The Name of the Wind

The Kingkiller Chronicle: Book 1

Patrick Rothfuss

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Extract

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The Name of the Wind

PROLOGUE

A Silence of Three Parts

IT WAS NIGHT AGAIN. The Waystone Inn lay in silence, and it was a silence of three parts.

The most obvious part was a hollow, echoing quiet, made by things that were lacking. If there had been a wind it would have sighed through the trees, set the inn's sign creaking on its hooks, and brushed the silence down the road like trailing autumn leaves. If there had been a crowd, even a handful of men inside the inn, they would have filled the silence with conversation and laughter, the clatter and clamour one expects from a drinking house during the dark hours of night. If there had been music . . . but no, of course there was no music. In fact there were none of these things, and so the silence remained.

Inside the Waystone a pair of men huddled at one corner of the bar. They drank with quiet determination, avoiding serious discussions of troubling news. In doing this they added a small, sullen silence to the larger, hollow one. It made an alloy of sorts, a counterpoint.

The third silence was not an easy thing to notice. If you listened for an hour, you might begin to feel it in the wooden floor underfoot and in the rough, splintering barrels behind the bar. It was in the weight of the black stone hearth that held the heat of a long-dead fire. It was in the slow back and forth of a white linen cloth rubbing along the grain of the bar. And it was in the hands of the man who stood there, polishing a stretch of mahogany that already gleamed in the lamplight.

The man had true-red hair, red as flame. His eyes were dark and distant, and he moved with the subtle certainty that comes from knowing many things.

The Waystone was his, just as the third silence was his. This was appropriate, as it was the greatest silence of the three, wrapping the others inside itself. It was deep and wide as autumn's ending. It was heavy as a great river-smooth stone. It was the patient, cut-flower sound of a man who is waiting to die.

CHAPTER ONE

A Place for Demons

IT WAS FELLING NIGHT, and the usual crowd had gathered at the Waystone Inn. Five wasn't much of a crowd, but five was as many as the Waystone ever saw these days, times being what they were.

Old Cob was filling his role as storyteller and advice dispensary. The men at the bar sipped their drinks and listened. In the back room a young innkeeper stood out of sight behind the door, smiling as he listened to the details of a familiar story.

'When he awoke, Taborlin the Great found himself locked in a high tower. They had taken his sword and stripped him of his tools: key, coin, and candle were all gone. But that weren't even the worst of it, you see . . .' Cob paused for effect, '. . . cause the lamps on the wall were burning blue!'

Graham, Jake, and Shep nodded to themselves. The three friends had grown up together, listening to Cob's stories and ignoring his advice.

Cob peered closely at the newer, more attentive member of his small audience, the smith's prentice. 'Do you know what that meant, boy?' Everyone called the smith's prentice 'boy' despite the fact that he was a hand taller than anyone there. Small towns being what they are, he would most likely remain 'boy' until his beard filled out or he bloodied someone's nose over the matter.

The boy gave a slow nod. 'The Chandrian.'

'That's right,' Cob said approvingly. 'The Chandrian. Everyone knows that blue fire is one of their signs. Now he was—'

'But how'd they find him?' the boy interrupted. 'And why din't they kill him when they had the chance?'

'Hush now, you'll get all the answers before the end,' Jake said. 'Just let him tell it.'

'No need for all that, Jake,' Graham said. 'Boy's just curious. Drink your drink.'

'I drank me drink already,' Jake grumbled. 'I need t'nother but the innkeep's still skinning rats in the back room.' He raised his voice and knocked his empty mug hollowly on the top of the mahogany bar. 'Hoy! We're thirsty men in here!'

The innkeeper appeared with five bowls of stew and two warm, round loaves of bread. He pulled more beer for Jake, Shep, and Old Cob, moving with an air of bustling efficiency.

The story was set aside while the men tended to their dinners. Old Cob tucked away his bowl of stew with the predatory efficiency of a lifetime bachelor. The others were still blowing steam off their bowls when he finished the last of his loaf and returned to his story.

'Now Taborlin needed to escape, but when he looked around, he saw his cell had no door. No windows. All around him was nothing but smooth, hard stone. It was a cell no man had ever escaped.

'But Taborlin knew the names of all things, and so all things were his to command. He said to the stone: *"Break!"* and the stone broke. The wall tore like a piece of paper, and through that hole Taborlin could see the sky and breathe the sweet spring air. He stepped to the edge, looked down, and without a second thought he stepped out into the open air . . .'

The boy's eyes went wide. 'He didn't!'

Cob nodded seriously. 'So Taborlin fell, but he did not despair. For he knew the name of the wind, and so the wind obeyed him. He spoke to the wind and it cradled and caressed him. It bore him to the ground as gently as a puff of thistledown and set him on his feet softly as a mother's kiss.

'And when he got to the ground and felt his side where they'd stabbed him, he saw that it weren't hardly a scratch. Now maybe it was just a piece of luck,' Cob tapped the side of his nose knowingly. 'Or maybe it had something to do with the amulet he was wearing under his shirt.'

'What amulet?' the boy asked eagerly through a mouthful of stew.

Old Cob leaned back on his stool, glad for the chance to elaborate. 'A few days earlier, Taborlin had met a tinker on the road. And even though Taborlin didn't have much to eat, he shared his dinner with the old man.'

'Right sensible thing to do,' Graham said quietly to the boy. 'Everyone knows: "A tinker pays for kindness twice".'

'No no,' Jake grumbled. 'Get it right: "A tinker's advice pays kindness twice".'

The innkeeper spoke up for the first time that night. 'Actually, you're missing more than half,' he said, standing in the doorway behind the bar.

'A tinker's debt is always paid:
Once for any simple trade.
Twice for freely-given aid.
Thrice for any insult made.'

The men at the bar seemed almost surprised to see Kote standing there. They'd been coming to the Waystone every Felling night for months and Kote had never interjected anything of his own before. Not that you could expect anything else, really. He'd only been in town for a year or so. He was still a stranger. The smith's prentice had lived here since he was eleven, and he was still referred to as 'that Rannish boy', as if Rannish were some foreign country and not a town less than thirty miles away.

'Just something I heard once,' Kote said to fill the silence, obviously embarrassed.

Old Cob nodded before he cleared his throat and launched back into the story. 'Now this amulet was worth a whole bucket of gold nobles, but on account of Taborlin's kindness, the tinker sold it to him for nothing but an iron penny, a copper penny, and a silver penny. It was black as a winter night and cold as ice to touch, but so long as it was round his neck, Taborlin would be safe from the harm of evil things. Demons and such.'

'I'd give a good piece for such a thing these days,' Shep said darkly. He had drunk most and talked least over the course of the evening. Everyone knew that something bad had happened out on his farm last Cendling night, but since they were good friends they knew better than to press him for the details. At least not this early in the evening, not as sober as they were.

'Aye, who wouldn't?' Old Cob said judiciously, taking a long drink.

'I din't know the Chandrian were demons,' the boy said. 'I'd heard—'

'They ain't demons,' Jake said firmly. 'They were the first six people to refuse Tehlu's choice of the path, and he cursed them to wander the corners—'

'Are you telling this story, Jacob Walker?' Cob said sharply. 'Cause if you are, I'll just let you get on with it.'

The two men glared at each other for a long moment. Eventually Jake looked away, muttering something that could, conceivably, have been an apology.

Cob turned back to the boy. 'That's the mystery of the Chandrian,' he explained. 'Where do they come from? Where do they go after they've done their bloody deeds? Are they men who sold their souls? Demons? Spirits? No one knows.' Cob shot Jake a profoundly disdainful look. 'Though every half-wit *claims* he knows . . .'

The story fell further into bickering at this point, about the nature of the Chandrian, the signs that showed their presence to the wary, and whether the amulet would protect Taborlin from bandits, or mad dogs, or falling off a horse. Things were getting heated when the front door banged open.

Jake looked over. 'It's about time you got in, Carter. Tell this damn fool the difference between a demon and a dog. Everybody kn—' Jake stopped midsentence and rushed to the door. 'God's body, what happened to you?'

Carter stepped into the light, his face pale and smeared with blood. He clutched an old saddle blanket to his chest. It was an odd, awkward shape, as if it were wrapped around a tangle of kindling sticks.

His friends jumped off their stools and hurried over at the sight of him. 'I'm fine,' he said as he made his slow way into the common room. His eyes were wild around the edges, like a skittish horse. 'I'm fine. I'm fine.'

He dropped the bundled blanket onto the nearest table where it knocked hard against the wood, as if it were full of stones. His clothes were criss-crossed with long, straight cuts. His grey shirt hung in loose tatters except where it was stuck to his body, stained a dark, sullen red.

Graham tried to ease him into a chair. 'Mother of God. Sit down, Carter. What happened to you? Sit down.'

Carter shook his head stubbornly. 'I told you, I'm fine. I'm not hurt that bad.'

'How many were there?' Graham said.

'One,' Carter said. 'But it's not what you think—'

'Goddammit. I told you, Carter,' Old Cob burst out with the sort of frightened anger only relatives and close friends can muster. 'I told you for months now. You can't go out alone. Not even as far as Baedn. It ain't safe.' Jake laid a hand on the old man's arm, quieting him.

'Just take a sit,' Graham said, still trying to steer Carter into a chair. 'Let's get that shirt off you and get you cleaned up.'

Carter shook his head. 'I'm fine. I got cut up a little, but the blood is mostly Nelly's. It jumped on her. Killed her about two miles outside town, past the Oldstone Bridge.'

A moment of serious silence followed the news. The smith's prentice laid

a sympathetic hand on Carter's shoulder. 'Damn. That's hard. She was gentle as a lamb, too. Never tried to bite or kick when you brought her in for shoes. Best horse in town. Damn. I'm . . .' He trailed off. 'Damn. I don't know what to say.' He looked around helplessly.

Cob finally managed to free himself from Jake. 'I told you,' he repeated, shaking a finger in Carter's direction. 'There's folks out lately that would kill you for a pair of pennies, let alone a horse and cart. What are you going to do now? Pull it yourself?'

There was a moment of uncomfortable quiet. Jake and Cob glared at each other while the rest seemed at a loss for words, unsure how to comfort their friend.

The innkeeper moved carefully through the silence. Arms full, he stepped nimbly around Shep and began to arrange some items on a nearby table: a bowl of hot water, shears, some clean linen, a few glass bottles, needle and gut.

'This never would have happened if he'd listened to me in the first place,' Old Cob muttered. Jake tried to quiet him, but Cob brushed him aside. 'I'm just tellin' the truth. It's a damn shame about Nelly, but he better listen now or he'll end up dead. You don't get lucky twice with those sort of men.'

Carter's mouth made a thin line. He reached out and pulled the edge of the bloody blanket. Whatever was inside flipped over once and snagged on the cloth. Carter tugged harder and there was a clatter like a bag of flat river stones upended onto the tabletop.

It was a spider as large as a wagon wheel, black as slate.

The smith's prentice jumped backward and hit a table, knocking it over and almost falling to the ground himself. Cob's face went slack. Graham, Shep, and Jake made wordless, startled sounds and moved away, raising their hands to their faces. Carter took a step backward that was almost like a nervous twitch. Silence filled the room like a cold sweat.

The innkeeper frowned. 'They can't have made it this far west yet,' he said softly.

If not for the silence, it is unlikely anyone would have heard him. But they did. Their eyes pulled away from the thing on the table to stare mutely at the red-haired man.

Jake found his voice first. 'You know what this is?'

The innkeeper's eyes were distant. 'Scrael,' he said distractedly. 'I'd thought the mountains—'

'Scrael?' Jake broke in. 'Blackened body of God, Kote. You've seen these things before?'

'What?' The red-haired innkeeper looked up sharply, as if suddenly remembering where he was. 'Oh. No. No, of course not.' Seeing that he was the only one within arm's length of the dark thing, he took a measured step away. 'Just something I heard.' They stared at him. 'Do you remember the trader that came through about two span ago?'

They all nodded. 'Bastard tried to charge me ten pennies for a half-pound of salt,' Cob said reflexively, repeating the complaint for perhaps the hundredth time.

'Wish I'd bought some,' Jake mumbled. Graham nodded a silent agreement.

'He was a filthy shim,' Cob spat, seeming to find comfort in the familiar words. 'I might pay two in a tight time, but ten is robbery.'

'Not if there are more of those on the road,' Shep said darkly.

All eyes went back to the thing on the table.

'He told me he'd heard of them over near Melcombe,' Kote said quickly, watching everyone's faces as they studied the thing on the table. 'I thought he was just trying to drive up his prices.'

'What else did he say?' Carter asked.

The innkeeper looked thoughtful for a moment, then shrugged. 'I didn't get the whole story. He was only in town for a couple hours.'

'I don't like spiders,' the smith's prentice said. He remained on the other side of a table some fifteen feet away. 'Cover it up.'

'It's not a spider,' Jake said. 'It's got no eyes.'

'It's got no mouth either,' Carter pointed out. 'How does it eat?'

'*What* does it eat?' Shep said darkly.

The innkeeper continued to eye the thing curiously. He leaned closer, stretching out a hand. Everyone edged even farther away from the table.

'Careful,' Carter said. 'Its feet are sharp like knives.'

'More like razors,' Kote said. His long fingers brushed the scrael's black, featureless body. 'It's smooth and hard, like pottery.'

'Don't go messing with it,' the smith's prentice said.

Moving carefully, the innkeeper took one of the long, smooth legs and tried to break it with both hands like a stick. 'Not pottery,' he amended. He set it against the edge of the table and leaned his weight against it. It broke with a sharp *crack*. 'More like stone.' He looked up at Carter. 'How did it get all these cracks?' He pointed at the thin fractures that crazed the smooth black surface of the body.

'Nelly fell on it,' Carter said. 'It jumped out of a tree and started to climb

all over her, cutting her up with its feet. It moved so fast. I didn't even know what was going on.' Carter finally sank into the chair at Graham's urging. 'She got tangled in her harness and fell on it, broke some of its legs. Then it came after me, got on me, crawling all over.' He crossed his arms in front of his bloody chest and shuddered. 'I managed to get it off me and stomped it hard as I could. Then it got on me again . . .' He trailed off, his face ashen.

The innkeeper nodded to himself as he continued to prod the thing. 'There's no blood. No organs. It's just grey inside.' He poked it with a finger. 'Like a mushroom.'

'Great Tehlu, just leave it alone,' the smith's prentice begged. 'Sometimes spiders twitch after you kill them.'

'Listen to yourselves,' Cob said scathingly. 'Spiders don't get big as pigs. You know what this is.' He looked around, making eye contact with each of them. 'It's a demon.'

They looked at the broken thing. 'Oh, come on now,' Jake said, disagreeing mostly out of habit. 'It's not like . . .' He made an inarticulate gesture. 'It can't just . . .'

Everyone knew what he was thinking. Certainly there were demons in the world. But they were like Tehlu's angels. They were like heroes and kings. They belonged in stories. They belonged *out there.* Taborlin the Great called up fire and lightning to destroy demons. Tehlu broke them in his hands and sent them howling into the nameless void. Your childhood friend didn't stomp one to death on the road to Baedn-Bryt. It was ridiculous.

Kote ran his hand through his red hair, then broke the silence. 'There's one way to tell for sure,' he said, reaching into his pocket. 'Iron or fire.' He brought out a bulging leather purse.

'And the name of God,' Graham pointed out. 'Demons fear three things: cold iron, clean fire, and the holy name of God.'

The innkeeper's mouth pressed itself into a straight line that was not quite a frown. 'Of course,' he said as he emptied his purse onto the table then fingered through the jumbled coins: heavy silver talents and thin silver bits, copper jots, broken ha'pennies, and iron drabs. 'Does anyone have a shim?'

'Just use a drab,' Jake said. 'That's good iron.'

'I don't want good iron,' the innkeeper said. 'A drab has too much carbon in it. It's almost steel.'

'He's right,' the smith's prentice said. 'Except it's not carbon. You use coke to make steel. Coke and lime.'

The innkeeper nodded deferentially to the boy. 'You'd know best, young

master. It's your business after all.' His long fingers finally found a shim in the pile of coins. He held it up. 'Here we are.'

'What will it do?' Jake asked.

'Iron kills demons,' Cob's voice was uncertain, 'but this one's already dead. It might not do anything.'

'One way to find out.' The innkeeper met each of their eyes briefly, as if measuring them. Then he turned purposefully back to the table, and they edged farther away.

Kote pressed the iron shim to the black side of the creature, and there was a short, sharp crackling sound, like a pine log snapping in a hot fire. Everyone startled, then relaxed when the black thing remained motionless. Cob and the others exchanged shaky smiles, like boys spooked by a ghost story. Their smiles went sour as the room filled with the sweet, acrid smell of rotting flowers and burning hair.

The innkeeper pressed the shim onto the table with a sharp *click*. 'Well,' he said, brushing his hands against his apron. 'I guess that settles that. What do we do now?'

Hours later, the innkeeper stood in the doorway of the Waystone and let his eyes relax to the darkness. Footprints of lamplight from the inn's windows fell across the dirt road and the doors of the smithy across the way. It was not a large road, or well travelled. It didn't seem to lead anywhere, as some roads do. The innkeeper drew a deep breath of autumn air and looked around restlessly, as if waiting for something to happen.

He called himself Kote. He had chosen the name carefully when he came to this place. He had taken a new name for most of the usual reasons, and for a few unusual ones as well, not the least of which was the fact that names were important to him.

Looking up, he saw a thousand stars glittering in the deep velvet of a night with no moon. He knew them all, their stories and their names. He knew them in a familiar way, the way he knew his own hands.

Looking down, Kote sighed without knowing it and went back inside. He locked the door and shuttered the wide windows of the inn, as if to distance himself from the stars and all their varied names.

He swept the floor methodically, catching all the corners. He washed the tables and the bar, moving with a patient efficiency. At the end of an hour's

work, the water in his bucket was still clean enough for a lady to wash her hands in.

Finally, he pulled a stool behind the bar and began to polish the vast array of bottles nestled between the two huge barrels. He wasn't nearly as crisp and efficient about this chore as he had been with the others, and it soon became obvious the polishing was only an excuse to touch and hold. He even hummed a little, although he did not realise it, and would have stopped himself if he had known.

As he turned the bottles in his long, graceful hands the familiar motion eased a few tired lines from his face, making him seem younger, certainly not yet thirty. Not even near thirty. Young for an innkeeper. Young for a man with so many tired lines remaining on his face.

Kote came to the top of the stairs and opened the door. His room was austere, almost monkish. There was a black stone fireplace in the center of the room, a pair of chairs, and a small desk. The only other furniture was a narrow bed with a large, dark chest at its foot. Nothing decorated the walls or covered the wooden floor.

There were footsteps in the hall, and a young man stepped into the room carrying a bowl of stew that steamed and smelled of pepper. He was dark and charming, with a quick smile and cunning eyes. 'You haven't been this late in weeks,' he said as he handed over the bowl. 'There must have been good stories tonight, Reshi.'

Reshi was another of the innkeeper's names, a nickname almost. The sound of it tugged one corner of his mouth into a wry smile as he sank into the deep chair in front of the fire. 'So, what did you learn today, Bast?'

'Today, master, I learned why great lovers have better eyesight than great scholars.'

'And why is that, Bast?' Kote asked, amusement touching the edges of his voice.

Bast closed the door and returned to sit in the second chair, turning it to face his teacher and the fire. He moved with a strange delicacy and grace, as if he were close to dancing. 'Well Reshi, all the rich books are found inside where the light is bad. But lovely girls tend to be out in the sunshine and therefore much easier to study without risk of injuring one's eyes.'

Kote nodded. 'But an exceptionally clever student could take a book

outside, thus bettering himself without fear of lessening his much-loved faculty of sight.'

'I thought the same thing, Reshi. Being, of course, an exceptionally clever student.'

'Of course.'

'But when I found a place in the sun where I could read, a beautiful girl came along and kept me from doing anything of the sort,' Bast finished with a flourish.

Kote sighed. 'Am I correct in assuming you didn't manage to read any of *Celum Tinture* today?'

Bast managed to look somewhat ashamed.

Looking into the fire, Kote tried to assume a stern face and failed. 'Ah Bast, I hope she was lovely as a warm wind in the shade. I'm a bad teacher to say it, but I'm glad. I don't feel up to a long bout of lessons right now.' There was a moment of silence. 'Carter was attacked by a scraeling tonight.'

Bast's easy smile fell away like a cracked mask, leaving his face stricken and pale. 'The scrael?' He came halfway to his feet as if he would bolt from the room, then gave an embarrassed frown and forced himself back down into his chair. 'How do you know? Who found his body?'

'He's still alive, Bast. He brought it back. There was only one.'

'There's no such thing as one scraeling,' Bast said flatly. 'You know that.'

'I know,' Kote said. 'The fact remains there was only one.'

'And he *killed* it?' Bast said. 'It couldn't have been a scraeling. Maybe—'

'Bast, it was one of the scrael. I saw it.' Kote gave him a serious look. 'He was lucky, that's all. Even so he was badly hurt. Forty-eight stitches. I used up nearly all my gut.' Kote picked up his bowl of stew. 'If anyone asks, tell them my grandfather was a caravan guard who taught me how to clean and stitch a wound. They were too shocked to ask about it tonight, but tomorrow some of them might get curious. I don't want that.' He blew into his bowl, raising a cloud of steam around his face.

'What did you do with the body?'

'*I* didn't do anything with it,' Kote said pointedly. '*I* am just an innkeeper. This sort of thing is quite beyond me.'

'Reshi, you can't just let them muddle through this on their own.'

Kote sighed. 'They took it to the priest. He did all the right things for all the wrong reasons.'

Bast opened his mouth, but Kote continued before he could say anything. 'Yes, I made sure the pit was deep enough. Yes, I made sure there was rowan

wood in the fire. Yes, I made sure it burned long and hot before they buried it. And yes, I made sure that no one kept a piece of it as a souvenir.' He scowled, his eyebrows drawing together. 'I'm not an idiot, you know.'

Bast visibly relaxed, settling back into his chair. 'I know you're not, Reshi. But I wouldn't trust half these people to piss leeward without help.' He looked thoughtful for a moment. 'I can't imagine why there was only one.'

'Maybe they died coming over the mountains,' Kote suggested. 'All but this one.'

'It's possible,' Bast admitted reluctantly.

'Maybe it was that storm from a couple of days back,' Kote pointed out. 'A real wagon-tipper, as we used to say back in the troupe. All the wind and rain might have scattered one loose from the pack.'

'I like your first idea better, Reshi,' Bast said uncomfortably. 'Three or four scrael would go through this town like . . . like . . .'

'Like a hot knife through butter?'

'More like several hot knives through several dozen farmers,' Bast said dryly. 'These people can't defend themselves. I bet there aren't six swords in this whole town. Not that swords would do much good against the scrael.'

There was a long moment of thoughtful silence. After a moment Bast began to fidget. 'Any news?'

Kote shook his head. 'They didn't get to the news tonight. Carter disrupted things while they were still telling stories. That's something, I suppose. They'll be back tomorrow night. It'll give me something to do.'

Kote poked his spoon idly into the stew. 'I should have bought the scrael from Carter,' he mused. 'He could've used the money for a new horse. People would have come from all over to see it. We could have had some business for a change.'

Bast gave him a speechless, horrified look.

Kote made a pacifying gesture with the hand that held the spoon. 'I'm joking, Bast.' He gave a weak smile. 'Still, it would have been nice.'

'No Reshi, it most certainly would *not* have been nice,' Bast said emphatically. ' "People would have come from all over to see it," ' he repeated derisively. 'Indeed.'

'The *business* would have been nice,' Kote clarified. 'Busy-ness would be nice.' He jabbed his spoon into the stew again. 'Anything would be nice.'

They sat for a long moment. Kote scowling down into the bowl of stew in his hands, his eyes far away. 'It must be awful for you here, Bast,' he said at last. 'You must be numb with boredom.'

Bast shrugged. 'There are a few young wives in town. A scattering of daughters.' He grinned like a child. 'I tend to make my own fun.'

'That's good, Bast.' There was another silence. Kote took another spoonful, chewed, swallowed. 'They thought it was a demon, you know.'

Bast shrugged. 'It might as well be, Reshi. It's probably the best thing for them to think.'

'I know. I encouraged them, in fact. But you know what that means.' He met Bast's eyes. 'The blacksmith is going to be doing a brisk business in the next couple of days.'

Bast's expression went carefully blank. 'Oh.'

Kote nodded. 'I won't blame you if you want to leave, Bast. You have better places to be than this.'

Bast's expression was shocked. 'I couldn't leave, Reshi.' He opened and closed his mouth a few times, at a loss for words. 'Who else would teach me?'

Kote grinned, and for a moment his face showed how truly young he was. Behind the weary lines and the placid innkeeper's expression he looked no older than his dark-haired companion. 'Who indeed?' He gestured toward the door with his spoon. 'Go and do your reading then, or bother someone's daughter. I'm sure you have better things to do than watch me eat.'

'Actually . . .'

'Begone demon!' Kote said, switching to a thickly accented Temic through half a mouthful of stew. *'Tehus antausa eha!'*

Bast burst into startled laughter and made an obscene gesture with one hand.

Kote swallowed and changed languages. *'Aroi te denna-leyan!'*

'Oh come now,' Bast reproached, his smile falling away. 'That's just insulting.'

'By earth and stone, I abjure you!' Kote dipped his fingers into the cup by his side and flicked droplets casually in Bast's direction. 'Glamour be banished!'

'With cider?' Bast managed to look amused and annoyed at the same time as he daubed a bead of liquid from the front of his shirt. 'This had better not stain.'

Kote took another bite of his dinner. 'Go soak it. If the situation becomes desperate, I recommend you avail yourself of the numerous solvent formulae extant in *Celum Tinture.* Chapter thirteen, I believe.'

'Fine.' Bast stood and walked to the door, stepping with his strange, casual grace. 'Call if you need anything.' He closed the door behind himself.

Kote ate slowly, mopping up the last of the stew with a piece of bread. He

looked out of the window as he ate, or tried to, as the lamplight turned its surface mirrorlike against the dark behind it.

His eyes wandered the room restlessly. The fireplace was made of the same black rock as the one downstairs. It stood in the center of the room, a minor feat of engineering of which Kote was rather proud. The bed was small, little more than a cot, and if you were to touch it you would find the mattress almost nonexistent.

A skilled observer might notice there was something his gaze avoided. The same way you avoid meeting the eye of an old lover at a formal dinner, or that of an old enemy sitting across the room in a crowded alehouse late at night.

Kote tried to relax, failed, fidgeted, sighed, shifted in his seat, and without willing it his eyes fell on the chest at the foot of the bed.

It was made of roah, a rare, heavy wood, dark as coal and smooth as polished glass. Prized by perfumers and alchemists, a piece the size of your thumb was easily worth gold. To have a chest made of it went far beyond extravagance.

The chest was sealed three times. It had a lock of iron, a lock of copper, and a lock that could not be seen. Tonight the wood filled the room with the almost imperceptible aroma of citrus and quenching iron.

When Kote's eyes fell on the chest they did not dart quickly away. They did not slide slyly to the side as if he would pretend it wasn't there at all. But in a moment of looking, his face regained all the lines the simple pleasures of the day had slowly smoothed away. The comfort of his bottles and books was erased in a second, leaving nothing behind his eyes but emptiness and ache. For a moment fierce longing and regret warred across his face.

Then they were gone, replaced by the weary face of an innkeeper, a man who called himself Kote. He sighed again without knowing it and pushed himself to his feet.

It was a long time before he walked past the chest to bed. Once in bed, it was a long time before he slept.

As Kote had guessed, they came back to the Waystone the next night for dinner and drinks. There were a few half-hearted attempts at stories, but they died out quickly. No one was really in the mood.

So it was still early in the evening when the discussion turned to matters of greater import. They chewed over the rumours that had come into town,

most of them troubling. The Penitent King was having a difficult time with the rebels in Resavek. This caused some concern, but only in a general way. Resavek was a long way off, and even Cob, the most worldly of them, would be hard pressed to find it on a map.

They discussed the war in their own terms. Cob predicted a third levy tax after the harvests were in. No one argued, though there hadn't been a three-bleeder year in living memory.

Jake guessed the harvest would be good enough so the third levy wouldn't break most families. Except the Bentleys, who were on hard times anyway. And the Orissons, whose sheep kept disappearing. And Crazy Martin, who had planted all barley this year. Every farmer with half a brain had planted beans. That was one good thing about all the fighting – soldiers ate beans, and prices would be high.

After a few more drinks, deeper concerns were voiced. Deserter soldiers and other opportunists were thick on the roads, making even short trips risky. The roads were always bad, of course, in the same way that winter was always cold. You complained, took sensible precautions, and got on with the business of living your life.

But this was different. Over the last two months the roads had become so bad that people had stopped complaining. The last caravan had two wagons and four guards. The merchant had been asking ten pennies for half a pound of salt, fifteen for a loaf of sugar. He didn't have any pepper, or cinnamon, or chocolate. He did have one small sack of coffee, but he wanted two silver talents for that. At first people had laughed at his prices. Then, when he held firm, folk had spat and cursed at him.

That had been two span ago: twenty-two days. There had not been another serious trader since, even though this was the season for it. So despite the third levy tax looming large in everyone's minds, people were looking in their purses and wishing they'd bought a little something, just in case the snow came early.

No one spoke of the previous night, of the thing they had burned and buried. Other folk were talking, of course. The town was alive with gossip. Carter's wounds ensured that the stories were taken half seriously, but not much more than half. The word 'demon' was being spoken, but it was with smiles half-hidden behind raised hands.

Only the six friends had seen the thing before it was burned. One of them had been wounded and the others had been drinking. The priest had seen it too, but it was his job to see demons. Demons were good for his business.

The innkeeper had seen it too, apparently. But he wasn't from around here. He couldn't know the truth that was so apparent to everyone born and raised in this little town: stories were told here, but they happened somewhere else. This was not a place for demons.

Besides, things were bad enough without borrowing trouble. Cob and the rest knew there was no sense talking about it. Trying to convince folk would only make them a laughingstock, like Crazy Martin, who had been trying to dig a well inside his own house for years now.

Still, each of them bought a piece of cold-wrought iron from the smith, heavy as they could swing, and none of them said what they were thinking. Instead they complained that the roads were bad and getting worse. They talked about merchants, and deserters, and levies, and not enough salt to last the winter. They reminisced that three years ago no one would have even thought of locking their doors at night, let alone barring them.

The conversation took a downward turn from there, and even though none of them said what they were thinking, the evening ended on a grim note. Most evenings did these days, times being what they were.