Lady Sybil."

"Mmm. Why?" *Right, Sybil wasn't good at taking it easy, even now. Even the times when it was clear she didn't quite feel her usual self. If a thing was worth doing, it was worth doing full speed with a diary full of checked off lists and I am having the very devil of a time convincing her she needs to hire a full time cavern girl now, never mind keep one on after-*

"The baby. Because of the baby," Fred hissed urgently.

*Exactly! After the baby. But try convincing Sybil it was probably a bad idea for her to still do all the evening mucking out and hauling buckets of coal around the pens and you would probably get a return salvo about how getting some exercise was a good idea, and maybe she didn't prefer taking little walks in the garden or just up and down the block and besides, the sidewalks were icy and the doors were open and she was only carrying one bucket at a time. I'm probably going to have to tell Mrs. Content she's wearing herself out. I mean, I came in last evening and she was already asleep in the chair, and she was-* The minuscule bit of his brain that had been charged with operating his ears and letting him know if anything important happened in the conversational arena had been nudging him for the last few seconds. Now it was jumping up and down, finally resorting to putting the boot in, and then some of the rest of his brain caught up and lit up like a firework. In its rush to catch up to the conversation, the majority of his brain unfortunately left behind the humble but currently rather important bit tasked with Making Sure Beverages Don't Go Down The Windpipe and Sam Vimes made a wet, suctioning noise that could best be transcribed as "Shhnnorrrk-hnng!" before settling down fully to the serious business of trying not to drown in hot coffee, with full orchestral accompaniment of coughs and wheezes. After an extended period of coughing, wheezing, being slapped on the back by Fred and the waiter bringing a fresh cup, Sam stared at Fred.

“What did you just say?” he asked, a little hoarsely.

Fred looked around again before sitting with the air of a spy fearful of being overheard. “The baby? One on the way soon, isn't there, Sam?” Fred added a little more uncertainly. Sam blinked and thought frantically, trying to remember if he had said anything that might possibly mean Fred should know about this. *Were we telling people? Have we told people? No, we have not told people. In fact, I remember very distinctly we said we aren't telling people, not yet, anyway. Not until we have to. Well, people know, of course. I mean, the midwife does, you can hardly avoid that, but she wouldn't tell people. And I would bet my eyeteeth Vetinari knows. Thinks he's being clever, all that asking after her health when we got back and the little oh so witty remark about, hah, midwifing a trade deal, but Vetinari doesn't count as people. Not proper people, anyway. I'm not sure what he counts as. And there was Angua, Sybil confided in Angua, I'm pretty sure of that, but Angua wouldn't tell people. It isn't her style. If anyone was good about knowing when to refrain from saying anything about someone's private business it would be Angua. Carrot doesn't even know yet, if I'm any judge. Carrot wouldn't be able to keep quiet about it ten seconds. If he knew, he would already be organizing a whip-round for engraved binkies or some such. I suspect Willikins at least guessed something was up right away. We had to tell Willikins. Well, Sybil had to tell Willikins. You couldn't put a lot past Willikins, but Willikins was too... Willikins to mention it much. He just got on efficiently with knowing. Likely part of the official butler code. But people shouldn't know. Fred definitely counted as people. You simply didn't get more “people” than Fred Colon. I mean, I would tell Fred eventually of course, he's known me damned near all my life, since I was practically a kid, and he was best man at our wedding. If it hadn't been for old Fred, I don't suppose I would even be married to Sybil...*

Sam looked at the round, earnest, questioning face, suddenly feeling guilty. There had been just a hint of hopefulness at the end of that question. *I reckon it can't stay private business much longer. It's going to get public soon enough. Very public.* “Yes,” said Sam woodenly. He took a deep breath and looked at the upcoming sentence from at least a dozen possible angles and mentally tried them all on for size, phrasing-wise. There wasn't a one of them that didn't make his ears burn and his throat want to constrict[2]. He settled on “Sybil's... going to... have a... have a... a... a baby.” It was the first time he had said it out loud to anyone, even his own reflection in the mirror.

*[2]-But possibly that was just the coffee that had gone down the wrong way.*

Fred's face creased into a soft, relieved smile. “Had me worried I was completely wrong there for a minute.”

“How did you... er... know?” His face seemed to be on fire. From the collar up. And his ears were joining in. *Oh gods. If Fred knows, he's sure to hand out some fatherly advice, just like he had about courting. And marriage. Worse, if Fred knew, it wouldn't be long before Nobby would know, even if Fred meant to keep quiet about it. And everyone else.* Back when it had only been the four of them in the Watch, it had gotten so Sam didn't know which was worse, Fred's little paternal moments[3] as the voice of experience or Nobby's knowing leers. He still cringed a little at the memory of being lectured on how he ought to be getting around to the serious business of kissing her, already. It didn't bear thinking about what Fred Colon might be moved to share on the subject of expectant mothers. *Yet... Fred has been married for years, true. Happily enough, I think. And they've got children and grandchildren. There must be something in that.*

*[3]- Or worse, long minutes.*

“Oh, don't worry, I don't think it's known about that the two of you are... ah...expectin',” Fred said, delicately. “I was dead sure.”

“Do tell, Fred,” Sam asked with a sort of lightly horrified fascination.

“The missus ran into Lady Sybil down near Mrs. Content's a while back, and she said she had been to see her. Didn't think much of it at the time. She visits her sometimes, right enough. Then our Molly was round to dinner the other night. Molly fills in sometimes when they're short-handed at the banquet hall up at the University. She filled in serving and helping out in the kitchens when they had the fund raising dinner for the scholarships thing last week. The fancy 'do the dowager Duchess of Quirm put on.”

“Oh. I think Sybil might have said something about seeing her.” He was almost positive she would have. *Probably did, anyway.* Sybil seemingly knew everyone in the city. And about three quarters of the population outside it. She was about as apt to come home and tell him she had spoken to a watchman's nephew or niece he didn't even know about as she was to mention a run in with an ambassador.

“Well, Molly said they talked and all. And you know how women, especially ones what are mothers themselves, pick up on little tells? Said she picked up on a few that might point that direction,” Fred said.

“Such as?” Sam asked, unable to stop himself.

“Don't rightly know. Women know about those...” he gestured vaguely, “...things.” He said it with the air of someone talking about the mysteries of witchcraft or wizardry, or possibly astrophysics. “Besides, I reckon it was the two bigger tells that made her positive. You could probably overlook giving the brandy and things a miss in favor of fruit juice now and then. But it's not as easy to overlook when the cabbage soup makes you go and be sick out back.”

“Well, if you weren't feeling well, eating cabbage soup...” Sam protested lamely.

“Just bringing it out, before it was even served? That's usually not enough to make you excuse yourself to go be sick in the rhododendrons. And she got over feeling poorly in just a few minutes. Apparently, it tends to come and go all sudden like. The wife used to swear she could get sick as a dog one minute and eat the table legs the next.”

“Sybil didn't mention that,” Sam said woodenly, trying to, with a sudden, amorphous dread, calculate just how many people had been at this dinner.

“Molly happened to see her out the window while she was on her way to the larder and took her a ginger beer and a shawl. Made sure she got back in all right. Don't think many people even noticed she stepped out. You know how wizards, especially, don't pay any attention when there's a banquet on,” Fred insisted, digging into his own mound of potatoes, similarly oblivious. “And your secret's safe enough with me. Mum's the word. No puns intended.”

*Right up until you blurt it out to Nobby and swear him to secrecy and he turns right around and tells half the Watch, at least,* Sam thought with an inward sigh. “Have to tell people soon enough, I suppose. But not just yet,” he added hastily.

“When does Mrs. Content reckon the happy event's going to be?”

“Er... late May, maybe June.” *Ye gods, it's already Offle.* The calendar suddenly seemed mercilessly short.

“Mrs. Content's very experienced. Probably delivered thousands and thousands of babies. She delivered all of ours and a couple of the grandkids. Very experienced. Knows all about

them things, can handle anything. Thought she was completely retired from the midwifing, though," Fred said a little uncertainly.

"Right. Experienced. Very. Sybil asked her a favor, I think. She used to do their laundry, too, all the way back to when they lived at the Yard." *Only, she's got exactly zero experience doing this for Sybil. Problem is, no one does...* "Sybil thinks a lot of Mrs. Content."

"And t'other way around, I bet. Hear tell she told Lord Rust a flat out no, first grandkid or not, no matter how much he offered," Fred confided.

Sam snorted. "Can't blame her. Would you want to aid and abet bringing more of Rust's genes into the world?" *Grandkids. Some people roughly our age are already starting on grandkids. Ye gods.*

"Course, there's worse things than the getting sick. The crying, for starters," he added sagely.

"Well. I mean, obviously. A baby-"

"Oh, I'm not talking about the baby. Mothers... well, they have their Funny Little Moods," Fred said, definitely pronouncing the capital letters. "Cry over practically nothing sometimes. Absolutely grieve over something silly like being out of raspberry jam. And that doesn't even count the times you find them crying over something and they can't even tell you what they're crying about. Apparently, it's the *hormones*," the sergeant whispered, giving the word all the dread foreboding of an exotic plague.

There were few things Sam dreaded more than tears. Yelling, he could take. In fact, he was a little more at home with women yelling at him than he cared to admit, sometimes. But actual crying? He was terrible at dealing with crying women. Worse with a crying wife. He would just about rather deal with a bad-tempered troll suffering from a toothache and hopped up on Slab than a crying wife. That went triple if he had his choice of which to do in public. "Well. Er... Sybil's not exactly the teary type. Could count on one hand the number of times she's cried since I've known her."

"That you know about," Colon said blithely, unknowingly shoving the knife in. "They get a bit freer about it when there's a baby. There were a few tears up at that inn, weren't there?" *And there was the twist on the handle.* "Only Cheery said-"

"She had just been held hostage by armed bandits, Fred. I shot the one behind her in the neck. I know a dozen men who would have been having to change their drawers in the same circumstances into the bargain," Sam growled. *And she knew. She knew he was holding a loaded crossbow, and that he just wasn't killing anybody yet because that would end the fun early. She knew about the baby, too. What if I had known? Could I have even asked her to duck and taken the shot? And you don't know, Fred. You don't know what it's like to realize it isn't just mud that's ruined your wife's dress. It's the kind of thing that keeps you up nights if you start thinking about it.* "She was shaken up and covered in mud." *And something that rhymes. She didn't sign up for that. I didn't sign up for that.* "And it had been a long trip, anyway. She was probably already worn out." *And she kept trying to tell me, and I wasn't listening...*

"Well, sure. Only, sometimes, there's tears for good reason and there's tears because it's Octoday," Fred said, still mostly engrossed in his potatoes. "And that's better than the other mood swings. Get angry over nothing, too. Get a bit of a fearful temper. Even throw things, sometimes."

"A temper? Over what?" *I will not mention that Sybil usually doesn't get angry, as such. I'm*

*sure I'll be contradicted. Besides, Sybil usually does something far worse. She just gets disappointed at you if it's something worth getting angry over. Which is a thousand times worse. Give me throwing things any day of the week.*

“Get all hot at you over things you can't do anything about, like not being able to fit into a blouse, or having heartburn. Seems like it's all your fault for some reason,” Fred said glumly. “Just because you was *involved*.”

“Sybil's not much for getting angry. Cheerfully threatening to string you up by something painful if you're not on time for something about which she means business, maybe, but not your actual... getting angry,” Sam said desperately.

“Oh, that changes. You get the blame for everything from getting kicked to wanting honey ice cream at two in the morning. And the aching back. And swollen ankles. It's your fault for getting her in that condition, evidently. I reckon it's mostly because you are gettin' off so lightly by comparison.”

“Right,” Sam said, giving up. There was a deeply uncomfortable, long silence.

“There's the headaches and leg cramps, too. And I definitely wouldn't mention how big-”

“Fred? Can we save some of this for another time? I don't think I can take it all in during one sitting,” Sam protested feebly.

“Of course. I won't ask how you're going to redo the nursery, that's for another time. The wife will want to be knowing, eventually. And I won't press about whether you want a boy or a girl or names or any of that... Of course, it's a beautiful time of life, though. And you becoming a father... Well, who would have credited it a few years ago? I remember when you were just a lad yourself, all green Lance Constable and now you're a duke and a married man and about to be a father. Bit of a turn-up for the books, eh?” Fred was definitely getting the soft, misty expression of someone being lovingly rapped by a cosh while tottering down one of the dangerous back alleys of Memory Lane. “It's not like it was back when it was just the four of us, things was definitely simpler then, but... well, it won't be wanting for anything, at least.”

“What won't be wanting for anything?” Sam asked, gripping the cigar case tightly. He was sorely in need of a smoke all of a sudden.

“What? Oh. The little one, I meant. You won't have to knock your pipes out just to make sure there's a bit of meat on the table. Shouldn't want for anything, should it?”

“No. It shouldn't,” Sam agreed, pushing the unfinished plate away. He stared at the cigar case with a vaguely unsettled feeling, which was odd. It usually served as more of a calming influence. *Money should definitely not be a problem, or a roof over our heads. We've got roofs I've never even seen. And Sybil... well... she's a wonderful wife. Probably be a fantastic mother. The only thing that might come up wanting is... me.*

“Not going to finish your lunch?”

Sam shook his head. “You go ahead and finish. I'm going to nip outside for a smoke,” he added, not taking his eyes off the case.

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Sam Vimes absentmindedly tossed his truncheon in the air and caught it as he turned onto the catshead cobbles of Scoone Avenue, pulling at the smoldering remains of a cheroot. He paused in the gravel driveway long enough to grind it out with a thick leather sole and headed into the house, definitely a man with something weighing on his mind. He drifted through

dinner well enough, but got caught out during the reading of the evening paper, while Sybil bustled around what he tended to think of as the Ghastly Pink Drawing Room in between reading chapters of her own book. She paused behind his side of the sofa and leaned over the back of it, looking over his shoulder. "Pondering investing in a hernia belt from Aiden McGuernsey's Medical Supports in Tenth Egg Street, then?" she asked conversationally.

"Wha-...no... why?" Sam spluttered, lowering the paper.

"Only you've been staring at that same advertisement for at least twenty minutes. I thought maybe you were thinking of getting one," Sybil said, rounding the end of the sofa and settling back down. "Or you could just tell me what's really bothering you."

"Nothing!" Sam said too quickly.

"Pull the other one. It has got bells on," Sybil replied primly.

"Noth... alright, I had lunch with Fred," Sam admitted.

"Talked about hernias, did you?" Sybil asked, raising an eyebrow. The sort of eyebrow that Meant Business.

"It's just... well, he knows," Sam hissed.

"Knows what?" Sybil hissed back.

"About the... that..." Sam floundered, gesturing vaguely.

"Sam Vimes..." Sybil said in a warning tone.

"About the baby," Sam said miserably.

"Oh. Is that all?" Sybil asked, blinking.

"Is that all? Well, if Fred knows, Nobby will know inside a week, and the rest of the Watch- no, make that the rest of Ankh-Morpork, will know inside two hours," Sam grouched.

"I think you'll find it sort of tells itself in a few more weeks, anyway," Sybil replied, smoothing her loose blouse down. "Everyone with decent eyesight and a basic knowledge of biology is going to be able to put one and one together and get two, pretty soon. Or maybe that should be put one and one together and get three... In any case, I think the pram and what's in it are also going to be a dead giveaway come summer."

Anyone with decent eyesight could already see a waist that was a bit thicker than a few weeks ago, and when the angle was just right, a certain generalized roundness that hadn't been there before. Presumably, at some point, that got difficult to explain away. And people evidently stopped explaining it away and started wanting you to explain things like how you were going to redo the nursery and whether you wanted a boy or a girl. "But they'll know..."

"And what's so terrible about that? Anyone would think you didn't want people knowing at all," Sybil said. "That you were asha-" She broke off and gave him a Look. "Or that you were embarrassed. That's it, isn't it? You're embarrassed?" She laughed. "Oh, my goodness! You *are* embarrassed!"

"Am not," Sam muttered defensively, but it was too late. He could feel his ears turning red. He almost wished he had a helmet on. All the better to pull down low over his forehead...

"You are too! Sam Vimes, you're embarrassed about people knowing I'm expecting a baby! Unbelievable..." she added, shaking her head and looking far too amused for Sam's comfort.



"Am not," Sam repeated, but without much enthusiasm.

"You are too... your ears are red as beets right now," Sybil said with conviction. "Afraid you're going to get teased in the locker room, are you?" She chuckled softly.

"Not quite, dear," Sam said. He couldn't say the thought hadn't occurred to him, but he doubted anyone would actually say anything to his face. *Not if said watchman didn't want to pull a week of double shifts down around Sweetheart Lane, anyway. Now, what they might be saying behind my back in a few weeks, that was another matter entirely.* "It's just... well, there are Lance Constables that don't know which end of the truncheon is the business end what have more experience at-" he waved his hand vaguely again, "all this." *And the last thing I want anyone commenting on is my experience in this area. Watch humor does not tend to be sophisticated. It leans more toward the 'hur, hur, hur' variety. If I find the traditional packet of Sonkies and-*

"Oh. So that's really it, then. That answers that," Sybil said dismissively, picking up her book.

"Ye- what?"

"What, what?" Sybil murmured, not looking up.

"What's really it?" Sam prodded.

"Same thing it always is," Sybil answered. "But you had better get used to it."

"Get used to what?" Sam insisted.

Sybil put the bookmark back in. "Being human. Sooner or later, it might even slip in front of the Watch," she added mildly. "Look...." Sybil gave a little sigh. "Let me tell you a story. You know how the regiments used to be... well, tradition, of sorts?"

"Yes, and..." Sam prompted.

"Well, this particular lord had command of a regiment. And I suppose he might even have been generally considered quite good at it. The men seemed to like him well enough and he saw to it that their pay arrived on time and that they were fed properly. And given decent equipment. And were shown which end of it was the pointy bit well before being expected to use it. He even kept up the training and the wages when they weren't on real maneuvers, a few times a year. Which is more than can be said of most of the leaders of regiments. One of the better regiments to be in, all things considered, and they weren't a bad group of soldiers, at all, at least he thought so," Sybil said. Sam grunted doubtfully, though he kept any commentary on the subject to himself. He usually tried to bite his tongue when it came to regiments in general, mindful of the fact that Sybil's ancestors had probably viewed the regiments as a jolly holiday abroad. "And if there's one thing Regiments are traditionally big on, it's not allowing that commanders might be human."

"I thought it was the poor sods at the front that didn't get the label," Sam grouched.

"Not with some people," Sybil admitted. "But that's not what this story is about. Anyway, to make a long story shorter, he got the bright idea to take them out and bivouac out on one of his country estates as an exercise for a couple of weeks. Good way to give boys who had never been outside the city walls a taste of the real thing, just in case. Room for tents and camps and practicing maneuvers. All that. About three days in he was out in a field on a horse, in uniform, addressing the men, probably something inspiring about how glorious it is, managing to come home with all your vital bits attached and maybe a few extra that used to be attached to some poor fellow on the other side, or similar. Let's just say the inspiring mood

might have been spoiled by the six-year-old that came running, having hysterics at their father about seeing an enormous snake dangling out of the tree where they had been playing.”

“What was a kid doing there, anyway?” Sam asked, doing the mental equivalent of jogging to keep up. Sybil often hopped from item to item in conversation in such a way that lesser listeners felt they had to cling on to the thread of discussion like an out of control cart careening around a corner.

“Country estate. The whole family was staying there. Life didn't stop just because there were a few hundred soldiers about the place having a bash at one another with wooden swords. It's not as though the regimental commander had much of a choice. You look rather ridiculous dropping war games, blood and glory in favor of a six-year-old in tears. Granted, you look just as or even more ridiculous ignoring your own child or sending an underling to take care of things at that point. So he did the only sensible thing he could. He decided Daddy was a more important title than Lord and got down off the horse. He took getting snickered at by the men, went and killed the snake with his sword and carried the child back to the governess up at the house and stayed until things had settled down before going back. He could have just about died from the embarrassment, and he wasn't exactly easy to embarrass. Funny thing happened, though. The men started acting differently after that. He rather expected that, but it was the way they acted differently that surprised him. They were... better... after. More willing and eager to please. More willing to speak up with ideas or opinions. Less intimidated and so forth. Turns out they used to see him mostly as some big, shouty, uniformed mustache on a horse that wasn't to be crossed or reasoned with. Couldn't disagree with him or venture an opinion at him or not just blindly do what he said any more than you could bring a mountain around to your point of view. After that, well... they saw a man with a family and all the problems and choices that brings, more like most of them. Someone who maybe didn't have all the answers all by himself. A commander who was willing to come down off the high horse once in a while and get his hands dirty. He said in later years that it was the best regiment he ever commanded, because they didn't expect him to be all-knowing. Even the privates would usually speak up if they had their doubts. I know you don't like admitting it, dear,” Sybil pointed out, patting his knee, “but maybe it wouldn't be a completely *bad* thing if the entire Watch were aware that you have some other demands on you, too. And a family to go home to, same as them.” She leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. “Besides, it's good practice for being a father. You eventually have to break it to children that you don't know it all and can't do it all, too. Mothers, too.”

“Does that mean you'll reconsider what I said about a nursemaid and head cavern girl?” Sam asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Possibly,” Sybil said noncommittally. “That's not the point. Ruddy big viper it was, too. Late spring, I suppose it had gone up the tree after a bird's nest. I never did care much for snakes. Especially not the kind that bite.”

Sam had the familiar feeling of being left behind around the last corner for a moment. “What does that have to- Oh.” He blinked as the penny dropped.

“Yes. Oh. I think he just about forgave me for it in a week or two,” Sybil said, putting her head against his shoulder. “Aren't all your best officers the ones that know even Mister Vimes puts his trousers on one leg at a time and all that?”

“I suppose so,” Sam admitted. “You know, a body can only do so much.”

“Exactly,” Sybil agreed.

"I meant *you*. At least the nursemaid."

"Sam, you know how I feel about nursemaids!"

"You don't like the idea. *You* had one as a kid," Sam pointed out.

"I also once had a venomous snake directly over my head as a girl, too. I don't particularly recommend it," Sybil replied.

"You're always telling *me* I employ people who can do things and I don't have to do it myself."

"We employ quite enough people to do things for us here. I'm not particularly keen on hiring one to help with the job of parenting. Maybe I'll consider the head cavern girl. *Maybe*. I'm not promising anything," she conceded.

"I'm seeing to the brickwork in the cesspit soon as there's a warm afternoon, then. I have my reasons," he said when she gave him a curious look. "You do too much. You shouldn't overdo things. Especially not now."

"Look who's talking," she said, then sighed. "Fine. I'll leave fetching the rest of the heavy things down from the attics to you and Willikins."

"You didn't tell me you got sick because of the cabbage soup," Sam said, trying not to sound accusing[4].

*[4]-Policemen are typically so bad at this that even "good morning" can sound like a demand for an alibi. Or at least a demand for further solid evidence that it is, in fact, a good morning.*

"I didn't think it was worth mentioning."

"Fred's Molly did, evidently. I still think you should consider the head cavern girl and the nursemaid."

"I see. It's late. Would Mister Vimes care to go up to bed with me and take his trousers *off* one leg at a time? Someone keeps telling me I need my rest, after all. And it's not as though you're *reading* that newspaper."

Sam glanced at the folded paper lying, ignored, on the sofa arm. "You're just trying to change the subject on me," he said, looking back up.

"Maybe a little bit. Is it working at all?" Sybil asked.

"Maybe a little bit," Sam echoed. "It is late."

"I'll seriously *think* about it. Later. No promises."

"There never are."

She stood up. "Look, whether you're going or not, I'm going to bed."

He stood up and followed. When his foot hit the bottom step of the staircase, he called ahead, "Look... you're not going to get... upset about things, are you?"

Sybil paused, hand on the banister. "Upset about what things?"

"Well... Fred's warning me you're going to get upset about things like... having to get new clothes," Sam admitted. He laughed nervously. "To hear him tell it, expectant mothers cry about everything."

Sybil started up the stairs again. "Don't be silly! I've already had to do that. Did you and Fred have a good cry over the fact that the last batch of uniform trousers I ordered for you had a

bigger waist measurement?"

"Well, good then- Wait... what?" he spluttered, hurrying up the stairs a little faster.

"Your trousers are bigger," Sybil said, reaching the landing.

"You're joking," Sam said uncertainly, following close behind as she turned toward the big bedroom on the left. "Aren't you?"

"There, there, dear," Sybil said, turning around in the bedroom door and patting him on the chest. "If you feel the need to go somewhere private and have a little sniffle over that, I'll completely understand. You expectant fathers can be so sensitive."

"Are not," Sam protested.

"Then we're finally telling people, are we?" Sybil called over her shoulder, leaving him standing in the hall.

"Maybe not for a few more days..."

"We can't hire a nursemaid for a baby you won't admit we're having, Samuel Vimes!"

"Okay, fine! We're telling people! I'll take out an ad in the bloody Times." *That ought to give de Worde something to write down...*

"Not right next to the hernia supports, I should hope," Sybil said, poking her head back into the hall.

Sam's eyebrows came together in confusion. "I think the Help Wanted ads are in their own section, dear."

"The subject of a nursemaid's still not settled, dear. The fact that we're having a baby *is* settled, however. Try telling just one person and I'll try thinking about how I feel about a nursemaid. Tell Havelock. You've got a meeting with him tomorrow afternoon, anyway."

"Vetinari? Hah! He's probably known for weeks, the sneaky, spying-"

"All the more reason to officially tell him, then. Think of it as good practice for telling people who don't really know."

"We're having a baby," Sam said woodenly.

"Good start, dear," Sybil said, giving him a gentle pat on the cheek. "See? It's not so awful. Tomorrow you can try it with someone *other* than me."

"We're having a baby."

"I know, dear. I'm the one carrying it around all the time, remember? I'm going to bed." She gave him a peck on the lips and walked back into the bedroom.

"But... we're having a *baby*..." Sam repeated, a little desperately. "That's a big announcement to make..."

"Maybe *I* should just be telling people, Sam. When you've gotten over the horror of people knowing, you can come to bed. If you like, I can come tell the Watch and tell the other boys not to tease you while I'm at it."

"No, I'll tell them... it's just..."

"Just that we're having a baby?"

"Yes."

"I know. It takes me the same way sometimes, too, dear."

"Really?"

"Sometimes. Are you coming to bed or not?"

"Maybe an ad wouldn't actually be such a bad-

"Don't you dare seriously suggest we're going to tell people we're expecting by taking out a newspaper ad. I might be moved to get upset," Sybil said.

"Of course not, dear. Maybe it wouldn't be such a bad idea for announcing a birth, though," Sam mused, stepping into the bedroom. "They already write up the deaths. Might as well have de Worde getting them coming *and* going. Maybe he can find an up and coming nursery school prodigy to write them from the proper perspective, like Mr. Bendy and his death notices."

"Birth announcements?" Sybil yawned, perching on the edge of the bed. "Not a bad idea, I have to admit. You can suggest that to William, maybe. He's always looking for something else to put in," she added as Sam sat down next to her.

It didn't take long for the two of them to finish getting ready for bed and to begin settling down under the covers in the darkened bedroom.

"I told Willikins to lay out your dress uniform for that meeting."

"Mmm. Sybil?"

"What?"

"We're having a baby," Sam said. "Just practicing." There was a protracted silence. "About the trousers..."

"Not very much bigger, dear. Go to sleep."