Cry of Justice

JASON PRATT

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Jason Pratt

Bittersea Publications

Cry of Justice
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For further information, please contact:

AtlasBooks
30 Amberwood Parkway
Ashland, OH 44805
www.atlasbooks.com

Printed in the United States

Cry of Justice
Jason Pratt

1. Title 2. Author 3. Fantasy

ISBN: 978-0-9778884-0-5
Library of Congress Control Number: 2006902083

Acknowledgments

Thank you, various readers over at critters.org, for feedback on drafts of Section One of *Cry of Justice.* I hope the rest of the story measures up to your expectations; and I'll be back someday (I hope)—this time as a publisher.

Thank you, Alex and Family, for giving me breaks from writing (and editing, and editing, and *editing* . . .) All work and no play makes Jason kind of edgy!

Thank you, Jim and Dale, for helping me save the U.T. Knoxville Fencing Team from extinction. Being a swordfighter—and a teacher—in the decades since (well, more than a decade anyway), makes a sufficiently obvious contribution to the story, I think.

Thank you, Stefan, for being the very first person to ever read the book besides myself. I hope other readers will be cheering along as loudly as you, during the Macro Fight Scene at the end (in an airport or otherwise!) Now anyone who wants to know what happens in Book 2 can go bug Stefan, who lives in a Nashville. (Ah—but *which* Nashville? Have fun . . . !)

Thank you, Bro, for helping me learn and appreciate strategies and tactics over 20 years of playing games against you.

Thank you, Mom and Dad, for being awfully patient with me over the years, what with the late nights away and missed dinners and all. Hopefully you'll have more reason to be patient with me for decades to come! This is my life—and I wouldn't be here (including at all!) without you.

Thank you, Jen, for helping to keep me sane, through the most difficult years of my life.

Thank you, Marie, for preventing the book from being *completely* unreadable. It simply would not be here without you; and (hopefully) generations of readers will owe you a debt they can never completely repay. (Although they can make a stab at that, by reading *your* books as well! Visit swantower.com to see what Marie is currently up to in fantasy writing!)

As for my highest acknowledgments . . . well, those will be in the dedication.

And then—the end begins.

(And now let us see what the future will bring . . .)

Dedication

yuqowç hfu yihhur mua,
lfuru paw I ko, I favu woh asruaçí kowu?
Lfuw liss ní musgimfwumm yu çumhroíquç?
Lfí lam I kivuw, lfah I lam kivuw?
Lfo lam I kivuw gor?
Lfah kooç im hfu folu iw ní fuarh,
lfipf muubm ihm sigu iw hornuwh?
Fol preyuç ho bolçur
nemh ní fuarh yuponu
yugoru I giwimf çíiwk, Sorç?
Quh, ass liss vu luss
or lo Qoe favu bronimuç.
Wuvurhfulumm:
gor hfu owum I sovu hfu nomh
hfu Owu Ayovu awç hfu owu yulol
I an brubaruç ho yuar hfu folu iw ní fuarh
goruvur
ig hfah im lfah Qoe loesç favu og nu
ashfoetf I twol hfah yoe nemh lawh monuhfiwk noru
gor nu
Ní fobu nemh woh yu gor nímusg,
yeh nemh yu gor hfu owu
gor lfon Qoe kivu Qoer vurí sigu.
awç quh
ig hfim peb
paw vu bammuç
lihfiw Qoer liss
I braí
hfah monuowu liss yu laihiwk gor nu
yuqowç hfu yihhur mua

Jason Pratt
March 27, 2006

Table of Contents

Preface 1
Introduction—To A World 3

Section One—TURNING POINTS

Words that are Tears 9
The Obligation of a Bleeding Soul 11
The Cry 15
Prices of Sheep 18
To Deny and to Test 24
Dances 27
Fires, Composures and Any Sword 30
No Easy Prey 35
Balances Regained 46

Section Two—DOWNSLOPE

Sealed 51
An Autumn Breeze 54
The Cowherd 57
Weeds and Oaks 60
Parries and Ripostes 62
The Monster Inside 64
Adding Things Up 66
Calculated Risks 70
Signs of Change in the Weather 76
Waiting and Humming 78
Path Through the Woods 81
Getting to Know 85

Section Three—FIRST NIGHT

In with Him 95
Together in the Dark 99

Fazed 106
Settling In 110
Onward and Upward 114
Living, Unliving and Chafing 118
When Nothing Matters 121
Victory 131
Facing the Facts 137
When Something Matters 140
To Believe and Not to Believe 153
Matters of the Heart 157
Opportunity 160
As Silent as a Breeze 162
How It Is to Be 164
Good Morning 166

Section Four—COMPLICATIONS

Shapes of History 173
The Grass 177
Eyes 183
The Forest for the Trees 187
Results 198
Glimpses of Twisting 201
Studies 204
Heart and Stone 212
Convocation 221
Worsts 229
Indunas 241
House of Cards 250
Alone 258
Almost Perfect 267

Section Five—WITHIN

The Right Trust 275
Captains 282
Corners 290
Tensions 303
Call to Glory 307
The Man Behind the Door 315
Marshallings 329

Section Six—WITHOUT

The Heart of the People 343
Hearts of Sacrifice 348
The River Begins to Crumble 354
Butchery 358
Desperate Faces 366
Rain of Hammers 373
Enough 382
Avalanche Dancing 388
The Cry from Above 402
The Fall 409
Resolutions 416
Loose Ends 422
Accomplishing, Not Finishing 430
To Know and to Wonder 436
Threats and Opportunities 442

Preface

My wife, my beloved;

I promise.

I can explain.

I can explain where I went. And why.

I can explain why I didn't explain, when I returned.

I didn't explain . . . because I was afraid.

Our duties require us to be apart, sometimes—as you yourself are gone. Always we have kept in touch, even when apart.

But . . . this time I could *not* do so. Not because a power prevented me; but . . . because . . .

. . . how can I explain . . . ?

I wanted to tell you. You deserve to know, because you love me. But I couldn't find the courage—and now you are gone.

And you refuse to keep in touch this time.

I deserve no better.

But, how to tell you . . . how to explain . . .

so much pain and horror and death . . .

and I am responsible . . .

I brought back books from that world. I tried to save something.

I needed to find a place to begin.

I met people there. This is their story—the story that I am responsible for destroying.

They never knew that, of course. I never told them.

There is one who suffered most. She *also* was responsible—for terrible things. She also wrote a confession.

I will begin with her story. And I see another I met; who is also part of her story. Good.

I will follow their history, then; using her book and those of others to guide my search. It won't take long, by our standards—I can write it in a day; you can read it in an hour.

I am a coward. I rather would tell you a story of them—

than simply to tell you the truth.

But, I promise: you *shall* have the truth.

In this life, or in the next.

Introduction—To a World

I will tell you a story, beloved;
a story of a cradle.

Once,
there was a world,
bobbing and spinning within the center of her space,
infused with life, alit by lights both great and small,
upon her and above her.
From the beginning, she had borne her children
—not to stay, but to leave.

But, the children did not always play well.
And, they did not always leave well.
Sometimes they pushed each other out.

Sometimes, they pushed each other hard.

On this cradle lay a vastness of mountains and forests, lakes and islands, rivers and valleys and plains. Half the cradle, the children called Mikon; the other half was water.

On the land, the children lived.
The children often grew into monsters.

Fires and floods, storms and quakes, blood and steel and wood and life, crackled and *cracked.* This happened many times in Mikon.

And monsters laughed—
while a mother cried, and a father sighed . . .

I look upon them with my power, beloved—
with the power that doomed them.
I look through their space; I see their times.
I read their words.
I read their minds.

I will allow them to tell their story, letting them lead where I will look, respecting them.

I will live within them; I will let them teach me.

I will let them speak through me, as they would have spoken.

I will tell what they would have told, had they been able.

I will do no less.

I can do no more.

no more.

And so I look along the line of their time. Three sources gleam as lights to begin my hunt, through the darkness of their history—that they do not know has almost reached its end.

I see a stag, stepping cautiously through the dappled shadows of early night, cropping grass as it moved from place to place, comfortable in its confidence, instinctively trusting its nose and ears in the quiet misty dusk.

Its reactions to food, and brush, and paths of unquiet travel were largely predictable; but, the buck couldn't know this.

So, it was entirely natural for the deer to pass too close to one particular tree.

From behind that tree, now on the deer's left flank, an unnatural shriek erupted.

The deer's heart *surged!* —it leaped away in the other direction, responding precisely in line with its instincts.

Consequently, the deer leaped straight through a wall of brush.

The stag *thrashed* the entangling branches and leaves, ripping with its rack of antlers. The threatened attack had not yet come, but the stag couldn't ponder what this meant. It only struggled, eventually tearing free on the brush's farther side, bleeding from minor cuts, its right eye swollen shut from a poke by a branch.

The stag gasped for air, and gathered itself to leap again—

—one leg crumpled as weight was applied.

The deer crept through the tiny glade, regressing to cries of infancy.

But, it couldn't bear the physical stress; and so it fell, quietly.

Its ears twitched; its nostrils flared; its neck bobbed, this way and that.

All these movements made it feel more comfortable—slightly. Nothing gave it new signs to fear.

The stag began to relax. The starlight-speckled glade was swirling in the deer's euphoric relief.

The deer felt sleepy.

The deer felt a spike punch through its lungs and heart.

It jerked in response—then spiraled deeper into its relief . . . no leap could save it from such a wound.

The deer felt only its final need—as if to sleep.

The spike stabbed, twice again. The deer felt neither stab.

The dull-black spike, longer than the body of the deer, withdrew: gripped, by a black hand, of a black arm, glistening with sweat, stretching from the nearby brush. A tall, limber creature raised itself on legs with muscles taut as cables.

Unlike the deer, the only hair the creature wore was thin and close on the top of its head.

Unlike the deer, the creature wore . . . *more*—though not much more than hair: short barbadense trousers, harvested from Manavilin Island; woven in Fyzabad City; dyed—black to match the creature's skin.

The deer would have thought the creature a monster, had it been able to judge.

The creature thought of himself as a man.

But he wondered, as he laid his palm on the deer he had pierced, how close he was to being a monster.

The man did *not* gloat over his crafty slaying. He had alerted the deer, not only to make it entangle itself—but to give it a fair running start.

He would have trotted silently afterward, tracking the sounds of flight, the sight of starlight-scattering flicks in the night, even the smell of the blood.

Had it escaped detection, he would have bidden the deer goodspeed.

The deer would not, *could* not, have begun to understand fairness.

Sometimes, the man wished neither could he.

In recent weeks especially.

The man returned through the forest, bearing the body away from the quiet nightly hum, the patchy starlit glades. He returned: to the brightening fires of controlled destruction, by which his species survived—even when at peace.

His species hadn't been at peace for several seasons.

He passed pickets; then paced between the fires at night—a creature who killed: a man of the Guacu-ara . . . the Hunting Cry.

The men and women around him didn't see him, as he carried his catch to the cooks of the camp; or, if they happened to see him, they looked away.

They did not speak to him; because he never really spoke to them.

Because he never really spoke to them, words had boiled his brain for weeks. He had bought a book and pen.

So he returned, to where he had put his small, blank book; through dangerous men who shrank away if they saw him, back to each other and back to their fires, back to polishing swords and axes, back to the safety that lay in numbers.

For this man, Seifas, safety had never lain in numbers; but in movement, in striking first and striking last.

Yet, now, as he slid into his own small tent, he faced an enemy he could no longer avoid, with which he must now do battle—perhaps to the death.

He faced his own despair.

Seifas sat, knelt, lay himself down; turned up his small lantern; and started to write:

> "It all has fallen apart . . ."

Section One

Turning Points

Chapter 1

It all has fallen apart.
Again.

Sometimes at night I see the glow of another village burning.
Behind closed eyes, at night, I see that glow again: of coals that shouldn't burn.
I don't have tears enough, to wash away those fires.
Why does this always happen?
Where are the Agents?
Where is the Eye??
I don't even know why such a war is called a Culling . . .

Matron Cami might have known. But she is gone—the woman who tried so hard to teach us juacuara something other than how to hurl a javelin fifty paces or to knock out a brain with a blade.

She tried to give us poetry for our souls; to help express and judge the events of our lives; to make some sense of the hidden world behind the obvious.

My Matron is gone.

She vanished one day.

. . . perhaps that was best. Her heart would have broken, in bearing the tragedies afterward.

No . . .

No, not that. She would have led us, and we would have followed her, putting our faith in her wisdom and strength.

Was that why she was taken?

Was that why she went away?

Other klerosa than Cami have vanished: the indisputable sign of a Culling. All klerosa—the ones allotted true power, true healing—always go, and never are seen again.

Leaving us alone to put our trust in . . .

. . . what?

My weapon? My body? My peer? My commander? These shall all fail me. I know this distinctly.

Trust in the magi? They surely did *not* disappear all at once! They chose their sides and disbanded the Cadre, and scoured the skies and the lakes and the trees with their wrath!

A year they did this; then, within the slopes of a season, they also fell silent—leaving the wounds they had made.

I remember Qarfax, who claimed four faces guarded him, so that he would *never* be caught by surprise. He had hired a garrison for his private tower: I and some troops from the city of Wye.

His fear drenched the air of his tower.

Whenever a man—moreover a magus—invests his soul within a place, his presence seeps into the stones.

But when we awoke one night for our watch, I knew with some others: the feel was gone. We wouldn't find Qarfax alive.

We found some ash on the floor of his room instead, where he had watched and waited.

We never learned for what he had waited. We left his service that very moment.

We also left his regalia, on the floor, within the ash—no one would touch the remains of a magus.

The students of magic—the dabblers and the apprentices—will soon recover their masters' work. I serve one now: Portunista.

But, I don't trust her either . . .

No, nothing mortal remains to trust. Not even my brethren, destroyed by the wars of the Culling.

I have no home. No family.

No hope.

Some men say they only trust themselves.

I am not so foolish. I know my strengths; and I know my weaknesses. I might as well lift myself into the air by pulling my arms . . . !

No answers. No hope.

No justice.

These thoughts all dart behind my eyes, after the middle of the night, in front of the glow of villages burning, until I spill them onto paper.

I am a soldier. My words are my tears.

They don't wash away the fires.

Chapter 2

From the dark man in his darkness, my beloved, I turn; looking forward seven summers.

On the edge of mountains and plains, a bright clean palace gleams.

Within its halls, a woman walks; slowly, stiffly, smoothly, straight and tall.

Her long auburn hair is dancing with life; her face, however, can no longer show so much expression. Her royal gown of greens and browns, trails behind. Her servants pause to smile and bow.

They love the fragile smile she gives in return; they know she cannot give much more, and wonder about the tears they see on her cheeks. Some of them think they know why.

Some of them speculate wildly.

Some of them are correct.

She wants them to know—more than they know; more than they will be comfortable knowing.

One day, they will learn why they see those tears.

But, that time cannot come, until she takes a first step of hundreds.

Smoothly she glides, stepping out into her quiet garden, which she touches.

Slowly she glides, up the baked stone face of her tower, which she does not touch; although as always she checks it for wear.

She gently steps into her wide upper room, between its narrow encircling columns.

A servant waits, having ascended by stairs curving up through the floor. The servant has brought what she asked, and sets it on a tilted frame.

The woman nods to him, and with a gracious gesture she dismisses him.

He will do the same for her on each first day, each week, for years to come.

The woman carefully lowers her willowy body into a nearby tall-backed chair, billows of hair arranging in comfort around her.

She pulls the frame to her. Upon the frame: a shallow tray filled smooth with clay.

The woman casts her mind back through the years; back to the days when she leaped and crouched and stormed through life.

Then she reaches, and sinks a stylus-tip into the clay.
Along with this she sinks her thoughts.

I am the Empress of Mikon.
I do not know how long I have, before the next great change.

My people have often represented my body and face; indeed, moreso than any woman's in history. Somewhere a sage is collecting a record of all my public utterances.

But, the paintings and sculptures and statues of me, are only of my body. Even my sayings do not reveal my soul, my mind, my history.

My people deserve to know, to remember, the truth about me.

I remember. I have failed in so many things, and most of my people do not know—or do not remember.

They *should* know. They must remember.

On a day to come, their disillusionment, though divisive, still will serve its place in the fate of the nations.

And, perhaps, this testimony shall also serve historians, helping them piece together events of the past few years. I held a central place in the history of our lands, of Mikon, after the most recent Culling.

I did not know what privilege I had been granted.

Oh, I surely asserted my "privileges"! I thought I snatched them by my will, from the anarchy of that time.

I was a fool.

Already I hear the ardent denials, from people who shout my name with such devotion. I treasure and bless those people in my heart, more than they can imagine. And those paintings and sculptures showing the ground beneath my feet becoming fertile, watered by my eye-closed tears—they are not wrong. No, they are far more right than they know. Yet none of them, nor the songs which call me "meek" and "stern" and "gracious" . . .

None of these tell *why.*

They don't even know from how deep a wound, to myself and others, those tears seep.

I dug my wound, bit by bit, filled with decay and ooze and bile. It swelled with infection.

It had to be lanced.

And even now, I pay the price.

but my price is small, compared to what others have paid . . .
for me.

Page by page she scratches her soul along with the clay.

Every week, a new blank tray. A day a week, a page a day; the fine, small letters she cuts in the clay, as if into powdered flour. It doesn't weary her, but emotionally.

Emotionally, and in one other way.

She mustn't write more than one page a week.

She still has many things to do, many people for whom she must be strong, before she dies.

She will not kill her body through her writing.

Not yet.

Whatever use it may be to scholars later, this is a testimony first—of the person that I was.

I am a maga; even though I haven't needed to use those skills in years.

But what I was, still echoes in what I am.

It would be misleading to say that I am no longer a maga. Every study affects the soul. My soul is still here; although my body has flowed away, as every mortal body flows—as the curving of a waterfall.

Scars and all, my soul is still here.

I am *not* against magi—not in principle.

But I was not a good one.

And that makes all the difference.

When I began what I considered to be my self-carved path to glory, I had not long passed my twentieth year; having spent some time already in preparation and training for the magical arts.

I'd always enjoyed my use of power—a habit that wouldn't soon change—and so had devised a clever scheme of revenge against . . . someone I had known as a girl.

I had been certain that I would escape detection.

I had been caught, of course.

This was when I learned true fear.

Had I been properly punished—and I *did* deserve death after some demeaning service—I might have learned wisdom through fear. But, my masters delayed my punishment.

I now suspect that they were debating, whether to risk the loss of my potential—to the world at large, or to particular schemes of their own, the Eye only knows.

Then the Culling began; thanks to fighting among the Cadrists.

I also know the Rogues had a hand in the Culling as well.

All the klerosa vanished; and the nations fell apart; and I was released when the Cadre disbanded. Why, I never found out; and had no wish to discover. I took myself away to survive in obscurity, not to become an expendable pawn: the fate of most apprentices.

That was a terrible year. Fool that I was, I tried to tell myself how exciting my life had become.

Then the fighting began to slacken as one by one the surviving Cadrists also disappeared. Bands of soldiers crossed the land, seeking any advantage, competing simply to live.

I also needed advantages—and resources.

So, I gathered squads; building them into companies. I thought of myself as daring, and innovative, and defiant—swimming against the currents of history!

Hardly. I threw myself headfirst downstream into the river, trying to swim more quickly than anyone else.

and . . . I who am thought an example of virtue today, was once . . . something else.

I was worse than any mere flirt. I enjoyed edging men in that direction, with or without my magic, achieving power for myself at their expense. And if it bothered them, so be it—what were they doing around me at all?!

Fortunately, I was distracted enough by my practical problems: I never gave my full attention to this addictive little hobby.

Yet, even now . . .

I feel such burning shame in my heart, I wonder if steel would quench it . . .

No.

This is only another temptation: to defy the price of what I have done, to pretend that I can make it go away.

What I have done is real—forever.

Further crippling myself will never help me. Adding to my crimes will only add to the burdens I carry beneath the unavoidable Eye.

I can be crushed beneath those burdens.

Or, I can let love to help me to stand—and to walk—and perhaps one day to run.

I do not believe that I shall be running again in this world.

I am grateful, even to walk . . .

Now my thoughts have turned that way, so I will follow the bend in the path I walked so poorly.

But, *not* that far. Not yet.

That cliff must be descended; but not yet.

Chapter 3

Along with this woman, I turn back my gaze, beloved; back to those fateful days: where I find the dark man—and his same dark struggle.

Seifas dips his pen into his ink, and debates of slaying one last man . . .

The final apprentices now are rising from the shadows, trying to claim their masters' power.

My current commander, Portunista, is such a one. She makes it clear, that *she* is her only goal. To that degree, she is honest.

And, as long as her troops stay warm and fed, and have some time for leisure, I suppose they won't complain.

I would complain. I am a subcommander.

But to preserve that authority, I must stifle my conscience.

I hate it.

I can feel my soul eroding away.

I should just leave.

but I have nowhere to go.

. . . I should kill myself—rather than offer a silent assent to the dissolution around me.

What is my duty?

Should I risk my soul to chance that I might live, to see the return of justice?

What chance is that?

If I cannot decide—it might as well be *no* chance.

And if justice will not be fulfilled—then there is no hope.

And if the cries in my heart are hopeless . . .

. . . I might as well be dead.

I have a small knife. I bought it for this.

I see it where it lies, awaiting my choice . . .

I do not fear death, as other men do. I am one of the Guacu-ara.

If there is nothing, I shall not know it. If there is something, then I will fight or I will serve; and that is no different from now.

So, shall the cries within me be fulfilled?
The knife awaits my answer . . .

If the cries are only my wishes, they are not a reliable guide—my wishes are *not* the ground of All. I won't continue my pain for a self-delusion.

If the cries are only induced by the world around me, then they are unthinking urges. Only to fill such hungers would cast my mind into death—or else I am there already. I might as well complete it.

If the cries have only been trained into me by men, then where did *they* receive their notions of justice? From where I have said? Their *own* cries will only be hunger or lies!

I might as well kill myself.

A shameful act, you say? The act of a coward? Not the mark of a man or warrior?

But, if there is no justice, then why *should* I agree? From *my* own pride? To kill my life is the ultimate pride—the deadliest victory over mere instinct!

Should I agree, because of *your* pride? I might as well prefer my own—and then, to the knife!

Should I agree, for *you* perceive justice? How is *your* mirror then better than mine?? And if I cannot see justice, even the blurriest vision, *your* witness to me must *also* fail!

Even my reason can have no meaning: without true justice, my motives for thinking are only irrational.

So.
I am a cripple, deluded. I should completely free myself.
A knife to the artery stings but a bit.

A death in battle? What *can* a death *mean,* in a world without justice!?
I will seek elsewhere, for satisfaction—or else for oblivion!

. . . . . yet, I choose to stay, still.

Why?
Not from lack of nerve or skill to do the deed.
Why??

Because, whatever else is real—so is my cry for justice.
It may not be what I think it is—but it is *something.*

What does this tell me?
To myself I ask: what do I hunger for? Why am I starving inside my mind and soul?!
I want to see the return of justice!
Ah—it is only my instinct, only my training, only . . .
Perhaps. Perhaps. . . . . .

Listen, knife. What rests beside you, there in the shadow? You I have known for a day. What is *this* I have known, for years?

This weapon, I say, is my aasagai.

No, you say; that is an axe.

Oh? And why should I listen to *you?*

Here is a rigid, finger-thin needle, as long as some men are tall, with sharpened pommel and infighting quillions—I hold it along the shaft of its length, and twirl it around myself for defense, until I punch past the guard of my foe . . . this is an *axe?!*

If you were to say "a spear" I might agree. It shares some traits with things called *spear.* It has no likeness to things called *axe.*

Yet, if I mistook, and held an axe instead, you *still* would be absurd to say "*not* an aasagai"—unless *you* had some accurate notion of what an aasagai *is;* and what it is *not.*

And I can tell this difference!

Mere desires of my heart, *are not* justice! Mere training is not of itself *justice!*

I *do* perceive the distinction, the disparity!

Somehow . . . despite any blurrings and flaws and mistakes . . .

. . . I must have some sight of true justice!

And, if justice exists . . . then *hope* must exist.

And you, knife, offer no hope at all.

Would Matron Cami be proud for me . . . ?

how I miss her

We of the Guacu-ara never were told of our parents. Our ranks were our brothers; our Matrons our mothers. But Cami *loved* us: the children she never would bear, whom she had forsworn for our sake.

I do not know where my birth-mother is; nor the only mother I ever have known.

But now I am sure that someday, somehow, my cry for justice *will* be answered.

And with that knowledge, I find I can sleep.

For tonight.

Chapter 4

The following day, Seifas assigned himself to scouting—again.

The sun threw shadows through forests, as he loped around close hills and quiet coves of lakes. The shadows and light lay patchy on him. Seifas embraced and used the shadows, sent by sun or stars; but even after the night before, the shadow of his life still lay on him.

He didn't embrace that shadow. He bore it in shame.

While on patrol, he wouldn't be fighting a losing battle against his commander's selfishness.

Yet, he also knew that by his absence the battle was lost.

Still, out all alone, he could forget the shadows in his life—

until he chanced on a forest glade, where a girl sat watching a flock of sheep.

Eighteen hours later, Seifas would record what happened—and so commit his journal to an empire not yet born:

> "The midsummer sun glares into the glade—reminding me, that what I do will be seen by the Eye. I can feel myself, there in those shadows once more, wondering what to do.
>
> "Should I tell the brigade?
>
> "Should I warn the girl and her family, to protect their precious flock?
>
> "Should I simply leave, saying nothing to anyone?
>
> "I . . . *we* . . . should be helping this girl!
>
> "But, we also need to eat.
>
> "Yet—if we take the sheep, then how do we differ from brigands??"

Weighed by his doubts, Seifas waited.

He wanted to pray to Macumza, the Agent who guarded the paths of the Hunting Cry. But only a Matron could have that communion—and now the Matrons were gone.

He would have even prayed to the Eye for guidance. But the Eye seemed far beyond every star in the sky.

Waiting was easier, and doing nothing.

So, he did.

The soldiers he soon was seeing, slipping through the trees, didn't wait.

They acted. Although, like many men, they couldn't even stalk a sheep.

The animals scattered; and in their distress, the shepherdess jumped from her rock in fright.

A woman and man, both in light armor, leaped from thickets, into the path of the girl.

"Gotcha now, my—aaaow!" yelped the man; the girl had smashed his head with her staff.

"Pike, really, you *are* impossible," muttered the woman, who reached and snagged the girl by her hair. The shepherdess shrieked and flailed with her crook; but the woman walked, steadily pulling the girl off balance. "Long hair; bad idea my dear," she mused. "Then again—keep it. You may find it useful in other ways . . ."

"Get a move-on!" snapped the sergeant to the others, who had paused in their chasing to watch and laugh. They returned to killing the scattering sheep.

Seifas was already moving.

The juacuar crept, outside the glade's wide edge, his belly low, his aasagai across his back. The girl might not be in danger, yet; surely the woman would remind them, Seifas thought, that they were men not beasts.

Still, the girl would be the key. If he attacked immediately, they might attempt to use her against him. If they didn't take her, he would follow them to find their camp.

If they *did* take the girl, then first he would kill her guards. Although he would spare the woman's life, if possible.

Seifas was a soldier—and he was of the Hunting Cry. He knew all plans were uncertain; and no one knew more than the Guacu-ara how an uncertainty could lead to death.

However well he planned his attack, he might be slain this afternoon—over a handful of sheep, and one poor girl.

Still; a better reason to die, than any he'd recently had—or could reasonably hope to ever have again . . .

"So, good friends!"

Seifas froze, balanced on fingers and toes.

He and the others stared with shared amazement as a fair-skinned, bearded man strode out of the trees.

The man was dressed in simple clothes—though something about them itched the back of Seifas' mind—and he carried a flutewood stalk.

This unexpected apparition calmly paced across the glade.

"I see, young miss, the market has come to your family," chuckled the stranger. "Did they offer you fair price?"

Even the girl had no idea, whether or how to answer! Not knowing what else to do himself, Seifas resumed his meticulous crawl around the clearing. Securing her freedom had now become more pressing—or, perhaps Macumza *had* sent help after all . . . ?

The sergeant tried some bluster: "Who're you?! And why're you here?!"

"I am merely someone seeking service, like yourself," bowed the smiling man, solidly settling near a slaughtered sheep. "I think that covers both your questions admirably! May I ask the price you promised to her?"

Seifas continued flicking glances back and forth between the glade and his chosen path, carefully picking obstacles out of his way.

"None of yer business," growled the leader.

Seifas could no longer see the stranger's face, but the man still sounded like he was smiling . . .

"That tells me these sheep, and this young lady, are none of *your* business. *If* that is the case, and if she requires, then I am prepared to *make* it my business." He chuckled again, and gave a slight bow to the girl.

Seifas would relive this moment, in his journal.

In some ways, he would relive it the rest of his life:

> "I feel my heart pound—with emotion? No, more! Something I've lacked, for so many seasons, threatens to blind and to suffocate me!
>
> "It is *hope.*
>
> "I am snarling now, blinking away the tears my heart is crying. I will *never* live without hope—never again!
>
> "I will find the hope to have, or seek my death in finding it!!
>
> "I can see the girl; she doesn't dare to hope; she *wants* to dare to hope . . . My heart is bleeding—its scabs fall away!
>
> "I promise her: I will share the hope I find, or seek my death in sharing it!!"

The soldiers didn't know of this doom, creeping toward them around the glade. They kept attending to the smiling stranger.

"An admirer, eh?" the sergeant snickered. "What, no ladies your own age to play with, out here in the hind end of nowhere?" The other soldiers chortled.

The woman whispered loudly to the frightened girl: "I'm sure you *can* do better than this peasant, my dear! In fact, I guarantee it: from these fellows here as well as their friends!"

Seifas felt his fingers digging furrows in the ground.

This woman, who would murder the hope of her common sister, would *not* escape him while he lived . . .

The stranger shrugged his shoulders. "I can listen all day long to your baseless slander. Eventually, her family will wonder where she is. In any case, I think you soon will be facing someone *far* more wrathful than I!"

"Well, then," retorted the sergeant, "we had better run away with our meal and our fun, if we want to live!"

You cannot *possibly* run away quickly enough, Seifas assured him silently . . .

"Come and stop us if you dare, you lone buffoon," the sergeant challenged. "Let us see that weed you carry parry steel! Clov, you get the sheep!" The youngest soldier began to move.

"You will be quite embarrassed, if I brought some reinforcement," smiled the stranger.

Seifas and Clov both jerked to a stop at this!—though Seifas instantly forced himself onward. Clov glanced around uncertainly.

"Look at the girl," continued the stranger, "then at me, then at yourselves. Who doesn't belong?"

Indeed, he looked as different from them as Seifas himself—although in an opposite fashion! Now, only one straight line through trees and brush divided the juacuar from his striking point . . .

"So, I am not from the area; therefore, cannot be here to see the young lady; who certainly is—my apologies, miss—a little too young to be courting."

Sweat ran down the sergeant's face. Was the stranger a scout for a squad? Or . . . was he perhaps a magus?

Seifas could feel the sergeant breaking beneath the strain; and knew his time had run too short. He wouldn't be able to strike the first blow . . .

"Clov!" the sergeant shouted. "Get the bloody sheep!"

The brigands tensed themselves as Clov edged forward, twitching his eyes from tree to bush to rock. He paused at the body nearest the stranger, trying to think what to do.

"I truly am sorry," the fair man said. "You *know* you shouldn't be taking that sheep."

Clov looked back at his fellows.

"Go on," the woman coldly ordered. "Let us see what happens."

Clov stooped, and reached a hand.

With a whistling crack, the flutewood *snapped* against his other wrist. The startled brigand reflexively dropped his sword.

"Tsk," the stranger chided; then, *whoop!* as Clov dove forward from a crouch, attempting to grapple. The fair man spun, without much grace—the flutewood cracked through the air again, flatting the brigand's neck between his helmet and studded jacket. The soldier fell, unmoving.

Seifas scurried, no longer worried about being heard.

"Oh, well," the stranger sighed, as the sergeant and the third of the brigands launched themselves into action.

The third man closed into striking range first. The stranger dodged his poorly-timed swipe by simply backstepping; then darted left and ahead, as the

soldier swung a backstroke. But the stranger, inside the soldier's reach, blocked the stroke by raising the staff at a crossing angle.

After a pausing thought, the fair man punched the brigand.

A clever move for an amateur, Seifas thought: the stranger's hand had been held high to pull his staff on guard against the counterstrike—

—but the brigand's bulky helmet blocked the still-clutched flutewood, keeping knuckles from meeting the nose!

The fair man grunted; then flicked a finger into the eye of the brigand.

The third man *yelped* and threw his hands to his face—punching himself with his own guard!

The stranger's sudden dash a moment ago had put this man between himself and the sergeant. Now the two unwounded antagonists circled around the staggering third.

The stranger now kept quiet. Seifas watched, unmoving, filled with curiosity. The fair man shifted grips on the pole, his pale face pursed in thought.

Then with a grin, he glided in behind the central man, whirling his pole in a striking loop to harmlessly thump his enemy's chest.

"Char take ya!" cursed the still-blinking man, lunging a countermove—right into his leader!

"Fool! It's me!" the sergeant cried, and parried the strike. The stranger, rebounding the flutewood, pulled it around and thrust it over the middle brigand's shoulder. This creative gamble *paid:* the pole-tip pounded the sergeant, driving the nosebone deep in his skull.

"Sarge!" the man in the middle screamed, as his officer sank to his knees.

The stranger jumped back into a pre-lunge stance; and then, his hands neck-high, he thrust again—at the vulnerable gap between the vest and the helmet: *snap!*

The last man shouted and finally leapt to attack from where he was guarding the girl—but:

"Pike! Stop!" the woman barked. "Get back here!" The thin man yanked in his tracks; he backpedaled, twisting his face in rage. The stranger, who still was smiling, heartily twirled his weapon back to a hiking position, as he turned to face the guards.

"Enough of this," the woman muttered; she jerked a knife from its sheath and held it out to the throat of the girl. "Drop that stick and submit to the mercy of Pike, here—or else she dies."

Her tone was level and deadly.

The smile of the stranger finally faded.

"There will be little mercy," he said, "coming from *your* direction, I think."

Indeed.

A collapsed-carbon spike punched through the woman's knife-arm just above her wrist. Her hand popped open, dropping the knife, as the pick was yanked from her arm. Pike heard her gasp, and twitched his head in time to see a dark blur whirl in a three-quarter spin around the side of the woman. The blur became a blood-bespattered spectre—ebony-skinned, ivory-toothed, gripping a devilish tool, the sharpened pommel driven through bone, between her ear and eye.

The woman wasn't even looking at her fiendish slayer; yet she dropped from the pommel-spike with infinite horror in her eyes . . .

Pike tried to scream and turned to run.

He couldn't run fast enough.

"Afterward," Seifas would write, "we watched each other, black and white, at a cautious distance.

"The girl had long since run away to find her father and family—I am afraid I frightened her.

"But, I didn't frighten *him.*

"I do believe I impressed him, though: he didn't smile at me, at first.

"After a time, he spoke.

"'Well,' he said.

"'Well,' said I.

"'All manner of things shall be well,' he murmured. The ghost of a smile appeared on his face.

"'I am Seifas.' I did not add, 'of the Guacu-ara.' He wasn't blind.

"'I am . . .' and he hesitated.

"Then he said, 'Jian.' And smiled a little more.

"'Well met, Jian.' I did not know the name. 'You carry yourself with honor.'

"'I like to speak a little softly,' he said with a chuckle.

"'Your stick won't last very long,' I warned. 'Perhaps I can find some steel for you.'

"'Perhaps,' he agreed.

"And then:

"'Would *you* know someone willing to pay fair price for slaughtered sheep?'"