

That night I scoured the seedier parts of Lookshy for a dealer in stolen goods. Nothing I'd stolen was directly traceable, but that didn't mean I wanted to sit on the problem. Without too much difficulty I found someone willing to take them off my hands. After that I found a common house and slept in the public room.

By this point rumors of my morning activities had grown, twisted, and mutated into things nearly unrecognizable. Teams of Dynastic warrior-assassins had broken into the Haid estate for insufferable insults against the Blessed Isle. It was the first stroke in an impending war. The army was mobilizing. A rain of kittens and squid was the direct result of the Goddess Ro Thas's anger at the insult to her high priest, one of Haid's kinsmen. Naked swordsmen were falling into rose gardens all over the city.

In the morning I found a gambling hall, and watched a game until I figured out how it was rigged and in who's benefit. After that I bet on him and let my small pile of winnings accumulate. Once I had enough that no single coin from the fence remained in my possession yet my funds were significantly greater, I left. I changed my clothes, cut my hair, and developed a new accent. That took most of the day. I ate again and waited for night to fall.

Not being a fool, I had slipped a hot knife behind Wood Elm's seal and opened the letter during my long travel here. The letter itself was innocent, consisting of an explanation of how the archivist had met me, what I wanted, and that under the deceased archivist's impression, I was a trustworthy individual. There had been nothing along the lines of, "He is the one. Get him!" Of course, if the mysterious booted individual had remained in Sijan, he could have discovered my actions. From thence it would have been a simple undertaking to send a messenger ahead on a fast horse.

This left me with additional questions. Who had conspired to frame me for murder? Under what intent had it been done? Honestly, my errand was innocuous. It had also been given to me under conditions that didn't bear public knowledge. I didn't see how a hostile party would learn of it, or even who would be hostile to such a benign intent as to help the nameless ghost's estranged family.

It was always possible that this had nothing to do with my errand, I chastised myself. Someone had done bad things to Wood Elm and wanted to do bad things to me. That was the mark of a bad person, and I had made a vocation of stopping such people. A little nonplussed at my unexpected adversary's vehemence, I sat in a small military cafe where young soldiers drank and tried their luck on the staff as the shadows lengthened into evening. While the longitudinal direction of the wide roads husbanded the dimming light, in the businesses beside the dark came creeping out of cupboards and basements as night came to exchange its brief words with day. Then the sun set, and the evening consolidated its hold on the city.

I paid my modest tab, tipped generously, and set out across the city. Vast cavern mouths lead down into the catacombs where the partially functional but barely understood cathedral-workshops of the First Age lurked. Either they came alive at night or the ebb of the day's crowds ceased to camouflage their noises, for now the city pulsed with faint thumping noises that ground up between the flagstones of the road to hint at the strange secrets below. Usually the roads down were surrounded by great walled academies or military garrisons.

In the northern part of the city, near where the walls opened up on the river, were the large houses of the city's moderately rich. The truly affluent were more to the south. That was where the five great houses of Lookshy, the Gens of the Seventh Legion, had their manses. Haid was not nearly powerful enough to be in their number however. His manse stood near the obdurate mass of the riverward wall.

It hadn't burned down. In fact the fires had done little but leave smoke stains on the white granite. The oceanic mosaic on the walls was unbroken, but soot had left black marks all over it. An oil slick marred the vista. No other damage showed from the outside. Guards ringed the building, watching the roads carefully. Smiling to myself, I crept into a courtyard of the estate behind, and made my way from tree to tree until I overlooked the outside wall.

Soon deep twilight gripped the yard, yet it was still too early for the guards' eyes to have fully adapted to the night. I hurled myself into Haid's back yard, rolled, and darted through an open window.

The room beyond stank. Something had been stored in here, dyed woolens perhaps, that had been consumed by fire with a retched smell that still permeated walls. No sooner was I within than my eyes started watering and nostrils burned. I stopped breathing, crept to the door and listened carefully. When I heard silence I moved on.

The hallway was broad and long. One direction lead to a central hall I'd passed through briefly before being introduced to Lord Haid the first time. In it all the Dragon-Blooded scions of the house and those mortals in positions of esteem were eating together at a raised, central table. Around the outside were smaller tables for children and poorer relations. They ate from porcelain plates with silver utensils instead of gold and crystal, but the food was the same. A roast course was just being served, and most of the wine glasses were still half full. I stole away the other direction.

Again the labyrinthine nature of the place tried to confound me. Had the western library not been huge it would have been nearly impossible to find. Ultimately it was mostly by luck that I made my way in.

The house I killed Lemora in would have fit comfortably within that single room. The ceiling was sixty feet from the floor, decorated in elaborate depictions of the armies of Lookshy's conquests. On every wall shelves full of books, scrolls, and objects of historical significance rose to that lofty ceiling, ringed periodically with catwalks and floors that no place required a ladder to reach. Wide placards denoted the divisions of the books within, and without exception all were military. Logistics, Tactics, Strategy, and Arms ringed the first floor. Above them the second level was devoted entirely to the Realm. Above that were sections on every major nation in Creation, and above that were the histories. I scrambled up to that high catwalk and started my search.

These books clearly showed frequent reference. Several alcoves dotted the walls where desks were filled with recent work. Haid's uncles who worked on their historical treatise had been hard at work, and their efforts were meticulously categorized. It took no effort at all to find the records of Yvores Alson. It was a huge book, bound in leather and iron, with bronze filigree on the cover. Excited I yanked it off the shelf and cracked it open.

Half the pages were missing. Right in the center of the volume, they had been cut out, excised from the binding with a sharp knife. I stared at the absence with irritation, before flipping to the back, looking for an index. That had also been removed. Seething, I went to the front, looking for a table of contents. Unsurprisingly that was gone. Annoyed I slid the censored volume back into place and lapsed into thought.

My ruminations were interrupted by voices below. Dinner had ended, and the scholars were returning to their labors for the evening. Their dedication was unimpeachable. I dashed into an unlit corner, bounded upwards to grab the next level's catwalk and pulled myself up. Now I was on the top level,

devoted to specific manuals on repair and maintenance for every piece of equipment the Seventh Legion had issued its rank and file soldiers in its approximately fifteen hundred year history. These scholars were nothing if not thorough. I retreated into an alcove thick with dust.

“Anything we can do for you tonight?” asked a young woman. Her voice was polite and eager to please.

“Same as usual,” replied an older man with amused tolerance. “Try to keep the noise to a minimum.”

“Have we been bothering you?” she asked, abashed.

“Yes!” snapped a second elderly voice.

“No,” countered the first one. “You’re fine.”

“You could guard us from outside,” suggested the peevish old man.

“Sorry, sir. Orders,” demurred the young woman. “We would if we could.”

“Bah.” If footsteps could sound annoyed, those would.

That more or less ended the conversation below. Three sets of footsteps, slow and careful, ascended a circular iron wrought staircase until they were on the fourth floor, the level of the histories. Meanwhile four chairs were pulled out from a table below, and cards were shuffled. I filtered those into the background as I focused on the three gentlemen below me. By the sound of it, they entered the alcove directly below the one I was hiding in, and set to work. I heard pens scratch on paper.

“Waste of time,” muttered the peevish voice. “A distraction too. I can barely work with the sounds of their card playing all day.”

“Stop complaining, you old goat. You’re so deaf you couldn’t hear their card playing if they dealt on your bald head,” retorted a new voice. This one was older than either other, and sounded tired.

“I can hear a mouse fart a hundred yards away!” snapped the first voice.

“Fifty years ago you might have,” countered the older one. “Now you’re a post.”

“Still a bloody waste of time,” grumbled the peevish one. “Like that Stark Vision chap is going to be hiding behind the animal husbandry manuals with assassination on his mind.” Curiously I glanced at the book spines on my right. *Proper Horse Care for Cavalry* read old script. I shrugged. “Haid should have his people looking for whoever broke in a ruined that book.”

The old man who’d been nice to the guards sighed wearily. The other one rose to the bait. “You still think they’re two separate assassins? Or that someone hired a veteran thief just to vandalize a book no one but us even knows exists?” His voice was scornful.

“It makes more sense than that Stark lad breaking in to ruin it and then coming back,” the peevish one snapped. “Or do you think that while Haid was chasing him he evaded him, crept in here, found the book, precisely cut away the chapters on the Reprieve Operations, and then left without another trace?”

That was one question answered.

“So you think there is a second thief. Like the only thing the criminal element has on their minds is the ruination of historical documents? Because I'm sure that Mongo the Murderer is going to stop mugging his way across the world to indulge his secret hobby of revisionist history.” The oldest one snorted, contemptuously.

Under his breath the nice one murmured “I'm so glad that those four guards aren't disturbing my work with their pointless bickering. That would be quite annoying.”

“What was that?” snapped the grumpy one, the one who could hear a mouse fart fifty yards away.

“Nothing,” the other replied innocently. “I'm trying to find the second reference Horatius Brus made to wheat requisitions in the spring of BY Four. I want to see if that corresponds to the inventories of the Nexus Expedition.”

“Still think Brus headed that operation?” the oldest one asked, diverted.

“It would explain the use of the Arraka gambit on the fourth day of the battle of Guern,” he replied.

Their bickering stopped as they worked mutely, presumably following this new line of inquiry. The library was silent except for paper rustling and the dealing of cards. In the silence, there was a soft spoken “Four,” from the table on the first floor.

“Stop that infernal racket!” screeched the grumpy one.

Card noises stopped. In the sudden stillness, I lost the sound of the old one's breathing. The sudden cry must have startled him halfway to death.

“Impossible to get any work done with all that noise,” the screecher grumbled. “Damn kids and their cards playing.”

“Olber, if I die, I'm taking you with me,” swore the archivist who had nearly just experience cardiac arrest. He had just started breathing again.

“What are you blathering about, you senile goat?”

“I suddenly remember that I still have the notes I took when I wrote those passages from Yvores' accounts,” mentioned the kind one. His voice sounded very tense. “I think I'll go see if I can find them.”

There were moving noises, and then one set of footsteps going down. At the floor he asked the guards if they wanted to accompany him, and all four leaped to their feet. Soon the two old men were alone with their work.

“Finally, they're gone,” said the grumpy one with a sigh of relief.

“Thanks to you! Now we have no one to protect us in case that Stark lunatic is lurking around here,”

the other snapped.

“Like that will happen!”

They descended immediately into bickering. I rose to my feet and crept to the catwalk balustrade. There was no one below but the two distracted men in their alcove. They were in plain sight of the spiraling stair. I took firm grip of the railing and then silently heaved myself over. Along the way I caught a brief glimpse of the them, frozen in an instant of quarreling, before I was past. They looked every bit as old and crotchety as they sounded. I plummeted down to the floor below them and snagged the iron catwalk. It didn't even creak as it arrested my fall. Then I dropped down to the thick rugs of the ground, and peered outside.

Old and friendly was walking away from me with all four soldiers at his back. I stole into the hallway behind them. It was well past nightfall, and the candles had mostly been extinguished. Only a few still burned in iron settings to light the halls. The archivist and his four guards threw long shadows.

“Now that we're out of there would any of you care to join me for a drink?” offered the old man. “My old nerves could do for a bit of soothing.”

“Sir, we would be remiss in our duties if we did not accompany you wherever you might lead,” the young woman replied seriously. The other three all agreed with great dedication.

“Excellent. Stay here a moment, and then we'll nip down to the kitchen.”

The old man entered a side door, and the five of us in the hallway waited patiently. Soon he returned with a sheaf of papers. From there the party went to the kitchen. The old man put his papers down on a table before joining the other four for a drink. Soon the conversation dovetailed to the bizarre personal habits of the other two archivists, and no one was paying any attention to the notes.

One of the side effects of being a magician is a certain aptitude to thievery. I made a beckoning gesture to the paperwork, and they vanished to reappear in my hands. Simply taking them and running seemed disrespectful to the one man who hadn't deserved it, but there was no time to read them there. Instead I pulled up my pants and using the old man's pen, which I had also stolen, transcribed the documents onto my leg with the blinding speed of magic. A final flickering gesture send the papers back, and I exited the mansion in much the same way I'd come.

Half a dozen blocks away I went to an ale house and acquired a private booth in the back. Once the barmaid came I impressed her with my desire to drink alone, and my willingness to tip for the privilege, and soon devoted myself to the study of ancient lore scrawled across my thigh. I neither know nor care what she must have thought upon returning with my refill, and finding me so occupied. She didn't say, and I didn't ask.

My knowledge of history is mostly devoted to the great ancient evils who've plagued the world, and the forbidden powers they worship. At the risk of sounding immodest, I possess a near encyclopedic mastery of the exploits of ancient demons and know the names of most, if not all, the forbidden gods. Military history, unfortunately, is not my strong suit. I know there are militaries, there have been militaries, and can say with confidence they usually tried to stick swords in their enemies. Furthermore,

the trick seemed to be preventing those enemies from doing the same to them.

The area of overlap between these nearly discrete fields of lore lay with the Fair Folk. The fae I've met and fought on a dozen occasions across the known world. They're beautiful and terrible, like watery mirages in the desert. With no connection to human definitions of sanity, they are still quite distinct from being mad. As mentioned, during the Balorian Crusade they invaded Creation en masse, intent on wiping the stain of ordered life from the pure madness of the Wyld. They also very nearly succeeded.

According to old Werzan's notes, which he labeled quite clearly, the Reprieve was undertaken when it became known that in the nearly unresisted initial blitzkrieg of their assault, the fae had pursued the fleeing Shogunate army with such abandon they had completely missed great chunks of creation that had lacked the capacity to put up a noteworthy resistance. Ninety seven mortals and sixteen Dragon-Blooded had dashed madly into the Wyld in the direction of Aphor. They'd arrived and were organizing the populace to flee when they'd sent a messenger back to tell their commander of their success. That messenger had been captured by the fae and had revealed all before they killed him. Yvores Alson had been taunted with the knowledge of the mad bravery of this effort. Ultimately it had been pointless, for Fair Folk nobles had severed the ties of geomancy that had linked the isolated kingdom to the reality affirming Poles of Creation, and let the region sink into the pure wyld. The noble who'd captured the historian taunted him with stories of unleashing his hordes on the humans and their ineffective guardians, and eating their souls with delight.

But Yvores never mentioned being confronted with truth of this final claim. That Aphor fell into the wyld is beyond doubt. Yet years later, when his freedom was won from the fae in a game of chance, Yvores insisted that the noble had never actually shown him evidence that the hundred men and almost score Dragon-Bloods were dead. It had been left uncertain, that that question might haunt him to his death. That mystery, and ones like it, had been what ultimately drove Alvores mad.

That matched up well with my knowledge of the fae. They lied in abundance and delighted in falsehood. It was what made their illusions so potent. If the ghost's fetters still bound him to the world, which only made sense, then some member of his household still breathed. Still, the old ghost had died years before the Balorian Crusade. He recalled seeing generations of his family reside in the home he'd protected. Thus some stray child could have left and wound up safe in Creation while all who lived in the land of their fathers had died, as the fae had declared.

There was no way to tell. Knowing nothing, not even a name, I couldn't go to any oracles. My own sorcery required more fuel than I had to feed it. Asking the Fair Folk was pointless. I had nothing.

That actually made things quite a bit simpler. I finished my beer, paid my tab, and left. As I walked out the door I noticed the bartender and the server talking together in low tones with heads bent close. They stopped as I went by and watched me. Grinning, I waved and sent them a manic grin. Then I left.

The people of Lookshy were a secular people. They believed in the force of arms, and the works of their minds. This did not mean they were without temples and had forsaken the gods. There were temples to all the gods one could expect in the religious districts. In the heart of the old part of the city stood the great Obelisk of Triumphant Divinities. Leave it to Looksy to only patronize gods who won their conflicts. The obelisk itself was a gold pillar a couple hundred feet tall, emblazoned with bas reliefs of the gods who had earned the worship of the people of the city through force of arms. I found the role reversal terribly amusing. Around the base were the private chapels of individual gods, while the gigantic mass of it, older than the city itself, towered above even the distant hilltop palaces of the

great Gens. Now, close to midnight, the throngs of the day were gone. There were still people around, but not many.

When no one seemed to be paying too much attention to me, I jumped. I admit, I cheated.

Magic, if you want to use that incredibly inaccurate term, can be broken into two broad groups. (Technically, this isn't true, but nothing I'm going to say is in the strictest sense.) Sorcery falls into one group, while Charm use falls into the other. Sorcery is what most people consider magic. If you want to turn a river to blood or summon a demon, you do that with sorcery. It's powerful, flashy, and draining. Charms are simpler. They're barely even magic, being more of mildly supernatural tricks at the most basic level. The two don't interact much. When I counter-spelled the soulstone vortex in Lemora's demesne, that was sorcery. When I augmented my legs with essence until three hundred feet was well within leaping distance, that was a charm.

Once I'd landed on top of the pillar to victorious gods, I poked around for a while. The summit wasn't featureless. Instead there was a small amphitheater and on what might be considered the stage was a altar, unused for since the ending of the last age of man. Outside the amphitheater, facing inward, were three majestic lions of sandstone, each a dozen feet tall. They looked perfectly lifelike and faced the center stage with immobile anticipation. I had never been here, but reading up on the fleshharrowing golems of Miridas Ker had told me what to expect. This was where the mad god-kings of old had worshiped those few beings they considered greater than themselves until arrogance had turned them blind to any power other than their own.

Conceit had seeped into the stone. Even without carvings or inscriptions that boasted of unsurpassed power, the nature of the place reminded me of the old lords of creation. Some trace of that old self absorption had permeated the entire monolith, manifesting itself as the tacit assumption that the gods had to prove their worth for worship in this city. If the will of the old god-kings had not been so puissant that even now, an age after them were gone, their magics had not anchored this plinth to existence and rendered it inviolate I'm sure some deity would have contrived a 'natural' disaster to bring this edifice of hubris down. That would have irritated the piss out of me, because what I wanted was up here, and it was hard enough to get to with the platform. Yet millenia had barely eroded their ancient works. Their hubris might have been madness, but it was grounded in power.

Back to my previous discussion of magic, suppose one wanted to open a locked door. Were one unaccustomed to the existence of locks and keys, the key could be considered magic. Similarly, were one never able to conceive of kicking a door open, you might similarly consider such an action supernatural. I've got Charms that will do either of those two things quite effectively without requiring a key like the former or being as obvious as later. While they transcend some of the limits of those methods, they are still bound by them, and thus require the door to have a key hole, or a frame and hinges.

Sorcery, on the other hand, obeys by no such rules. Sorcery is like a great obscene gesture raised to the laws of heaven and earth that spits on the natural order before battering it aside with raw power. As you might imagine, the mad god-kings of old were quite fond of it. It suited their arrogance. I consider it a necessary evil. Quite simply, the door I wanted open wasn't actually there. Charms of passing would let me walk through empty air quite easily, but wouldn't open invisible nonexistent doors. I wanted that empty air to take me someplace else, so I took a club of pure essence and smacked the laws of location with it until they clattered aside. Dovetails of arcane might fell of the broken constructions of the world as the nothingness parted, and then opened and a portal blazed into being.

The crowd below much have thought they were in the presence of a miracle. They sort of were, but really weren't. For all my power, I'm not beginning to claim divine status.

As the spiritual doorway breached down the center, there was a sudden radiance of iridescent light that bathed me. It was warm and glorious, and filled the night sky. I bowed very low, not out of obligation, but respect.

"Sun-Child," breathed a deep voice. It was at once perfectly clear, and yet had undertones of great felines roaring as they brought down their serengeti prey. "You had better have good reasons for this."

Turning, I faced the three sculpted cats, who were now looking down at me from golden eyes. The false appearance of sandstone had fallen away, revealing mobile orichalcum, distilled gold, that flowed like fur over impossibly powerful muscles. If my actions had smelled of the supernatural, their very existence radiated it.

"I'd like to speak with a god," I said respectfully.

"Go to a temple," the vast beast on my right suggested. Its words displayed tremendous fangs, and the cat shook its mane at me threateningly.

"The god I desire an audience with has no temples," I explained. "His people are no more, and his worship has fallen from the customs of man. Even the lands that bore his nation have disappeared into the risen tide of the Wyld eight centuries past. I would speak to the defunct god of Aphor, kingdom by the banks of Mer."

The lions considered me in silence, letting the night winds ruffle their fur. Though metal, it moved like real hair, and coruscated brilliantly with its own light.

"Heaven is closed to you, Sun-Child. Destiny forbids it." This was said by the central lion, but there was no meaningful difference between them besides location. Each was the image of the other, and alike in act and thought.

"Access to Heaven is my right," I pointed out. "And no power less lofty than the Unconquered Sun himself, who is my patron, may bar my access. I come in peace and on due business with a resident."

There was an uncomfortable silence for this was true. Finally one answered me, "Sun-Child, at one time that was beyond reproach, yet your kind have not been here since you went mad in the Last Age. Times have moved on, and your kind no longer rule Creation as you have never ruled Yu Shan. Customs have changed, and customs give rise to law. Would you risk violating the peace of Yu Shan?"

"I have spoken nothing but the truth, and shall undergo any test you would care to name to prove it. Even were this not the case, my authority bows to no law less potent than the words of the most high. Even Destiny is beholden to him." Again, this was true.

"Sun-Child, what do you want with a defunct god that you would endanger the peace of heaven?" the great lion asked. It was concerned. True, legally speaking I was beyond reproach, but the lion knew well that Destiny ruled matters now.

“What matter is it to you? Would you bear a message for me, that I might not enter Yu Shan myself, and thus not risk a conflict with Destiny?” I asked. Amazing how subtle I'm not, aren't I?

“We will undertake no errand that risks the laws of heaven,” a lion replied, cautioning me.

“Would you tell the God of Aphor that I seek the remnant of his people, to do service to them as I have been beseeched by a ghost of one of his children? I would know if any yet live within Creation, and desire his help. If he accedes, I may be found by the Plaza of Voices Raised in Song at midnight of each day.”

The lions considered this. Their feline expressions are naturally haughty, yet some instinct told me that they were considering my request only in their own defense. Bearing a message to a minor god was undignified, yet it avoided any number of conflicts.

“One of our number will undertake such a thing,” one of the guardians replied. “But only if you make no further attempt to enter this place.”

“I will make no further attempt to enter on this purpose,” I added the stricture carefully. I had no intention of willingly exiling myself from anywhere, much less Heaven, regardless of whether or not I'd ever been there before. “But only should you assure me you will bear no tidings of this to Destiny, nor let their agents learn of this though any direct efforts of yours.”

“That is agreed,” the great cat replied. At once one of the three passed through the gateway, to be instantly replaced by an identical construct. It took the place of the missing guardian as if it had ever been there. “Now release your geas on this portal.”

“Certainly,” I replied. “But before I do, there is one further thing.”

“What?” retorted the lion. All three of them leaned forward menacingly, waiting for this last bit of trickery.

“Thank you,” I said graciously and ended the spell. The portal vanished as if it had never been, and the night sank into darkness. As it vanished the celestial guards returned to their immobile pose, and settled into sandstone stillness. The sheen of metal more precious than gold vanished from their coats, leaving only old stone. For a long time I waited, as the after effects of the word of opening ended. Radiant essence ceased to rippled the air or exude from my skin. Then I bowed to the silent guardians and leaped from the pillar as I had come.

I landed in an alley some distance away. A crowd was collecting, moving towards the great obelisk, as wonder reached through the jaded hearts of a secular people. Smiling affably I moved away from them and left that environ.