

His Grace, His Excellency, Sir Samuel Vimes, Duke of Ankh, Commander of the City Watch, was thoroughly disgruntled.[1] “The blasted thing. Won't. Fit. Properly,” he spat around the unlit cigar clenched between his teeth. Not currently being able to light it when he was badly in need of a smoke was not helping to improve his mood.

[1] This, in and of itself, was hardly new. It was practically his base state of being.

“Try another angle,” Sybil suggested. “And bend your knees.”

“I've already tried every gods-damned angle there is. It's not going in,” Sam protested, trying very hard not to raise his voice in frustration. Much. His knees were already making it crystal clear they didn't appreciate him doing this.

“Well, just... rock back and forth a bit. That usually works,” Sybil said.

“Look, it's all very well and good for you to lie back and tell me how to do it, but this just isn't working,” Sam insisted.

“It might be a bit of a tight fit, but you'll just have to force it. Push harder, straight down, once you get it lined up with the opening,” Sybil said patiently.

“Sybil, the bloody thing is not going to stay up, right? As soon as I take my hands away, it's going to fall right over,” Sam huffed indignantly. A muffled grunt slid past the cigar. “My hands are probably getting all sticky and I'm being poked in the ribs something awful. And it's too thick to get a proper grip on.”

There wasn't much sympathy in the reply. “You were offered assistance and refused. Twice, in fact. If you can't keep it up by yourself, it's your own fault,” she said brightly.

Sam's knees were protesting something awful by now, thanks to the awkward position. “You are in no condition to be helping me with this bit, Sybil...And I'm certainly not letting Willikins do this for you.”

“I'm having a baby, dear, I'm not totally disabled. I don't know why you're so worried I'm going to strain myself. And who do you think did this sort of thing with me before we got married?”

“Would you just stay still and let me do this? If I could see what I'm bloody well doing it would help a-”

“If you nudge it a bit to the right, I think you've just about got it, now,” Sybil interrupted.

“My right or your right?” Sam asked wearily. He was ready to give anything a try at this point, up to and including 'being reasonable', which was always a last resort in situations where husband and wife are mad enough to attempt these kinds of things together.

“Yours. Move the tip a couple of inches to your right and it should go straight in if you give it a good shove,” Sybil said.

Sam gave a grunt and pushed, finally felt it slide home and took his hands away. He took a

tentative step or two back and waited to see if the tree stand would hold the trunk.

“See? I told you,” Sybil said from the massive divan a few feet away. She was reclining with her legs crossed at the ankles, propped up on her elbows and against the cushions. “It would have gone a lot faster if you had just let me or Willikins help instead of being stubborn and silly about it.”

“Look, getting the Hogswatch tree up is *my* job, not the butler's.” He wasn't quite sure *why* that was, but it seemed very important that it *was* his job. He might not be fond of or even good at the titchy things about Hogswatch, like cards and gifts and parties and decorations, but by damn, he could at least oversee that the sodding tree got roughly upright every year. Especially *this* year. “And you do *not* need to be tugging on anything heavy. Or shoving anything. Or straining yourself,” Sam added sternly.

“Or engaging in anything more strenuous than breathing?” Sybil prompted, resting a hand on the by now distinct bulge beneath the loose blouse. “Or am I forbidden to do that, too, now? I mean, honestly, hiring a head cavern girl *and* a nursemaid? Is that really necessary?”

“Yes. I'm thinking of making it against the law and everything, in fact.”[2] Sam chewed on the cigar again and adjusted the trunk a few inches. “And a body can only do so much. It can't hurt.” Sybil hadn't been too keen on his suggesting that they needed to keep on the head cavern girl after the baby came plus add a nursemaid, but that was one thing he was going to be insistent about. Most insistently insistent. Sybil was just as insistent that you didn't just dump children off on the help to raise. The point was still, one might say, very much in negotiation.

[2] He was mostly kidding. He had only been sorely tempted to ask Carrot whether there might not be something in The Laws and Ordinances of The Cities Ankh and Morpork about the Expectant Wives and Bloody Great Boxes Of Baby Things in Ancestral Attics Act Of Fourteen-something-or-other the once. Fortunately, Willikins held Views on women in that condition tugging on heavy things. Unfortunately, Sybil held equally strong Views on Being Mollycoddled. After a few days of butting heads, Willikins had taken the proactive step of dragging any box or piece of furniture even remotely baby-related into one of the spare bedrooms in pure self-defense.

Satisfied the tree had been subdued, he turned back to his wife and stepped away from the tree. “Now, which one of these boxes of ornaments do you want to start wi-”

“Sam! The-” There were a couple of seconds and a *whump* noise followed by a lot of rustling as the tree got its own back with a sneak attack.[3] Sybil's mouth dropped open as she sat bolt upright. “Are you hurt? Sam?”

[3] In accordance with the universal laws of comedy, Hogswatch trees (or indeed, any holiday-related frippery) always manage to perfectly triangulate a trajectory that results in maximum hilarity. As opposed to, say, falling over in the opposite direction and completely missing the poor sod who has finally managed to wrestle it into the tree stand or falling into a corner where it will prop up neatly and harmlessly. For example, if there is a cat in the house, prepare for an ear-splitting screech and yowl. Falling holiday trees are practically cat-seeking missiles. Even when the cat is in another room. This probably has to do with Quantum.

"Fine. I'm fine," Sam said through gritted teeth, daring to unhunch his throbbing shoulders as the rustling and woody twanging died down on the floor. "Stupid tree." He gave it a nudge with the toe of his boot and considered some choice profanity. Then reconsidered it.

"It might have been a good idea to fasten the tree stand first, dear," Sybil said sweetly, getting up. "You're sure?"

"I'm grand. Right. Fine. Get back and let me get it back in the stand, and maybe you can tighten up the screws on the stand this time while I hold it, if you promise to be careful."

"I promise I'll try my best not to let you drop it on me," Sybil replied, radiating innocence. If Sam hadn't known better, he might have considered that deliberate sarcasm.

This time, he gave the tree a good shake after the screws had been tightened, and only let go completely once Sybil was well out of the way and he was satisfied that it was fully braced up. He stepped back from the tree and glared at it with narrowed eyes. "Now. I dare it to fall over. If it does, I'm going to get that dwarf axe we brought back with us and—"

"You're sure you're not hurt?" Sybil said, coming over and brushing a few loose needles off of his shoulders. "That could have caught you a very nasty crack on the head."

"But it didn't," Sam said dismissively. It had caught him only a... marginally unpleasant crack on the head. More a *thwap* on the head. As *thwaps* go, it was hardly a *twang*.

"You're going to have to start wearing your helmet and armor when you put the tree up from now on," Sybil said. There was an oddly strained edge to her voice and Sam snuck a sidelong look at her. "Wouldn't do to have to send word to Pseudopolis Yard that the commander won't be back after Hogswatch thanks to a vicious sneak attack by a Hogswatch tree." The corners of her mouth were pulled tight. "And in his own home, too."

"You're trying not to laugh at me. And doing a damned poor job of it," Sam accused, crossing his arms.

"I am not," Sybil said innocently, pressing her lips together. Very tightly. The dimple in her cheek was showing. And she was turning pink.

"You are too trying not to laugh," Sam said. "Could have gotten my head bashed in, and you're laughing."

There was a barely suppressed snort of laughter and her shoulders started shaking. "I was doing a pretty good job of it for a bit," Sybil insisted, putting a hand over her mouth in a vain attempt to stifle it. "Until... It's... it's just... the look... if you... could have seen... the look...the look on your face...and the... the tree...when it..." She dissolved into breathless peals of laughter.

"I'm glad my near death by tree-braining was so bloody amusing," Sam fumed.

"Sam... I'm sorry..." The laughter died down only very slightly. "It's just... you were so insistent,

and... and... you... It looked ridiculous. But I'm glad you're not hurt.”[4] She stepped behind him and wrapped her arms around his waist, laying her cheek against his shoulder and pressing close with a sigh as the giggling died away. He could feel her belly nudging him in the back, among other things. A most definitely pregnant belly. It still gave him a right jolt to think that Sybil was going to have a baby. An actual *baby*. Having the hard evidence, as it were, pressed up against him still tended to make at least half his brain screech to a halt. The other half generally took up the slack by panicking, imagining the worst or, on good days, merely supplying the proper sort of “Yes, dear”, “Any color yarn you like, dear” or “Yes, it was very thoughtful of the Dowager Duchess of Whatsit or Lady Thingamabob to send us something for the layette, whatever a layette might be, dear”, when consulted on things like woolly baa-lambs, floppy eared soft toys, positively tiny pairs of booties and little knitted bobble hats that just about fit his balled up fist. There were still the tell-tale tremors that meant she was just laughing *silently*, now.

[4] That is, being interpreted, “I'm sorry I laughed at you for being a macho idiot and promise I won't say 'I told you so' again. That'll teach you to let me help next time I offer.”

“If it weren't for your condition, I would swear you had been at the eggnog.” He gave her hand a conciliatory pat.[5]

[5] Which is to say “Apology accepted. So long as there is no further mention of me being a macho idiot.” This is the true language of love at its finest.

Sybil loosened her grip but didn't take her arms from around his waist. “I didn't think I was particularly given to being drunk and disorderly.”

“No, more my thing. Used to be, anyway,” Sam murmured. Reflexively, he reached up and briefly touched the silver cigar case in his pocket. Since Sybil had given it to him[6], it had generally served as a reliable talisman when he really, really wanted a drink, which he usually turned into really, really wanting a cigar as quickly as possible. It had just sort of turned up, quietly, as a wedding present from Sybil. Silver, slim and curved, with that inscription, and over the years, as he had more and more occasion to wear uniforms that weren't meant to get dirty and armor that wasn't meant to be dinged and the hated buckled shoes, it had become more and more a part of him, almost like his badge or his nose. He didn't think about it much these days, it just *was*. Until it wasn't in his pocket.

[6] Except for a short trip to a couple of the local pawn shops when Nobby pinched it and flogged it. It never stayed gone for long, thanks to the inscription, but there had been a closed door meeting in his office and Words. Many of which peeled paint and could be heard through the door, anyway.

Sybil hadn't ordered him to stop drinking. She hadn't pleaded, threatened or begged, nor had she done anything beyond occasionally calling a spade a spade when he showed up too drunk to be fit for much. She hadn't even asked or suggested, he noticed. He had promised to stop because his drinking *bothered* her. It upset her. Worse, she tried not to let on that it bothered her. And that bothered *him*. He hadn't actually had a drink since just before he had married. Oh, he had *wanted* it a hundred times so badly that he might have given his right arm for a taste. But he had made the promise, and then this thing had shown up... and... well, that had settled it, hadn't it? There wasn't any point in wasting any more words on the matter.

Six simple ones covered it better than a million could. He had discovered, amazingly enough, other things that made the world come into focus that didn't involve looking at it through half a bottle of Bearhugger's. Mind, all that probably didn't keep a good number of the finest members of the upper crust this side of the river from whispering behind their hands about him being a drunk while they got thoroughly sozzled at parties on more expensive fare. The cigars had proven to be a reliable substitute.

Except when they weren't. Now he couldn't just light one up inside the house any time he wanted. Well, you couldn't complain, given the reason...

"You could go ahead and smoke that, you know." Sam Vimes sometimes thought wives would make very good policemen.[7] They couldn't half spot sneaky little tells.

[7] It didn't hurt that they also felt all your belongings, drawers and pockets were subject to random search and seizure. He had lost more thin-soled boots that way...

"If I smoke it in the house, Mrs. Content would have my hide and the cook would have what's left. And I guess Willikins would work over whatever Mrs. Parsons didn't," Sam protested. "And then Carrot would probably lecture whatever survived that. Not worth it. It's coming a gods-damned blizzard outside. I don't want one *that* badly." It had been weeks since the desperate run through the snow, and truth be told, he still didn't much like being in it. His leather greatcoat hanging in the hall wardrobe was huge, heavy with oil, dry and warm as toast. Normally, he would gladly stand outside for an entire miserable night in the thing. Between that and the heavy leather boots Sybil insisted upon getting for him, you hardly felt the bite of the cold at all. Not like the cardboard-soled things he used to barely afford and nothing but a standard-issue cape... But just looking at the white stuff, even thinking about it, made him shiver and his bones hurt. With reluctance, he put the cigar back in the case and slipped it back into his pocket.

"Sorry. Maybe I could make it up to you," Sybil said, rubbing his chest soothingly.

"No need. Now, did you want the box of those fiddly little tinkly things first or the icicles or... maybe the Hogfather topper thing. I know I saw the box around h-" He stopped mid-sentence. One hand was not rubbing his chest any more. Most definitely not. Er. He turned around to face her. "Um... Sybil?"

"Yes?"

"You're... uh... that is... you just... er..."

"I know. Problem?" Sybil draped her arms around his neck and raised her eyebrows in innocent inquiry. Sam Vimes wasn't a particularly tall man, his wife was actually a few inches taller than he was when he wasn't wearing these thick-soled boots[8]. Still, just now he had a fine vantage point for cleavage that was deeper, fuller and rounder than it had been even a couple of weeks ago, nicely framed by a low, gathered neckline. Then she pressed up against him again. There was a rustle and the press of blouse, shirt and whalebone. And *ohgodsskirtandtrouserstoo...*

[8] And inexpertly darned socks were practically as good as a pair of lifts.

Now, bits of his brain were shutting off for reasons that had hardly anything at all to do with the reason why she had started favoring loose, high-waisted blouses and skirts over dresses and gone to the corsetier for a fitting session soon after they had gotten back from Überwald. The rest of it was just lighting up like a Hogswatch tree. That had been torched.

“Well, it's just... I mean... are you sure? You're... I mean... you've got... is it... you know... safe?” Sam stammered.

“Safe for whom, exactly?” Sybil asked, the corners of her mouth turning up.

“Well... you know... for you... and the... the baby...”

“You weren't asking that question while we were still on holiday,” Sybil said, giving him a quick peck on the cheek. The question of whether or not he had had a decent shave this morning flitted across his mind. Not that it mattered much. A decent shave soon turned into a bad shave. It was just a matter of a few hours.

Right. Holiday. Or at least a three week meander back to Ankh-Morpork. No work, no Watch, no particular place to be and no particular time to be there. When evenings in had just sort of happened with no apparent planning or effort^[9] because there was nothing to interrupt them short of the inn being set on fire or similar. And not quite so much to press into him down below. The baby had been more of a vague concept at that point to tell the truth. It'll probably take a while to sink in, Sybil had said. It hadn't so much sunk in as it had fallen on him like a ton of rectangular building things when he least expected it. “It wasn't... so... um...” Sybil fixed him with a Look. It was one he had come to dread. It was the one that meant there wasn't any point lying, because she could read him like a book in any case. One with a lot of colorful pictures and very short words. Sam settled for the last refuge of the desperate. The truth. “You weren't showing then.”

[9] It takes quite a lot of effort, for example, to make it crystal clear to an entire city police force that the first person who knocks on the door at Scoone Avenue on the Commander's wedding anniversary for anything short of a city-wide riot headed up the lane is going to find him- or herself testing out the Commander's latest ideas for assassin-repellents and patrolling nothing but the Shades for the next six months. The second one would not be so lucky. It would probably involve putting a Narrow-Eared Smut in one pocket and nitroglycerin in the other.

Sybil's face fell. “Oh. I see.” She took her hands away from his neck, stepped back and folded her hands in front of her. He saw something he didn't often see from Sybil. Self-consciousness. When he had first met her, he hadn't thought her capable of such a thing. He would have thought she had never given a toss about what anyone thought and had never, ever been uncertain about anything. She had seemed to have absolute, unwavering self-assurance. Marriage had afforded him the revelation that there were occasional chinks in it, but they were remarkably small, few and far between. Sam didn't have much experience of women, he would be the first to admit. He had even less of expectant mothers. This was part of the map that was emblazoned Here Be Dragons. It didn't take an expert to know he had just mangled what he had meant to say and it had gone over like a lead balloon.

“That is... I mean to say... is there a... point... er... when you're supposed to... stop... doing... *things*? I don't know anything about this sort of... er... thing,” Sam said miserably. *And who have I got to ask? he thought. Fred Colon? Corporals and Sergeants half my age?*

Sybil looked at him curiously. “You're honestly worried it's going to hurt me or the baby if we...”

“Won't it?”

She smiled again. “Sam,” she said gently, slipping her arms back around his neck, “believe you me, the baby is pretty well protected in there. And I hesitate to point this out, but that's how it got in there in the first place, don't you know. I believe someone in this room told me to push a bed against a door just a few weeks ago. You've certainly changed your tune since then.”

Sam colored at the memory. “It hadn't properly sunk in. And I did tell you not to strain yourself...” he finished lamely.

“Look, Mrs. Content says I can do most anything I feel like doing, within reason. It's fine to have evenings in as long as you like provided there isn't a problem. Mind, at some point, it will probably take more planning and logistics than a full scale assault on Klatch, but she's been a midwife for fifty years. I would think she knows what she's talking about. Besides, the exercise would probably do me good. It's not like I'm getting any out in the dragon pens these days. And between you, Willikins, and the entire Watch when I dare to go out, I can't walk ten feet without someone telling me I need to sit down and take it easy.”

“If you're sure... we could...” *We could go upstairs, and light a fire in the fireplace... and stuff the sodding tree... it's upright... it can be decorated tomorrow.*

Before he could get the words out, she kissed him. Not a quick peck on the cheek, either. There was a faint whiff of Captivation and lavender soap. The usual slight undertone of acrid, chemical smoke that tended to cling to avid dragon breeders most of the time wasn't there, and he decided he missed it slightly. His hands found her waist and back in an effort to pull her closer. One thing he could say for the maternity corset so far. There was at least a *reduced* chance of finding yourself being poked by something unfamiliar and made of whalebone when you went exploring. By the time their mouths parted company, Sam realized there was a distinct flaw in his suggestion. For a start, he was going to have some difficulty walking much of anywhere, including upstairs. That much was obvious. Almost painfully obvious at the moment. It was early enough that Willikins was probably still pottering around downstairs, best he recalled, tomorrow was cook's night off, so this was a late night, and knowing his luck, they would run into the cook, two of the maids and the man who stoked the boiler coming back for his hat before making it as far as the staircase... “You were saying?”

“I was going to say we could go upstairs. If we wait a few minutes,” he amended.

Her eyes flicked downward. “But why does it have to be upstairs? We've got a perfect good divan right over there.”

“Divan?” Sam said blankly.

“The overgrown sofa thing.”

“I actually *know* what the divan is, amazingly enough. It's the chifferobe and the credenza I'm forever getting mixed up... I meant... here? There are people in the house. Down here. On this floor.” The thought made his ears burn with embarrassment.

“I don't see why not. The door's closed. And there are people in the house, up there, lots of times when we're in bed.”

“But they don't often walk into our bedroom without knocking.”

“The door could be locked if you're so worried. Besides, Willikins always knocks. I doubt one of the maids is suddenly going to be taken by a mad urge to come in here and dust the sitting room after nine in the evening,” Sybil argued. “And it's not as though we have anything to be ashamed of. It's our sitting room, we're married and we can do what we like in it. Besides, I think the cat just *might* be out of the bag on that score. At least for people who understand elementary biology and know about the baby. Which, if I'm any judge, is most of Ankh-Morpork.”

In some strange way, Sam was a remarkably shy man when it came to romantic things. In fact, Sybil was probably the only person who would even dare use the word to describe him. Words, he had never been particularly skilled with words, even when they were alone. He made the effort when it was important, and that was enough. He wasn't much good at being affectionate in public. The best he could generally manage when people might be watching was a sort of ineffectual shoulder patting. But when all the distractions were gone, and it was just the two of them, and there were no words needed, he could definitely be good at this.

Sybil smiled at him. And this time, it was that smile she reserved just for him, the one that made him feel like he could do anything except actually deserve being smiled at like that and that his heart might burst, all at the same time, and he was completely lost. She kissed him again, and by the time she pulled away a second time the only coherent thoughts he could muster mostly involved the extremely urgent need to get clothing out of the way.

Sam untied the lacing on the blouse. He spent a few moments removing his belt and loosening his trousers before kissing her neck. Soon after, he was working his way across her shoulders and collarbones with hands and mouth, then the tops of her breasts. He was dimly aware of Sybil tugging his shirt free and fumbling with the buttons, unfastening them, putting her hands on his bare chest and shoulders, tracing lingering fingertips over a few of the familiar scars. He savored the flutter of her pulse beneath his lips, the warmth and softness and scent of her skin, until he needed to come up for air.

Sam stripped his own shirt off and awkwardly shed his boots and socks^[10] before giving her another quick kiss on the mouth and lifting the blouse over her head.

[10] There is simply no way anywhere in the known multiverse for a man to look suave while removing footwear standing up. James Bond can't even manage this. Chances are he will look bloody stupid trying to get out of his trousers, too. Especially if he hasn't tackled the footwear first.

Sybil slipped off her shoes and stood next to the divan, unfastening and dropping skirts and slippers while Sam divested himself of trousers and drawers. She sat on the edge and wordlessly patted the space next to her before lying back, propped on her elbows. "I never know how to work these blasted things," Sam admitted sheepishly, plucking at the fiddly buttons and loops at the front of the corset, fingers feeling clumsy with eagerness, trying to work his way up from the bottom.

"Here, let me help," Sybil murmured, starting to unfasten the corset at the top, peeling it away and tossing it aside when all the buttons were undone and their hands met near the bottom. He propped over her, cupped and kneaded heavy breasts while he kissed her shoulders again. Then he teased calloused thumbs over her stiff nipples before putting his mouth to first one, then the other. There was a sharp intake of breath, and Sybil combed fingers through his brown hair, which was fast turning a dusty gray along the temples and behind the ears. He used lips and tongue, licking and sucking, then kissing along the divide between.

He had been not altogether surprised to find his wife had a fairly pragmatic and open attitude toward naked bodies and sex once the two of them had gotten beyond those first few somewhat bunglesome attempts at any sort of physical intimacy. Granted, they were primarily bunglesome on his part.[11] And it had taken quite some time for it to even properly register that his wife actually liked spending time with him. That was an entirely new concept. There had been plenty of years that Sam hadn't even liked his own company. Sybil lightly nudged her pelvis into him again. "I trust you still remember how to work knickers?"

[11] It had taken more courage from a bottle than he would care to admit to work up the gumption to attempt to kiss her the first time. Plus a whole evening's worth of internal pep-talking and debate during dinner. Part of him had insisted that if he had any decency left, he would break it off right now, for Sybil's own good, before things got too messy. The other part had lied that he was just curious as to what it would be like to kiss her. In the end, the curious part won out. And then it spent the next few days being curious as to where a proper Lady had learned to kiss back like that...

"I think I can just about manage," Sam said, hooking his fingers into the waistband and slipping them down and off with her cooperation. Sam ran a nut brown hand down her side, took in the contrast between well-tanned and windburned skin and paler flesh, then traced a palm around her navel before covering her mouth with his own again. The hand slid between her thighs, stroking and probing tentatively, and for a few minutes, there was just breath and touch, give and take, warm, slick velvet. When he pulled his mouth and hand away again, Sybil eagerly kissed along his jawline and neck, then arched her back and rolled her hips in open invitation. By now, he didn't need to be asked twice. He knelt, repositioned and seated himself inside her. Sam rubbed the solid, well padded curve of a hip, enjoying the feel of it before stroking down her bare thigh, then back up, cradling her breast again before settling into a slow, deliberate rhythm. He was spurred on by the soft sounds of pleasure Sybil was making and the sounds of their breathing.

Sam closed his eyes and concentrated on the sensations, the awareness of her body beneath and around him, the inviting and varying softness of her curves, the surprising firmness of the new mound seated between her hip bones. After a few minutes, he opened his eyes and traced his fingers along the tender skin of her inner arm and wrist, along her

palm, before lacing the fingers of his roaming hand between hers. They both clung tight, almost painfully so, flexing and squeezing, hot, damp palms touching for a while.

He retraced the ridge of her collarbones, idly niggling with the delicate chain of the small locket she wore. It was probably something that had belonged to a grandmother or great-grandmother or any number of greats ago. There always seemed to be a name or a story associated with each piece. Ancestral Ramkin jewelry seemed to sprout up like mushrooms after a spring rain in jewelry boxes and dresser drawers all over the house, everything from old rings and earrings to brooches and even, of all things, jeweled tiaras. Many of them sported precious stones that would have made an incautious member of the Thieves Guild drool while giddily planning his retirement. Sybil generally rotated through it the way some people changed their socks.[12] Sam likely hadn't seen a tenth of it yet. Therefore, it gave him some satisfaction to note that she always, without fail, wore her engagement and wedding rings. Even now that her fingers sometimes swelled and she often left the other rings in the jewelry boxes.

[12] In the case of people like Nobby Nobbs, rather more often than other people changed their socks.

Sam let the chain fall off his fingertip and went back to cupping her left hand instead, rubbing his thumb over the two bands, her palm and fingers. It wasn't an especially expensive engagement ring. The stones, three rather small, round blue diamonds, were positively minuscule when compared to what she already owned, but the jeweler on the Street of Cunning Artificers had indeed done a cunning job of setting them to their best advantage. It had cost him several months of setting aside a little extra[[13] to even put a decent down payment on it. It had also cost him several extra miles out of his way when out on patrol "just going by to look at it again" and way more sleepless days than he would care to admit. It had been worth it in the end to see how pleased Sybil had been with it, especially the fact that he had thought about it enough to choose blue stones. It always stayed on her left ring finger, nestled up against the simple, plain gold wedding band, day in and day out, quietly settling into a semi-permanent groove and tan line in the way wedding rings do. Wedding rings have a lot more to say but much less to prove. Sam didn't wear one at all. Sybil had been understanding about it. But her father and grandfathers had been in the regiments, hadn't they? If there was one thing the military and the Watch could agree on, it was that rings could catch on things and cost you a finger in a *melée*. Losing a finger tended to be a mite distracting. And it wasn't like much of anyone in Ankh-Morpork needed reminding that he was married or who he had married. Most of the inhabitants were either perpetually astonished by it or perpetually annoyed by it. Sometimes both. At least when they bothered to acknowledge his existence in the first place. Men like Lord Rust usually preferred mentally erasing him from the immediate universe when possible.

[13] Admittedly, not drinking had made it fewer months than it would have taken otherwise. Even when you frequent a less flashy boozier like the Bunch of Grapes and drink the stuff that will also clean spoons and clear drains, drinking to forget adds up. Especially when you don't remember exactly what it is you're trying to forget, so you drink a little extra to make sure you don't remember it, just in case. All in all, joining the Klatchian Foreign Legion is a lot more affordable.

He prodded her fingers open, pressed a kiss into her palm, then guided it to lie on his own

shoulder. Sybil rested her hand there for a while, kneading almost in rhythm with his thrusts. Then she made an urgent, slightly strangled noise in the back of her throat, tensing her legs and pushing her thighs against him for a second before her breath quickened. Sam could hear his own roaring in his ears, along with his pulse. The building tension led to a slight faltering in the rhythm.

Sybil's tented knees jerked inward again, in an involuntary spasm. There was mounting sensation, drive, imperative, need, catching of the breath, tightening of the muscles, and finally, release, followed by the peculiar, diffuse warmth and rubbery looseness that made muscles feel more like melting butter, all the tension flowing and ebbing away. Sam tucked in beside her, and the two of them lay in a companionable tangle for a while, waiting for their breathing to settle. "I really should get up and at least stoke the fire before it dies down all the way..." Sam said at last, taking in the pink flush of Sybil's skin. All he could manage for the time being was rolling over to look across the room to the fireplace. He was feeling thoroughly lazy and indolent at the moment.

"It'll keep a little while, yet," Sybil insisted, massaging his shoulders. *Gods, now I'll never want to move...*

"You might catch a chill," Sam protested, but there wasn't much spirit in it.

"There's a blanket, right here." It didn't require nearly as much effort to get the blanket spread out over the two of them as it would stoking the fireplace. Better, it didn't require getting up. Besides, Sam thought, they would get up and go on up to bed in a little while, anyway.

The next thing he was aware of was the definite skritch, clanky noises of a poker in the clinkers, coke and ash of a fireplace, as though it were trying to be as discreet and quiet as possible. Still half-asleep, he mumbled, "Don't... leave it... I'll do it..." The muzzy prodding by his brain that there was still the weight and heat of another body just behind his back didn't quite make it through the fog. The voice of Willikins, however, did the job of at least three bad cups of coffee.

"With all due respect, Your Grace, it's quite cold this morning. I think you'll be wanting to wait until the fire's had a chance to take the edge off the chill before rising. There are clean clothes on the chair. I took the liberty of gathering up yesterday's things for the laundry hamper. I'll be back in a few minutes to make sure the fire is still going and relay any requests for breakfast," the butler said, stepping smartly out the door and pulling it closed behind him. As though finding his employers on the divan first thing in the morning wearing nothing but a blanket were perfectly normal.

Sam took a quick, slightly panicked stock. The blanket was still, thankfully, over both of them. Not, granted, that Willikins hadn't seen him in the altogether before, but Sam couldn't help feeling there was a real difference between bringing you something in the bath and... well... *this*. For a start, he didn't usually have female company in the bath... He rolled over carefully and rearranged the blanket self-consciously. Sybil had her face nearly buried in the upholstery, sleeping heavily. "Er... Sybil..." He nudged a bare shoulder, feeling downright guilty for waking her. He shook more firmly when she didn't budge. "Sybil... Willikins stoked the fireplace," he added, a little desperately.

"That was nice of him," Sybil murmured, voice still thick with sleep, eyes still closed.

"He's going to be back in a few minutes. To see to the fire and ask about breakfast..."

"Anything is fine."

"Sybil..."

"What?" She dragged her eyelids open and propped up on her elbows.

Willikins stepped in just then and stoked the fire again with old retainer efficiency. "Might I pass along anything to the cook about breakfast?" Willikins asked briskly.

"I'm sure anything the cook wants to make is fine. And no great hurry," Sybil said.

"Very good, Your Ladyship. Your Grace?"

"Er... Sorry about... we... that is-" Sam set up on an elbow and gestured weakly at nothing in particular.

"No need to apologize for simply choosing to spend the night down here, Your Grace. I understand completing the holiday decorating can be quite tiring," Willikins said, in the face of the contrary evidence of the completely naked tree. And Sam supposed, what he must know were two completely naked occupants of the divan, given that he had gathered up their discarded clothes. "Nothing specific for breakfast, Your Grace?"

"No. Nothing specific..." Sam said blankly.

"Thank you," Sybil said graciously, as though it were perfectly normal to be having a conversation with the butler while separated from the world by nothing more than a blanket. Sam couldn't help staring sidelong at her.

"Very good. I'll let the cook know that the menu for breakfast is entirely at her discretion. It shall be kept ready at your leisure," Willikins said, stepping out again, the door shutting with a snick behind him.

Beside Sam, Sybil laid back down and stretched a little under the blanket. He did the same and looked at her. She looked more awake now, but still a touch heavy-lidded.

"Morning," she said, the corners of her mouth turning up slowly.

"Morning," Sam parroted. "I suppose we can finish up the tree after breakfast."

The smile broadened slightly and she kissed him on the lips. "It'll keep," she said with a shrug, curling in tighter against him.

"It'll keep," Sam agreed, resting a hand on her shoulder. "Bloody thing will keep."