

On the other side was a small square of a paved courtyard with edges that vanished into a white mist. About the square were arranged tables and chairs, like a seating area for an outdoor restaurant, but the air was full of an ethereal music. It was the melody of the fountain, and the rhythm that pervaded the voices of every choir who gave song in the plaza. It was beautiful and indistinct, hovering on the outside of hearing. Between the tables ran an elaborate arrangement of water and basins, similar to the fountain and the source of the music. Where the fountain in Lookshy had been small and circular, marked by a single sculpture that poured water from the internal mechanisms, this one was sprawling and elaborate. It ranged across the ground, made of complex watercourses that endlessly sounded the music of the spirit of the place. Lit like from the sun behind thick clouds or by a multitude of torches in thick fog, the sanctum was brighter than the night on the far side but not unpleasant for our darkness-adjusted eyes.

With Rush the Falling Water, who was visible from the torso up from a reflecting pool, was the spirit of that place. Both literally and metaphorically, the spirit was both the air and feeling of the physical plaza while also wearing the music like a robe with the sights as its hair. It was faint, bearing little outline, but seemed to beckon us to chairs. We seated, and the music swelled faintly.

“The Plaza has little power,” the bean god told me, “but is fed much from the simple prayers and fond wishes of those who visit her. Thus within her slight purvey she is quite potent of simple things.”

“Then, spirit, thank you for welcoming us into your home. Your hospitality is great, and we appreciate it well. We will not forget this.”

The music tinkled cheerily, but there was no other response. I waited a heartbeat, wondering if food and drink would appear at the table, but that did not happen. It was most likely beyond the nature of our ethereal host. Yet the place was pleasant, and the air was safe. I felt only gratitude that we were here at all.

“You consort with gods, and speak with them as equals?” Salation asked, looking around.

That wasn't true either. I spoke to most gods as inferiors, but that required a bit of explanation before that came across as blasphemous arrogance. To be honest, it was that blasphemous arrogance that had been the undoing of the god-kings of old. They who had raised the pillar atop which stood the gateway to heaven had lorded their power over the world. Sometimes I felt the seduction of that arrogance, and knew if I was aware of it, it must influence me when I did not notice.

“Sometimes,” I replied, hoping if my response wasn't modest at least it wasn't conceited. “But there are many beings of vastly greater power than me. Greatest of them is my patron, the Unconquered Sun, and while few creatures have attempted to treat him as an equal, that ends badly, and in cataclysm.” That was a silent nod to those departed god-kings, my antecedents. Added as much for me as for them, it reminded me that arrogance wasn't just a social flaw. Salation was looking at me strangely, like she had no idea who I was. The expression I was getting from her mother, however, was dark and full of suspicion.

“Lad, I'm coming to suspect certain things about you that make me, as a dutiful scion of the Immaculate Faith, quite unhappy,” she said pointedly.

“Oh?” I asked, and suddenly turned a meaningful glance at her daughter. Clearly there were things that she had neglected to tell me as well, not the least of them being her mother might well feel religious

obligations to kill me.

“Mother, I-”

“No, don't leap to conclusions. But I think it would be wise if we talked about other things.”

That was an excellent idea. “You aren't hurt, are you ma'am? Or you?”

“I feel better than I have in years,” the old lady replied, with a hint of relief in her voice.

“No, I'm fine. Tired, but fine,” Salation concurred.

“Let me provide food then, and something to drink,” Rush the Falling Water offered. From a place indistinct he produced a platter of sautéed beans, and glasses of a milky wine. We tried a bit of the first, and found it excellent. The later was as well. It had smooth vegetative flavor that was very faint but had been spiced with nutmeg. We ate and drank for a while, and talked of nothing that might involve religion or politics. Unfortunately that precluded any discussion of the demon who assailed us, however.

That was brought into sharp relief when the song that filled the small square world we inhabited turned suddenly discordant. I leaped to my feet and rushed to the great, central fountain, that stood where the small fountain had in the plaza, but was in all ways greater. The sculpture was more elaborate and poured water from a dozen flutes and horns, while the rippling waters outlined the shapes of static notes of singing. Now there was a shadow on the water that flowed back and forth, slowly spreading oily black patches across the surface. The water stilled, and the music grew quieter.

“It's trying to get in,” Rush the Falling Water said for the benefit of the two women. Then in reassurance he added, “But it will not succeed.”

“Not for a while,” I said, staring down. Through the rippling water I could see little, but with the images of Telitia's memory of the ants in my mind knew what would be happening. “It's spreading across the water, trying to bring enough ants to bear that it can force the gateway. But they traverse the water by clinging together. The moving water of the fountain breaks up their clusters. Eventually enough of them will get sucked into the water intakes to plug the jets. The fountain will stop, and the swarm will bring its numbers to bear. Then it will come.”

“Even here, in sanctuary?” asked Salation. She glanced at the musical spirit, who sat very still. The singing was not much louder than breathing.

“Once the fountain stops, the noise it makes will stop as well. Then the spirit's power will be reduced. Meanwhile the swarm demon will lose only a few of its number,” I explained. Then I shrugged. “Don't worry about it. Once it passes through, I'll take care of it.”

I looked at Telitia, a calculating stare that she met head on. Her daughter paused on the cusp of asking how the new menace would be mitigated at my exchange of looks with her mother. The old woman shrugged. We both knew who had what cards in their hands. It would be easiest not to say anything.

While I alluded to this before, no amount of hyperbole could exaggerate the hostility the Immaculate Faith had for my kind. It was made all the worse by the justification behind it. My antecedents, those

mad beings who ruled the world in the name of the Unconquered Sun but with little regard to his edicts or commandments, had done everything that the Immaculates listed as their crimes. In fact they had done more and in ways that few now had the power to understand. Musical instruments which played melodies wrought from human suffering were the tip of an iceberg that extended vast and horrifically under the waters of history. I know this because I remember it.

That which makes me one of the Sun's chosen and has exalted me to the powers I possess isn't a singular act of divine will. It is a thing, referred to as an Exaltation, that binds itself to a mortal. Gods make much of this point, and it is the reason that Rush the Falling Water initially referred to me thusly. So far as I know, no power can or has ever been able to separate an Exaltation from a soul. There are reasons for this I'll explain later, to avoid bogging down my current narrative. In theory these Exaltations seek out mortals of a suitable nature. It is an autonomous process, initiated by the patron but undertaken and conducted exclusively by the Exaltation itself. Ideally the Exaltation I've received seeks out mortals who fit its peculiar nature, and then transubstantiate their nature into beings vastly more than gods. Thus my power chose me and attached itself to my soul. With it came some of the memories of those souls it attached itself to before, some of their knowledge and some of their failings.

Thus I'm terrified of entering into the fallacies of my predecessors. I already have doubts about the guiding controls of the Exaltation, because I received one of the Eclipse Caste. I'm supposed to be a diplomat. While some of the knowledge that came with the Exaltation is conducive to that, it's all the overwhelming, mind blasting power that has the subtlety of a broadsword and twice the ethical concerns. Instead I find myself solving my problems with Agate or my feet and baffled about how I'm supposed to talk my way out of being judged Anathema by Salation's mother when I unsummon this demon with magic from the old world. Add to this that I know the joys of ruling a kingdom of willing slaves and exactly how to go about doing it again. I also know the words of power that deprive men of their wills. Worse, I know I'll like it.

“Are you sure you can stop it?” Salation asked me, looking at the oily covering of the water.

“One way or another,” I replied evenly.

“You sound like you're expecting a problem,” she pointed out.

“I am,” I agreed. Then I turned, and considered her mother as she sat, eating the meal provided by the poor god. “Don't worry. There shouldn't be an obstacle to dispensing with the demon, but the nature of the solution isn't quite as discrete as I'd prefer. Why didn't you tell me your mother was devout?”

“I said I didn't tell anyone about you,” she explained defensively. “And we haven't had time to talk with the horse business.”

“I thought you hadn't told her about me for normal reasons that had nothing to do with my nature and the faith.”

“Like you being a multiple felon?”

“Yes, like that.”

She rolled her eyes at me. I scowled back, and then the both of us noticed the song of the plaza was fading rapidly. Glancing down the surface of the water was completely black, and flat as a sheet of

lead. Only peering very closely rendered visible the tiny movement of the thousands of little legs that must be treading th water. I withdrew from the central fountain to get some working room.

“Why don't you go take your mother to the far side of the square? Give her an excuse to not see what I'm about to do. It will also be safer.”

“You said not to worry!” she exclaimed.

“Don't worry. Just get back,” I replied vaguely.

With a look at me that was mostly annoyance hiding a core of worry, she retreated to where Telitia sat. They relocated to the far end of the plaza. Salation sat so she could see what was about to happen causing her mother to put her back my way. I smiled at them, and then returned my concentration to the fountain.

“Can you banish it?” Rush the Falling Water asked.

“Almost certainly. My problem is that if I don't use a powerful enough banishment I'll fail and won't be able to try again for five days. However the more powerful spells have side effects like geysers of power and pools of radiant light which with reveal our location to anyone with eyes to look and some idea what they mean. I'd rather not dispense with the ant demon to find a Wyld Hunt bent on ridding Lookshy of the Solar menace, by which I mean me.”

“Stark Vision of Inevitability, may I ask what difference it makes? I understand you must protect the woman, and will remain here until you do. I do not criticize you, and will aid that as I can. But once this thing is destroyed, do you not intend to leave Lookshy anyway? We have places to go, and the sooner we go, the sooner you can return.” The god's words were diffident, but under them was a harsh edge of logic.

I sighed. Instead of directly answering I said, “I will make sure that no other demons come after this family due to my presence.”

“Of course. But then?” he asked. His question covered his point well.

I nodded to him and accepted his words. “Very well,” I conceded. “You mean to tell me there's no reason to be discrete any more? I'm convinced.”

Suddenly concerned, Rush the Falling Water backpedaled, “I don't mean that exactly-” but got no further for I had hauled down the purifying lightning of the Sun into that sunless place.

“Immolating Fist of Wrath!” Solar flares came to my call, ripping through the gateway to the plaza and immolating the demon that lurked in the threshold. As the gateway was still partially intact, much of the blinding sorcerous plasma reflected back in to the sanctum. The white light burned up to a mandala of the Unconquered Sun's victory over the demons in the War of Ascension and reflected back. Moving at the speed of magic the coruscating fire bounced between my impenetrable barrier and the gateway, leaking demon banishing magic across the border with each reverberating impact. It only took a matter of seconds. Then the sanctum was very still.

“Stay here and guard them. I'm going to make sure this is complete,” I told Rush the Falling Water,

who's semi-material form was wavering in the aftershocks of the most power demon annihilations ever devised. To give the devils their due, the god-king Solars of old had invented some excellent magic. Then I stepped through the gateway with sword in hand, looking for a fight.

The Plaza of Voices Raised in Song was deathly still. Birds and crickets in Lookshy made no noise, no carriage wheels clattered on the paved streets, and the ring of horseshoes was gone. Even the tinkle of water in the fountain had ceased. The effects of the magic were gone, and there was no trace of it any more, but I wondered how eventful the casting of that spell had been on this side.

With a bang someone threw open a window and cried, "What was that!?"

"Light of Venus," I called back, hopping off the lip of the fountain to search around for traces of demons. Not finding any, I noticed the rocks were glowing slightly, and the water shimmered as if it had confined rainbows within. With a burst of spray the child sculpture spat a stream of pure water into the air. I stuck my fingers in and licked it. The water tasted like new sunshine breaking into a shuttered room.

The demon had been eliminated with such vehemence that after a few moments of searching there were no insect carcasses to be found. By then people were appearing, looking into the plaza with wonder. I exited via preexisting hole in a wall and crossed Lookshy, heading towards the clock shop.

It was as we'd left it. I went around back to climb in the second story window that no longer had a pane, and poked around. Continuously I sent paranoid glances up at the ceiling and listened for the near silent traces of insects burrowing but found nothing. Leaving Salation's room I crept down the hallway and upstairs.

Here I finally found traces of the beasts. Underneath the window frame I'd tossed down the hall were several crushed insects. They didn't look that big until you realized that each one represented thousands more, and their jaws were a third the length of their bodies. Phantom pains in my legs reminded me how easily they could chew through flesh. I twitched, and flicked my gaze over the ceiling again. Nothing was there.

I ran downstairs to Salation's workshop where she also displayed her finished pieces. Poking around yielded me some a glass bottle. I filled it with water and returned upstairs to scoop a few of the ants inside with a knife.

"Now, you little monsters, show me whence you've come," I ordered and breathed a little essence on them. At once they swirled around the jar, filling it with reflections, until it seemed a whole swarm was confined within the glass. They rushed about inside, and I turned and twisted the bottle, trying to get a decent look.

The reflected swarm was scuttling along an indistinct gutter, like any of those that filled the city. There would be no way to determine where. I was pleased to see that the swarm was much smaller, less than a hundred of the things had survived. They were running away and soon passed underground. The bottle went dark. When I held it close to a candle, I saw only the few dead ants I'd put there, floating with neutral buoyancy in the water.

I went to one of the city gates. They were still checking for me, but it was late and the guards were paying little attention. I attached myself to the underside of a poorly searched wagon and bypassed

them without more difficulty. Once outside I loped into the lesser city and found the crooked horse dealer.

“Evening,” I said happily, as I walked into his tent.

“You bastard!” he said, concealing the joy he had at seeing me with profanity and threw something at my head. He missed, which must have meant he liked me.

“I need another horse,” I told him.

“You're paying for it with money!” he snarled back.

“All your horses are stolen to begin with,” I snorted.

“They're fine animals!”

“Fine stolen animals,” I corrected.

“You're paying with money!”

He seemed very excitable. I nodded and left his tent, walking around back to the fenced pen where he kept his animals. The horsedealer staggered after me. I think he was a bit tranquilized, because he was having some trouble walking. I kept going through his animals until to my surprise I found Wimp.

“You found my horse!” I observed, delighted.

“It's my horse,” he argued.

“No, this is the one I won from you before. Remember?”

“That cannot be. That horse had a bad leg.”

“You sold me a horse with a bad leg?” I asked pointedly.

“I sold you nothing. You cheat at dice!”

“So then you don't know how you got my horse.”

“That's my horse,” he repeated.

I took a few steps back and whistled. Wimp, remembering our trip to the beached ship, walked over to me placidly.

“You're whistling at another man's horses. You could be hanged for that!” the horsedealer threatened.

“I think that only applies to women, and only in the south,” I replied.

“Well that's fine, because here this is my horse.”

I ignored that. "Supposing that regardless of who owns the horse now, this animal is the same one that changed hands between us before. You will notice between then and now his leg has been healed. Now if that could happen once, it could probably happen again, and since I believe most of the rest of your animals are sicker than a leper colony, I think that would significantly increase their resale value. Perhaps beyond the cost of this one animal, who's still mine anyway."

"What exactly are you suggesting?" the drunk, crooked horsedealer asked suspiciously.

"Give me back Wimp, and I'll cure these five animals around me," I offered, pointing at a few who had conditions I could readily discern.

"You a Dragon-Blood?" he asked.

"No."

He waited for further explanation. I didn't give him one.

"Fine, do it," he decided.

We parted ways again shortly. I had an idea where the swarm was heading, and rode hard to the south, heading for the site of our last meeting. When the bottle revealed the demon had broached the surface the background was shadowed stone, flecked with a rippling pattern of light. I stared at it baffled for a few seconds before realizing the rippling light must be dawn reflecting off water. The stonework was a bridge. For several minutes a hundred ants scuttled along the underside of a bridge, meaning it would be vast. They were heading north, crossing the river. I had been completely wrong.

At once I wheeled Wimp around and gave him the lead. He took it with joy, setting into an endless racing pace that only together could we achieve. Soon we were passing other riders who stared at the dashing racer that was only flecked with foaming sweat. I stayed low with my face against his neck.

Unfortunately it was haste that gave us away. As we passed Lookshy several hours behind my demonic quarry calls rang out. Soon a dozen men were dashing after my on fast horses. With the words of the god in my mind forsake any discretion. I turned Wimp's head to the water and whispered encouragement into his ear until the beast was in a mad haste. Like a bolt he descended the gentle bank and thundered into the spray. His hooves struck the water and found purchase on its surface. Furious the Lookshy cavalry plunged into the river up to their warhorse's chests, and then surged back and forth in frustration as we charged across the blue expanse. It took but moments. Then we ascended the far bank and fled on the far road, not stopping until we were far out of sight.

That they would come after us was certain, but our lead was significant. They would lose time fighting the traffic on the bridge, which under the best case would still be a detour. Thus once we were a few miles up the road I paused to consult the small bottle.

The predatory ants were crossing leaves and roots, scuttling over shadowed ground. It was certainly a forest, and a dense one. Now I was presented with a new problem. Though Wimp could bear me ten times faster than they, I had little way of knowing where they went. Between Lookshy and Sijan was a hundred miles of mostly settled farmland, full of places for the swarm to rest and hide. With a new hive it was even possible they could replenish their numbers.

Worse, it was possible they could do so without. The swarm was bound together by magic, guided by a demonic intelligence of pure malice, and might very well ignore any law of nature. That it was limited was a certainty, for otherwise it would have replenished itself immediately, but whether that implied it could not recover at all, or simply needed some condition was unknown. The swarm might just need a place to rest and hide.

I had no more time to consider it. Soon the riders of Lookshy would arrive. I turned down side roads and made for distance, taking a weaving path, switching roads often, and did what I could to make my trail unintelligible. What I couldn't do was simply occultly eliminate it. Those techniques were possible, but I didn't know them. Thus relying on mundane trickery and Wimp's endless stamina, I made a snarled knot across country once more.

Unfortunately I was not the only one with unique powers. After six hours of riding through hill and dale, muddling my tracks in those of farmers and goat herders, I looked back and saw six men riding along, their leader bent low over his saddle. They were less than an hour behind me. It did not seem humanly possible. It probably wasn't.

If the pursuit was being lead by one of Lookshy's Dragon-Blooded trackers, he would be able to follow a falcon through a snowstorm. It left me with two choices. Ride hard north and hope I could outrun him, or take them out. I considered the bottle. The swarm was out of the forest now, scuttling under beating stalks of wheat. They could be anywhere. I turned Wimp around and set him towards the pursuit. It was time to end this violently.

The road dropped into a dell and was bordered by high walls enclosing fields and pastures. Between them it resembled a ravine. On my initial pass I had detoured suddenly along one of the narrow paths that cut between walls to a farm house. I'd ridden through his barn, and out the second story window onto a wall and away. Now I charged into the valley from the far side. Before I'd halved the distance the Dragon-Bloods knew I was coming.

In terms of strategy there isn't much to say. When taking on a half dozen supernatural beings alone you hit them hard and fast, killing the horses out from under the riders and then chopping those riders apart with abandon. My estimates put the conflict at less than thirty seconds to my death or victory.

That did not prepare me for the party to rein in and display their hands, coming to a full stop. Their leader, the tracker, called me to hold as all six of them paused. Their great jade lances went up, pointing to the sky. Confused, I reined in as well. Wimp took offense at being checked when he wanted to run, and reared, dancing about on his hind legs while he whinnied his protests at me.

“Are you the one known as Inevitable, the invader of Haid's home?” the tracker called. We were perhaps thirty feet distant. They stood in a loose pack, and their superbly trained warhorses stood still save when they ground their hooves into the dirt with anticipation. Wimp, excited and full of energy, danced forward and sideways, rarely pausing.

“That is close to my name,” I replied. “And I did not invade the manse of Gens Haid. He invited me in warmly.”

“Yet your escape was full of violence?” the tracker replied. “You injured six men, and assaulted the master of the house and his nephews?”

“That happened,” I admitted.

“Was it glorious?” the tracker asked, his eyes shining.

“What? Who are you?” I barked.

“Yushoto Tein, a member of the imperial guard. These are my cousins, and combined we are the White Brotherhood,” he replied, waving a hand to indicate the five with him. I considered them suspiciously and waited. “You may have heard of us.” He looked young, but Dragon-Blooded age can be deceiving. They can look young well into their third century. Yet there was a youthful enthusiasm behind his eyes, lightly alloyed with immature arrogance, the affirmed the impression of youth. Like the pentarch of riders at his back, he wore a white breastplate with attached bracers and shoulder guards. Below the waist he had a skirt of reinforced lamellar plates that left his legs free to manipulate the warhorse. He also wore greaves and cavalry boots. His helmet was small, white as the clouds, with stiff hairs protruding from the brow that looked like a halo. He had removed it when we first started talking, and now it rested on the pommel of his saddle.

Tein had shockingly green hair. It was greener than emeralds, brighter than sunlight off oak leaves, and thicker than fields of young wheat. His eyes were the same shade but had an inner intensity that dominated his face. Clean shaven with a slightly hooked nose, he had angular features unlined by cares yet. There was a bit missing from his right ear, just above the lobe.

“I haven't,” I denied hearing of his fame.

“Not to worry; you have now,” he replied easily.

“What do you want?”

“Now that is an excellent question. What can you offer?”

“Death by the sword or crochet.”

Yushoto Tein ignored my jibe. He continued as if I hadn't spoken, “You are Anathema, are you not? The one who invoked Solar magic on the border of the Mourning Field? It is the shadowland to the south of Lookshy.”

I couldn't figure out where he was going with this. “The same,” I affirmed.

“Could you do it again?”

“Do what? Invoke sorcery?”

“Yes. On that spot, the Mourning Field.”

“I could certainly invoke it on that spot,” I replied cagily.

“What about the Mourning Field?” he asked, eagerly.

“You mean, can I burn it from the world completely?” I guessed at the direction of his questions.

“Yes. Can you?” His eyes burned with their own internal enthusiasm. Either he was a master actor or truly considered the prospect with great eagerness.

“Maybe,” I concluded. The Light of Solar Cleansing certainly wouldn't work, but there was something else very similar to it. “But not quickly. All the forces that inhabit that shadowland would come to protect it while I summoned my efforts.”

“Suppose you had an army to protect you?”

“Suppose they turned on me as soon as I was done, killing me in my moment of weakness,” I countered.

“Suppose we're here to bargain in good faith,” he counter-countered.

“We're doing a lot of supposing.”

“Not the least of which is the supposition that you can do what you claim,” he pointed out.

“If I can, what exactly are you offering?” I asked.

“What do you want?”

“Ants, to begin with,” I said seriously. “Certain ants. Track them, find them, exterminate them.”

“Easily done,” he replied. He didn't even consider the oddity of the request.

“That's a down payment, not a final price,” I added. “I want that to show me you bargain in good faith.”

“Then let us continue our theorizing. Suppose that we kill these ants for whatever reason you desire. Furthermore, let us suppose you can remove this blighted shadowland and we help you, taking no advantage of you, and causing you no harm. Would you willingly do this thing that would benefit all the world?” he asked.

I frowned, trying to figure out what his advantage was. That the shadowland was indeed a menace to all the world I agreed with completely. Honestly, eliminating it would meld quickly and easily with my own desires. But I had no idea why this Dragon-Blood would negotiate with me, something akin to consorting with ye old powers of evil, to achieve it. I explicitly refused to believe it was out of altruism.

“What's in it for you?” I asked.

“We are the Princes of the Earth. We steward the whole world, and our rule of Creation is founded on tending to it.”

The harder I peered into his words, the more I began to suspect he was at least partially telling the truth. There was a certain idealistic spin on his words that was selfless. Yet there was more.

“A laudable sentiment. What else?”

Yushoto laughed good naturedly, not in the least insulted by my suspicions of his motivations. “May we suppose something else?”

“Enjoy yourself.”

“Then suppose this shadowland, the Mourning Field, used to belong to my family, and now is a worthless trinket of land. The fields were fertile, and crops burst from the earth as if compelled from below. Its forests used to provide lumber we used in our warships, for building, and for export, and was integral in our family fortune. Then the armies of the Realm met us there and made war at the very gates to the city. Now the fields grow monsters, and the woods are a pestilence. Yet it is still the property of Gense Yushoto, though it brings us no jade and costs us deeply. Every time a dark creature comes out our family must use vital resources to crush it. Obligations of duty and law require Gens Yushoto to protect the world from this thing.

“Yet a few days ago a white light lit the beach. Even in the middle of day we could see it. The beached pirate vessel with its dead crew was burned away, and the taint burned from the trees. I come to an interesting possibility. If the entire Mourning Field burns away, then we will no longer drain our strength against it. If it can be restored, then the lumber from it will return, and Yushoto's wealth will flourish.

“It is not a bad choice to make.”

“Yet I'm Anathema,” I said.

“You are of dubious morality. The shadowland is not.”

We considered each other on the road under the early afternoon sun.

“How can I trust you?” I asked.

“You may have our oaths,” he replied.

“And I will bind you to them,” I replied. “Be aware that even if you intent to swear falsely, I can ensure dire consequences come upon you.”

“Solar Anathema, do not question my word,” replied the Dragon-Blood. His words were calm, but underneath them suddenly arose a great intensity. “I've said nothing but the truth, and spoken to you fairly when I could have attempted to lure you into a trap. Yet should you question my honor, then you and I will have poignant words that I doubt you will recover from.” For the first time he spoke with real menace. The suggestion of dishonesty had struck him deeply.

This was why I couldn't imagine why I was intended to be a diplomat. I tried to explain my distrust without insulting him further. “Yushoto, with no offense intended, I am hard pressed to accept you at your word. Perhaps it is my ignorance of you, and if so I am doing you a grave disservice, but my welcome in the city of Lookshy has not been gracious. I was welcomed into the domain of Gens Haid and then ambushed for a crime I did not commit without being given a chance to speak in my defense. You have seen some proof of what I can do, but what proof do I have of your good intentions?”

“Let us make a simple deal. I will provide you the advance you asked for, tracking these ants, and in

exchange you will give us your trust when we negotiate in good faith to remove the Mourning Field.”

That was, I admitted silently, a very good deal. “That is very reasonable.”

“Excellent.”

He rode out from his comrades towards me. I guided Wimp to him. At the same time my left hand dropped to my side. I did not summon Agate to hand, but I could feel it's closeness in that other place. Cautiously I trotted to meet him, and we shook hands in the road. No part of this deal required me to trust him yet, though, and I used my will to bind the oath as I had the common criminals before. Instinctive understanding of what I had done hit him like it had them as well, and he glared at me. It had been a tacit statement of distrust.

“You owe me for that,” he said calmly.

“Consider it a cost of doing business,” I replied. “Add it to my tab when we negotiate purging the Mourning Field from the world.”

“Very well. Now tell me of these ants,” he instructed. At once it seemed the slight had been forgotten, but that was only a facade.

“There is a demon that has been plaguing me,” I explained. “I have already killed two of its kind in the environs of your city. This one appears as a swarm of southern ants, each about the size of a finger from tip to the second knuckle. I have almost destroyed the swarm, but it escaped.”

“Where did you see it last?”

I produced the bottle. Shaking it I put a bit of essence within it and then tossed it to him. Curious he snagged it out of the air, and stared in. The sunlight glinted off the glass and reflected into his face. As he stared at the myriad reflections within, rainbows traced across his features. He stared for a long time, and then returned it to me.

“Come. We will lead. You can follow so no one rides at your back.” he said. Without another word he urged his warhorse forward, and his White Brotherhood fell in behind him. For the first I noticed that more than half his 'brotherhood' was female. The five fell in around him, and they moved quickly. My paranoia had the unfortunate consequence that I rode in their dust for several miles. That was not unintentional. I had insulted Yoshota Tein and this was his reminder of that.

Still his injured pride meant less to me than survival. If he expected people to trust him explicitly on their first meeting, he had unpleasant surprises in his future. We rode in silence, making a near straight line to the west until he turned onto a wide wagon path. It was deeply furrowed from farm carts, forcing us into riding in single file. Continuously I flicked my glance to the right and left, seeking signs of an ambush.

Suddenly the line paused. Having been paying attention to our flanks and rear I did not at once understand why, though Wimp slowed of his own accord to stop behind the woman we followed. Leaning, I saw Tein had dismounted and was on his hands and knees, staring at featureless mud. From there he crawled off the edge of the road and into a field.

“Come,” urged the white sister who rode before me. The second rider had taken Tein's reins and we followed him off the road into a cow field. Once within we circumnavigated the pasture. The imperial guard tracker never remounted his horse, and went usually on hands and knees, inspecting the ground. I could not imagine he would be able to find ant tracks in dirt. He didn't.

“They did not exit above ground,” he concluded finally. With that he remounted and asked for the bottle. I renewed the charm within, and he inspected it carefully. Finally in disgust he handed it back to me. “There is nothing here. They are most likely underground, burrowing away.”

Telitia said when she was a child she had seen a swarm nest within a rhino. I considered the cows of the pasture carefully. There were four of them, three together and chewing while a third stood apart, seemingly asleep. Neglecting the Dragon-Blooded brotherhood I approached the cow and increased my hearing. There was no bovine heartbeat.

“Yoshoto Tein, you are indeed a great tracker. Please, watch my horse. I think this will be done soon.”

He looked at me askance, but without prompting another of his party took Wimp's reins. I was but ten feet from the great still animal when I pulled Agate to me. I felt better with it in my hand. The Terrestrial's spread out, watching me carefully. Tein asked me, “Your foe is a cow?” as if he could not believe his own words.

I crept a little closer, observing the vast side of the animal. I remembered well how easily they had gone through my leather shoes, and wondered if the hide would slow them down. For all I knew it was quite possible they had spawned more, completely replenishing their number, and now lurked beneath the hide, waiting to explode outward by fell magics and engulf me. I needed some connection to banish the horde, but I could not see, hear, or feel them, and the bottle had showed Tein only blackness. That meant I needed to open the cow.

Once I was within arm's reach I stopped. Agate had a slim pommel like a child's fist. I moved slowly, approaching the bovine from the side, but behind the massive head. Its eyes would not naturally see me. Then resting the very tip of the blade on its shoulder, I listened carefully. For a long time I remained perfectly still, until the noise of the three remaining cows chewing was a sea of noise I dove beneath. Underneath that, underneath the rasp of wind in the grass, and the snorting of six of Lookshy's elite cavalry horses was nothing. No blood moved in the cow's veins, but neither did any insects.

*Of course not, I thought silently. They don't hunt by swarming. They're burrowers.*

The ground collapsed inwards and twelve hundred pounds of beef dropped on top of me as the carefully executed pit trap worked perfectly. Even as I plunged into the pit, the walls fell in with the hundred squirming bodies of the swarm, as the immense leaden weight of the cow, which had done so well as bait, tumbled down atop me.

I spun as it fell, took the impact with my back, and was crushed to the ground. The swarm dropped as well, pulling an avalanche of dirt after it. For a moment I held my weight and the cow, while my arms buckled and my fingers worked like mad. The hive scurried around the leather hide and came to my skin, seeking it with their envenomed jaws. From the surface, we must have simply appeared to disappear.

Then a burning white light blazed up from the center of the pit as I unleashed the plasma of an angry

god. It ripped through the ground like an earthquake, sending aloft half the pasture as dust burned into cinders. The air was full of the smell of burned dirt. The crater was empty.

Then I crashed into the ground, and the burned hunk of beef plummeted after. What goes straight up from the center of a blast comes straight down. I hit on my back staring half a ton of burned cow as it fell directly at my face and decided my choice of spells had been ill considered. I was also deaf as a post. Agate came to my hand and I swung with desperate strength, and the beast dropped onto either side of me.

“Do you live?” yelled Yoshoto Tein as he rushed to the edge of the crater, ignoring the falling ash and dust. His head appeared as an outline against the sky. Not having heard a word, I stared at him with a dumb look on my face.

“Solar?” he yelled again. The spots started fading from my eyes, and I saw his lips moving. I groaned and sat up.

By the look of it he was yelling something else. I slapped my ear with the heel of a hand a few times then shrugged at him. He got the message and scrambled into the crater. With him came three of his sisters, all staring around confused.

Once it had been established that there would be no conversing, I took a moment to get my bearings. Not that I lost track of where I was, but being at the epicenter of a detonation has a way of disrupting one's sense of location and time. Tein was watching me for signs of a concussion while I did so. He said something else, and the edges of his words started coming through. After that my hearing returned quickly, and soon we could talk.

“Fire-based anti-demon magic,” I explained. “Very quick, not very subtle.”

“A banishment?” he asked.

“Sure,” I replied. “Banishing gets rid of demons and so does that, so yes.”

“And cows too?” asked one of the women.

“Eh?” I asked. We both walked over to where she and her comrades were staring at the bisected cow. Instead of leaking innards all over the ground, the cut was shimmering like misty glass, much as the entrance to the spirit of the plaza's sanctum had. That could mean only one thing. “Oh, bloody hell,” I muttered.

“What?” asked the woman.

“It's an entrance to a sanctum. Now either this cow is an infernal gateway to Malfeas,” I admitted, since it was indeed theoretically possible. Sort of. Vaguely. If I squinted at logic until nothing was in focus. “Or the swarm never fled Lookshy because it was worried, it went looking for a large animal. These things must burrow into the center of them and make a hive, and this swarm coincidentally also used it as bait. Where ever this thing makes its hive it connects to the demon's own twisted den.”

“I have no idea what you just said,” admitted Tein without a trace of self consciousness.

“Stay here. This may take a while,” I replied, and spoke a word that opens all doors. It was the same as had opened the way to Yu Shan. Now it took me to a much more vile place, but I went through quickly. If it had guardians, they would not be dealt with by words.