



CHAPTER 1

The Chase

“You deaf, boy?”

Packer Throme didn’t answer. The last thing he wanted now was a fight. Dog Blestoe was a big man, bigger than Packer by three inches and thirty pounds, and Packer’s elder by thirty years. Leathery, gray-headed, lean and muscular from a lifetime of hard labor, Dog stood across the table with his hands knotted into fists.

Packer stayed seated and silent.

Dog snorted. He had made sure Packer had left town humiliated four years ago. He would make sure the boy returned the same way. He rammed the table with his thigh, sloshing the mug of ale sitting on it. Packer caught it before it tipped.

“Say something!”

Packer didn’t look up.

Dog grabbed the back of a wooden chair and tossed it aside, clattering it across the plank flooring, where it nearly shinned one of the regulars. “Disrespect!” he seethed, nodding around the pub at the undeniable proof Packer had just offered them all.

They did not nod back. These fishermen had come with their usual intentions, to talk and drink and smoke their pipes and do some modest complaining after a hard day at sea. Not to witness this. Not again.

“Stand up, boy!”

Packer studied his ale. Cap Hillis, the pub's friendly proprietor, had set the dark, white-capped mug there just moments ago. The modest complaining today had been about the pirate, Scatter Wilkins, and the rumors flying around that the feared outlaw had turned fisherman, and was now using harvesting techniques like those of their rivals across the sea in the Kingdom of Drammun. In so doing, Scat, as almost everyone called him, was helping to empty the sea of fish and glut the world's markets. In the process, he was also helping himself to a fortune, and making the fishing villages—like Hangman's Cliffs—all poorer by the day.

Dog believed the rumors. They gave him a specific target for a deep, general sense of discontent.

"The *Trophy Chase* wasn't built to catch cod," Packer had offered, the only full sentence he had spoken since arriving.

"I said *stand up!*" Dog now ordered. Packer did not comply.

Dog eyed Packer carefully. The boy had grown some, gained some weight. His pimples had turned to pockmarks. His mop of blond hair was even shaggier, if that were possible. But he was still the same spineless kid who wouldn't speak up, who couldn't look a man in the eye.

"They teach you this at seminary?" Dog sneered. "How to mock your elders?" He leaned on the table, his big, hard hands now splayed on the worn wood, his eyes locked on Packer as though they could burn through him. He dropped his voice. "Oh, no—I forgot. They didn't want you there, either."

Packer grimaced. He closed his eyes again, letting the pain, and then the anger, pass. Everyone in the village knew he had been expelled after less than a year at the seminary, rejected as a priest. But he was not prepared to have it flung at him the moment he returned.

Dog saw he was getting to the boy. He kept pushing. "So why'd you come back? You don't like hard work. That's what we have here. No books. No tea parties."

One groggy old fisherman, head hung over his ale, looked suddenly perturbed. "Hey, I got a book," he countered thickly. He was called Fourtooth, a nickname he'd earned after losing a run-in with a jib boom as a young man. Having had his say, he let his mug work its way back toward his mouth.

Packer took a sip of his own ale, careful to do it calmly and deliberately. It was cool, and his mouth was dry, and it felt good



going down. He closed his eyes, and his mind returned him to where he'd been just this afternoon, standing atop the Hangman's Cliffs, the rugged precipices after which this village was named. He had been looking down on the inlet below, down on the great, sleek *Trophy Chase* shining in the sun, with her two escort ships beside her. Basking in the wrinkled blue water.

Packer alone knew of the pirate's ship hidden in the inlet below... and he knew he had to be aboard that ship. He wished he were standing on its forecandle deck, facing the Vast Sea, right now.

"You're cow dung," Dog sniffed, bringing Packer back to the moment. "And the only thing worse than cow dung is cow dung with no respect."

Packer tried not to imagine how a respectful pile of manure might behave. Would it salute? He tried to take another sip, but Dog must have noticed that he had let a trace of a smirk slip through, because the older man slapped him hard across the mouth with the back of his hand. The cool drink went flying, and the mug skittered across the floor.

Packer stroked his stinging jaw, but didn't respond, didn't look up. The innkeeper, round and red-faced, scrambled over, recovered the mug, examined it. It was made of sterner stuff than it appeared. He mopped halfheartedly with a rag at some of the puddled ale on the floor but was immediately distracted. It would soak into the open grain soon enough, absorbed like a thousand spills before it.

"Dog, lay off. Why not just hear him out?" a voice from the back of the room suggested. "Find out what he knows." Others echoed agreement.

"But he has nothing to say," Dog countered. "Do you, boy?"

Packer drew a line with his finger down a rough scar on the tabletop. The gash looked to Packer like it had been carved carefully with a knife, artwork made to look like an act of violence.

"Seems to me he's about to head right back out of town, now that he's finished his ale. Isn't that right, boy?" Dog snorted his disdain, pondering whether the lad needed hitting again. He decided against it and allowed himself half a smile. "Just as well you broke your promise to Panna. Marrying you would have ruined her."

There were a few oohs, and a whistle. Dog was hitting low.

Packer's jaw clenched just slightly, as Dog's words sliced through him. But this, too, was a familiar pain—the truth was, he couldn't



disagree. A more honorable man would have come home to Panna after the seminary rejected him and settled down to the quiet life of a fisherman. But Packer had not.

Dog laughed and turned away to pick up his chair. "Go ahead, try to act like nothing bothers you. If you want us to think you're turning the other cheek like some holy man, it ain't workin'. We all know you better than that. They sure knew better at your priest school. Like I've always told Panna," he continued casually, "you're just a worthless dreamer. Good for nothing." Dog stood over Packer now and delivered his final blow in a whisper. "Exactly like your daddy."

Audible breaths were taken and held.

Packer's face revealed nothing. But he stood up slowly, his blue eyes cold. Dog straightened, hands still clenching the back of the upright chair. Packer now looked Dog in the eye, a direct challenge. The fisherman smiled broadly. "What, you don't like me talking that way about your old man?"

Packer was smaller than Dog, but at just a shade under six feet, he was bigger than almost everyone else in the room. His shoulders were usually slouched some, but now he put his head back, squaring himself to the older man. He didn't look quite so soft, suddenly.

Dog was unimpressed. He looked for something else with which to bait him. He found it on Packer's belt. "Look at this! What do you know, boys! Did you see? He's a swordsman! Is that how you protect yourself from all us old fishermen?" Dog pantomimed a little loose-wristed swordplay, gaining laughs from around the room.

Packer's heartbeat quickened, but his cold gaze didn't change. He waited a moment longer, wrestling with his conscience, knowing he should walk away, not wanting to. Dog had crossed a line.

Dog's moment of mockery turned to disgust. "You're not fooling anybody. Your daddy was an embarrassment, and so are you. Tuck your tail and get."

Packer made his decision. He unbuckled his belt and gently laid it, with its scarred and stained leather scabbard, on the table. It was a dueling sword, a thin, straight, double-edged rapier. When all eyes were resting on it, Packer looked at Dog and spoke softly. "I'm sorry if this frightened you."

Dog's face went red, and the room erupted in a flash, amazed, gleeful. Packer had some fight in him after all.



“Draw it!” Dog demanded. Then without looking away, “Give me your iron, Cap!” Everyone knew what the innkeeper kept behind the bar for protection.

“No, Dog,” Cap protested, his high voice strained. “Not swords!” But it didn’t slow Dog or the others. One of them, a dark-spirited man named Ned Bassar, reached behind the bar, and with a wild grin tossed Dog the barkeeper’s sword. Cap tried vainly to intercept it, but his short, thick arms flailed uselessly as the rusted blade sailed over his bald head. Dog snatched it out of the air by the blade, proving to all who cared to notice just how dull it was. “There you go, Dog!” Ned called out. “Sic ’em!”

“No, leave him be!” Cap warned Dog in a shrill voice, grabbing at the big man’s elbow. The innkeeper leaned in, stood on his tiptoes to speak into Dog’s ear. “They say after he left the seminary he studied swordplay at the Academy...let it go, Dog.”

But Dog’s slitted eyes were now drilling into Packer’s. He shook the barkeeper off his arm. “They can say what they like. I know what this boy’s made of, and a few lessons in a lace drawing room can’t change that.”

Packer took his sword and scabbard from the table and looked at it, weighed it in his hands for a moment, and then suddenly unsheathed the blade. The oiled steel hissed as the blade flashed into view. It was a gleaming, finely crafted piece of work, with ornate detail engraved a third of the way up its length.

The older man’s eyes widened almost imperceptibly. This was truly a swordsman’s sword, the kind that Hangman’s Cliffs had rarely seen. How Packer had gotten it and whether he knew how to use it were questions that only now formed in the older man’s mind. He couldn’t keep from looking down at Cap’s sword, to which he had paid scant attention until this moment. The darkened thing looked like a fireplace poker by comparison. The blade was slightly bent, the tip rounded and dull, the hand-guard little more than a loose crosspiece of bent metal. He frowned. No matter. This was about manhood, not armor.

Dog gritted his teeth. “Come and get it,” he croaked. But his voice didn’t boom now. The words came not from the belly, but from the throat, more smoke than fire. Still, there was no chance he would back down. He turned sideways and raised his sword, pointing it so that the tip was inches from Packer’s heart. The others stood



and cleared a small space, moving chairs away and the table from between them, so the two could face each other properly.

Packer stood still, not taking his eyes off Dog. Rather than raise his guard, though, the younger man lowered his sword casually, resting its point on the rough flooring. Dog prodded a few times, brandishing his sword menacingly, actually poking Packer in the chest twice.

“Come on!” he demanded. His voice was now nasal. The room grew quiet again. The fishermen were suddenly worried Packer might not fight after all, even now. Last time it was fists, and humiliation. With swords, Packer might end up dead.

Packer had no such concerns. He shook his head casually, pulled on his earlobe. “You need to relax,” he instructed his opponent. “You can’t fence when you’re tight as a drum.” Dog looked sour—but more surprised than angry. Packer spoke with a casual authority the older man had not expected.

Now Packer raised his sword and stepped back, his body melting easily into a perfect guard position, eyes focused and ready, his blade just touching Dog’s. “But most of all, Dog,” he said, with a sudden, burning energy that seemed almost joyful, “try not to show so much fear.” And he smiled.

This drew howls from the audience and a loud curse from Dog. The elder took a great sweeping hack at the younger. Packer reacted as though he expected exactly that move, as though he had meant to provoke exactly that move. He met the blow effortlessly, with the ring of steel on steel. In the same motion, his blade slid down the length of Dog’s, sparking as it went, until its tip sliced across the knuckles of Dog’s sword hand, easily missing the useless hand guard.

As Dog winced, a second flick of Packer’s blade, executed so quickly it was almost imperceptible, sent the old sword flying across the tavern. Before it came to rest on the floor, and before the fisherman could grab his bleeding right hand with his left, the sharp tip of Packer’s sword was pressed, cold and unyielding, into the sagging skin of the older man’s throat.

Dog grabbed Packer’s blade instinctively with his uninjured hand, closing his fist around it, but Packer quickly slid it out of his grasp, slicing Dog’s palm and fingers as he did. And then he put the point right back where it had been, at Dog’s throat. Dog held his



two hands up, both of them now bleeding. He stepped backward reflexively until he stumbled into an open chair.

There he sat, hands now balled into bleeding fists, eyes wild, neck held back in a futile effort to stay away from the point of Packer's sword, which felt like it had already bored an inch into his throat. The room went quiet again. Dust swirled in the lamplight.

Packer's face was flint, but his voice went soft. "Now would be the appropriate time to show fear."

No one drew a breath. They all heard Dog's throat gurgle. His head didn't move, but his eyes darted around the room, vainly looking for help. He was having trouble grasping that there would be no help; it was already over.

Packer read his eyes, his expression, waiting for the moment when the obvious question arose in Dog's mind. And as soon as Packer saw it, he spoke. "Apologize to my father."

Dog's pride warred with his instinct for self-preservation. His mind spun, searching for another option, any option but apology or death. Apology was shameful; he had been ridiculing Packer Throme and his father, Dayton, for years. To simply retract it all in a moment would be to crumble completely, to admit cowardice as well as defeat. And yet to die at this boy's hands would be more shameful yet, giving Packer the last word, proving Dog wrong—and forever. Worse yet, Dog would be dead.

He very much did not want to be dead. But would the boy do it? Packer saw that question forming, the arrogance returning to Dog. He pushed just slightly on the blade and nodded, so there would be no question that he was willing.

Dog believed. From deep within him came a roar, full of anger and passion born of fear and pain. His teeth were bared, the strings of his neck taut and visible. He was a wounded, cornered animal, screaming his fury and his terror.

Packer's face didn't change, his blade didn't move. And then the rage in Dog was spent, and the roar rose to almost a shriek, petered out to a whimper. Dog closed his eyes, wrenched them tightly shut. He was breathing heavily, and looked like he might cry.

Still Packer waited. He knew Dog's moment of decision had not yet come. Dog had not yet decided to live with this moment branded into his memory, and into the memories of all these men; neither had he decided to die and be done with it. The choice would be



made now—now that the anger was gone. How deep did Dog’s pride run?

The moment hung in the balance for what seemed like an eternity, Dog unwilling to choose, and Packer unwilling to choose for him. But it was Packer’s resolve that crumbled. As his own emotion bled away, Packer suddenly saw himself—in this moment, detached from the events that had led to it. What if Dog were to choose death? Would Packer really kill him? A seated, helpless, unarmed old fisherman? Right here, like this? What was he doing? What would Panna think when she heard about it? And she would certainly hear. He looked around at the shocked, fearful, amazed expressions of those around him.

He had no idea how long he’d been standing here, the point of his sword poised to kill—but he couldn’t continue, not another instant. He withdrew his sword, and sat down in the nearest open chair, his back to Dog. He laid his blade on the table in front of him.

Dog put a thumb and forefinger to his own throat, found the pinprick, was relieved to find so little damage. Then he looked around the room, assessing the much greater damage done to him in the eyes of his friends. Those few who would look at him seemed sad. He looked at Packer’s back and forced a crooked smile.

“Well, boy. It’s just as well you got kicked out of seminary. You’d sure make a lousy priest. No need to turn the other cheek when you can handle a sword like that.”

There was scattered laughter, general agreement. But Packer hung his head, closed his eyes. It was a thrust to the heart.

Cap rushed up with a bar towel and began to bind it around Dog’s bleeding hands. Dog rejected the help, snatched the cloth from the barkeeper. “I better go tend to these little scratches. I got work to do tomorrow.” He eyed Packer with a cautious look. The younger man didn’t see it. But when Dog said, “I’ll see you later, Packer Throme,” Packer heard the dark promise in it.



Hangman’s Cliffs, the village Packer called home, was little more than a spot of lamplight perched above the ocean, the Vast Sea. A half-dozen storefronts huddled together on a rough cobblestone street, and a few dozen wooden and stone houses gathered around



them. A small stone church stood at one end of the main road, facing the tavern at the other.

The church had no sign out front, but a cheerful hand-carved *Welcome* graced the doorway. At the other end of the town, above Cap's tavern doors hung a crude painting of a sea monster with a snake's body and a dragon's head, lightning coming from its mouth. It was the beast the locals called Firefish, and it was the name of Cap's pub. The main road ran east and west, so that the sun rose on the front doors of the church and set on the stoop of the tavern.

Behind the church at the western end of the unnamed main street were woods that stretched up and down the hills for miles, part of the timbered, rocky land that surrounded this warm circle of humanity. Beyond those woods were the Deep Woods, and beyond them, the Nearing Plains, which stretched nearly forever, north all the way to the Cold Climes, where few men dared to live, and south and west as far as the Great Mountains.

A stone's throw east of Cap's little pub, behind it, the ground rose up a few dozen feet. This rise was part of a long, rocky, tree-strewn ridge that ran parallel to the coastline along the top of the cliffs. When the ridge dropped off on the other side, it plummeted almost straight down into water. The small fishing village sat perched almost five hundred feet above the ocean. The fishermen trudged or drove their mule carts more than five miles each day around these cliffs, winding through switchbacks, to and from the ramshackle docks of Inbenigh, an unpleasant little spot that was named, or so the story went, after the carefully heeded advice to be "in by night-fall." And so, the elevated haven of Hangman's Cliffs was a fishing village hidden from the sea.

Packer had been born and raised here. He knew the terrain as only a local boy could. He had climbed and played and hiked during endless summer days, fall and spring, year after year, all along the rocks, clambering closer to the cliffs' edge than his parents knew or ever wanted to know.

He loved this place, and back then he had assumed he would always be here, as much a part of the landscape as a tree or an outcropping of rock. Going to sea with his father in their small fishing boat was as far from home as Packer ever thought he'd go. He would sit perched here beside his father, an eight-year-old boy watching the ocean, listening to its distant thunder. Saying few words, the



fisherman taught his son about the enormity and the power of the created world, things seen and unseen, secrets known and deep secrets kept by God and the sea. If God could create all this, what couldn't He do? And a God who would choose to create all this, intricate in its beauty, perfect in detail, enormous in power, detail upon detail on such a grand plan, well...that was a God worth serving.

As Packer grew older and the work of fishing drew him in, he found himself fighting the inexorable flow of his life. The fishermen constantly scraping for subsistence, alternately praising and cursing the sea for what it yielded or refused to yield, somehow did not seem right. As the numbing and thoughtless repetition of their life dragged on him, he began to understand that he was connected to the created world, and the Creator of the world, in ways others around him did not seem to be or care to be.

Dayton Throme understood the longings within his son's heart. He told Packer there was a path for people who thought such thoughts and felt such things as he did. On this path, he could dedicate himself to God and to helping others love this great Creator. Packer's mother was thankful; she wanted her son to be anything but a fisherman, to live anywhere but Hangman's Cliffs. She felt keenly the scorn that was heaped on her husband for his strange devotion to the legend of the Firefish—certainly more keenly than Dayton did, who simply shrugged it all off with a laugh.

And then there was Panna Seline.

As far back as Packer could remember, Panna was always there. Panna, the daughter of Will Seline, the beloved village priest. Panna and Packer, playing, her silvery laughter rising up to the sun, the unceasing smile that teased behind her eyes always. The two of them had spent many hours talking about the world and everything in it, the sea and everything in it—sea monsters, pirates, the glorious life of the tall ships. And the God who created it all. Then, with a path to the priesthood opening up for Packer, their growing affection began to turn to love. And love grew into dreams for the future...and plans.

But so much had happened since those days. Dayton was gone, lost to this world years ago, his name now on the list *Taken by the Sea*—etched onto the marble memorial that stood in the cemetery amid the clearing in the woods. With Dayton gone from her life, Nettie Throme couldn't stay in Hangman's Cliffs. The day after Packer left for seminary, she moved back to her family in the Cold



Climes. In Packer's mind that awful plaque read, *All Dreams Shattered—All Hearts Broken*.



It had been two days ago in the City of Mann when Packer had heard that the *Trophy Chase* was headed to Hangman's Cliffs. For months he had tried to locate her, following whispers and tips up and down the coast, but she was always one day ahead or one town away. Then, following a rumor, he'd found himself at a pub in Mann called Croc-Eyed Sam's. There he found an old pirate signing up sailors for a dangerous, secretive mission. But no strangers, and especially no fishermen, were welcome. Among the whispers that night, however, he heard the name of his own village uttered more than once.

It was a sign, a good omen. Packer knew exactly where a captain would take a tall ship if he had reliable information about the coves and tides and inlets near the village.

The cliffs themselves ran north and south as a whole, winding in and out along the shoreline for two or three miles like a corrugated piece of tin bent in a series of sinuous, eel-like "S" shapes. The result was a series of naturally formed bays that, had there been any way to dock or get ashore, might have made excellent ports of call. They would certainly shelter ships from any storm.

It was from above one of these small bays a mile-and-a-half north of town that Packer had found the *Trophy Chase* and her sister ships at anchor. The three vessels stood on the water, motionless. They looked as if they could have been painted on a blue background of sky and sea. Only the occasional flutter of the skull and bones above the *Chase* hinted at her true nature, like the revelation of dagger claws in the lazy stretch of a cat.

She was as perfect a vessel as Packer had ever seen, smoother in line and turn than he could have imagined a ship being; long, lean, as though in motion even when still. To Packer, she looked as much a part of the ocean as a dolphin, as a seagull. She looked like she could fly as easily as she could sail. The *Chase* was every bit the equal of her reputation. He drank in the sight. And he determined more than ever that he would put his new plan in motion, right here at the Hangman's Cliffs he knew and loved so well. It would be a



new beginning; his new calling would start where the old one had, looking out over the ocean.

“*Trophy Chase*,” he said aloud, just to hear the sound. The name rolled into the pounding of the waves below, into the salt sea air and the cries of the gulls. He said it again.

The words had barely left his lips when a puff of smoke flew from a cannon portal facing him. Packer dove for cover. The cannonball crashed just below him, sending shards of rock high into the air. “*Vigilance*,” he said with respect as dust and debris rained down on him. “*Vigilance and precision*.” He knew these words—they were two-thirds of the motto by which Scat Wilkins sailed his ships.

Packer scrambled back down the far side of the rocky ridge, taking care not to be seen again.

“Today?” Fourtooth asked, his wet eyes unblinking. “You saw the pirates *today*?”

Packer nodded. He was sitting at the center of the pub now, where Dog had been, with all eyes and ears riveted to him and his message. He had come here to warn them, but now, after his skirmish with Dog, his heart wasn’t in it. His words seemed flat and hollow, like he had to squeeze them from his chest. “Scat Wilkins and his escorts are anchored off the Hangman’s Cliffs just north of here.”

Fear darted into the eyes of the old fisherman. He hunched forward as if a pain had shot through his belly. “What do they want?”

“He’s here for supplies,” Packer replied. “No doubt he’ll send a party into town tonight.”

“Here?”

Packer fought irritation. “Yes, here. Hangman’s Cliffs, and every other village for ten miles up and down the coast.”

“But why?”

Packer took a deep breath. He knew they needed more. He forced himself to concentrate on these men, on the faces around him. They needed to understand. “Well, that’s how he works. He won’t dock the *Chase* in just any port in the kingdom. I guess he thinks he’ll be boarded, or infiltrated. So he comes to small towns and scrounges.”

“For what?” asked Cap Hillis, staring from his place behind the bar.

“Everything. Canvas. Lumber. Clothing. Food. Water. Ale.”



With this final statement, the reality finally hit Cap over the head. “You mean...you mean, pirates might be coming *here*? To my pub?”

Packer’s irritation dissolved with the sudden fright he saw in the old tavernkeeper. He felt warmly toward him. “No, Cap—I mean pirates *are* coming here. Tonight. If the town is locked down tight, they’ll knock on a few doors, make their deals, and go away; so I’m told. But no one should be out until morning.”

More silence. Then Ned Basser spoke up, still stinging from Dog’s poor showing. “You better hope you’re not lying.”

Packer was silent, trying to untangle the logic of that statement.

Fourtooth stood up slowly. “I gotta get outta here,” he said wide-eyed. Then another thought crossed his mind, and he sat back down heavily. “But first I gotta have another drink.” He reached for a pitcher of ale, but his neighbors already had him under the arms, helping him up and out of the tavern.

Packer watched them all go. He took a deep breath. His message had been delivered, and believed. He felt some relief, but not enough to penetrate the dark cloud brought on by his duel with Dog.

Cap, alone now in the pub with Packer, picked up the half-empty pitcher of ale that Fourtooth had coveted and put it down between them. Then he slapped a clean mug in front of Packer, eyed and selected an empty mug from a nearby table for himself, wiped it dutifully with his towel, and poured ale for the two of them. He kept an eye on Packer, trying to assess him.

Cap was plenty nervous about the approach of Scat Wilkins, but he could see that Packer was not. So long as this young swordsman was around, he figured, maybe there was reason panic might be delayed.

“You were a fearsome foe here tonight,” he said finally, testing the waters. He wanted to know how deep this new steel ran in his good friend’s son. The boy had always had more backbone than he’d showed, but it was generally hidden beneath a sensitivity that never really fit in well here. The priesthood had seemed right for Packer. But was that soft heart now gone?

Packer shook his head, slouched back in his seat, and toyed with his mug. What if Dog had sworn at him, stood up, called his bluff? What if he had simply decided to die, and leaned into Packer’s sword? This quiet moment would now be utterly hellish, with the priest summoned, a body on the floor, Dog’s wife arriving to find



herself widowed, weeping uncontrollably, hysterical, cursing Packer. Panna would never look at him again. There would be a sheriff's deputy called, and even if Packer were vindicated, he would live with that moment forever.

Would he have done it? Could he have killed the old man? He felt sure he could have. His skills came not from a few odd lessons, as Dog supposed, but from three grueling years of the best training in the kingdom, perhaps in the world. And to what end? So that Packer could draw his sword in anger and nearly kill an unarmed man in his very first duel? His swordmaster would be gravely disappointed in him.

Packer looked at the tables and chairs, still pushed aside for the duel. He stood and began dragging them back together, erasing evidence. Cap watched for a moment and then took a deep drink. "You'd have been within your rights to kill him, you know." He refilled his mug to the brim. "He struck you. He provoked you. He called for the duel, and he drew on you."

"No," Packer answered softly. "I shouldn't have fought him at all."

Cap rubbed his red face with a pudgy hand. He felt relief that the old Packer had not been completely swallowed up in the swordsman. "Well, I disagree. I think you taught him something he needed to learn. Had it been another man he picked on, one without your skill or your heart, we'd be burying Dog's bones tomorrow."

Packer paused, thought about that. He could see some truth in it...that the outcome might actually help Dog live a longer, wiser life. But it didn't mean Packer had done the right thing. He went back to arranging furniture.

No need to turn the other cheek when you can handle a sword like that. Dog's words and the scripture they pointed to weighed on his mind. "But I say unto you, that ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also." The whole point of that doctrine, as far as Packer could tell, was that only those with the heart to let themselves be wronged could be shed of evil themselves. "Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord." And that's because only He can wreak vengeance without malice, without impurity of heart. Those who retaliate on this earth, regardless of their motives, somehow join the ranks of the evil.

Packer had had the heart, four years ago, to "resist not evil" when



Dog had slapped him around. What good had it brought, though? What had changed for the better since then? It had clearly had no effect on Dog—if anything, it had stirred him up more. Packer knew that the only Man who ever lived without retaliating, not even once, not even in his heart, was the Man who had first uttered those words. But how is it possible to do good when you aren't that Man? When your efforts to do good are always mixed in with poor motives?

Cap watched Packer move chairs around, reading a troubled heart easily enough. “Well, I say the whole town's indebted to you for keeping us righteous.”

Packer stopped and looked at Cap. “Righteous? What do you mean?”

Cap shrugged, as though the answer were obvious. “You saved us all from having to stand over his grave and lie about him.”

Packer laughed out loud. “He's not all that bad.”

Cap raised his mug in tribute. “‘And he's one whale of a fisherman!’ See how little it takes?”

Packer laughed again, then sat down across from Cap feeling genuinely relieved. He drank the toast, studied the innkeeper's smiling face for a moment, then turned somber. “Cap...I have to ask you to do a favor for me. And for my father. And for Dog and the rest of the fishermen.”

Cap wrinkled his brow. “What kind of favor?”

“A risky one.”

Cap scraped his chair closer to Packer. “Ask away.”

