

When I woke up it was pitch black outside, and every one of my danger senses was shrieking like a banshee. I was still in her bed, and Salation slept beside me, curled into a ball. We were very close but not quite touching. She twitched as I jerked upright, yanking back the sheets. I snapped a glance at the windows and the door to the hall. Both were closed and sealed.

Something was about to happen. Restored by what must have been twelve to sixteen hours unconscious, I let my hearing go until I heard the neighbors sleeping, and their children fighting in their rooms. Deep, slow groans emanated from the old wooden beams of the house, as the weight settled after the day's movement. My heartbeat was rolling thunder, but that of the southerner was deep and slow. She would wake up in a moment from my movement, but for now she was still entrapped in her dreams. The sheets settled slightly in the bed.

My head snapped down. I'd thrown them off in preparation to jump from the bed, but had not yet pivotted my legs. They didn't even touch the soft copper skin. I rolled my weight to the side and peaked over the edge of the bed.

The monsters under the bed had spawned, and now the floor was alive with a thousand black bodies, shot with orange hairs. The huge ants were creeping in under the door, and through the cracks in the walls. They moved slowly, and their tiny footfalls collectively made less noise than my racing heart and adrenalized breathing. As I glanced into the myriad horde, I suddenly got the impression the silent mass was looking back at me. Whatever overarching sentients behind them was like a hungry abyss with a thousand mouths.

I screamed, and six thousand tiny feet rushed into speed, throwing their bodies up the bed's legs. They engulfed it like a moving stain. I grabbed the girl with both hands and hurled us from the bed, springing across the room to the dresser, and slammed down hard, crashing into the wall with a deafening noise. Before the bed finished rocking from my exit, the mass had taken it over. The direction of the insect tide changed instantly, and they flowed across the floor to me.

“Close your eyes,” I told Salation, as she gasped and looked around. Sleep sweat stuck her hair to her face, and she looked at me with the blank incomprehension of suddenly being awoken. “Do it now, and do not open them, or your mouth.”

Then, perhaps more than any time before, I was tempted to use the techniques that force obedience in others. Still fuzzy with sleep, her mind barely processed my commands, and she stared at me confused. I reached down, and yanked one of her drawers from the dresser.

“Please. Now,” I whispered, and without explanation lifted her and set her body into the drawer. Curled up as she was, she fit easily, even if the drawer walls barely covered a fraction of her. The drawer held brown and white cotton of a variety of shades.

She didn't argue. Scrunching her eyes tightly, she froze, clenching her entire body rigid. She even stopped breathing.

I threw her out the window. The drawer went first, shattering the glass, but fragments of it fell around her. As soon as she was out I was landing in a crouch, and the black and orange tide of ants was cresting the edges of the dresser. They were still silent, but somehow terribly angry none the less. I lunged out the window as well.

Before I've finished passing through I was kicking the frame, driving fragments of broken glass into my foot, but hurling myself down. I caught her moments before we hit, slammed my back on the irregular stones of the alley, but did not let go. Nor did I loosen my grip and let her head whiplash back and forth. She knocked the wind from me, but I paused a second on the ground. We were out.

“What is-”

“Ants. A swarm. The one that attacked me before. It's come for me, and it's in your house,” I explained as quickly as possible. She opened her eyes and looked at me. Then we both spoke at the same time.

“My mother!”

“Your mother.”

I rolled to my feet, set her down, and reached down to yank the shard glass from my foot. Discarding that to the alley floor, I asked, “Which window is hers?” pointing at the house.

“She's on the other side. Central room, top floor.”

“Naturally,” I murmured. “We'll be right back. Stay here. Run if the ground starts moving. They're black and orange and big.”

“Like that?” she gasped, and pointed at the window we'd just exited.

I jerked my head up. The black stain of the swarm was pouring out the window after us, and spreading as it left the house to darken the wall. Their individual forms were indistinguishable, but the vast black shape gave the sensation of myriad internal movements.

“Exactly.” I grabbed her, put her under one arm, and bolted across the alley, dashing straight up the opposing wall until I was on the roof. Then I got back to gain room for a running start and turned to sprint off the edge, hurling myself across the intervening space. My feet smashed into the tiles of Salation's roof, and broke through. I sank to my knees.

Ripping free I raced over the roof's peak with the girl still in my arms. She was holding on tight, making it easier to bear her slight weight, so I released one arm as I hopped off the far eave on the side facing the street. I dropped a few feet and caught myself on the wall, finding purchase by driving my fingers through the planks to the palm. There were windows on either side of me.

“That one, on the right,” the woman said as I put holes in her house.

I swung away and hurled myself sideways, and broke through the glass with my feet. She sheltered her face against me, while I tried to block my eyes with my arm. Then we were through and rolling across the floorboards. They were bare.

To forestall any questions, I snapped, “We're being attacked by demons!” to the old lady who'd awoken as suddenly as our violent entrance. She couldn't bolt upright, but as her daughter extricated herself from my arms and help her, she got up. She was wearing the same cotton sleeping robes as her daughter. No doubt it was a custom they'd only adopted when coming to Lookshy, for even the nights in Paragon are hot. I left bloody footprints as I rushed to the door and peaked out. I didn't see the

swarm.

“What next?” Salation asked me. She had an arm around her mother and was helping her get vertical.

“Normally I'd burn your house down,” I admitted calmly.

“Absolutely not.”

“Then we improvise,” I judged. I could take out perhaps an ant a second. Maybe two for a brief time, and that would drain my energy far faster than the swarm, neglecting the unpleasant reality that I would be eaten long before I made a significant dent in their numbers. “Get your clothes; we're leaving.”

“Where are we going?”

“Away from here. You, and your mother, don't need to be anywhere near this.”

She wanted to argue, but the mention of her remaining parent stopped her. Without saying anything to me, she got a heavy robe and started helping the older woman into it. I stayed at the door, watching the hallway.

I felt deaf, even though the city's noises filled my ears. No enemy of mine had ever been this silent before. It took away advantages I'd relied on for years. Some taint of the swarm's occult nature must have touched one of my danger senses, giving me the prior warning I'd had. If the swarm had gotten to the bed, they'd have engulfed us both and there was nothing I'd be able to do about it. Fighting a sudden tinge of nerves I flicked my glance over the entire room, walls, floor, and ceiling. Then I noticed the planks of the roof were old and dry. A motivated swarm would be able to bore channels through there almost effortlessly. They had the numbers to cover the entire ceiling, and there would be no way to dodge if they all dropped at once.

“Ladies, we're leaving. Now.”

“How?”

I glanced at the window, and then at Telitia. She'd just recovered from her sickness. Her body might endure the jolt if I held her carefully when we dropped.

“Same way we came in,” I told her, and raced over to the window. Forsaking clearing the glass I ripped the window frame off the way, and negligently tossed it away. It sailed through the open door and landed half in the shadows of the hall. Yet as I glanced the shadows moved, and it was engulfed.

“Once I'm down, jump,” I told Salation, then lifted her mother in both arms and dove outside. Once outside I twisted and spun, and dropped to the street. I hit hard enough that my cut foot splattered blood on the road.

“You all right, little lady?” I asked her.

“I'm old, boy, not ancient,” she replied waspishly. I smiled and set her on her feet.

Turning, I could see that my girl was holding the window frame, with her head out watching us. I

motioned and she flung herself after. It was an amazing leap of faith, possibly aided by fear induced strength, for she cleared me and I had to run to catch her. But once she dropped into my arms she was safe, and there were no bugs on her.

The hole where the window frame had been was better lit by moonlight on this side of the house. All the colors were in shades of silver and black, but the rushing shadow that spread from inside and scurried down the house on a thousand legs was unnatural even in monochrome. There was no denying it, and neither Salation nor her mother said anything as it rushed down the house after us.

Not that we stayed to converse, mind you. As soon as the engulfing swarm of elephant ants appeared, the three of us proceeded down the road with all due haste, stopping for nothing. Foolishly perhaps I expected the swarm to give up once we were outside. With the relentless malignancy of the cancer I'd expunged from Salation's mother, it chased us down the street. Now the numerous internal movements made it look fluid, as did the way it flowed over obstacles. Forsaking propriety in the name of speed, I lifted both women and ran off into the city. Soon I outdistanced it, but with every step I left a faint trail of blood from my cut foot. That might not even matter.

Had it been two days ago that I'd escaped the swarm a score of miles or more south? It had taken me several hours of hard riding to get back, and that was at unnatural speeds Wimp had only sustained through my intervention. How long had it taken the horde to get here? The walls would have posed no obstacle, but how had it found me? Gods, what threat had Lemora kept in reserve for vengeance on whoever killed her? This thing was horrifying.

"That swarm, that's the demon?" asked Telitia as I raced through Lookshy.

"Yes," I replied.

"Those are elephant ants. I've seen them on the plains where I used to live as a child."

"Know anything useful?" I asked, desperate.

"When we saw them, we ran. I once saw a bull rhino stumble into a swarm of them. It went down before it could flee a hundred yards, and later I saw them living in it's corpse like a hive."

"Not useful."

"They can even cross water. They make a nest of their bodies and float down rivers. It's something they learned from the ant gods."

Gods? That gave me an idea. I changed directions and raced to the Plaza of Voices Raised in Song. It wasn't quite midnight yet. Since I had skipped the last two meetings, Rush the Falling Water might not be there. That meant I would probably have to kill him.

That line of thought proved unnecessary, for almost immediately after I arrived the divine personage appeared from the fountains as usual. He looked even younger than he had before.

"Stark Vision of Inevitability, I greet you," he said formally.

"Evening," I replied hastily.

“I thought your name was Crimson Wing?” Telitia asked me.

“I lied,” I replied evenly, cocking my head towards her as I put the two women down. “Ladies, this is Rush the Falling Water. He's a bean god, but shortly will be lord of the children of Aphor once more, provided our mission succeeds. Rush the Falling Water, this is Salation, clock maker of Lookshy, and her mother Telitia.”

Telitia stepped away from me and smoothed down her robe, ruffled from the traverse of the city, but Salation did not leave my side. After I'd put her bare feet on the ground she leaned into me, and slipped her arm around my shoulder.

“Salation, bow in the presence of a god,” chided the woman, doing so as she spoke. Her daughter ignored her instructions, and held on closer to me.

“Thank you for your respect, woman,” replied the old god, pleased. “You are correct, and you have my blessing for it. But if your daughter is the consort of this man, then she need not make obeisance. He and I are bound together in ways that overturn normal etiquette.”

That wasn't entirely true. Rush the Falling Water was bound to me by hope and desperation, but I was bound to him only so long as I let my promise bind me. As it had been demonstrably proved, I was something of a liar. Still, I said nothing, more interested in seeing how Salation reacted to being called my consort. She didn't. She simply watched the god cautiously.

“I have a problem,” I said, after it was obvious that the girl wasn't going to do anything. That might be a silent acceptance of the title, but it also might mean nothing. It was a topic for later consideration. “There is a horde of demonic southern ants chasing me through the city. I can deal with them, but require you to watch these two. They must be protected at all costs.”

“This is twice now you've come to me with problems,” the god pointed out.

“Bean god, how did you like those unanticipated prayers and services?” I snapped.

Rush the Falling Water lifted his hands pacifyingly. “I only meant to point out that when I take care of this one as well, you should be respectful. We are tied together, you and I. I will, of course, provide any service I can.”

That might have been what he was going to say or might not. Still, he was right. He had been helpful and did deserve some respect. “Then I am justly chastised,” I said, giving him a head bow. “You are correct.”

“Thank you,” he replied. Then, with grace he added, “And those services were the sound of heaven's nightingales to my ears. Please, let me take all three of you to sanctuary. There you can rest, and when you set out to negotiate this problem, you will need no fear for those I will protect.”

“Please,” I agreed, and nodded again. He made a welcoming gesture towards the fountain, and then sank into the babbling waters. In the night the plaza was suddenly still, broken only by the sound of the fountain singing near silently to itself.

Both ladies looked at me. I shrugged and released the one, walking over to the water. There was an indefinite shine to the water, a luminescence like starlight in fog. Reaching back I took Salation's hand, completely wrapping her fingers in mine, and purposefully walked into the fountain. Before my foot touched the water I was gone.