

Wild escapes.
A desperate journey.
And the ghastly Fangs of Dang.

NORTH! OF Be Eaten



ANDREW
PETERSON

THE
WINGFEATHER SAGA
BOOK TWO

Praise for
North! Or Be Eaten

“Peterson deserves every literary prize for this fine book. It is obvious that his musical talents have been put to good use as his use of words, plot, and narrative read like a well-scored film script. A very fine book, by a very fine writer and future talent. Amazing—thrilling and well worth reading again and again.”

—G. P. TAYLOR, *New York Times* best-selling author of *Shadowmancer* and
The Doppie Ganger Chronicles

“Toothy cows are very dangerous. Andrew Peterson convinced me and shivers run down my spine at the very thought of meeting a toothy cow face to face. The author spills characters like Podo and Nurgabog onto the page, then weaves a tale of danger that holds the reader captive. Believe me, you will relish being held captive by this master storyteller. But be sure you don’t get caught by the Stranders. Those people just ain’t civilized.”

—DONITA K. PAUL, author of *The Vanishing Sculptor*

“In a genre overrun by the gory and the grim, Peterson’s bite-sized chapters taste more like a stew of Gorey (Edward) and Grimm (the Brothers). *North! Or Be Eaten* is a welcome feast of levity—and clearly a labor of love. Andrew Peterson has awakened my inner eight-year-old, and that is a very good thing.”

—JEFFREY OVERSTREET, author of *Auralia’s Colors* and *Cyndera’s Midnight*

“An immensely clever tale from a wonderful storyteller—filled with great values and even greater adventure!”

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“Thrills, chills, spine-tingling mystery, and lots of smiles. It’s not easy to combine heart-pounding danger with gut-busting laughs and make it work, but Peterson pulls it off. For readers who want nonstop action infused with powerful, life-changing themes, *North! Or Be Eaten* is a must-read.”

—WAYNE THOMAS BATSON, best-selling author of *The Door Within*
Trilogy, *Isle of Swords*, and *Isle of Fire*

“Andrew Peterson is a gifted storyteller, scene painter, and wordsmith who takes you on a rollicking white-water ride of adventure. Readers of all ages are sure to find *North! Or Be Eaten* worthy of a big mug filled with a favorite beverage and a cozy nook near a crackling fire for hours on end. Here there be tales within yarns within stories. Listen, reader, bend your ear, but keep an eye peeled lest the dreaded Fangs of Dang be near!”

—R. K. MORTENSON, author of *Landon Snow and the Auctor's Riddle*

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A desperate journey.
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PETERSON

The Wingfeather Saga Book Two



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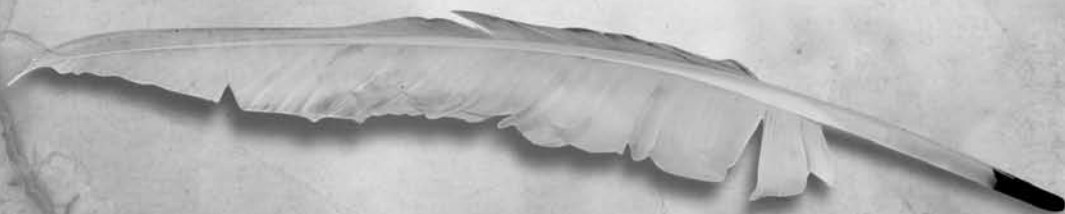
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*For Aedan, Asher, and Skye.
Remember who you are.*

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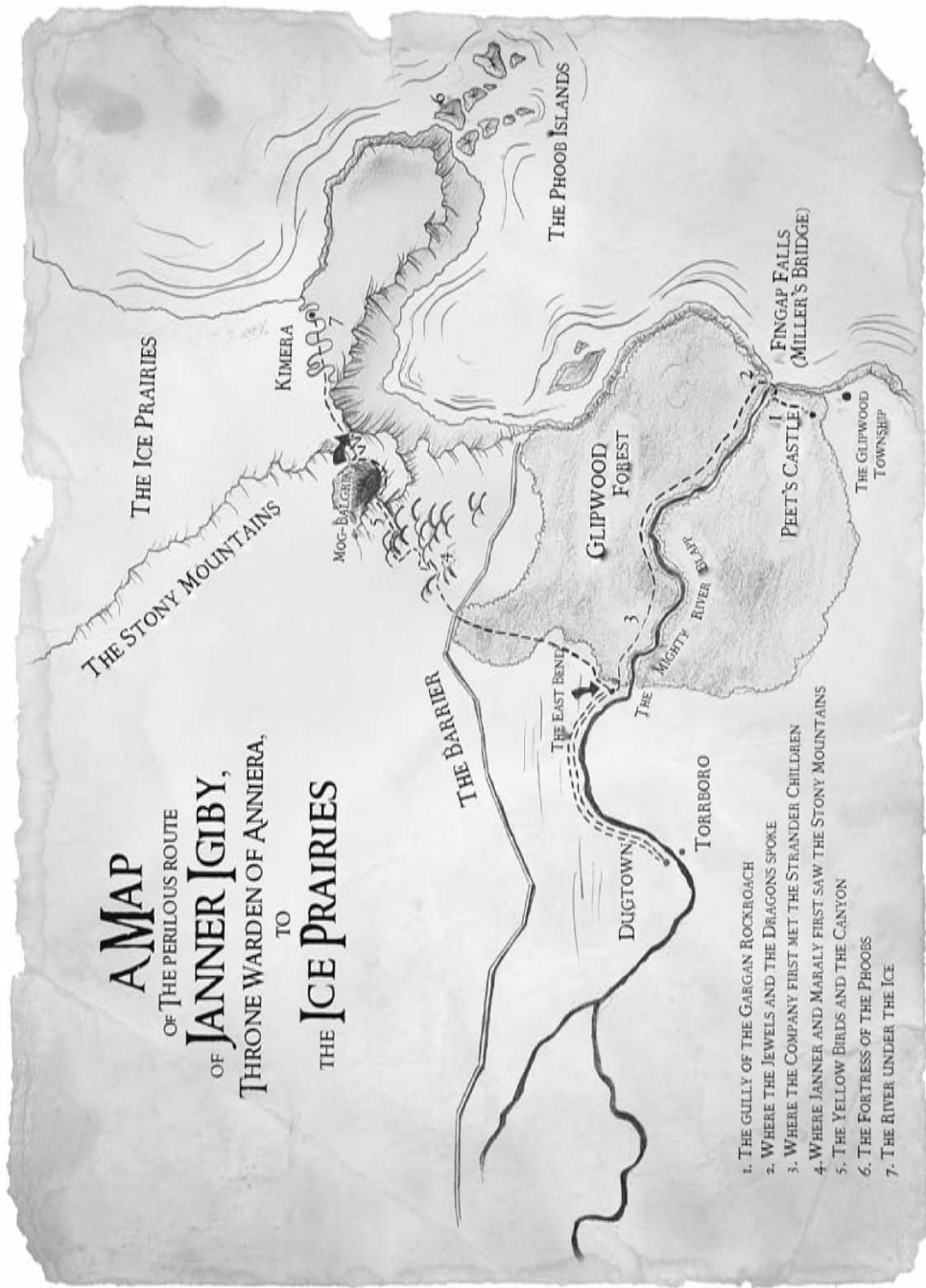
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NORTH!
or
Be
Eaten

A MAP
OF THE PERILOUS ROUTE
OF JANNER IGIBY,
THRONE WARDEN OF ANNIERA,
TO
THE ICE PRAIRIES



1. THE GULLY OF THE GARGAN ROCKROACH
2. WHERE THE JEWELS AND THE DRAGONS SPOKE
3. WHERE THE COMPANY FIRST MET THE STRANDER CHILDREN
4. WHERE JANNER AND MARALY FIRST SAW THE STONY MOUNTAINS
5. THE YELLOW BIRDS AND THE CANYON
6. THE FORTRESS OF THE PHOBOS
7. THE RIVER UNDER THE ICE

The Lone Fendril

TOOOOTHY COW!” bellowed Podo as he whacked a stick against the nearest glipwood tree. The old pirate’s eyes blazed, and he stood at the base of the tree like a ship’s captain at the mast. “Toothy cow! Quick! Into the tree house!”

Not far away, an arrow whizzed through some hanging moss and thudded into a plank of wood decorated with a charcoal drawing of a snarling Fang. The arrow protruded from the Fang’s mouth, the shaft still vibrating from the impact. Tink lowered his bow, squinted to see if he had hit the target, and completely ignored his grandfather.

“TOOOOOTHY— oy! That’s a fine shot, lad— COW!”

Podo whacked the tree as Nia hurried up the rope ladder that led to the trapdoor in the floor of Peet the Sock Man’s tree house. A sock-covered hand reached down and pulled Nia up through the opening.

“Thank you, Artham,” she said, still holding his hand. She looked him in the eye and raised her chin, waiting for him to answer.

Peet the Sock Man, whose real name was Artham P. Wingfeather, looked back at her and gulped. One of his eyes twitched. He looked like he wanted to flee, as he always did when she called him by his first name, but Nia didn’t let go of his hand.

“Y-y-you’re welcome...*Nia*.” Every word was an effort, especially her name, but he sounded less crazy than he used to be. Only a week earlier, the mention of the name “Artham” sent him into a frenzy—he would scream, shimmy down the rope ladder, and disappear into the forest for hours.

Nia released his hand and peered down through the opening in the floor at her father, who still banged on the tree and bellowed about the impending onslaught of toothy cows.

“Come on, Tink!” Janner said.

A quiver of arrows rattled under one arm as he ran toward Leeli, who sat astride her dog, Nugget. Nugget, whose horselike size made him as dangerous as any toothy

cow in the forest, panted and wagged his tail. Tink reluctantly dropped his bow and followed, eying the forest for signs of toothy cows. The brothers helped a wide-eyed Leeli down from her dog, and the three of them rushed to the ladder.

“COWS, COWS, COWS!” Podo howled.

Janner followed Tink and Leeli up the ladder. When they were all safely inside, Podo heaved himself through the opening and latched the trapdoor shut.

“Not bad,” Podo said, looking pleased with himself. “Janner, next time you’ll want to move yer brother and sister along a little faster. Had there been a real cow upon us, ye might not have had time to get ’em to the ladder before them slobbery teeth started tearin’ yer tender flesh—”

“Papa, *really*,” Nia said.

“—and rippin’ it from yer bones,” he continued. “If Tink’s too stubborn to drop what he’s doin’, Janner, it falls to you to find a way to persuade him, you hear?”

Janner’s cheeks burned, and he fought the urge to defend himself. The toothy cow drills had been a daily occurrence since their arrival at Peet’s tree house, and the children had gradually stopped shrieking with panic whenever Podo’s hollers disturbed the otherwise quiet wood.

Since Janner had learned he was a Throne Warden, he had tried to take his responsibility to protect the king seriously. His mother’s stories about Peet’s dashing reputation as a Throne Warden in Anniera made Janner proud of the ancient tradition of which he was a part.¹ The trouble was that he was supposed to protect his younger brother, Tink, who happened to be the High King. It wasn’t that Janner was jealous; he had no wish to rule anything. But sometimes it felt odd that his skinny, reckless brother was, of all things, a king, much less the king of the fabled Shining Isle of Anniera.

Janner stared out the window at the forest as Podo droned on, telling him about his responsibility to protect his brother, about the many dangers of Glipwood Forest, about what Janner should have done differently during this most recent cow drill.

Janner missed his home. In the days after they fled the town of Glipwood and arrived at Peet’s castle, Janner’s sense of adventure was wide awake. He thrilled at the

1. In Anniera the second born, not the first, is heir to the throne. The eldest child is a Throne Warden, charged with the honor and responsibility of protecting the king above all others. Though this creates much confusion among ordinary children who one day discover that they are in fact the royal family living in exile (see *On the Edge of the Dark Sea of Darkness*), for ages the Annierans found it to be a good system. The king was never without a protector, and the Throne Warden held a place of great honor in the kingdom.

thought of the long journey to the Ice Prairies, so excited he could scarcely sleep. When he did sleep, he dreamed of wide sweeps of snow under stars so sharp and bright they would draw blood at a touch.

But weeks had passed—he didn't know how many—and his sense of adventure was fast asleep. He missed the rhythm of life at the cottage. He missed the hot meals, the slow change of the land as the seasons turned, and the family of birds that nested in the crook above the door where he, Tink, and Leeli would inspect the tiny blue eggs each morning and each night, then the chicks, and then one day they would look in sad wonder at the empty nest and ask themselves where the birds had gone. But those days had passed away as sure as the summer, and whether he liked it or not, home was no longer the cottage. It wasn't Peet's tree house, either. He wasn't sure he had a home anymore.

Podo kept talking, and Janner felt again that hot frustration in his chest when told things he already knew. But he held his tongue. Grownups couldn't help it. Podo and his mother would hammer a lesson into his twelve-year-old head until he felt beaten silly, and there was no point fighting it.

He sensed Podo's rant coming to an end and forced himself to listen.

"...this is a dangerous place, this forest, and many a man has been gobbled up by some critter because he weren't paying close enough attention."

"Yes sir," Janner said as respectfully as possible. Podo grinned at him and winked, and Janner smiled back in spite of himself. It occurred to him that Podo knew exactly what he'd been thinking.

Podo turned to Tink. "A truly fine shot, boy, and the drawing of the Fang on that board is fine work."

"Thanks, Grandpa," Tink said. His stomach growled. "When can we eat breakfast?"

"Listen, lad," Podo said. He lowered his bushy eyebrows and leveled a formidable glare at Tink. "When yer brother tells ye to come, you drop what yer doin' like it's on fire." Tink gulped. "You follow that boy over the cliffs and into the Dark Sea if he tells you to. Yer the High King, which means ye've got to start thinkin' of more than yerself."

Janner's irritation drained away, as did the color in Tink's face. He liked not being the only one in trouble, though he felt a little ashamed at the pleasure he took in watching Tink squirm.

"Yes sir," Tink said. Podo stared at him so long that he repeated, "Yes sir."

"You okay, lass?" Podo turned with a smile to Leeli.

She nodded and pushed some of her wavy hair behind one ear. "Grandpa, when are we leaving?"

All eyes in the tree house looked at her with surprise. The family had spent weeks in relative peace in the forest, but that unspoken question had grown more and more difficult to avoid as the days passed. They knew they couldn't stay forever. Gnag the Nameless and the Fangs of Dang still terrorized the land of Skree, and the shadow they cast covered more of Aerwiar with every passing day. It was only a matter of time before that shadow fell again on the Igbys.

"We need to leave soon," Nia said, looking in the direction of Glipwood. "When the leaves fall, we'll be exposed, won't we, Artham?"

Peet jumped a little at his name and rubbed the back of his head with one hand for a moment before he spoke. "Cold winter comes, trees go bare, the bridges are easy to see, yes. We should probably po—probably go."

"To the Ice Prairies?" asked Janner.

"Yes," said Nia. "The Fangs don't like the cold weather. We've all seen how much slower they move in the winter, even here. Hopefully in a place as frozen as the Ice Prairies, the Fangs will be scarce."

Podo grunted.

"I know what you think, and it's not one of our options," Nia said flatly.

"What does Grandpa think?" Tink asked.

"That's between your grandfather and me."

"What does he think?" Janner pressed, realizing he sounded more like a grownup than usual.

Nia looked at Janner, trying to decide if she should give him an answer. She had kept so many secrets from the children for so long that it was plain to Janner she still found it difficult to be open with them. But things were different now. Janner knew who he was, who his father was, and had a vague idea what was at stake. He had even noticed his input mattered to his mother and grandfather. Being a Throne Warden—or at least *knowing* he was a Throne Warden—had changed the way they regarded him.

"Well," Nia said, still not sure how much to say.

Podo decided for her. "I think we need to do more than get to the Ice Prairies and lie low like a family of bumpy digtoads, waitin' fer things to happen to us. If Oskar was right about there bein' a whole colony of folks up north what don't like livin' under the boot of the Fangs, and if he's right about them wantin' to fight, then they don't need us to gird up and send these Fangs back to Dang with their tails on fire. I say the jewels need to find a ship and go home." He turned to his daughter. "Think of it, lass! You could sail back across the Dark Sea to Anniera—"

"What do you mean 'you'?" Tink asked.

“Nothin’,” Podo said with a wave of his hand. “Nia, you could go home. Think of it!”

“There’s nothing left for us there,” Nia said.

“Fine! Forget Anniera. What about the Hollows? You ain’t seen the Green Hollows in ten years, and for all you know, the Fangs haven’t even set foot there! Yer ma’s family might still be there, thinkin’ you died with the rest of us.”

Nia closed her eyes and drew a deep breath. Peet and the children stared at the floor. Janner hadn’t thought about the fact that he might have distant family living in the hills of the Green Hollows across the sea.

He agreed with his mother that it seemed foolish to try to make such a journey. First they had to get past the Fangs in Torrboro, then north, over the Stony Mountains to the Ice Prairies. Now Podo was talking about crossing the *ocean*? Janner wasn’t used to thinking of the world in such terms.

Nia opened her eyes and spoke. “Papa, there’s nothing for us to do now but find our way north. We don’t need to go across the sea. We don’t need to go back to Anniera. We don’t need to go to the Green Hollows. We need to go north, away from the Fangs. That’s all. Let’s get these children safely to the prairies, and we’ll finish this discussion then.”

Podo sighed. “Aye, lass. Gettin’ there will cause enough trouble of its own.” He fixed an eye on Peet, who stood on his head in the corner. “I suppose you’ll be comin’ with us, then?”

Peet gasped and tumbled to the floor, then leapt to his feet and saluted Podo. Leeli giggled.

“Aye sir,” he said, mimicking Podo’s raspy growl. “I’m ready to go when the Featherwigs are ready. Even know how to get to the Icy Prairies. Been there before, long time ago—not much to see but ice and prairies and ice all white and blinding and cold. It’s very cold there. Icy.” Peet took a deep, happy breath and clapped his socked hands together. “All right! We’re off!”

He flipped open the trapdoor and leapt through the opening before Podo or the Igbys could stop him. The children hurried to the trapdoor and watched him slide down the rope ladder and march away in a northward direction. From the crook in the giant root system of the tree where he usually slept, Nugget perked up his big, floppy ears without lifting his head from his paws and watched Peet disappear into the forest.

“He’ll come back when he realizes we aren’t with him,” Leeli said with a smile. She and Peet spent hours together either reading stories or with him dancing about

with great swoops of his socked hands while she played her whistleharp. Leeli's presence seemed to have a medicinal effect on Peet. When they were together, his jitters ceased, his eyes stopped shifting, and his voice took on a deeper, less strained quality. The strong and pleasant sound of it helped Janner believe his mother's stories about Artham P. Wingfeather's exploits in Anniera before the Great War.

The only negative aspect of Leeli and Peet's friendship was that it made Podo jealous. Before Peet the Sock Man entered their lives, Podo and Leeli shared a special bond, partly because each of them had only one working leg and partly because of the ancient affection that exists between grandfathers and granddaughters. Nia once told Janner that it was also partly because Leeli looked a lot like her grandmother Wendolyn.

While the children watched Peet march away, a quick shadow passed over the tree house, followed by a high, pleasant sound, like the *ting* of a massive bell struck by a tiny hammer.

"The lone fendril,"² said Leeli. "Tomorrow is the first day of autumn."

"Papa," said Nia.

"Eh?" Podo glared out the window in the direction Peet had gone.

"I think it's time we left," Nia said.

Tink and Janner looked at each other and grinned. All homesickness vanished. After weeks of waiting, adventure was upon them.

2. In Aerwiar, the official last day of summer is heralded by the passing of the lone fendril, a giant golden bird whose wingspan casts entire towns into a thrilling flicker of shade as it circles the planet in a long, ascending spiral. When it reaches the northern pole of Aerwiar, it hibernates until spring, then reverses its journey.

Room Eight of The Only Inn (Glipwood's Only Inn)

After it flew over Peet's tree house, the lone fendril's shadow passed over Joe Shooster, proprietor of The Only Inn (Glipwood's only inn), as he lay pinned face-down in the dirt, fighting back tears. From the front door of the inn, Joe's wife, Addie, watched in horror. Her hands covered her mouth to stifle a scream as the Fang drove his boot harder into Joe's back.

The day was bright and blustery. The wind drove leaves and tumbleweeds through the streets to collect in the nooks of the town's battered buildings. A few weeks ago, the Glipwood Township had been wrecked by a mighty storm that descended on Skree like an apocalyptic stomp of the Maker's boot. Ferinia's Flower Shop had lost its roof, and rain flooded the building. Some structures had been flattened, leaving parts of Glipwood in rubble. Others, like The Only Inn, Books and Crannies, and the town jail, survived, sad reminders of the town that once lay quiet and peaceful at the edge of the cliffs.

Joe grimaced and managed to speak. "No, my lord, I have seen nothing of them. I swear it."

The Fang cracked Joe's head with the butt of his spear—hard, but not hard enough to render him unconscious. A cry slipped out of Addie's mouth, and the Fang whipped his head around and fixed her with a cold look. Joe felt the Fang's cold, damp tail drag over him as the Fang stepped across his body and climbed the steps to the inn's front door. Addie screamed as the Fang burst through the swinging doors and seized her by the back of the neck.

"You, then, sssmelly woman," the Fang growled, covering his snub nose and retching.¹ "Look old Higgk in the eye and tell him if you've sseen or heard from the Igbys or from that nasty man who used to run the bookstore, Oskar Reteep."

Addie went pale and trembled, unable to speak or take her eyes off the long fangs jutting out of the creature's mouth, oozing venom.

"That one's useless, Higgk," called another Fang who watched happily from the street. "See what it does when you bite it."

"Aye!" called another. "That's what the poison in yer teeth is for, ain't it?"

Joe Shooster pulled himself to his knees and clasped his hands. "Please, lords! Don't hurt my Addie. She knows nothing. Nor do I, and I swear to it." Joe tried to keep his voice steady, but seeing his wife's pale face so close to the Fang's teeth made it impossible. "Please."

The Fangs of Dang derived much pleasure from watching Joe and his wife squirm and began to chant for Higgk to bite the woman. Higgk grinned and opened his mouth. His fangs lengthened, and tiny streams of venom squirted from them, criss-crossing Addie's blouse with steaming, hissing burns. Addie's eyes rolled backward, her eyelids fluttered, and Joe prayed that she would be unconscious when the Fang bit her. She went limp and sagged in the creature's grip.

A long whistle came from deep within The Only Inn. Joe dimly recognized it as the teapot on the stove in the kitchen.

Addie's eyes fluttered. "Tea's ready," she slurred, and in a flash of inspiration, Joe leapt to his feet.

"Wait!" he cried.

"What?" Higgk barked. "Have you suddenly remembered the whereabouts of the Igibysss?"

"No, lord, but if my Addie is gone, who will cook you booger gruel? No one else in Skree can make a pot of it like Addie Shooster. And what about midgepie? And clipping-topped gullet swanch?"²

Higgk hesitated. The other Fangs stopped their heckling and cocked their heads sideways, considering Joe and Addie in a new light. Except for the whistle of the teapot,

-
1. Addie Shooster was in fact quite fragrant, by human standards. Her cooking was lauded in Glipwood as the finest in Skree, and when she didn't smell like roast and potatoes or cheesy chowder, she was careful to apply flower petal perfume in copious amounts to her neck and arms. This perfume is likely the scent to which the Fang referred.
 2. Joe remembered Nia Igiby's bargain with the late Commander Gnorm to prepare him a maggotloaf weekly. Not only had it rescued her children from the town jail and the Black Carriage, but it had bought them a degree of immunity from the Fangs, who were too lazy to cook for themselves and who valued such meals nearly as much as gold and jewelry and murder.

there was silence. Joe wiped his hands on his apron and met his wife's eyes. She took some strength from him and said, "M-my critternose casserole is dreadfully good, sir."

"Fine," Higgk said.

He released Addie, and she fell to the ground in a heap. Joe rushed over to her and placed a kiss on her forehead.

"Ugh," said the Fang. "If I don't have a plate of that critternose casserole by sundown, I'll finish what I started." The Fangs hissed and snarled and chuckled their agreement. "If you learn anything about Reteep or the Igbys and you don't tell Higgk, no amount of food will save your smelly ssskins."

Joe and Addie hurried to the kitchen, where they set to work concocting a critternose casserole, the name of which Addie had invented on the spot. She sent Joe out to round up as many rodents as possible so she could begin the work of removing their little black noses.

Joe kissed her and thanked the Maker they were both still alive. "I'll be back soon, love," he said.

He hung his apron on the back of a chair and pulled on his boots but hesitated with his hand on the doorknob. Joe peeked out the window that opened on to the back courtyard. He saw no Fangs.

Instead of going outside, Joe tiptoed up the kitchen stairway to the second floor of the inn. He paused at the top and stared at a hallway lined with doors.

He listened. He heard faintly the raucous Fangs in the streets. He heard the creak of the old building and the gusty wind outside. Joe stole down the hallway to room eight and eased the door open.

Room eight contained a neatly made bed, a wash basin on a chest of drawers, and a desk, each piece of furniture simple but sturdy. Joe moved to the window and paused, looking out at the wreckage of Glipwood with a pang of sadness. Below the window lay what remained of Shaggy's Tavern. The stone chimney stood like the trunk of an old petrified tree, the ground littered with planks, broken stools, and shattered bottles.

Wincing at the creak of his footsteps on the wooden floor, he crept to the chest of drawers and slid it away from the wall. Behind the bureau was a small doorway. Joe looked around one last time and ducked inside, pulling the chest back into place behind him.

The doorway opened on to a cramped room lit only by a tiny window in the ceiling. The light was weak, but after a moment Joe's eyes adjusted, and he could see the plump figure shivering in the bed.

“Hello, old friend,” Joe whispered.

The man stirred and tried to sit up. A blood-soaked bandage adorned his large belly.

Joe put a hand on his arm. “Don’t sit up. I have to step out for a bit, but I wanted to check on you first. Do you need water?”

The man on the bed tried in vain to flatten a lock of white hair against his balding head. “I’m...parched,” he said, “to paraphrase the wise words...of...Lou di Cicaccllicelli.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” Joe said with a smile, pouring a cup of water from a pitcher beside the bed. He lifted it to Oskar N. Reteep’s mouth. “I’ll be up later to change your bandages. Do you need anything else?”

Oskar swallowed the water with a grimace. “A few more books would be splendid, if it’s not too much trouble.”

Joe looked at the stacks of books in every corner of the room. “I’ll do my best,” he said. “Rest. I’ll be back tonight. It’s nice that you’re able to talk again, Oskar.”

“Yes,” Oskar wheezed. “And Joe, there’s much I need to tell you. Zouzab... beware—” He broke off in a fit of coughs.

“It’s all right. There will be time to fill me in on everything later.” Soon Joe would have to tell Oskar that his little companion Zouzab was gone, probably killed by the Fangs. He didn’t want to burden the old man with more grief.

Oskar leaned back and fell asleep immediately. As bad as he looked, he had come far in the weeks since Joe found him bleeding on the floor of Books and Crannies. The day the storm came, Joe and Addie had spent the better part of the afternoon maneuvering him into the inn. No Fang reinforcements had come since the night before the storm, when Podo and the Igibys fled to Anklejelly Manor to escape the hundreds of Fangs that had come for them. Joe still wasn’t sure what became of the Fangs that night, but it seemed that someone, or something, had killed them all.

When the Shoosters emerged from their hiding place the morning after the battle, it felt as if the world of Aerwiar had ended. Dark clouds roiled in the sky above the deserted town, and the streets were clogged with the dust, bones, and armor of countless Fangs. Soon Shaggy emerged from the tavern, and the Shoosters felt great relief at his appearance. They had been neighbors for decades and were the only members of the Glipwood Township who chose to stay rather than flee to Torrboro or Dugtown the night the Igibys fought their way out of the Black Carriage.

But then the one friend the Shoosters had left was taken from them.

One afternoon a company of Fangs tore through Glipwood on their way north from Fort Lamendron. From a second-story window of The Only Inn, the Shoosters watched helplessly as Shaggy pushed a wheelbarrow of firewood across the street. When the Fangs saw him, they pushed him to the ground and one of the lizards sank its fangs into Shaggy's leg.

The Fangs left as quickly as they had come, but by the time Joe and Addie raced to Shaggy's side, he was already dead. The Shoosters wept as they buried their friend in the Glipwood Cemetery at the southern end of Vibbly Way. Joe scavenged the SHAGGY'S TAVERN sign from the building's wreckage. It bore the name of the tavern and an image of a dog smoking a pipe. Joe placed it at the head of Shaggy's grave after carving, in his finest lettering, the inscription "Shaggy Bandibund, an Exemplary Neighbor and Friend."

Now the Fangs were back, demanding to know the whereabouts of Reteep, Podo Helmer, and the Igiby family, and Joe had no idea why. Oskar had mumbled a great deal in his sleep about the Ice Prairies and the Jewels of Anniera, whatever those were, but Joe Shooster was merely the proprietor of The Only Inn. He didn't know about such things and didn't care to. He just wanted Oskar to recover and things to somehow go back to the way they were before the Fangs set foot in Skree.

If the Fangs wanted Oskar, then Joe Shooster knew the right thing to do was to keep Oskar hidden. When the old man's wounds were healed, Joe would figure out what to do next. In the meantime, he had to be careful. As Joe had just seen with Higgk the Fang, it wasn't just Oskar's life in danger but his and sweet Addie's as well. He hated to think of harm ever coming to her.

Joe bid Oskar farewell with a pat to his leg, and Oskar grunted in reply. Joe listened at the back of the chest of drawers for a long moment before sliding it aside and creeping out from behind it. He scooted the chest back into place and froze.

What was that sound? Movement from the window behind him? A sheen of sweat swept over Joe's body, and his mind raced. As casually as possible, he removed a handkerchief from the pocket of his vest and dusted the top of the chest. He hummed to himself as he moved from the chest of drawers to the desk and risked a glance at the window.

A face stared back at him.

A small figure with delicate features and a patchwork tunic perched outside the window of room eight. His eyes were piercing and cold, and they froze Joe in his tracks.

“Zouzab!” Joe said aloud, glad and confused to see the little fellow. Oskar would be pleased his friend was still alive.

He waved at the ridgerunner, who nodded in reply. The little creature was probably worried about his old master and would be a great help to Joe and Addie as they nursed Oskar back to health. Joe placed the handkerchief back in his pocket and slid the window open.

“Welcome, Zouzab!” he said, as the ridgerunner skittered through the window like a spider. “It’s good to see a familiar face in Glipwood.”

“Greetings, Mister Shooster,” Zouzab said. His voice was thin and brittle—not like a child’s, but not like a man’s either.

Joe patted the little man on the head, failing to notice the look of disgust that flashed over Zouzab’s face when he did so. “I suppose you’re wondering about Oskar, aren’t you?” He smiled at Zouzab, happy about his good news.

Zouzab’s eyes widened almost imperceptibly, and he nodded. “Yes, Mister Shooster, I’m most concerned for his...health.”

“Well,” Joe said and then remembered Oskar’s words just a few minutes ago: “*Zouzab...beware.*”

Joe had assumed Oskar wanted to warn his little friend to beware of the Fangs—but now he wasn’t so sure. He detected something sinister in the way the ridgerunner studied him.

“Oskar...” Joe faltered.

Zouzab took a step forward.

“Well—I haven’t seen him. Not since the day before all this chaos descended on Glipwood. Have you?” Joe cleared his throat, removed his handkerchief, and busied himself with dusting the rest of the furniture in the room, tightening the sheets, and fluffing the pillow, acutely aware of Oskar’s presence on the other side of the wall. He prayed the old man wouldn’t wake up or snore.

Joe opened the door to the hallway and paused at the threshold. “Would you like to come with me? I have twelve more rooms to dust, and it’s terribly exciting work, I assure you. Otherwise, you’re welcome to leave the way you came in.”

Zouzab watched him in silence, like a cat about to spring. The two stood in room eight for what felt to Joe like an eternity before Zouzab looked over the room one last time, bowed, and leapt lightly to the windowsill.

“Good-bye, Mister Shooster,” Zouzab said, and in a flutter of patchwork, he was gone.

Joe crossed the room on trembling legs to close and latch the window. Then the silence was shattered by a loud burst of flatulence from Oskar's secret room.

Zouzab's head appeared in the window.

"Excuse me," Joe said with a shrug.

The ridgerunner narrowed his eyes, wrinkled his nose, and was gone.



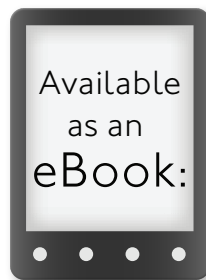
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