Wylin

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The small candle spluttered and flickered, slowly drowning in a pool of its own molten self. Darkness advanced forward, to be pushed back as the light fought against its death. Shadows danced wildly about the small, cluttered study and the hunched figure sitting close over a book, edging ever closer to the candlelight.

Wylin Smydier was not one to lose his concentration easily, but the candle was proving quite annoying in its final moments. He sighed, motioned toward the candle, and snapped his fingers. A skittering and scratching of many small legs, like a family of mice running across the floor, faded down the steps of the tower. Wylin pushed his book even nearer the candle, endeavoring to read the tiny script.

Soon enough, however, the skittering noise ascended back up the stairwell. It crossed the room, mounted the desk, and raced toward the drowning candle. The noise came from a creature, roughly the size of a small housecat. The creature was made of silver metal, with a dozen appendages protruding from a roughly circular center disc. It was impossible to discern which was the creature's front and which its back. Wylin called it his snaggier. He used it not only to retrieve materials, but also to clean the tower, keep watch on the doors, and any other task Wylin would rather not do himself.

The snaggier skittered across the desk to the spluttering candle and, in a blur of appendages, replaced it with the new candle it had claimed from the tower below. Wylin grumbled acknowledgement and absentally patted his shoulder. The snaggier raced up his arm to perch, spider-like, on Wylin’s shoulder as he read.

A loud gurgle erupted into the study's silence. Momentarily surprised, he was about to continue on with his reading when the snaggier whispered something in his ear.

“Yes, yes,” Wylin said, irritated. Without looking up from his text, he waved his hand toward the top of his desk, muttering, “Food.”

Wylin had been ignoring his stomach for at least a day’s time he thought, though it was difficult to say.

There was a soft popping sound and the desk rattled a little as something landed on it with a wet thump. Sprinkles of dark brown liquid sprayed onto the open pages of the book. Uttering a distressed curse, Wylin snapped his fingers again and the snaggier ran down the chair to fetch a cloth of some sort to dry the book.

Wylin looked at his desk and blinked, discovering a large slab of meat covered in thick gravy lying in the midst of his notes and ancient maps. He adjusted his spectacles in surprise. Then, focusing his attention a bit more, he repeated his command and, with another soft pop, received a new slab of gravy-covered meat in his hands. This time his meager concentration rewarded him with a plate, a fork and knife, and a few sickly looking vegetables on the side. The fork was rusted with too short a handle, while the knife had no handle at all, but it was better than nothing, and Wylin had no patience to try again.

The snaggier finished its work cleaning the text. It then set about dutifully cutting the meat. As Wylin read his book, mumbling and taking notes, the snaggier fed its master.

He reached for another piece of paper on which to make his notes, scribbled a few lines, and turned the page of his text. It was blank. The words stopped mid-sentence and did not resume. Maxten Sheb, the herbolologist, had been describing the medicinal uses of Alacran seaweed and now, nothing.

Furious, Wylin checked the binding: Chreb and Cub. He should have known. He had never trusted their publishing house. And, now, 2,500 years later, they had the final victory. Though he was certain the publishing house had gone to dust while he was locked away in his Study, he was equally sure it had taken the money he had paid for the book with them.

Disgusted with his poor choice of booksellers, Wylin stood up from his chair to storm down to his bedroom. Promptly, the world wobbled as his legs gave out beneath him; his legs had long since fallen asleep during his most recent day long study. Wylin landed in a heap on the floor. Irritated, he glared up at the snaggier sitting on his desk.
The candlelight glinted off the snaggler’s smooth metal body and Wylin saw a flickering, warped reflection of himself. He was slightly troubled by what he saw, but mostly curious. He made no move to get up, but motioned the snaggler closer. When it was in reach he grabbed it and stared down at his reflection in the disc. The snaggler patiently waited on its master’s whims, letting its appendages hang limply at its sides.

On the snaggler’s body, Wylin saw reflected great white eyebrows over sunken eyes, which stared back into his own. His forehead was creased and wrinkled. His hair had grown long and unruly, along with his beard. And his nose had developed a large brown wart slightly off center on its ridge; indeed, the wart was the only thing keeping the half-moon spectacles from falling off the face. He flared his eyes, blue-green like a choppy sea under a cloudy sky, as if it were the snaggler’s fault. “Up!” he commanded.

The snaggler wriggled free from his hands. It landed on the floor, rocking from side to side, turning one way then another, unsure how to help its master up. At last it positioned itself behind Wylin’s sitting figure and slid several appendages under his bum. Thrusting upwards it began to lift. With a hoot, Wylin was on his feet, faster than he imagined, and was rubbing his sore backside. The snaggler was looking very proud of its ingenuity until Wylin threw the rusty fork in its direction, yelling, “How do you like that? Cold metal pinchers indeed.” The snaggler grabbed the fork midair, clutching it tightly as a prize, and did a better job of hiding its pride.

Shuffling, Wylin made his way down to his bedroom, the circular stairwell curving right. The bedroom was sparse, save the lavish tapestries hung on the stone walls to keep out the cold. They told the stories of ancient kingdoms, great battles, and noble families. Most dealt with Wylin’s home country of Natton, which was a land of cool streams and broad meadows bordered by deep, green forests.

Wylin sighed, actually pausing to see the likeness of his homeland in he did not know how many years. Now that his Study was complete, cut short by dishonest booksellers, he longed to walk beneath the sun again. It had been a sacrifice – but knowledge had demanded it.

His bed was large, with a soaring canopy, upholstered in deep red. Beside his bed stood a full-length mirror, completely covered with dust. Years ago he had ordered the snaggler to stop dusting it, for it reminded him too much of what he gave up to see himself age day by day – a reminder that had just come back to him suddenly and with great force. But now, furrowing his brow, he looked at the snaggler and snapped toward the mirror. Immediately it darted beneath the bed and retrieved a rag.

Wylin went to his standing wardrobe, the only other furnishing in the room. When he had dressed himself in his finest – a flowing purple robe with a bright green sash – he inspected himself in the mirror. “Fine. Fine,” he mused to himself. “What do you think?” he asked the snaggler.

The snaggler darted up its master’s body and whispered in his ear. “Yes, yes, you are right,” Wylin replied. “We really do not know what the weather may be like.”

Going back to the wardrobe, he pulled out a long silver cloak and draped it over his shoulders, fastening it with a silver brooch shaped like a turtle. The cloak’s hood hung nearly to his waist. It was soft and durable, but it would keep him warm.

“Much better,” he said. “Now let us just...” Wylin had sat down upon his bed to rest his tired legs. Feeling the soft comfort of the bed, his body betrayed him and slumped over onto the mattress.

When the snaggler heard his snores it gently tucked its master in, then crept quietly under the bed and curled up amongst its rags and bits of metal, shiny souvenirs hidden from the eyes of its master. The fork was its latest proud addition.
Hours, perhaps days, later Wylin awoke uncertain of where he was, or why he was dressed in part for the king's halls and in part for traveling. Lying in the dark, pondering, he slowly remembered. His stomach growled, not wanting to be forgotten again.

He snapped his fingers and the torches roared back to life. It was a little trick he had learned from Dalon Tolcar, expert of fire, early into his Study; Tolcar's text had proved illuminating. Wylin saw the snaggier curled up by his side. The little silver creature did not move when its master stirred. Wylin gazed at his creation for a while before gently touching its central disc. The snaggier rose and stretched its appendages, two at a time, very much like a cat waking from a nap. It was trying to hide a comb and brush behind its body. As it skittered away Wylin touched his hair and beard and found every tangle smoothed away.

When the command for food was given and the pop of breakfast was sounded, the snaggier rushed back to feed its master. Instead, Wylin smiled and patted the pillow beside him. And as Wylin had breakfast in bed, the snaggier rested uneasy, unsure what to do. It contented itself with watching worriedly in case the fork ever missed its master's mouth and stabbed something important.

Breakfast finished, Wylin rose and said grandly to the snaggler, "It is time."

The old man swept down the remaining stairs, passing storerooms, sitting rooms, and a laboratory filled with unwatched experiments and plants run amuck. The snaggier's diligence had kept their effects contained to their level of the tower, but loath to leave its master too long, it had let the laboratory satisfy its chaotic will otherwise.

Wylin gave none of this a passing thought. He may not have even seen it, but interpreted the floors merely by memory. He was too preoccupied with his desire to open the doors again to his beloved Natton and bask in the cool breeze of its stream-filled meadows.

At last the main floor was made. Wylin and the snaggler stood before two great wooden doors, intricately wrought with friezes of the Nattur landscape.

The doors were bolstered with worked iron bars and hinges. Wylin wanted a fine exit, with both doors opening majestically before him as he reemerged into Natton, but the snaggler convinced him it was impossible with only the two of them, and, anyway, there was no guarantee anyone would be watching the tower. Indeed, there was no way to know as Wylin had ordered all the windows boarded up centuries past to reduce his distraction.

Grumbling, Wylin waved the snaggler toward the right door. When it was in position, Wylin intoned somberly to the empty hall, "I have completed my Study."

Nothing apparent occurred, but the snaggler knew it was now possible to open the door. The enchantment protecting the tower was dissolved. As it unlatched the door and began to open it a crack, the snaggler was suddenly thrust back as the door crashed open, groaning on its hinges, and a wave of golden sand ploughed its way in. Soon enough it was finished and a small hill of sand sat boldy in the entrance hall, filling the doorway, and ending just before Wylin's feet.

The snaggler made annoyed chittering sounds as it crawled from the sand and extracted grains from its joints. Wylin just stared. That had certainly not been out there before.