

The Swordsman Smada

by John Steakley

John Steakley has led a busy life. He has been a stock-car racer, a semipro football player, a private detective, an actor, a car salesman, and, of course, a writer. He has been writing for the movies for the last nine years, has completed one novel, *Armor*, and is awaiting publication of another, entitled *Vampires*.

It made sense that we were there.

It just made sense. That's how come we could accept it so easily. It was where we were *supposed* to be. It just made *sense*.

At least, that's what we thought before the slaughter began.

Lanny and me—that's Lanny Weaver, my best friend—were big into the Horseclans like you can't believe. Like even I can't believe, looking back on it. We ate 'em and drank 'em and *talked* 'em! God, how we *talked* 'em! We'd stay up all *night* all the *time* talking Horseclans stuff. And of course we always ended up talking about how neat it would be to really be there, really *live* in that world. To know Bill the Axe personally and hang out with him. And Milo. We wanted to meet Milo Morai more than anybody, of course. But we didn't really care if we never even saw him if we could just *be there!* Hot damn! Really *be there!* Carrying swords and petting prairiecats and wenching and just traveling around kicking ass whenever we wanted to without any cops or anybody to bug us. The Horseclans world was infinitely better than our own, we believed, and we talked about that a lot, too.

We dressed like 'em, too. We had tunics and stuff. And chain mail made special by some retired army tank guy in Richmond, Virginia. And swords, too, made by the same dude. We had everything. Really. Daggers and stuff. Wine-skins. Leggings.

And we wore them. At science fiction conventions and at meetings of our club and at SCA tournaments, which is really how all this happened. What, as Lanny said, "tipped us over the edge."

Anyway . . . you know what the SCA is? The Society for Creative Anachronism? If you know about Horseclans you probably know about them. But anyway, the SCA are a bunch of folks heavy into medieval life-styles. They dress up like those days, women too, and they have big feasts and tournaments where knights fight to establish the pecking order and determine who the king is. The king is the best fighter of everybody and he gets his choice of queen, which is sorta how the trouble got started, except Lanny and me weren't trying to be king—it wasn't that big a tournament. We were just trying to get laid.

You see, there were these two new girls just moved to town. They were sisters and they were . . . well, dynamite-looking. Gorgeous. And sexy, too. Really sexy. Blondes. I've always loved blondes. Lanny, too. So we set out to win their hands in trial by combat. And they'd made it real clear that it could be done. Win more than their hands, if you get what I'm driving at. Oh, those two were really something. They had us huffing and puffing. And they were eating it up the whole time. They had every dude in the club ready to kill himself—or anybody else—to get some of what they were offering. And the girls loved that, too. The funny thing was, we didn't care. I mean, we knew what it said about those two if they liked causing all that trouble and strife and the rest of it. But we didn't care. They would smile these smug little smiles—dimples and the rest—and then wag away real slow and we'd just stand there like idiots until they were out of sight.

And then we'd go practice like crazy. Huffing and puffing and pawing the ground.

Then the tournament came. It was in the spring and everything was real and pretty and we were all camped out in the "country with trailers and tents and stuff. It was really nice.

Sunshine and green grass and long flowing dresses and the like.

And we—Lanny and me—we were ready. Ready and psyched up and, most important of all, in shape. We had been working out together all winter long. Before the two sisters even showed up, even. I mean—we were ready.

And then the Incredible Hulk showed up and entered the tournament.

We called him the Incredible Hulk because . . . well, if you'd seen him you would too. His real name was Something Jones but he went by Bubba.

No kidding. Bubba.

But the point is, he was as big as a house. Slow as hell. Much slower than Lanny and me—but then that was our big deal, speed, and always had been. We were faster than any of the rest of them. And strong, like I said, because we were in shape from working out all that time. Stronger than most and faster than anybody and . . .

And it didn't help. Bubba pounded us both. Badly. I mean, really. We must've struck him ten times for every time he hit us, but the thing is, every time he hit one of us we'd bounce. It was frustrating as hell. Not to mention painful. Of course, you really couldn't get hurt too badly with masking-taped cane swords. All the weapons had to be taped up heavily. That was part of the rules. Nobody wanted to get skewered. But, see, that was the point. While we were getting dribbled by this guy we kept thinking: If this was *real*, we'd have killed him ten minutes ago.

But none of that made any difference. Bubba won and won so decisively that he got *both* sisters and then to top it all off was loud and obnoxious about it and then rude and crude to the girls, and you know what? They didn't even seem to mind. They let him get away with it. He was a jerk and clumsy and loud, but . . .

But he had *won*.

Dammit!

The party afterward wasn't much fun. Lanny and I spent most of it gritting our teeth. Oh, we were nice and all—what choice did we have? But it wasn't much fun. Maybe it was that awful mead stuff we were drinking that somebody had made in his garage. Or maybe it was watching-Bubba feeling up both girls in public.

Anyway, we left. Supposedly to go back to our trailer and get the tequila, but mostly just to get away from the rest and talk.

Only we didn't. We sat there across from each other, both covered with grass stains and humiliation, and didn't say a word for several minutes.

Then Lanny spoke: "Mr. Felix?"

"Yes, Mr. Weaver?"

"Let's get dressed."

I grinned, said: "Yeah!"

And we did. Put on our best tunics, not the junk we wore for tournaments. The realistic stuff. The chain mail and the rest.

And the real swords. And the real daggers.

And then we opened the bottle of tequila and took a swig apiece, toasting ourselves, and stepped outside.

It was the next part that I don't understand. I mean, there was a lot of it I didn't understand at the time and still don't. But what happened next has always been a mystery to me. I mean, how could we be so stupid and naive not to . . .

Anyway, we stepped outside into the darkness and headed toward the campfire and the rest of the party. They were singing over there and laughing and sparks were climbing up flickering above them and they all seemed to be having a great time, and suddenly we didn't want any part of it: We turned without a word and stepped into the woods to get drunk on our own.

We sure did that—get drunk, I mean. Just Lanny, and me and the branches up against the stars and the tequila bottle. And our voices, of course. Because we were having our same old conversation in no time at all. About the Horseclans world and how we wanted to be there. Hell, by now we were so drunk it was how we *deserved* to be there and *ought* to be there and other things so terrifyingly stupid that even now when I think about it I cringe.

But at the time it all made perfect sense. I mean that: *perfect* sense. There was something especially strident and clear about that night with Lanny and me all alone in those woods with our dreams and tequila. More than those things should've added up to. And we felt it.

We didn't say we felt it. We never acknowledged it out

loud. We didn't have to. It was there. I could see it in his grin.

We ended up sacrificing the last third of the tequila to the Horseclans God, which is just as well, seeing as how we were already so drunk we couldn't hardly move. But we made it a real solemn deal, praising His vision of glory and honor and combat. We ended it by making a formal request to be allowed to go there.

Then we sat down.

Then we passed out.

And when we woke up, we were there.

And, for the life of me, I still don't understand why we weren't scared! God knows we should have been.

Soon, very soon, we were. But not soon enough.

The man astride the horse was a very serious piece of work. It wasn't so much what he was wearing as how he was wearing it. Everything from the broadsword to the piercing stare was real. Real!

"I said, 'Stand aside!' Must I assist you?" boomed out through his graying goatee, and only then did I realize he had spoken before. It had been his voice that had waked me up.

Us up, I mean. Lanny was there a few feet away, sprawled as I was on the dusty thing that passed for a road.

I looked at him. "I don't believe this is happening!"

Lanny's eyes were as fierce and blazing as his red hair in the sun. "Sure you do!" he replied. And grinned.

He was right, of course. I did believe it. And, God help all fools, loved it.

"Lads!" boomed out from the same place as the rider spurred his horse forward between us. We scrambled out of the way.

Lanny was a lot quicker than me, as usual.

"Beg pardon, m'lord. We did not mean to impede your journey. We were momentarily dazed by—"

"By drink, from the look of you," snarled the rider. But he pulled his horse up and turned it about to face us. I noticed then how foamy it was. He must have had quite a trip himself.

"Nay, good sir. Bewitched!"

The rider's gaze narrowed even further, if that were possible. Lanny chose to ignore it. He stepped forward and started

to babble a tale about how we were both good men and true and fine swordsmen from good families, clans, he said, and had been waylaid by a wicked sorceress who had taken offense at our nobly attempting to rescue a fair damsel from her clutches—which we had managed to do despite a fearsome struggle and great personal loss to ourselves. But then the witch was so offended by our interference that she loosed upon us one demon after another, which we barely managed to escape each time, so then the witch cast a spell which flung us from our homelands (after first robbing us of all our coins) to this very spot where he found us just now, alone, penniless, lost, but without a single regret at having done the right thing—nay, the only thing a true gentleman and swordsman could have done.

It was great shit.

Even better, it looked like it was going to be effective shit. The rider sat silently throughout the entire tirade, seeming to eat it up. And I figured it was going to work. "It" being whatever the hell it was Lanny was trying to scam.

Then the man started laughing. He laughed and laughed and laughed and laughed. He laughed so hard tears flowed down his cheeks and his great belly rolled like a waterbed. He laughed so hard it wasn't even embarrassing after a while. Well, not completely.

When he finally got control of himself, he spoke.

"What are your names, lads?"

"Lanny Weaver, m'lord."

"Brad Felix, m'lord."

"Odd names you have."

Lanny just smiled. "Did I not just tell you of our having been whisked away from our native lands? In our world, our names are—"

The man held up a hand in a firm gesture. "Aye, lad. I did hear your tale. And enjoy it much." He smiled. And then the smile went away in a flash. "But I do not wish to hear it anew."

It was not a request. Lanny and I looked at each other, nodded, said: "Yes, m'lord," in unison.

The man leaned back in his saddle and rested a hand lightly on the hilt of his broadsword. It was not necessarily a threatening gesture. It was just to get our attention.

"You lads are indeed far from home. Young men seeking

your fortune. Seeking adventure and amusement. Lost and poor, no doubt, due to some foolish trusting of a clever wench, I know not how you came to be fast asleep on the road, and care not." He paused, looked pained. Then he smiled rather paternally. "Indeed, I know not why I should care about you at all, such as you are. But I was young once. And foolish." Then he peered right at us as he added: "And a liar."

We knew better than to take offense. Lanny even knew enough to smile.

The man nodded, satisfied, and went on. "So I shall offer you employment. It so happens I am in temporary need of a few extra swords in my personal guard. Have you horses?"

"Nay, m'lord," Lanny replied.

The man sighed. "I thought not." He paused for a moment. An idea seemed to occur to him. "It matters not. Several of my riders shall be along on this road. They have been lagging behind due to laziness and sloth. Tell them you are of my personal guard and are to take two of their freshest mounts. Then I shall expect you to catch up to me on this same road by sundown." He leaned down toward us and his voice got hard. "By sundown, lads, I'll be damned if I shall put two wastrels afoot just to horse two more. Is that clear?"

"Aye, m'lord."

"Aye, m'lord."

"For your sakes I hope it is."

"M'lord?" Lanny asked next. "Could we not have you name as well?"

"Trebtor Smada."

"Trevor Smada," I mispronounced.

"That is Trebor, lad! Not . . . whatever it was you said. You would do well not to get my name backward."

I was thinking that missing only one letter hardly consisted of getting it backward when suddenly two coins were spinning into the air, one toward each of us. Lanny caught his in the air with one hand. It took me two hands and some juggling, but at least I didn't disgrace myself by dropping it. And then, of course, I did drop it. I bent down, red-faced, and picked it up.

Smada was already on his way down the road. "That's to seal our contract. Perform well and faithfully and there will be more. Much more." He started cantering away. Lanny shouted after him.

"Lord Smada! How will we know these men with the horses?"

Without even slowing down, Smada boomed back over his shoulder: "Take the first two horses from anyone seeking Trebor Smada!" he shouted and then was gone around the bend.

Lanny and I were the ones really around the damned bend. We had bought the whole thing. We spent the next hour congratulating ourselves for having conned a job right off. Idiots! Stupid, trusting, numskulled idiots!

Oh, there had been a con, all right. But we hadn't even seen it. We just stood there on that road, like the dumb shits we were, waiting to die.

It was a couple of hours before anybody showed up on the road. Somehow Lanny and I managed to spend that time getting deeper into trouble. It started off innocently enough, though. We were just sitting there grinning at each other and noticing how pretty everything was.

Because it really was. I mean, gorgeous. The sky was so blue, the trees so green and pretty. Everything. The woods, the smell of the air. Even the dust of the road was somehow just right.

Us, too. I felt terrific. I felt healthy and . . . pure. I had even lost my desire for cigarettes. Well, my craving, anyway. After a while we noticed our clothes were different than they had been. The same, too. That is, they looked the same. But different. More realistic. Zippers, for example, had been replaced by buttons somehow.

It was neat.

In fact, I realized I felt as good as I ever had. I felt like I belonged. Oh, we had no excuses.

A thought occurred to me after the first half hour.

"Lanny?"

"Yeah."

"I don't think this is the Horseclans world."

Lanny laughed. "Of course it is. It's perfect."

"I know. That's the trouble."

Lanny laughed again. "What do you think it is?"

"I dunno. A movie."

"Huh?"

"That's what it feels like."

It did. It was too perfect. And I should have started to get scared right then with that thought. And maybe I did feel a little something, but then I got sidetracked when Lanny started talking again. This time it was about how we had to establish ourselves right away with these "peon types coming up the road." The idea, according to Lanny (and, to be fair, I liked it, too), was that we had to set these dudes straight. These and all the rest we met. Two kinds of people in this kinda place: the nobles and the gophers. And we were in no mood to gopher anything. Therefore we had to let everybody know right away that we expected to be treated like the upper-crust types we were.

"And," Lanny added, "what's the best way to get treated with respect?"

"Overtip the bartenders?"

"C'mon, Felix. Be serious."

"Sorry. How then?"

"Act like you expect it, dummy. Act like you're used to giving orders instead of taking them. You know, a little arrogant."

Which made perfect sense to me. I was already a little arrogant, feeling as good as I did.

So, anyway, that's how Lanny and I managed to get in trouble before anything even started.

Like I said before: no excuses.

An hour later they came around the trees riding at a slow walk. They looked tired and dusty and out of breath. About like Smada. Only these guys were a helluva lot less impressive. For one thing, Smada had been a big guy. Hard to tell when somebody's sitting a horse, but I'd guessed he was at least six three and two hundred fifty pounds or so. These guys were short. Five eight tops. We probably outweighed them by twenty pounds each.

They didn't even look particularly suspicious when we stepped into the road and held up our hands to stop them.

But why should they have been scared? They had no way of knowing how stupid we were.

They weren't too bright, either, thank God. They were off their horses and gratefully guzzling from the wineskins we offered before even asking who we were. I tasted the wine myself in turn. We had left with Robert Mondavi Table Red.

This was something awful and realistic. The riders seemed to like it well enough.

And then the shit started.

It didn't take much. One second we were all standing there smiling and drinking and the next second there were swords flashing in the sun. We didn't even get around to mentioning about taking their horses. We just introduced ourselves and told 'em who we worked for.

Gordon, the only one whose name I got, choked on his swig of wine. He stared at us.

"Trebor Smada?"

"The same," replied Lanny smugly. "We're his personal guards."

And then the one closest to me, not Gordon, had his sword out and was swinging with both hands right at my head, and I ducked instinctively and yelled, "Hey, watch it!" and stepped inside his guard and grabbed his wrists and said, "What the hell do you think you're doing, prick?"

And you know what? He just stared at me for a second. Totally unbelieving. But why shouldn't he be surprised I hadn't just immediately attacked back at him? He didn't know anything about stupid twentieth-century young-punk parking-lot slugfests. He didn't know anything about would-be posturing machismo. He lived in this world. If you fought then you fought. And if you won you lived and the other guy died.

In his world you didn't spend twenty minutes first standing around saying, "You better watch out, buddy, or else," while you took turns shoving each other in the chest until other friends came in to pull you two apart.

He was going to kill me. Just like that. And the fact that I didn't seem to know that startled him. Which is probably why when he ignored my idiotic grip on his wrists and flicked his blade at my face he didn't do it hard enough to cut my head off.

But his edge cut the shit out of my cheek. I stepped back and put my gloved hand up there, where the cheek stung. My glove came away bloody, and I lost it.

Which is what saved my life. I could just as easily have run away screaming. Instead I got mad and lived.

My sword was suddenly in my hand, bigger than his, and so was I, and swinging at him. There was a burst of sparks

and a godawful clang I'd never heard before outside of a movie, but I didn't stop to think about it—I just swung again, swung so hard and missed him so completely that I lost my balance and fell forward just as his first thrust sliced through, not my skin, but my hair.

That scared me. It also pissed me off. I growled and screamed and leapt to my feet, swinging again as hard as I could. He blocked me easily enough, parried me well the second time, but I was just too strong for him. Too strong and too mad and too scared and too adrenaline-zapped to be stopped. I broke down his guard with the sheer force of my blows. Broke his guard and then a rib and then when he stood there staggering I laid into him with both hands toward his throat, but I was too excited and too a-jumble to get it right. My blade got turned in my hand, and the flat of it hit him in the nose with a mighty *whack* and he sat down right where he was and keeled over.

I stood there a second puffing and staring until I heard a groan and a clump and saw Lanny tripping backward over his own feet, his sword flying over his head, and Gordon above him bracing his back foot for a quick thrust, and somehow I was right there behind him and slamming the hilt of my sword against the back of his neck, only I missed this time, too, and there was a truly awful crunch as the pommel bashed a hole in the skull and he died before he could fall.

Then he did fall, and I stood there, knees wobbly, until I sat down with a sudden plop and looked at the sight of that mashed gray and bloody head.

"Lanny! Lanny, I think I killed him!" I wailed, and the tears were already coming to my eyes.

Lanny was a lot cooler. Always had been. He was already back on his feet and retrieving his sword before he said: "Don't worry. He would've died anyway." Lanny shoved the body over with his foot, and I saw the blood. Lanny had been doing pretty well after all. The man's thigh was cut almost to the bone. What do you call that artery? The femoral?

I got pretty sick. After that I stayed crouched there beside the road on my hands and knees while Lanny made purposeful movements around me. I wanted to help, knew I should, but just couldn't stand to look at them right then, particularly after seeing that my guy was a lot more than knocked out. Seems I'd driven the nose straight back into his head.

Sht.

I stayed out of it until I felt Lanny pressing a cloth against my bloody cheek and putting my hand up to hold it there. It stung from the wine he'd soaked it with. But that made sense. Alcohol to kill the germs, like in the movies. And fortunately, the resulting infection wasn't serious.

I didn't really have it together until a few minutes later when we were already astride the horses, and moving down the road. Lanny's voice was sort of a dull irritation at first until I started paying attention to the individual words and realized he was trying to bring me out of the shock by reminding me of the point of the whole deal.

Such as: We had wanted to be here. We had wanted to kick ass. We had.

Plus: They had started it.

After a while it started to work, bless him. He got me calmed down and then coherent, and then even I started to look back with satisfaction on what I'd done. Only then, when I realized I'd broken every fencing rule I'd ever known and *still* gotten away with it, did I get really scared the way I should have been all along.

I had to stop my horse and get sick again. Lanny sneered and looked disgusted, but an hour later he had to do the same thing.

But that seemed to work it out of us, damn our silly hides. That seemed to settle us down. A couple of hours later, I'll be damned if we weren't grinning and cocky again.

Incredible.

"Wait a minute!" Lanny said suddenly, and pulled his horse up short.

"What?"

"We were set up! Smada set us up."

My reply showed how it had been done. "Huh?" I muttered.

"And we fell for it! Dammit! We were so busy trying to impress him we didn't even see what he was doing. He wasn't hiring us. He was using us to slow down whoever those guys were that were chasing him. Don't you see? He was running away from them. And he suckered us into buying him some extra time." He stared at me, his face furious with anger. "You get it, Felix?"

I did. Too late. Way too late. But I got it. Finally.

"Hey!" I burst out. "We've got to get off this road. If there are any more and they find those bodies in the ditch . . ."

Lanny was way ahead of me again. "Not only that, there's Smada."

"Whaddya mean?"

"He said he'd meet us down this road. I guarantee you that means he's on another one. We gotta go cross-country until we find him."

"Okay. Which way?"

"Guess."

And I did, and once more dumb luck (or, thinking back on it, maybe something else) worked. We not only found the other road, we came across it at the inn with Smada's horse corralled outside.

Along the way an odd thing happened. I asked Lanny if he was sure we wanted to find Smada. He looked at me funny and said of course we did and I let it go. Because it was true. I really did want to find Smada. Supposedly to teach him a lesson for messing with us. But in my heart I knew better, and so did Lanny, though neither of us admitted it.

We wanted to find Smada. But not to fight him. We wanted to find him to brag about what we'd done.

See what I mean? We were slow learners.

The fight started when, somewhere knee-deep into the party, I turned to the innkeeper and asked to use his phone. Don't know what possessed me to do that. The thing is, there was this dude standing at the bar between Lanny and me when I said this, a real jerk this guy, and . . . well, as soon as the words were out of my mouth I realized how silly it was, being where we were and all, and Lanny did too, and we looked at each other and started laughing. And this obnoxious dude, who had been spoiling for a fight all night long, thought we were laughing at *him*, and the next thing I knew I was fighting again.

Which was okay with me. The guy had pissed me off long ago when he'd been messing with Smada, and even though I was just stumbling into it more or less unexpectedly, it was all right, it was okay, I was ready.

Thinking back, we stumbled into the whole mess. And then stumbled from one step to the next. Like the inn, itself.

Thinking back, we didn't enter that inn at all. We dove

into it headfirst. Dove into it like it was the ultimate hot tub, steamy smoky air and spilling wine and healthy fun-smelly wenches and roaring fires and roaring laughter and loud music and barking dogs and gritty cool stone floors ideally positioned to catch you when you fell over with a mug to your lips.

It was a wonderful place. Truly. Exactly as I'd always imagined such a place to be. I mean *exactly*. Which shoulda made me wonder, only I was too busy having fun to think to be scared.

We didn't have any trouble with Smada. We stomped in to confront him, and there he was, pillowed in a corner like a sultan with wenches framed all about him and servant types fetching and carrying. And the first thing anybody said was me saying: "What happened to you?" Because lying there like that instead of astride that huge mount of his he looked so, I dunno, *unformidable*.

Underrating Smada was, without doubt, one of the major mistakes we made. Bad as it was, though, we managed to compound it later on.

The argument we had stated our intentions of having never got very far. For one thing, our hearts weren't much in it, and for another . . . well, he looked so goddam jolly there on those pillows filling his hands with whores and his belly with wine. We didn't want to fight him. We wanted to join him.

We did.

Smada, reading us like a book as always, laughingly pointed out that it was *we* who had begun by trying to con *him*, which was true. And it was *we* who had begun the day without a cent but had ended it safe, healthy, blooded, rich (from the coins Lanny had taken from the bodies) and mounted. So what had we to complain about?

Put that way, nothing. We laughed and looked a bit sheep-faced, I guess, and then we joined right in. It was wonderful. There were all *kinds* of folks there. It was one of the biggest inns in the territory and situated well along the major trade routes. There were merchants with their entourages and young swordsman types like Lanny and me and old swordsman types like Smada. One of them, the general, a big old tough dude with a full beard and scars, turned out to know somebody who knew somebody who was a cousin of somebody Smada knew well before she died, and on the basis of that

intimacy the two decided to combine parties at once, and within an hour the old general and his bunch, along with Smada trailing us, had all but taken over the place.

All but. There was this obnoxious punk I mentioned before who was feeling left out, I guess, on account of our bunch having bought up all half-dozen whores for the evening or maybe just because he knew what a jerk he was and was embarrassed about it. Or both, I dunno.

Anyway, he went out of his way to make a big deal of it when Smada, quite by accident, bumped into him on the way to the outhouse and spilled his tankard of ale.

Smada apologized. Profusely. More profusely than I would have, and a lot more than I expected him to. But the punk still wasn't satisfied.

"If the old man is too befuddled by drink to make true his steps, then he had best learn greater care in a public inn or someone else will leap to instruct him."

And I thought: Whoops! Here it comes! And I was looking at Lanny, who was already looking for *his* sword.

But all Smada did was bow and say: "An excellent point, young sir."

And my mouth just sorta fell open. But there was more to come. The punk kept pressing it.

"Perhaps, old man, I shall trouble myself to give you this lesson here and now, lest you forget the point that must be made."

And I thought: Here we go for sure! Smada will *never* take that!

But while I was thinking that, he was doing that very thing. With another bow, he said: "A generous notion, young sir. But I fear the very drink which provoked my unfortunate mishap might further besmear my appreciation for your kind instruction."

I couldn't believe it. But there was more still. When the punk was still standing there uncertain about what to do, Smada groveled some more.

"Pray, young sir, perhaps another time when I am not so clumsy with wine?"

And the punk stared. Then he nodded, abruptly and rude as hell, and just turned away back to the bar. Smada waited a beat and then trod on off to the can.

Lanny and I looked at each other. He was the first to speak.

"That chickenshit old fart!" he hissed. "Can you believe that?"

"No, dammit!" I replied in the same harsh whisper. "And we thought he was such a big deal!"

"Well," Lanny mused, "he was the first swordsman we found. I guess that's why we thought he was something. And on that big horse and all. Dammit!" he muttered a few seconds later. "I just hate being embarrassed for people."

And I nodded to that.

Later on when Smada reappeared from the outhouse we had trouble looking in his direction. But, interestingly enough, no one else did. We assumed it was because no one else had seen it. Lanny and I *had* been the closest ones to the exchange. And the party hadn't stopped at all while it was going on. So we just figured nobody else had noticed.

Wrong again.

With everybody else apparently immune to the tension, Lanny and I felt it was pretty hard for us to maintain it. And Smada really was the life of the party. In no time at all we were right back into the swing of things.

We thought. Hell, we *never* picked up on the rhythm of that place!

It was storytime that did it. Smada insisted on a story, and the old general echoed his sentiments loudly, and then the girls cheered and encouraged the idea. The first guy was this little short thin jester type, the old general's official storyteller. He cranked out this tale about—who else?—Bill of Morguhn, and then another one about the legend of the Undying One, who Lanny and I knew damn well was none other than good ol' Milo but nobody else considered anything but a fairy tale.

Then it was our side's turn. And Lanny did *The Mummy*.

No fooling. He did the whole damn movie. Got a bunch of white cloth and wrapped it around his head and legs. He had one wrist tied to his chest and the other arm stretched out in front of him reaching for victims' throats and dragging the one dead leg behind him and the whole bit. It was great. And the people at the inn absolutely ate it up. The whores squealed and held each other and us when the mummy snatched the

beautiful archaeologist's daughter and everybody cheered like hell when the evil Egyptian got zapped by his own monster.

Lanny was a tremendous hit. He should've been a writer.

After that was singing and dancing by the whores. It was, trust me, worth seeing. By the time the food came I was so horny my mug shook. But the food took care of that. I use the term "food" loosely.

Ate something they said was owl and tasted like one—that or anything else that had stayed up several nights in a row. Probably drinking that ale stuff the whole time. Let me tell you about that ale: It was no Budweiser. Though it probably would sell well in Milwaukee or anyplace else where they have trouble starting their cars on icy mornings. A little shot of that shit in the carburetor and "Zoom, zoom!"

The wine was—how shall I put this?—worse. In fact, the whole meal gave me a Big Mac Attack. I remember thinking about all the preservative fuss always going on back home and thinking that Ralph Nader, who had never manufactured anything and never would, didn't know what a glory he had.

Anyway, the men got to dance after that. Lanny and I needed to do something to work this stuff through our tummies. And we got into it full steam. We sang and danced and fell over benches and laughed so hard we couldn't organize arms and legs enough to get back up, and *that* only made us laugh all the more and on and on and on.

It was a blast.

About then is when I asked to use the phone and Lanny and I started laughing and the punk who had backed Smada down (*we* thought) got upset and demanded to know what was so bloody amusing and stupid me said he probably wouldn't understand it.

A lot of it was the booze I had downed, and a lot of it was the women watching. Some of it had to do with Smada being (in our minds, at least) such a weasel to this punk before. Maybe I just wanted to show how much neater I was. Or something.

At any rate, I said what I said knowing damn well the punk wasn't going to like it. And, sure as hell, he got mad and pushed off from me at the bar and reached for his sword. At first I thought it was just a bluff. I mean, he was moving so damn slowly! But then I got a look at his face and it was plenty grim enough to make this serious. Then I realized my

sword wasn't on but over there across the room with the pillows and the whores, and by this time his, the punk's, was almost out.

So I slugged him.

Clouted him good with an overhead gauntlet-fisted right cross right on the button, and he careened back against the bar and sat down with a plop. There were the usual gasps and cheers associated with a barroom brawl. Because that's all this was all of a sudden, on account of having hit him with my fist. The punk was hep to that, too. He loosed his swordbelt to the floor where he was and came up swinging.

At least you could call it that. I'm pretty fast, like I said before, but he was so goddam *slow!* His first roundhouse missed me by days and left him staggering in a circle three feet past me.

That got a big laugh.

So I decided to get cute. The next time he swung and missed I ducked underneath his arm and tapped him on the shoulder from behind and said: "Here I am!"

That got boos. No kidding. The crowd was ugly. I'd never been in front of an audience before, but it was clear to me that making fun of your victim was a definite no-no. Lanny's look told me he'd read the same attitude. So I set about finishing it.

Which was damned hard. He was slow as hell and no bigger than me, but he just kept coming. I'd jab him and punch him and knock him staggering or, more rarely, knock him down. But he just kept coming. I was really starting to admire the guy, all bloody and puffy and nose broken but not giving in an inch.

The only time he hit me was when, like an idiot, I stopped right in front of him, held out my paw to shake and said: "C'mon, man, let's call it a draw." He ignored my hand and hit me so hard you can't believe it. I felt the stones smack the back of my head and looked up kinda dazed to Lanny peering over me and hissing, his voice furious with anger and concern: "Finish this, goddammit! You're not at home!"

And that kinda woke me up. I laid into him hard and kept at it. But it was getting a lot tougher. My right hand was swollen and sore, and I've never had a decent left, and the punk was still coming on.

I remembered Lanny saying: "This isn't home," and realiz-

ing the naked fatal facts of that. I *wasn't* home. I wasn't anywhere else but where I was, and this was not only happening, it was gonna keep on happening until it ended. That thought, and the punk still coming on, got me a little scared.

Which is what I damn well should have been all along.

The first time I kicked him I got a few more boos, but by that time I didn't give a shit. I was the one doing the fighting, and nothing else had seemed to work. So I kicked him some more, once in the chest and once toward his balls. I missed his balls—you almost always do—but his groaning wince as my booted toe slammed into his thigh muscles opened up his bloody face again. I tried one more right cross, laying all my weight and momentum in behind it, and missed his chin and hit his throat and felt something awful go crunch and collapse, and then he was down and turning blue and wheezing and everybody tried to help but they couldn't get the wind-pipe clear in time and all of a sudden I had killed someone else.

It was quiet while they drug the body out and Lanny sat me down on a bench in front of Smada and the old general and the girls. Smada was clearly disgusted by something, and for a while I thought it was because it had taken me so long. And then I thought maybe it was on account of my using my feet. And then I didn't know *what* the hell was bugging him and was starting to get a little pissed off myself and said so:

"You got something to say to me, old man?" I snarled, calling him what the punk had called him on purpose. "Then say it!" I added.

Smada sat up and eyed me coolly. "Very well, lad," he began, and leaned forward and put his hands on his knees. "I don't know where you are from. But in this land there are far too few opportunities to be gentle instead of murderous." He paused, looked disgusted, added: "And you have just wasted one."

Then he stood up and went to the outhouse.

Conversations lamely shuffled ahead after he had gone. Lanny sat down beside me and handed me a mug, which I downed thirstily in a couple of swigs. Under the sound from the others talking I leaned over to him.

"Do you know what he's . . . ?" I began before Lanny shook his head to say, no, he didn't understand what was bugging Smada either.

But now I think he *did* know. He was just too embarrassed to tell me. Lanny was always quicker than me, and I think he did see Smada's point. The punk had been slow and ponderous and, while a jerk, still a harmless one. And we would have noticed how slow he was, as everyone else had, because everyone else had been paying attention to who was armed and drinking in a public inn from the first moment they had entered. You know, the way *we* should have been?

Smada reappeared suddenly with an apparent willingness to forget the whole exchange. "Now, pray tell, what is all this about a phone?" he asked gruffly. But he smiled as he did it. "Just what would a phone be, lads?"

We were tired and feeling a bit odd and, I dunno, glad that the snarling was over, so we did. We told him everything. We told the exact truth about what had happened. And we described America. We told all about it. About telephones and telegrams and television. About cassette decks and pornography. About panty hose and heart transplants and internal combustion and Watergate.

We described freeways and democracy and Walt Disney World and women's lib. We sang them some rock and roll.

They loved it. I mean *loved* it. Not that they believed us much, I don't think. But they ate it up anyway. Maybe Smada believed. He asked some incredibly penetrating questions anyhow.

What happened next was absolutely . . . I don't know. Stunning, I guess. What was stunning about it was the logic of their next question. Everybody listening agreed that this America was one helluva neat spot, all right. So the obvious question was: Why weren't we still there?

Lanny and I just stared at them. Then at each other. So they tried again.

Was there a horrible war or plague?

No.

Were we driven out for siding with the wrong king? Nixon, was it?

No.

Were we being pursued because of having been involved in some indiscretion (read: crime)?

No.

Then why were we here?

We wanted to be.

Why?

We think this is better.

Long pause. Exchanged looks.

No kidding, we assured them. We like it here more.

And then they really didn't believe us. Except Smada, I think, who looked at us like we were absolutely and completely stark raving stupid. And we were. We were.

And it was going to cost us.

But in the meantime we were just sitting around still getting drunk at the inn. The topic moved on to more important (or more believable) things, like the best whorehouse in the district and the worst way to break in a new slave. I tried to interest the prettiest whore in a little you-know-what. She was attentive enough. And friendly. But she never left Smada's side. None of them did, spread around him on those pillows like a doughnut. It was discouraging as hell.

Lanny and Smada talked a long time. I don't know about what, but at least some of it was a continuation of the America description and Smada's resulting amazement at our choice.

It was starting to get really late. Most of the other folks had retired to their rooms or headed back out on the road. Only the old general & Co., Smada and the whores, and us were still about.

And drinking. I had to give Smada credit for that much, anyway. He was the most incredible drinker I had ever seen. Drank like it was water, like there was no tomorrow, like he was to be hung the next morning, like . . . well, you get the idea: The sonuvabitch could by God drink.

I got up to piss toward the end and offered to do the same for Lanny but he said, no, he needed the exercise, so we went together. The outhouse smelled just like what it was: an awful place where people put their awful things forever.

When we came back in, everyone else was gone.

Everyone else. We had to wake up the innkeeper to find out what was what. And when we did, we were pissed. There was nothing wrong with our rooms. It's just that we didn't need separate ones, seeing as how Smada had taken *every single whore* to bed with him.

Our first knocks on the broad oak door that was the entrance to his rooms (the best in the place, of course) were tentative and shy. But then we got mad, thinking that we had also paid for the damn women and therefore had a right to at

least *two* of them! There was a lot of giggling from inside before a cute little redhead poked her head out and assured us that two of them would be out to join us in just a little while. Then she handed us another flagon and two more mugs and directed us to a little bench there in the hall to wait. We sat down, suckers that we were, and waited. She closed the door.

The giggling this time was a lot longer and louder. But we still just sat there with our little swords and our little mugs. And waited.

But even that wasn't as dumb as the conversation we got into. How is that Lanny and I, just by talking, could screw things up still to come? Incredible.

We talked about Smada, of course, and what we really thought of him. Which *wasn't* what we really thought of him at all. It was what we really *wanted* to think of him.

He *had* been a chickenshit with that young punk, no matter what he said.

"Right?"

"Right!"

And there really wasn't anything stupid about us wanting to come here to this world, it was just our being so adventurous and all.

"Right?"

"Right!"

And his amazement at our wanting to be here just showed even more what a weasel he was.

"Right?"

"Right!"

If he'd really been a *real* swordsman he'd *never* want to live in wimpy twentieth-century America.

"Right?"

"Right!"

But even if he was a sniveler, we weren't. We were damned glad to be here where men were-men.

"Right?"

"Right!"

And if anybody else doubted it or just wanted to make something of it, we'd kick their ass.

"Right?"

"Right!"

In fact, we were just hoping somebody'd mess with us.

"Right?"

"Goddam right!"

You see how bad we could get?

The last thought I had before passing out on that bench waiting for the whores was of Smada's face earlier that night when we'd been explaining why we were glad to be there. He had held up a hand for quiet. And once he had it he fiddled pensively with his goatee a second. Then he spoke, all the time looking back and forth between Lanny and me.

"Lads, I wish to have this clear in my old head. You have traveled here from a land of plenty where most men live threescore and twenty winters, may transport themselves one hundred leagues in a day, may expect to live a long and honorable life without once having need of violent resort and where the most compelling issue of the kingdom is the debt incurred from overpaying the poor?"

"That's it," I replied brightly.

"M'Lord Smada," Lanny rushed to say—which surprised me—"we wish you could understand just exactly why we undertook this journey of—"

"I do, lad. I do."

"Do you really, sir?" asked Lanny, seeming terribly relieved for some reason. "I do. You are, both of you, idiotic fools."

We woke up a little before dawn with the son of the innkeeper and a servant helping us stagger down the narrow hallway to our rooms. Room, rather, since the sight of the other bed in Lanny's room was too sweet a sight for me to move another step. I shouldered in past the innkeeper's son and slammed down upon it.

Lanny had been mumbling something the whole time we'd been stumbling along, mumbling it over and over again under his breath. Just before I went under again I recognized it.

"Alka-Seltzer . . . Alka-Seltzer . . . Alka-Seltzer . . ."

I knew just how he felt.

This time, we were just too smart for Smada.

He came into the room in a rush, looking . . . well, gorgeous. His hair was neatly trimmed, his goatee meticulous and . . . you get the idea; those damn whores had spent all night long preening him instead of servicing us, damn! But this didn't do too much more than add to the anger we

already felt for him. And when he tried to con us *again* . . .

It seems there was a feller named Lord Grey-something. Greydon, I think. Anyway, he was coming in from the west. He was the lord who had been pursuing Smada. He was also the one now shy a couple of outriders, thanks to Lanny and me. He would arrive at the inn by early afternoon or thereabouts.

He was not in a good mood.

The east road, according to Smada, was the way out of "our little difficulty."

Lanny and I looked at each other. "Our little difficulty?" Lanny retorted sarcastically. "Whaddya mean, 'our'? You're the one he's after."

"Yeah," I offered indignantly. "Besides, his men died in self-defense."

Smada raised an eyebrow quizzically. "And?"

Lanny and I looked at each other again. "They attacked us first!" I pointed out.

Smada just did it again. "And?"

"Would you stop saying that?" I snarled.

Smada half smiled. "What would you have me say, lad?"

"C'mon, Smada. You know damn well he isn't after us. He'll understand once we tell him what really happened."

"Will he?"

"Sure he will!"

Smada stared a few seconds. "I see. Lads, if ever I had uncertain thoughts as to your tale of transport in the past, I do hereby now lay them low. I doubt not at all that you spoke truly of your native land."

"You believe us?" Lanny asked.

"I do."

"How comè?" I wanted to know.

He smiled. But it was a grim one. "Because in no way could you have lived so long in this land."

And then he walked out.

Lanny and I sat up on the edges of our beds and talked about this awhile. The gist of it was this: That fat old smoothie was *surely* trying to con us again. Into doing his fighting for him again, most likely. And the smart thing for us to do was just stay away from him. If he wanted to run away—and that seemed to us to be the only thing he *ever* did anyway—then let him go. We weren't scared of this Greydon

dude. Oh, maybe a little. But we were sure we could work things out with the guy.

At least that's what we said.

We liked Smada. We really did. But he was a con artist and a chickenshit and . . . facts were facts. Best to go back to sleep, God knew we needed it.

Facts were facts. Facts are facts.

And fools are fools. We slept.

It wasn't until some hours later, when the innkeeper burst in to demand payment, that we realized our money was gone.

"Ah hah!" smirked the innkeeper. "Just as Lord Smada suspected."

"Smada!" Lanny and I shouted in unison. "He's the one who took it!" Lanny added.

It was obvious, Lanny explained to him, that Smada had done the whole bit. Lanny was smooth and persuasive and reasonable. He was as good as I've ever heard him.

And the innkeeper bought it. It seems he had suspected Smada all along. And when it had been Smada who suggested that the two young sirs asleep upstairs had no coins . . .

But we could still catch him. He had only just left down the east road. If we hurried . . .

"We're way ahead of you," said Lanny as we gathered ourselves together to ride.

We were gone a full mile's gallop when it hit us.

"Wait a minute!" yelled Lanny, pulling up his mount sharply. "Wait just one goddam minute!"

I pulled up alongside. "What'sa matter?"

"He did it to us again!"

"Who?" I asked, looking around like an idiot. "Smada?"

"Hell yes, Smada. And that bloody innkeeper. Look, here we are going down the damned east road just like he wanted. Right?"

"Uh, right."

"And that innkeeper—who doesn't know us from Adams, by the way—is suddenly trusting us to leave owing him money, catch up to the thief that stole from us, retrieve it, and return and pay him back? Doesn't that sound just a little fishy to you?"

"Uh . . . yeah."

"Well, let's go."

"Where?"

"Back to the inn, stupid. For whatever reason, Smada wants to get us away from that place."

"He says it's because of that Greydon guy."

"He says! He says! Dammit, Felix. I'm gonna go back to that innkeeper and kick his butt through the roof of his mouth until he tells me the truth. Are you coming?"

"Yeah!"

"Right?"

"Right!"

You have to understand, this made perfect sense in the stage we were in. That is: hungover and stupid.

So we went back. Despite everyone's attempts to save us, Smada's, the innkeeper's. Despite everything, we went galloping straight back into the nightmare to come.

We were sitting there drinking on credit when the Bad Guys strode into the inn. We were able to get credit by taking it. We were pissed off. The innkeeper had been surprised when we showed up back at the inn. Surprised and then guilty-looking when we accused him of having set us up on Smada's orders. When we saw his expression we were sure we were right. So sure, in fact, that we didn't also notice the sad look on the man's face that came right after.

We should have.

Anyway, we sat there and ate first and then drank some and then drank some more waiting for Smada to show up again. We were sure he would. We had no idea what scam it was he was planning but we were pretty certain there'd be some loot in it for somebody. And since he wanted us away from the inn, that's where it had to be.

"Right?"

"Right!"

We did that a lot. We also drank a lot. And waited. Ducks in a barrel.

And then, like I said, the Bad Guys came in. I call 'em the Bad Guys because that's damn well what they were. To begin with, they were huge. Every one of 'em was as big as I was or bigger, and they all wore black and carried polished swords with shiny handles and had big broad shoulders and big black helmets with little slits showing eyes that by God *should* have been blood-red and they slammed that front door

open and stalked in two abreast in *formation*, for Chrissakes, all six of 'em, and set up a semicircle just inside the doorway where they could survey the room and then just stood there, poised, looking like they just *hoped* they'd get a chance to slaughter everybody in sight.

Then came Lord Greydon, and he was worse. I mean, the man was a walking ghoul. White hair. Not gray—white. White pasty skin stretched like dead hide across cheekbones that shoulda been knuckles and a forehead that loomed over his eyes like the Frankenstein monster's. His eyes really *were* red. Bloodshot, anyway, like the look of somebody who spent his nights at a graveyard catching bats and cracking their bones with his teeth. And his voice . . . I'll never forget that voice. Husky and dry and dead and . . . piercing, somehow, like he had some sort of dead man's amplifier.

It was the voice that did it for me. From the first sound of it all my illusions were swept away. And you know what kind of illusions I mean. All the old clichés: "There's no such thing as a bad boy" and "Criminals are made by society" and "The Soviets are just people like us" and "Any man can be reached" and, best of all, "There's no such thing as Evil, only mental imbalance"—all of these thoughts were slapped pitifully down by that voice. It was as if I could hear the devil chuckling softly offstage, saying: "Welcome to the *real* world, boy."

I want to tell you, I was scared of that guy. Scared of his men and terrified of him. Terrified and . . . caught. That's it. Caught. It was as if I had been given every opportunity in my life to face reality but had been too lazy and too much of a punk and now it was too damn late. I had been caught pretending the whole thing was a game I could call off, but that wasn't up to me anymore. It was up to this ghoul. And he didn't *want* to call it off. He was *here* for death.

I glanced at Lanny and saw it in his face. He knew it too: Somebody was going to die.

Somebody did. Right then. For the first rasping words from Greydon's dead lips were: "Kill him."

The guy he was pointing to was some merchant standing closest to the door with a mug in his hand. We hadn't talked to him much and didn't know anything about him except that he was just what he appeared to be: an aging overweight penny-ante fur dealer who liked dirty jokes and barmaids

when on the road away from his wife and kids and who carried a sword for absolutely no reason other than for show.

But none of that mattered, because a second later he was dead when the closest black guard to him drove a blade as wide as your leg right *through* his spine and six inches out of his back with a horrible grating *chunk*.

It was so fast and so incredibly brutal that nobody else moved. The three guys at the bar and Lanny and me at our table just sat there while the blood spurted and the body sagged and a great black boot shoved against the deflating chest to give the murderer leverage to drag his sword noisily from the body. And then there was a blade at my throat and at Lanny's and at everyone else's and before we knew it we were disarmed and helpless and surrounded and Greydon was standing there smiling a grin full of wickedness and almost sexual delight.

"Where is Smada?" he asked the room.

And nobody knew. You could feel it. Not even the innkeeper. I could tell by looking at him. And I could tell something else, too. It hit me in a flash. Smada had been trying to save us. He had been trying to get us away from the inn, all right. Away from what was about to happen to us. But we had been too smart for him.

"Lord Smada is gone," said a frightened voice just over my shoulder. I turned around and saw the old general sitting there with two of his entourage, the storyteller and a personal servant.

A lot of the next was a blur to my blood-pounding eyeballs. There were cries of fear from the bar girls and fearful protestations from the old general and those with him and one of the black swordsmen lit a great flaming torch but nothing could stop what was about to happen. It was all a preamble to . . .

Look. I'll make it short. For calling him *Lord Smada*, they cut off the old general's hand with an axe.

Then they used the torch to cauterize the wound.

Then they slapped him awake.

Then they slapped him to stop his moaning.

Then they rapped his cheek with a sword hilt until he talked. And he babbled like a child. So would I. And so I did when my turn came after they had found out from the old

general and everyone else who knew that it was us who were riding Lord Greydon's outriders' horses.

We told him everything. We would have told him anything. I'd have given anything to know where Smada was. I'd have given my mother, my dog.

I would have given Lanny.

Yes, I was that scared. Scared and broken and beaten and willing to do anything to please the ghoul. I couldn't even look the black guard guarding me in the eye after the first second. His gaze seemed to drill right through the soft me I knew right then I was and had always been and always would be. But these guys . . . they lived here and killed here. Had grown up killing here and loved it and always would and this was just a lark to us, a game and . . .

And nothing. We were going to die. And right there. Right then. Horribly. Slowly. Painfully.

Lanny's voice while he desperately tried to explain broke my heart. He was too scared to even try to sound persuasive. He was merely plaintive. Almost begging. So was I, trying to help him. Help me, rather. Help make the ghoul just let us go. Let me go!

The ghoul loved it. It was the kind of thing he loved, watching us squeal and squirm like piglets. We were so scared we didn't even hate him. We were so scared we would have loved him if he'd let us leave in peace. We were so scared we didn't deserve a chance to live.

But we got one anyway when Trebor Smada, all six foot three and two hundred and forty pounds and mile-long broadsword and, incredibly, smartass grin, kicked open the side door and strode across the room to our table.

And the whole world . . . changed. More light seemed to stream into the room. More breath seemed to come to my lungs. Maybe it was the way the black guards moved back at his appearance. Maybe it was the look of hope on the innkeeper's face or the one of . . . not fear, but wariness, on Lord Greydon's.

Maybe it was none of these things. In fact, it wasn't. It was . . . I dunno, the truth. I'd been shivering in my seat so petrified at the price to be paid for my arrogant manhood. And then Smada showed up and reminded me that . . .

"So, Smada, you've come back to die," scratched Greydon into the heavy air.

"We'll all be dead someday, Greydon," replied Smada evenly. Still, his voice boomed of life.

"You'll be dead today, Swordsman!" snarled Greydon, but did nothing else. In fact, no one did anything at all for a second.

Smada moved at last. He did a curious thing. He was clearly responding to Greydon's remark when he spoke. But as he did he turned and looked down at Lanny and me, saying:

"We shall all be dead for ten thousand thousand years floating in the darkness and remembering that, for a time, some of us, but not all of us, were Swordsmen."

I can explain what that meant to me, but it would take forever. Leave it at this. I was still scared. I still expected to die. But, well . . . no more piglet. No point to it. Never was.

"Bah!" rasped Greydon. "You and your foolish Swordsman rituals. What good will they do you now?"

Smada's voice was dead-cold: "Watch."

He turned his back on them and looked at us. "Now, lads . . ."

"Now what?" we answered in sloppy unison.

"Now I'm going to retrieve your weapons," he said softly with a gesture to the bar, where they lay now unguarded. "And the fight will commence." He looked back at the rest of the room and spoke so all could hear: "I shall kill the three on the right. You get the rest."

I couldn't believe he just said that out loud. Neither could anybody else. We didn't have a prayer and everybody knew it. So did Smada.

But he was saying: "Screw it!"

Lanny gulped and asked: "When?"

Smada smiled and looked at us and said, "Right now."

And then Smada was spinning impossibly fast around to the bar and the swords were flying toward us and we caught 'em somehow and managed to grip them and I spun around and a black guard slammed into me full-face and we went over the table together smashing it flat with splinters flying up into the air and seeming to hang above us while we grappled and he tried shoving the edge of his blade into my

temple despite my grip on his wrist and his on mine. I got him over and got on top of him—I don't know how—and smashed at him with my hilt and kneced him in the thighs and then the stomach. His grip slid on my sword arm and I twisted my hand and popped free and drug my edge across his face, shedding sparks from the edge of his helm and blood from the underside of his chin. He gurgled and spat and I shrugged halfway up and shouted with triumph or bloodlust or something and two-handed my point into his chest and then screamed as a dagger ripped through my tunic and waist between chain mail and belt.

I spun about, still screaming, and saw the bloody face of the guard upon me, his helmet long gone and he long dead from a gaping thigh wound (Lanny's trademark) but not knowing it yet and maybe not caring. He threw himself at me again, his dagger blade flinging drops of my blood into my eyes. I dropped underneath his wide swing and drove upward with my point, but I skittered off to the side and suddenly the two of us were down, arms around each other and hissing hate and fear into each other's face.

He butted me with his forehead. It broke my nose and hurt like hell, but something else, too—it so, I dunno, *offended* me that I started doing it back to him and kept doing it until long after he was still.

"Brad!" Lanny shouted out and woke me up. I lurched up from the still form below me and there was Lanny, blood-soaked and swaying but alive. Smada was there, too, dragging a blade from another guard.

There were bodies everywhere and blood everywhere else and the women and the others were cowering in a corner whimpering and we'd done it! We had by God *done* it!

I had just noticed that Greydon was nowhere in sight when he burst back through the open front door.

He was leading the other guards. Six more.

We did pretty well, considering.

Smada was nothing short of spectacular. Lord, he was strong! Once, during a pause in my own struggles, I saw him backhand his blade at a guard's throat, miss the man when he ducked, but still manage to literally behead the guard behind the first with his off-balance follow-through. He was fast as hell, too. And he knew how to use all that weight. Even

without all of that wrist speed of his, he could have bludgeoned through almost anything.

My own lot was a blurring mist of terror and rage and exhaustion, of swords sparkling slippery through the air and grunts of pain and many, many wounds from dagger edges and sword edges but never again from points. I just hacked and drove ahead and kicked and punched and screamed in pain and fury and fear. I never fought so well. I never did anything so well. I needed to. I had three ribs smashed right through the chain mail when a guard slammed his hilt at my groin and missed. I broke my own left wrist hacking downward with my dagger against the side of a helmet but still managed to punch it in there through the space caused by knocking it askew. Once I plunged my blade in so deep I was too tired to draw it back out until somebody slammed into me and popped it loose.

All was confusion. And horror. And heartsick misery at what just goddam *would not ever* seem to be finished.

I saw a lot of what Lanny did. He was something to see. He skewered them and stabbed them and carved at them. He threw punches and furniture and karate kicks, of all things. I saw a lot of his fight. It was wonderful. He was wonderful. Once I saw him make a move I didn't know the human body could make at all, much less with power. I saw a lot of his fight, like I said. I even saw him kill Greydon.

I didn't know Greydon had already killed him.

Nothing in my life had ever been so horrible. Nothing hurt so badly. It was over, goddammit, and we had *won!* But Lanny's wound wouldn't stop pulsing. The life just kept throbbing out, and I remember thinking that any decent paramedic unit could have saved him. Saved him at the scene and, using the siren, have him at the hospital within seconds.

But there were no hospitals there and Lanny died. He died. In my arms, his body shivering, his face white and dying, too weak to speak.

I could not stop crying. I could not stop wailing. I couldn't stop. I couldn't do anything except catch my breath and wail some more. But it did no good. They wouldn't take me instead. Lanny never moved again.

Smada, tears of pity running pink down his own face, held me in his lap and rocked me and rocked me for what seemed

like days. Then, exhausted from fatigue and loss of blood and heart, I fell asleep in his arms.

And I had the most incredible dream. I *knew* it was a dream. And I also knew it was real. It was incredibly fast but also incredibly detailed. It was . . . hell, I don't know what it was.

Smada and I rode together, in that dream, for twenty years. It was awful. It was also wonderful. I mean, there were some wonderful moments. Some truly amazing parties, for example, with some truly amazing women. Lots of women, Smada being as he was. And lots of friendships and lots of swordy triumphs plus times of great but temporary wealth. But the money got spent and the friends all seemed to die, one after another. Some of them badly and dearly. It was like Lanny all over again with three of them, one of them for Smada.

It was such a grinding tragedy of a life. Flashing glory only meant more aching scars and bloody wounds and long lines of dirt-poor trudging peasants to pass on the roadway. And the whole time the thought of the wondrous age I had left behind.

When I awoke I was still on Smada's lap and Lanny was still dead in front of me and I began to whimper some more. Smada was infinitely caring. He rocked me until I stopped whining. He spoke to me in a dull but reassuring monotone. He wiped my bloody forehead with his glove and once, tenderly, with his damp soft beard. I just stared, mostly, not thinking of anything for a long, long time.

When I came partly out of it and looked up into his eyes he smiled lovingly at me and said: "Time to go home, son."

I began to cry. "I don't know how," I whispered plaintively. "I don't know how!"

But he just rocked me and said, "Sure you do."

And, of course, I did. I looked upon him one last time, teacher, father, brother-in-arms, and then I closed my eyes and slept again.

When I woke up it was night and I was back in the forest and the SCA party was still going on by the campfire and the tequila bottle was empty and Lanny was alive beside me.

He looked pale—bet I did too. We stood up and embraced and walked back to the trailer and took off our sword stuff and put on blue jeans and got drunk all over again and slept.

It was a three-day SCA event, but we left bright and early—and hungover—the next morning.

Lanny and I are still best friends, more than ever now. I never told him about my dream and he never told me about being dead, and I don't blame us. We still go to SCA stuff but we never fight. Mostly we just point and laugh.

We still read the Horseclans, too. Now more than ever. Because now we understand just what they were about all along. And the heroes in those stories are no less real to us than before. Hell, just the opposite. Now we understand that for a man or woman to rise to heroism in such a brutal place is what heroism is all about. We had wanted to go there because we thought being great was automatic. Now we know it's miraculous. It is awe-inspiring.

Read it.

No, I do not wish to go back. I think about it a lot, what happened, but I never think I want another crack at it. Not me. Not ever.

But I do miss Smada. Whoever or whatever he was—or is—I miss him. Every day I miss him.

Every single day.