

Outside was, as expected, a dappled stallion. It was tethered neatly to a tree. I tossed a little salt on it to see if it was a ghost, and the horse didn't pay any attention. Then I poked it with an iron nail I'd pried out of the floor to see if it was a horse-shaped fae. The horse gazed at me blankly, and one of Salation's neighbors who had stepped outside for a smoke started to watch me oddly. Finally I whispered a trivial banishing and made a sign of unsummoning against the stallion's rump. It tried to kick me. I figured that could go either way.

"Well?" asked Salation, from the door. She was crouched behind the frame, keeping her distance from the beast.

"I think it's just a horse."

"So what do we do with it?"

I stared at it perplexed. That was, I concluded, an excellent question. Then I glanced up at her and smirked a little. "Aw, you said 'we.'"

She hissed at me and slammed the door.

Now I was left with the problematic horse. I concluded that there was no reason to worry, as I'd disposed of inappropriately located horses before. After a few seconds to overcome its resistance towards riders other than its master. I mounted this one, rode it several blocks away, and then dismounted and smacked it on the rump until it walked away. With that taken care of I hastened back to the clockshop and crept inside. In silence she let me in and shot the bolts behind me.

"Well?" she asked.

"It's been disposed off," I said seriously.

There was a deep whinny from outside. Salation stared at me. I wanted to swear. "You suck at this!" she snapped.

"I'm not a horse thief!" I pointed out acidly. "I haven't done this before."

"Red," she began, then paused. "Or Stark, I guess. You never should have lied to me about your name," she criticized me as an aside. "And how did you get the name Stark Vision of Inevitability? No parent names their child that."

"I was born 'Zug.' After I left home, it got changed."

"Zug?"

"Zug."

"Stark it is. Now, Stark, would you please go dispose of that horse?"

I had been thinking. "You know, there isn't any reason to panic. Its rider has been disposed of. Thus there's nothing to connect it to us."

“Except someone may have seen him enter the house,” Salation pointed out.

“So? If anyone asks, tell them he left.”

“And didn't take the horse?”

“Odd, but not sinister. What are they going to say?” I shrugged

“That I stole it!” she rebutted.

“And left it out front of a town house?”

“Stark, I'm already harboring a fugitive, you. Do you really expect me to have stolen property out front as well?”

I sighed. She was adamant about this point and refused to listen to reason. “Fine. But when I come back, you're telling me what your problem with horses is. There's something.”

“There's nothing. I just want you to get rid of it.”

I eyed her levelly. She stared back at me firmly. With a roll of my eyes I stepped outside and took the stallion's reins. We walked through the quiet parts of the city, away from nightlife, heading north to where Rock's horse-trading cohort worked. A bit of luck came finally and brought with it a low fog from the river. More inquisitive people were inclined to remain inside and pay me no attention.

Soon I found the area of the warehouse district where this individual worked. Rock had called him Burrow. Burrow kept his office outside the military warves, near the city's private harbors for the rich families. Similar to the stained water harbor I'd been to before, these had less business and were controlled directly by their owners with little government oversight. In a row of large, blocky warehouses I found one in particular and knocked on the door. An eye-slit opened, eyes appeared, disappeared, and then the large door slid wide on well greased hinges. I lead the warhorse in.

Burrow was a lean, whip-like man, who was almost a head taller than I. His hair had just begun to go gray. He was still wearing the dark gray suit from earlier in the day. As before he was attended by a middle aged woman with glasses. She kept the money bag, and stayed at Burrow's left hand. I hadn't caught her name.

As I lead the stallion in, going past several occupied paddocks, I concluded that I was certainly leading the best piece of equine breeding here. Burrow and the nameless woman paused in their discussion to as I approached. I glanced around but Wimp was either already gone or somewhere else.

“What in name of the cursed gods is that?” snapped Burrow once I'd come before him. He stared at me in shock, which had turned to a sneer. He didn't sound pleased.

“Is this?” I exclaimed. “This is a pure bred cavalry horse. It's worth its weight in gold!”

“Weight in gold? It's worth nothing! That's a controlled item, a piece of military property. How am I possibly supposed to move it?”

“It will do that for you. That's what the hooves are for,” I added snidely.

“You jackass. That, there is a weapon,” Burrow snapped, stepping past me to approach the beast's flank. The woman silently took the reins from me and calmed the great mount, who was getting twitchy as people approached it from the side. “This, here,” the lean man added, pointing at a dark red mark on the side, “is the iridescent brand of the cavalry. The damn horse is marked, and everyone knows that owning one of these if you aren't in the Lookshy cavalry is tantamount to an act of war. My contacts in Nexus won't take this, and they'll take everything else!”

“Sell it to the Realm,” I suggested.

“And move from larceny into High Treason?” retorted Burrow. “No, thank you. You take this beast right back to whoever you stole it from and tell them you don't want nothing at all to do with it.”

“Actually, I didn't steal it,” I corrected absently.

“Right, you found it. Like the racer you acquired earlier.”

With a wave of my hand I forsook that argument. “Look, I just want rid of it. I'll give it to you. Yours, for the effort of taking it off my hands.”

“How hot is that animal?” he replied, angrily.

“I can't believe I'm having this conversation,” I opined to myself loudly. I glared at him. “I'm prepared to give you the single most beautiful piece of horseflesh you've even had a chance at, and you're refusing?”

“No, fool. You're trying to give me the biggest problem I've ever seen. You want me to move my business from something barely tolerated but widely considered not worth the effort to shut down to a counter-government military operation that could get a stealth squad called in on me. I don't want that thing, I don't want to think about it, and if you don't turn around and get it out of here before anyone notices I may have something happen to you so I can turn this thing back in to the authorities myself.”

“Too late,” hissed a sibilant voice. With a flicker like a blink people appeared. Men and women in suits of white jade and gray steel flashed into visibility. Their armor was proudly emblazoned with a strange crest across the breast, similar to the heraldic crest of Lookshy, but as I looked closer I read Old Realm writing across the top. It said, “If you can read this, you are fucked.” Two members of the squad appeared before me, and produced vast, two handed cleaving swords. I was already escaping through a wall.

It was one of those rickety interior walls that mostly exists to distinguish between rooms. I took it down with my good shoulder, knocking dusty furniture out of my way, and went head first through a window as waves of fire blasted through the hole behind me and the earth started shaking. When I hit and rolled on the paved road that side of the warehouse began to sag like melting butter. Several splashes of sea water crashed through the cracks while the boards of the wall sprouted buds before they caught fire. The road took me to an alleyway, and halfway through that I opened another door with my shoulder. This warehouse was similar to the first but was piled high with lumber. Given the display of elemental power before that was not ideal cover, but there was no help for it. I darted up a pile to reach one of the high ventilation windows and dove through that. Since it was already open that should make my trail

fainter.

The window opened up forty feet above water the rear of the warehouse abutted. This bit of the harbor was between two piers, and was no doubt intended for the draft of ocean going vessels. The waterline lay twenty feet down a stone wall from the warehouse's ground floor. As I plummeted down outside, the far wall I'd entered splintered like thunder as my pursuers came after. Tumbling logs crashed about inside, neatly concealing the splash as I entered the waves. I juked and managed to hit the harbor bottom with my stomach instead of my head. It was pitch black down there, but I stroked as I could, staying near the well dredged bottom.

As my lungs began to burn I headed up until up was brighter than down. Then I kept swimming horizontally until before me appeared a great dark shadow. I passed under the merchant's keel and surfaced slowly on the other side. It took an act of will not to gasp and sputter for air.

This little harbor was enclosed on two sides by the high walls of Lookshy. They rendered it invisible from the lesser city. Behind me the warehouses rose to secondary city walls, but those had no gatehouses. They merely existed for times of war. Between the harbor and the ocean a great sea wall extended from the sheltering citadel. It rose no more than twenty feet from the waves, but across the mouth of the harbor was an iron portcullis that ran on steel rails. A strong prowed ship could ram that down, but would succeed in little beyond lining the harbor entrance with a jagged metal reef. It was a strong, defensible setup. I swam for the gate, hoping to find a way underneath.

As I approached the metal barrier, I found my way faintly lit by blue light. Pausing, I stared through the murky water until I saw two women, dressed in armor of blue jade, standing at attention on the bottom of the harbor bed. They were the source of the blue glow, and stood easily with the buoyancy of the water easing the weight of their armor. Realization trickled through my shocked brain as I realized that they must be water aspected Dragon-Bloods, and they were pulling guard underneath the waves.

I paddled hastily away, and surfaced in a dark nook to breath and think. Terrestrial Exalted, commonly called the Dragon-Blooded, were chosen by powers like me. However there were only a few Solars in all Creation, while the Dragon-Blooded numbered in the thousands. Their power and numbers left them the defacto rulers of the earth. Each was aspected towards one of the five elements, and from that element they drew most of their power. Water aspects could stay underwater for a while, several hours at least, so it was possible that they pulled guard underneath the harbor normally. It was also possible they were part of the net that the stealth-suited operatives had used to try to snare their quarry. Still, the water of the harbor was far from clean, which meant standing underneath the surface for hours at a time had to be an unwanted job. That should mean these two were low on the rank structure. Hopefully that meant they had limited powers. One had been facing inward and one towards the sea. I doubted I could slip past them.

I reached up and felt the rocks of the seawall. They were huge and set with crumbling mortar. The crevices between them were deep. I dragged myself upwards from the water and climbed nearly to the top. Then I peaked over.

Across the top of the wall were more guards. These looked to be an even mix of humans and Dragon-Bloods, perhaps somewhat heavy on the human side, also evenly facing the city and sea. I lowered myself back into the water.

If this was normal, the security of Lookshy would be nearly impenetrable indeed. Giving up the idea of

escape beyond the walls I settled onto my side and swam back towards the resting ships.

First to mind came the sewers. Barefoot and injured, the idea of running through sewers hip deep in human waste posed little appeal, but the advantage that I would be very difficult to track silently. It got filed as a backup plan. Before resorting to that I wanted to know how many people were looking for me. If they had limited numbers, I might be able to slip past them. Less attractively but still plausible, was the idea of hiding in the water until the searchers departed. Dawn was about eight hours away, and the beginning of the work day would not be much further.

Ultimately I went with that. Sequestering myself in the notch between rudder and hull of a docked galleon, I found a way to wedge myself that I was nearly invisible. Thus I waited out the night, letting barely more than my head remain above water even in the shadows, and clinging to the barnacles of the hull to stay afloat.

Eventually the sun rose and dock hands came down to their labors. I abandoned my hiding spot and swam underneath a pier to the ground. From there I waited until a wagon was parked nearby, climbed up, and clung to the tongue. Eventually it left, taking me with it.

After exiting the little enclosed harbor, it was a simple matter to drop and let it pass over me. I hastened into an alley. Once it was well past I peaked into the street and glanced around. No one was looking for me. I ran for the clockshop and made it unharrassed.

“You!” gasped Salation as I stole through a rear window on the first floor.

“Me,” I agreed and peaked around. No one seemed to have noticed my entrance from outside the house. Once I'd drawn the curtains no one would. Women were always filling their windows with curtains. Useful things when one was a fugitive, though.

“What happened to you?” she exclaimed. She had been going to the pantry for lunch, and there was bread and cheese in her hands. Now they hung forgotten in her small fists.

“I got rid of the horse. Can I eat that?”

“What?” she asked, and then stared down at her hands. “Oh, yes. Here. When you didn't come back, I got worried. I waited up all night, but then in the morning I didn't know what to do, so I opened the shop as normal.”

“Good. That way there's nothing suspicious.” I took the bread from her and started chewing on it greedily. “Somehow the authorities came after me. I spent all night hiding from them.”

Then, because I saw no further point in evading the point, I asked, “Did you tell anyone about me, other than the demon I killed?”

“No,” she said instantly. I felt bad for distrusting her, but I searched her words for lies anyway. There were none. “I haven't said anything to anyone about you. My mother asked me about you, but I said I didn't know where you were. She's been upstairs the whole time anyway.”

“Well as soon as I'm gone, get her outside. The sickness should be gone, so there's no reason to keep her in here.”

“So what happened?” she demanded curiously. I gave her the full story between bites, trying not to omit anything interesting. My own adventures always seemed boring and simple, but I'd learned others don't always agree. When I was finished, and my narrative had placed me before her, Salation stared at me, perplexed. She explained, “Last night I found a pile of teeth in the washroom. Do you know what they're from?”

“The sharks, by way of me,” I explained. “Before the demon came last night I pulled those out of my shoulder and leg.” Shucking my jacket, I pointed to the circular line of scars across my chest and arm. “You can tell it was a blue by both the size of the bite and the nature of the teeth. See these concentric points here? That means the fish had two rows of teeth.”

Salation looked carefully at my shoulder. I pointed out the details of the stitching I used to close the wounds, which I found a lot more interesting than how I'd acquired them. It was more useful too. “You don't want to just sew the skin shut like a vest. Then you strain the flesh, and it doesn't heal quickly. See how the back stitch on each side reinforces the bind? That's the trick right there.”

“You did this to yourself?” she asked. There was a slight lilt in her voice.

“Yes, last night in your washroom,” I reminded her. “Getting behind the shoulder was a lot more difficult. I had to bend backwards to see it in the mirror. The stitching's also not quite as nice,” I admitted. I never know if that comes across modestly or not, but it would be dishonest not to mention it. With the way the last day had gone, I didn't want to err on the side of deceit with her.

“Oh, gods,” she murmured, turning white. With that she fled the room.

“The stitching's not that bad,” I muttered to myself, a little offended. I craned my head backwards and looked at my rear deltoid. “Well, it might be.” I reconsidered. My back looked like a small child's mad science experiment. Suddenly exhaustion hit me like a sledgehammer. The room wavered, and I had not the power to stabilize it. Yet there was something left to do before sleep. I found her in the kitchen, staring at the morning dishes she'd left to try on a rack.

“Are you all right?” I asked.

She looked at me and shrugged. It was a silly question. I continued, “How's your mother?”

“She's doing better. We talked for a while last night. This morning I gave her paper and a brush and she's been making prayer wheels. We sell them to the families of departing soldiers, and they ask the gods for blessings on those who have gone.”

Well, that sounded cheery. I took it as a remonstrance. “Salation, I'm sorry. We have much to discuss, but I can't do that now. Would you mind if I went upstairs to sleep until you close the shop?”

“Yes, that's fine,” she agreed blandly. It was the same bland tone she'd used when I'd told her I would be leaving soon, and as I got used to it I realized it meant she was leaving a lot unsaid. Had I the energy, I would have pursued it.

“Thank you,” I said again. There was a short, uncomfortable silence in the kitchen, and very little noise from outside. Then I retreated to her bed and slept like the dead.

