

Autumn sun in the afternoon was warm in Lookshy. I sat in a small park and read through the pages the horseman had planted in Salation's pantry. They covered the Reprieve in detail, describing the proposed course it would take north, past what is now Halta. From there they would have headed northeast beyond the modern edge of the world. There the trees grew thick and wild. It was cold in the winter, but close to where the sun rose, so the days were long year round. The expedition had been lead by a score of Dragon-Bloods, sixteen of which were reported alive by the messenger that the Fair Folk had intercepted. These notes had the itinerary, route, and plans the operation had taken. Most of the roads didn't exist any more, having fallen into ruin in the last millenia. Other parts of the trip would go through lands now claimed by the fae or pass through shadowlands. Yet someone could follow the route all the way to the edge of the world, were one so inclined.

I stared into the sky and wondered if I was so inclined. The short answer was no, I wasn't. Even if I followed the Reprieve into the wyld, the trail would be gone. Even the ground the running forces would have traversed no longer existed. In the deep wyld mountains would rise and sing where the Shogunate rescuers had swam rivers. East and north would no longer be meaningful terms. Even if I did find where the kingdom of Aphor had been, it wouldn't be there any more. Even 'here' and 'there' would not constrain the pure wildness.

After considering that, I suddenly wondered why my antagonist had planted these pages. They were more helpful than anything else had been on this trip. It could be a trap, but that made no sense. A good trap would have fewer details and be far more enticing.

I rose, purchased a small cloth sack, and put the papers in. At a candle shop I obtained wax to seal it, and stamped it with a small silver penny. It would do for a crest. Then I walked to a block over from the Haid residence and found an errand boy. For the penny he took the sack and promised to deliver it to Haid's uncles for me. I watched from a corner as he handed it to the gate guards. From there they passed it to their own errand boy, and it went inside.

By now it was approaching evening again. It was late to visit the clockmaker girl, but I'd told her I would come. Thus I made my way to her place and knocked on the door as she was closing up her shop.

"I was starting to wonder if you'd forgotten," she said as she let me in.

"Sorry. I've been busy." I apologized and made my vague excuse. She took it without saying anything. "How are you?" She shut the door and ran the bolt, while I divested myself of my jacket.

"Good. I finished another piece and sold the bird. It went for more than I expected."

"Who'd you sell it to?"

"A young cavalry officer. He didn't give me his name."

I paused, and then hung my jacket up. Salation was looking at me with her deep brown eyes that were flecked with gold. She had a satisfied expression, like she was enjoying making conversation after working all day. I met her eyes, and let my gaze drift over the curve of her neck into her shoulders. Her skin was so smooth. "Tell me about it?" I asked.

"Are you jealous?" she asked suddenly, smirking at me impishly.

I wanted to sputter denials, but I caught myself. “Maybe. Why don't you tell me about it? What happened?”

“He came in and bought a clock,” she said simply. “He was very nice, said he wanted something impressive that no one else could have. That bird was the most unique thing I have, and once he saw it he immediately asked about the price. After that he didn't even haggle. He sounded rich.”

“Was he handsome?” I asked, and faked a smile. She bought it and smirked again.

“Yes, as a matter of fact he was. He wore his uniform, but not the armor, and he tethered his big horse out front. Are you thirsty? I bought some wine after he left that I haven't opened yet.”

“Please,” I replied. “This officer, was he just back from an exercise or a battle?”

“How would I know?” she asked. She saw me seated in the chair I'd used yesterday, and left to the drinks. I settled in and looked around. She hadn't yet closed the broad windows. On an impulse I glanced up at the watcher's nest across the street. There was no one there.

When she returned, I asked, “Was he injured?”

“He didn't look like it. After he paid for the clock he bowed to me very gracefully. Very nice of him,” she concluded, handing me my glass. It was a local red, and the taste was soothing. I sipped it while I lay back in my chair, thinking.

This was beginning to sound like it had nothing to do with Aphor. If he wanted to block my access there, he would have burned those pages, not planted them. Visiting Salation seemed like he was making a statement. This had the earmarks of something personal.

“This is very nice wine,” I complimented her. “Thank you.”

She smiled at me. We sat without saying anything as the light diminished, and the sun sank into the distance.

“How are you?” she asked.

“I'm fine,” I replied. “Enjoying myself. It's nice to relax.”

“Been working all day?” she continued.

“Some of it. I'd rather not talk about it, if you don't mind,” I said.

“You never talk about what you do during the day,” she pointed out.

“At least I'm honest about it,” I replied. “If you want I can make up stories of knife fights and bar brawls. I know a couple of good ones about horse thieves.”

“Why do you know horse thieves?”

“Because I talked to the man who sold your officer his horse,” I rebutted snidely.

She scoffed at me. “He was far too much a gentleman to ride a stolen horse. Besides, you're a foreigner. You don't know that the Seventh Legion provides horses to their cavalry when they get their spurs. It's supposed to be a big event.”

I had a sudden thought. “Was he wearing spurs?”

She blinked. “No, actually. Normally someone who wears spurs chimes as he walks. This officer didn't.”

“Which is why he had to buy a stolen horse,” I pointed out and kept thinking.

Last night, when I'd run him through, he hadn't worn spurs either. Then I'd assumed it was for silence. But he had been wearing his hard boots, when for silence he should have worn something softer. If he was adroit enough that he could silence his footsteps, spurs wouldn't make a difference. I was just guessing that he used magic, but people don't stay upright after you cut their lungs out. They don't stay alive.

“Well, I think he was nice,” she snorted. After that she tried to look lofty while she drank her wine, but she only looked adorable. I was powerfully willed with a desire to touch her.

“How's your mother?” I asked, changing that line of thought.

“She's fine,” Salation replied, a little sadly. “I went to an apothecary, and he made her a new tonic. It quiets the coughing, but now she sleeps all the time.”

“The next time she's awake when I'm around, I'd like to say hello.”

“If you ever stay for dinner you can,” she pointed out.

I didn't want to tell her that the first time she'd offered me a meal I had only accepted to escape pursuit for my breaking and exiting. Now I felt guilty at the thought. “Maybe some other time. I'm on a strict diet of bitter dreams and children's tears.”

“Well, I'm fresh out of children's tears, but if you want bitter dreams I can let you have some of my mother's last medicine. I tasted it once and had nightmares for a week.”

“Smelled like onions?” I asked. “And cinnamon?”

Salation blinked, caught off guard. “How did you know that?”

“Wode's weed. It's usually served in a cinnamon solution to deaden the taste. Otherwise it's so nasty you can't drink it.” I replied. “It's good for sicknesses of the chest, but gives you terrible dreams. Normally that's not a problem because the patient is awake all night coughing anyway, but you didn't have that problem, did you?”

She was looking at me very surprised. “You know medicine?”

A lie occurred to me then. It was a brilliant lie, that didn't actually involve any falsehoods, just implications and suggestions. All I needed to say was, "You don't really think I spent all my time in knife fights and horse thieving," and she would believe something totally untrue. I looked at her beautiful eyes, and thought of how many inconvenient questions I could avoid.

"Quite a bit. But I haven't practiced in a while," I replied truthfully, if evasively.

"My momma always wanted me to meet a doctor."

"Your mother knows enough doctors for the two of you," I opined. "And she probably knows more about tonics and potions than me. But I haven't done medicine in a long time, and I'm not a doctor now."

"Why not?" she asked the most obvious of the inconvenient questions I wanted to avoid.

I considered answering fully and honestly. 'Because the last time I was a doctor, that's how I met my wife. I didn't find out until later that she was using me to find people who were going to die anyway and lock their souls up so she could use them to bargain with demons. I killed her on our anniversary earlier this year.'

"I'd rather not talk about it," I said calmly.

"Oh, you never want to talk about anything!" she complained.

"I want to talk about you."

"And I want to talk about you. Who are you? What do you do for a living?"

"I'm a horse thief," I lied, badly.

"Are you? Really?"

"No," I admitted. In my life I'd never stolen a horse. "But I thought about it pretty hard once."

She growled at me. It was adorable again. I glanced at my wine glass, and it was empty. "Thank you for the drink. But it's late, and you must be hungry." I excused myself as I rose.

"I'm not that hungry," she replied.

I listened for a moment. Her stomach was muttering to itself like the peevish old archivist from Gens Haid's library. She looked at me, and then slapped her hands over her belly while she flushed.

"Well, maybe a little," she added.

"But only a little. Good night, Salation. If you are still having bad dreams from the wode, eat rye bread without oil. It'll get rid of it for you."

"Thank you, Crimson Wing. If that is your real name," she said suspiciously as she got up and walked me to the door.

“It isn't,” I replied cheerfully. “I am the Bloody Baron of Black Cliff. I've come for your women and your horses.”

“Well, you can only have one of those.”

“Fine. Do you know where I can get some feed for the horses then? I think their stomachs are growling.”

She pushed me out the door and bolted it behind me. I hopped down the steps and saw her shutting the bay windows. I smiled, and she pretended to scowl at me. Ultimately she couldn't hold it and smiled back. After that I walked away up the road. I knew once my back was turned she stopped smiling, and was staring after me with a sad and disappointed look. The big man on the far side of the street was scowling at me as well as he kept an eye on the neighborhood. I tried to ignore them both and walked away quickly.

There seemed to be little to do but wait for the god. There was that, or ambush this cavalryman. Sitting on top of a house several blocks away I let time roll by while I watched Salation's house. I didn't expect him to come at night. He wouldn't make that mistake again. However I could not be sure, nor leave this to chance. Thus until nearly midnight I perched among chimneys, and then dashed off to the plaza across rooftops. I arrived breathless and gasping, but dropped from a balcony to the plaza's pavestones several seconds before there was a shimmering distortion in the water.

Rush the Falling Water looked different. Not younger, for gods are ageless and can be as old as they choose, but healthier. He didn't have the appearance of mad desperation. Now there was a touch of pride in him that was different from the hollow arrogance of the disenfranchised. He still only emerged to the waist from the fountain, but projected a slight air of divine charisma now.

“Mortal,” he greeted me.

“Spirit,” I insulted him right back.

The god considered this but ignored it. “I have found he of whom you spoke. His name was Medor, of the valley of Kit. In the two hundred and ninth year of the Shogunate he was scheduled to die, but his soul did not move on. Just a few months ago he entered Lethe and was absolved of the memories of life. His children and his children's children lived in the valley of Kit and did me honor as their righteous patron for many years, for the Immaculate Order was young then and did not have the stranglehold it does now.”

That sounded promising. There couldn't be that many souls who took fourteen hundred odd years to move on.

“Does he have any descendants?”

“None who live. His line was never fertile, and few of his progeny left the valley of Kit in my kingdom of Aphor. Those who did were exterminated to a man in the Contagion.”

“Then who was he fettered too?” I exclaimed.

“Peace, Sun-Child. I mean none who live within fate. I spoke to the mad god of the wyld, and learned that indeed souls may live within realms cut off from here, and thus not governed by the Loom of Destiny. Fate is simply heaven's method of accounting for the world. One can exist outside it much as one can exist outside of a nation's census in a neighboring realm.”

The old god had gotten calmer with the hope of reinstatement dangled before him. I followed his example.

“But now I must find his descendants. How can that be done?” I asked.

“There is a way,” he said seriously.

“That being?”

“It will not be easy.”

“Can we skip the preamble? You've been waiting for eight hundred years for this. We don't need to continue to protract it.”

“You are very impatient for someone who isn't mortal.”

I considered shanking him right then and there. Only that that would not get me to my goal stayed my hand. Instead I waited and stared at him, tapping my foot.

“Sun-Child, the ancient contracts that bind us together ordain that I may not give you this information without providing you such warnings as I am able. You must cross the known world and into the deep wyld beyond. There nature is not constrained or bound to a form. Beyond that lie-”

“The point!” I interrupted. Salation and her mother were at home, alone. I was here, which meant I was not watching them.

“Are you familiar with the Reprieve?”

“Very.”

“Then you know they took a Whispering Windchime with them. It extended the range of the Terrestrial Exalted's Wind Carried Words Technique a hundredfold. Unfortunately, it was still wasn't enough to reach the far land of Aphor. Thus they left it at Mugada, the midway point on their travels.”

“I didn't know that,” I admitted.

“Then you don't know that Ho-Tep, God of Lost Artifacts, knows that in Mugada it resides still. And it is still bound to its mate, a windchime that the leader of the expedition brought with him. They were deep into the land that now lies within the wyld before they found Aphor, but by then their route was cut off. The garrison at Mugada was overrun by the fae and slaughtered to a man, but not before they activated their final protocol and released a tide of iron upon the fort. It drove the fair folk out and killed any who returned. Now Mugada lies alone, desolate, but immune to the touches of the wyld on the very edge of Creation.”

“What makes you think that it will still work?”

“It was made in either the early years of the Shogunate or during the high First Age. Their mastery of artificing has never been exceeded or equaled. Since then it's been safe in Mugada, where no living thing can touch it,” the god replied.

I thought back to the pages I'd read earlier. Mugada had been a way point, north of present day Halta. It was possible, though not certain, that that place would still remain intact. If it did still exist and I could find it, then the Whispering Windchime might still exist as well. I was certain that if I could put my hands on it, I could devise some way of following it to its mate. The prospect before me was traversing Lookshy to Mugada, several thousand miles, and that was only halfway. The trip could easily take me years. Yet I had given my word.

“All right,” I said quietly. “I'll do it. I have things to wrap up. Return to Yu Shan, and learn whatever else you can on this affair. Settling things here should not take more than a few weeks.”

“What happened to your impatience, Sun-Child?” asked the god. “Moments before you rebelled at a moment's pause, now you tell me you won't even leave for weeks?”

I reached forward, grabbed the god by the beard and yanked him to me. His body followed his beard, but there was nothing below his waist by an amorphous tendril of water that flowed to the fountain. “Do not taunt me, small god. I will do this thing. It would be best for you to be filled with gratitude.” I hissed, letting his form dangle from my fist.

“Impudence!” he snarled and vanished. At once he was both invisible and immaterial.

I was, however, a sorcerer. My other hand darted forward, snagged his intangible presence, and yanked, dragging him suddenly and violently back to the material world. Now he hung startled from my grip, shedding droplets of water as his power ablated off in my presence.

“Do not start, small god,” I hissed again. “You are old and weak. No one in Yu Shan will care if your miserable existence ends here, and the other small gods of the field will delight that they no longer share your feast day's worship with you.”

He tried to pull away, but I refused to let him. Now the old being had real fear, for now he realized how little he'd had before and how dear even that had become to him.

“Peace, peace, Sun-Child. Let us be allies. I dearly want you to succeed on this quest,” he pleaded with me.

“That is wise,” I agreed and released him. At once I regretted my temper. He was an old and weak god, as I said, but deserved respect. Yet now I was committed to leaving Lookshy. I was leaving the streets, the parks, and a southern clockmaker and her shop. “Just go. See if you can find a way to get me to Mugada quickly. I'll contact you when I'm ready to leave.”

Without watching him vanish I turned and left. The loneliness of the silent Plaza of Voices Raised in Song struck me as it had not done so before. I walked between silent houses, doors locked and windows shuttered, on empty streets until I was once again on Weft street. Her house was dark. No candlelight shone through the upstairs windows. I sighed deeply, and sank down on the stairs that lead

to her porch. Playing with rocks by the road was pointless, but took my mind off things.

“Stranger, didn't I tell you-” began the big man. Did he have nothing to do but sit outside his house and growl? I didn't care. Taking a pebble I launched it with my thumb into his flapping mouth. It bounced off his tongue and dropped down his throat, lodging itself in his airway. Instantly he stopped talking.

I stared at my fingers while he gurgled and tottered around. Finally I relented and strode over. He was on his knees, turning blue, and clutching his throat. A firm punch to his chest knocked the stone flying, and he lay gasping for air.

“Listen carefully. I understand you mean the best, and I appreciate that. But I am not your enemy, and mean no harm to the lady clockmaker. Now leave me alone and go away. Do you understand me?”

He was still gasping when he choked out an affirmative. I grabbed his hand, shook it firmly, and let the bronze mark on my forehead flash to seal the deal. He didn't notice because he was still on his hands and knees, gasping on the ground. By the time he looked up I'd released him and reverted to normal. At some level he knew, though. When the big man could walk he got up and left, and I walked back to stare at Salation's door.

A few moments of blank minded stillness later, it opened and she stood before me, dressed in a loose blue robe. I looked up at her mutely.

“Would you like to come in?” she asked.

“Very much,” I admitted.

She stepped aside until she wasn't blocking the entrance way. I sighed like I was confronting my executioner at his block and trudged up.

Once I was inside she shut the door behind me and ran the bolt. I stared around her dark hallway, into the still workshop, and finally at her. The robe was loose and formless, concealing the curves of her body. Her shoulders rose out of it like cresting waves, as did the swell of her breasts and hips. Once the bolt was shot she turned to face me, expectantly.

Without really considering my actions, I reached out and embraced her. Unconsciously I sought her lips, and kissed her while I hugged the swell of her back. Once her body pressed mine the concealing property of the robe vanished, and the only thing that separated us was thin cotton. I held her for a very long time, stroking her lips with my tongue, and teasing hers. Finally I pulled away but did not let her go. She met my gaze levelly, before sinking her forehead into the side of my neck.

“I was beginning to wonder,” she admitted.

“Don't. It's never been in question,” I assured her.

“Good. I don't like inviting strange men into my house at night if it is.”

I picked her up and leaned backwards, that her body fell against mine while I held her. Her hair fell around my face. It smelled strangely of strawberries.

“Would you like to come to bed?” she asked into the side of my neck.

I had so many things I wanted to say none of them came out. My jaw worked for a bit meaningless.

“We can talk in the morning, you know,” she told me.

I gave up on talking or thinking. After that I carried her upstairs, until she pointed me through a doorway to a small bedroom. It was smaller than the workshop downstairs. The sheets had been thrown back, and the small central depression was still warm. I laid her on the center of it and pulled off her robe.

In the darkness her skin was the color of mahogany wood. She tasted like girl, that subtle mixture of skin, sweat, and sweetness that's inherently feminine. I kissed her until she managed to pull my clothing off and then entered her softly. Pinned underneath my weight, she held on until she clawed my back and I lost my mind. Then we lay still until we did it again.