

That morning I heard a very strange rumor. A corsair's hull had washed up on the beach not far south of Lookshy. Everyone aboard was dead. No one knew anything about the craft, but the name might have been 'the Killer Wave.' It had been spotted from a merchantman that morning, and a patrol was going to investigate tomorrow.

Without missing a beat I rose, dropped the cost of my meal on the table, and walked out the small tavern's door onto one of Lookshy's cobbled roads. Soon that road led me to another, and then I approached one of the main gateways under the vast walls that encircled much of Lookshy. It looked clear, without nearly the lines and crowds that collected on the far side. Lookshy didn't care much who left but was terribly interested in who came in. I entered the flow of people and departed.

Outside Lookshy proper was Lookshy lesser. This was where much of the real business of the city that wasn't military related took place. Wild grass grew untroubled in a circle around the city, reaching out exactly one thousand yards from the walls. In this desolate area there were no tents nor shanties, and people were not allowed to stop on the roads. Only the clustering lines seeking admission had permission to loiter within the killing zone.

Beyond that, starting sharply at the end of the desolate zone, the outer city burst from the ground like a tsunami. Tents were piled atop sod houses in nodes around market squares where everything made under the sun's eye could be found. Anything neglected could be found in one of the sod huts, where the acrid smoke of southern drugs mixed with the herbal odor of marijuana. Soldiers stomped around, hassling the peasantry, while unarmored police equipped with batons and nunchaku tried to keep order. The outer city ran unobstructed to the Meander river north, and east until it hit the plains. Here was done the business that didn't require the complications of entering the city walls. That which was legal was done openly, and frequently involved transactions between middle men. Wood from the far north changed hands to travel further south in return for the contents of spice caravans. Beyond them all flowed the vast Meander, miles wide at this point. Nearing the end of autumn, the river was at its lowest level of the year, but the central channel was deep enough for the greatest of deep water frigates to pass without a problem.

The river itself was as riotously active as the grounds. Lookshy's river port was full of wooden masts, flying pennons of the great Gens. There was a forest of flags. Below them occasionally one could catch a glimpse of the low, metal decking of old First Age warships, built of steel and jade. They had a menace all their own, cleverly concealed beneath smooth flowing decking that passed under the surface of the water like turtle shells. Outside the naval port was the civilian port where no rhyme nor reason dictated the appearances of the merchant men. Much of cargo that was sold in the wild bazaar never actually left the port, and only rights and money changed hands.

Outside the port lay the dredged channels to the deep parts of the river. Even more craft passed by heading upriver than stopped. The bridges over the Meander were vast, and towered over the reaching masts that passed beneath. More than once Lookshy had entertained the idea of taxing the river traffic. The powerhouse cities of Nexus, Sijan, Greyfalls, Great Falls, and even the warring nations of Halta and Linowan had risen up as one to counter that action. The Guild had boycotted the city en masse for a week, while the lesser nations rushed to the banner of the Realm. The Realm had sent warships from the Blessed Isle who parked just outside Lookshy's territory. They were low, sinister warships from the old world, and lurked mostly underwater, barely rising high enough to impinge on the natural movement of the waves. Invariably Lookshy retreated from the idea, and commerce returned to normal. The city fathers were forced to console themselves with the taxes from customs men, food and supplies for the cargo craft, a share of every sale that entered or left the city, and a thousand other slight tithes

that supported them in luxury.

I made my way west, towards the sea. The Meander went almost due west from the high eastern mountains, but right before it hit the sea ran north around a massive pile of granite. At that point was the true castle of Lookshy, and the city proper nestled in its shadow. I went south, away from the river, and came to a horse market.

Now another thing that doesn't impinge on my distrust of mental powers is analysis. I bear no moral dilemmas about discerning the truth of a sales pitch with lesser charms. The dividing line is clearly drawn if thin though. Only powers that reveal truth are acceptable. Such means that compel someone to only speak the truth I consider strictly forbidden. It's probably a hair-splitting distinction, but I stick to it.

It didn't take me long to find a crooked horse dealer, and enter into negotiations for a stolen mount. The man attempted to con me outrageously. After I deflected his every lie and bit of treachery, he offered to make a wager for the horse. Earlier that morning I'd waylaid a particularly successful young hoodlum, and had divested him of his ill gotten gains as I sorcerously encouraged him to depart his life of crime. I laid the loot against the horse and cheated better than the merchant could. Soon I led the beast away.

The beast was a well trained racehorse. I had gotten it cheap because it had broken a foreleg some time ago and could now neither race nor draw a plow. I walked it around a corner and in a sheltered spot looked at the injury. The bone had partially healed but done so crookedly. This wasn't going to be subtle at all. I mounted back up, and rode the old animal at a crawling pace until I was several miles from the press of people. Along the way I collected several stray plants, the leaves and berries from several trees, and dropped them all into empty bottle of gin I found discarded in a ditch. Then I dismounted, led it into a copse of trees and explained to the animal what I was going to do.

Not that it understood me, of course. But it got to know my voice, and that was more important. The dregs of the gin had saturated the foliage within, and now the bottle had two fingers of a black, noxious smelling mixture. I shook that up good and firmly, set it beside me, and then let the horse take a deep sniff. It at once settled into placidity. After that I crouched by the foreleg and lifted it into my lap. This confused the gelding, but it was too doped to protest. No one was looking, so I drew my sword and surgically broke the horse's leg with the butt. It didn't even whimper. I reset the leg, poured the toxic smelling concoction over the break, and hit it with some raw power to get the processes going. A few minutes later I rode my healthy, if tranquilized, race horse away and headed for the coast.

While the area was less densely populated than Lookshy, rarely was there a point between the river and the coast where one couldn't see a house. The fields on either side were well tended and organized in plots. Orchards interspersed cornfields, punctuated by the occasional cow's pasture. I set the beast's head towards the ocean and urged it up to speed. Then I encouraged it to go faster. It hit a ground eating gallop. I put my heels to it until it was dashing along, racing like it had on the ovals of its memory. With proper persuasion a racehorse will run itself exhausted at top speed without ever slacking. I just didn't let it get exhausted.

It was noon by now. In six hours the sun would be setting, and I intended to get back into the city by then. The gelding bore me across hill and dale like the wind, until we came to the edge of the ocean. Here steep hills ran down to the sea. The beach was black sand and narrow. I picked a way between the dunes to the thin deserted strand, and headed south.

Not far south of Lookshy the houses suddenly stopped. Trees grew wild and black. Their green foliage turned dark, like they were covered with an oily residue. I rode up from the coast to the line of ridges, and stared eastward. The blight spread out from the sea a few miles, beyond which it suddenly turned darker. Even in the early afternoon it was dark as deepening twilight. I considered the sea, and the shadowed land beyond.

Shadowlands were far from uncommon. If too many people died in suffering or torment, the mass of dying souls might strain the underlying foundations of Creation. The fabric of reality stretched and lost coherence. Then large areas could touch the Underworld. From thence could issue all manner of strange beasts, unnatural creatures, and deliberately malformed creations of the necromancy behind their undead masters. I had never heard of this one, nor anticipated to find it so close to the sea. The touch of salt was corrosive to the dead. The ocean breezes would carry salt water, and that meant the shadowland would be quickly eroded. Yet there it stood, almost abutting the ocean, and grim as night.

Taking careful note of this, I turned my steed back around and resumed racing south. For a while I hoped that this strange shadowland would fade before I found the dead ship I believed would be the Orca's Wave but such was not my luck.

When I found it, there was little doubt of its origins. Underneath the gloom of the dark trees, the brilliant orange stains on the hull looked diseased, garish, and unwholesome. They were undeniably left by the thriving corruption that fed on Lookshy's wastes in that tiny harbor. When I approached I could see that the bow did not bear a name. Yet a tattered flag hung in the sand, and it was blazoned with a killer whale rushing through a cresting wave. I dismounted and approached.

The ship had been driven far up the bank. It must have breached at a high tide. Laying on its side and tumbled over so masts pointed at the clouds on the horizon, the spars nearly touched the sand. Several low dunes rose over the level of the deck, and I crept aboard very cautiously.

Bodies lay everywhere. They'd been dead for a few days, and no one had tended to them. They must have died at sea, and the untended ship would have run aground before morning winds that raced shoreward. Most died from cuts about the head and shoulders, and small impaling wounds that went mostly down. The injuries were bloated with putrescence. There were some of my kind who could release the dead with a touch, incinerating the corpses so the spirit would be forced on to Lethe. Unfortunately, I couldn't. Under the eaves of a shadowland I crept about the pirate vessel.

There was a panicked whinny, and the sound of retreating hoofbeats. I poked my head over the side to see the ungrateful racehorse fleeing madly the way we'd come.

"Thanks," I muttered and went back to inspecting the crew.

Most of them were men. They were big men, huge and muscular. Even the bloating of death couldn't have made them look this big alone. I went up to the pilot's deck and poked around. Here were dead women, somewhat more richly dressed. There were four or five of them, but it was hard to tell. The cause of death was different, though. One had been cut down, but the others had been eaten. Their forms were devoured to the bones by small predators, vermin of some sort, certainly no larger than rats. Only hair and clothing remained from outside the body. The eaten ones were simply skeletons, lying in jumbles against the railing. I stared at them, then examined the mound carefully.

They were jammed amongst each other, and I figured parts were missing from each corpse. They had died and been stripped of flesh before the ship had crashed. Probably several days had transpired at sea before the ghost ship had been driven to the coast. There was an eerie implication that the shadowland had called these recent dead to it. I glanced below deck, but saw and smelled nothing alive.

That the crew had been cut down by a mounted man with a saber was certain. That the captain, mate, and whoever else had been on the steerage had been picked apart, likely by swarming insects was also very likely. In addition it had happened at sea. One of the ship's boats was gone. Rowing to shore would have been unlikely, but not impossible. Rowing to shore with a horse, much less a great warhorse, was madness. The boat would have capsized before it had gone a mile.

I left the ship, and considered the sinking sun, coming down from the pinnacle of the sky. This was a time for fire.

Lacking oil, dry wood, or any other suitable element, I took myself a dozen yards up the beach and looked around carefully. Nothing moved except the wind and waves. I reached up to the heavens and called down the Light of Solar Cleansing.

Forsaking subtly in favor of being thorough, I opened the heavens until a beam of sunlight like balefire shrieked down into the hulk, smashing the wooden beams to splinters. Waves of immolation swept outwards from the point of impact, glassing the black sand, obliterating any trace of the dead pirates. Their bodies were consumed with the vessel. From the epicenter waves of burning light swept over me like a tide. They burned the oily residue from the trees, restoring them to verdant green. A white arc flashed out into the forest, filling the dark shadows with sunlight, and then a great wind from the sea roared into the stillness. Salt spray stung my face. It tasted pure, somewhat like tears, but uncorrupted.

After a moment later the beach was still. The glassed sand crumbled into white fragments, and the hills no longer had a grim aspect. Yet the sunlight was weak. It was wan and had little power. The spell took much of the sun's intensity here, which would not be replenished until dawn. It had also taken much of the strength from me. I tottered uphill and sank down.

Tired I whistled for the racehorse. It was out of sight, but my call sidled across the winds after it. It would come, sooner or later, or else I was going to be really unhappy. Then I drew my blade and waited, watching the dim forest beyond the coast.

I'd forgotten how much I glowed when I did that. As I sat on the sand at rest, I noticed that my skin was burning with an interior luminescence. Without a mirror to see I knew more forehead was blazing with the sigil of the eclipse, a ringed dot. Mine usually shone with an incandescent bronze light. It was the badge of my power that naturally emerged in the wake of sorcery. It was also terribly inconvenient, given the Immaculate Order's opinions on my kind, and prevented me from using my power most of the time. Only here, on this desolate swath of coast, could I use it with little fear of repercussion. Unfortunately that fear quickly proved justified.

Hooves crunched the crumbling glass. Thinking my errant horse had returned at my call, I turned and rose, only to find myself staring at a gloomy figure, outlined poorly against the bleak setting of the shadow-shrouded coast. It was the cavalryman on his black warhorse. In the strained light of the sun he seemed more potent than before, as if shadow was more his natural environment than night. The night was a natural time, where as shade was an exception to the law of the sun's brightness. The horseman was more powerful in such a refutation.

My blade rested easily in my bare hand as his did in his leather gloves. His head towered above me, and the well trained mount moved idly with the energy that comes before a fight. I felt a brief pang of sadness for the horse, for it looked like a natural animal. Beguiled as it was under the rider, however, it was a weapon, and an incredibly deadly one at that. It magnified his strength and speed while providing him perpetually advantageous terrain. The cavalry of Lookshy train their horses to bite and kick independently, and cover their rider's sides and back as best they could. If we came to blows the first thing I had to do was kill his horse. I felt bad, but there was no help for it.

“Come here, darkling. We have much to discuss, but little need of words,” I invited him. The summit of my sand dune was narrow. It provided some slight mitigating advantage against his mount.

The officer smiled at me. He was well dressed in a neat uniform, well pressed with insignia of rank on the collar. His jacket was blue and his pants were green, no doubt purporting his house allegiance, but I didn't know Lookshy's heraldry well enough to read it. He didn't have spurs, nor did the flanks of the warhorse bear spur marks.

“Speak, dark one, or come within range,” I ordered him again. He'd spoken to Salation. I knew his disembowelment at my hands hadn't eliminated that capacity from him.

Instead he grinned at me, and his big stallion sidestepped around my dune summit. I blinked, impressed. That required a lot of training. He circled me slowly, one complete revolution, until suddenly he began to back up down the hill. The stallion made grunting noises, complaints as the rider urged it backpedal. It walked on deep sand, though, and there was nothing to catch a hoof. Slowly, it began to retreat down the dune away from me.

Suddenly I flicked my glance right and left, up and down, behind the horseman and behind me. His countenance was cruelly gloating, and I suspected he was setting me up for an ambush. Yet nothing seemed overtly threatening but him, and he continued to retreat. I strained to listen, for fear he had some invisible accomplice, which all I heart was the quick, excited beating of my own heart, and the deeper pulse of the warhorses. Wind and waves thudded against the sand. The cavalryman had neither heartbeat nor breath. I pushed my hearing until the crash of waves was a cacophony, and still the woods remained silent.

The silent rider paused. He was some distance away, down on the flat part of the beach where tides routinely washed the beach flat. With dignity he raised his saber in salute, before he turned and put his heels to the stallion. At once it sprinted away to the north. Baffled I stared at him, then looked beyond to see if he was riding to meet up with reinforcements. There was nothing but the walls of Lookshy in the distance.

He might have intended to lure me off my slightly useful high ground onto the flat sand where his steed would provide him with the greatest use. If so, he succeeded. I dashed off the dune and hit the sand, bounding after him, whistling madly for that skittish racehorse. I cut directly towards the ocean, trying to get to the flat ground, when the sand underneath my foot gave way and I tumbled hip deep into a hole. Impacting the side knocked the wind out of my, and my blade flew a dozen feet to jam blade first into a dune. Sand all around me was collapsing inwards, but between the black sand were little bits of orange and red. I thought for a moment of the algae that coated the sides of the pirate vessel. Then I thought of southern elephant ants, ants that could grow an inch long, covered in multicolored hair to blend in to the savana. They hunted in hordes and could take down a leopard if they could get the

element of surprise. Their prey they stripped to the bone, leaving only teeth and hair. I was in a pit up to my waist filled with moving sand up to my knees, and the sand was crawling into my clothes.

I shrieked and hurled myself up. Sand tumbled from me in all directions, revealing the myriad insect bodies as they bit their way through my pants to my skin. The huge bugs went through leather like butter, ravaging my boots, and the first of them latched its proportionately vast jaws onto my skin when I tumbled down on the sand.

My legs caught fire with pain. I rolled and ground my skin into the sand. Those still burrowing through my clothing were ripped off, but only a few of the ones that had their mandibles into my flesh were torn away, and they took whatever part of me they had bitten with them. I flailed and rolled, and saw that the sand was growing dark, like from a spreading oil spill, as waves of the creatures poured out of the sand. Around my dune a moat was collapsing. They had dug a pit all the way round, save for the path the horseman had used to come and go, and concealed it with black sand and their bodies. Now they swarmed out of the earth like a great living tide.

What was worse was their bites had a venom in them, and I could feel my muscles locking up. My legs were on fire, but flexed rigid, unwilling to bend. I couldn't get up and run, nor perform another vast leap. The tide of insects closed in.

I rolled into the sea. The first waves crashed over me, dumping salt water into the open excoriating wounds on my legs, and twisted me around. Vermin kept biting me, trying to burrow into my flesh. I got my head around and went face first into the next wave. That didn't push me nearly as far, and I paddled with the retreating water. Another wave hit me, and I got a little further to sea. When a final one crested over my head I sucked in a lung full of air, and plunged underneath. It tore me out past the beach, and over a steep drop off in the shore led to deeper, colder water. I went down.

It was dark down there. The current tumbled me around, spinning me until I had no idea which way was up. Nor did I pay attention. I ripped ant after ant from me, crunching them between my fingers. The little monsters were huge, some the size of my thumb, with jaws a third the size of their bodies. If I crushed them they left their mandibles in my skin. If I ripped them out, they took big chunks of me with them. Soon the tumbling currents spun me in a red haze of my own blood.

That's when the sharks came. Water rippled against my skin, portending something big was coming, and I thrashed aside. A huge, pointed head darted through the water where I had been, mouth agape with rows of teeth. I convulsed to get out of the way and the mouth followed me. As it darted in at my legs, seeking the sieve-like holes in my skin where blood poured around insects into the water, I jammed my hand into its wide gills to hold the head away. It thrashed around me, stirring the water to boil, and another lunged in behind me.

Thrown about as I was my back darted down when the thing was going up, and I hit it on the nose. Its skin was like sandpaper, excoriating flesh, and it twisted. Moving to quickly to turn I got a glimpse of it as it came through the dark red stained water. Sharks have dead eyes. This one looked bright and cunning, flicking its black pupils around seekingly. Noting it hadn't shut them protectively in the moment of attack, I tried to gouge it with a thumb, but it was already past. In the turbulence there was no prior warning when the next set of jaws sank closed on my shoulder.

If I hadn't had to conserve air, I would have screamed. Instead I released the gills of the one and reached up. The shark skin was smooth as my fingers flicked back, in the direction water flowed

around it, and finally I touched the cold, hard orbs of its eyes. At once it tried to blink for protection as I got my fingers in there as the pupils rolled back, away from the vulnerable area. That was a bit too late. Seizing it by the optic nerves, I yanked both its eyes out. It shook in pain, flailing me around in the water, and more of them appeared from the mists to bite at my legs.

Mad with either the effects of the power that dominated them or the simple hunting instincts, the ants were still burrowing into me. Running low on tricks and already drained of magic from the invocation the Light of Solar Cleansing, I was also almost out of breath. The shark had a tight grip on my shoulder, and its teeth were grating on my bones as it thrashed madly. It was flailing madly, not releasing its bite but swimming like it was trying to flee. It was acting on pure instinct, and briefly the cognitive dominance of whatever had filled it with the cruel cunning was gone. That meant it was swimming with dorsal fin pointing up. I flexed my black, swinging my rigid legs down, and that pushed the animal towards upwards as well. The fleet swimming predator pulled out of the rolling mire of blood and headed upwards. Some of the others stayed there, where the blood was still thick. The school was almost on the point of a frenzy. Other chased me and headed to the waves.

I slapped its nose, using a flicker of power to confuse its direction, and it breached the surface as I sucked greedily at air. For a moment the shark got halfway out of the water, flailing in primitive confusion at the lack of forward progress. Now I could see that it was a blue, somewhat more than ten feet long, and bleeding profusely from the eyes sockets. While we were in the air I held out my hand and screamed "To me!" Calling a blade is a simple trick. Agate came to my palm like a loyal dog.

We hit the water and I chopped the thing's jaw off, completely severing it. Instantly it's frenzied swimming pushed it past me. Some of the triangular teeth slipped neatly out, and some got caught in my flesh. But the beast was gone, and it flailed towards it's mates, chasing the scent of blood. They consumed it utterly, and I had a few seconds.

Now that I had air, a few more of my tricks became available. I caught a bit of foam, residue from the breaking waves, and heaved myself out of the water onto it. The bubbles bent with my weight but held. Suddenly I was completely free of the water. The breakers rushed around me, slamming into me and twirling me while rivulets of my blood pours onto the ocean around me. It confused and baffled the sharks below. They chased me in all directions, biting everything they could, and soon the horde was consumed with cannibalism. I gripped my blade and unleashed it on the ants.

"Death of a thousand spirits!" I screamed and blazed with essence. There was no further point in being subtle. The display of power raced over the sea, further confusing the senses of the sharks. Had they not been frenzied their guiding evil would have lead them directly to me, but now it just filled them with the desire to bite anything nearby. I unleashed a dozen strokes at the burrowing beasts. Few had gotten more than their heads into my flesh, leaving them obvious and vulnerable.

Like the blue sharks, they were controlled by some sentient evil. It was like a ghost, only more powerful and more mad. Yet it was limited by the individual power of each form it controlled, and each one I killed let loose a bit of power I consumed. They fed on me, and I on them. Each bit of strength powered me to attack again and again, until I'd eradicated the horde that had tried to consume me.

Still I was in the grip of the waves, and they pushed me back towards shore. Furious at the deaths of their fellows, the swarm I had evaded before now paced me on the beach, waiting for the tides to bring me in. Underneath the waves the spirit that controlled the frenzied school was trying to reassert its dominance. I did not have much more safety on the surface of the sea. I took a desperate look around to

see where the cavalryman was. He was less than a mile up the beach, heading towards Lookshy at a canter. But my horse was coming, bashfully, from the hills. It looked embarrassed to have fled earlier. I felt savage joy.

I whistled like hell. The piercing note was like a lightning bolt through the equine brain, and it flung itself down the beach towards the waves. The ants paid no attention to it until it charged through their midst, but then there was nothing for them to bite but iron shoe. Almost at once it was past, racing knee deep in water. As the swarm tried to follow the breaking waves tumbled their tiny forms around, and they were forced to retreat.

A sharp nosed blue, insane with blood scent, lunged out of the water to my rear. I smacked it with the flat of my blade and pushed. The bier of sea foam underneath me skittered away across the water. As the school came under control of its guiding evil more and more lunged out of the water after me, and I beat them away with fist and steel. Now I was pulled along by the waves as well, thrown towards the shore. The racehorse matched my pace on the beach. I had not the grip on it to compel it into the water, nor would I have with the feeding frenzy in progress, but it could follow me along the shore. A blue managed to get through my guard and sink its teeth into my leg. Furious I ripped the animal from the water and decapitated it. The body I threw seaward and the recoil pushed me into the grip of the breakers. I was driven to shore.

On the crest of a wave I snagged the saddlebow. A couple good slaps got it sprinting up out of the water, and it left the immense swarm of unnatural ants behind, even as they scuttled across the sand in pursuit. Dragging myself upright I got into the saddle and took the reins. Binding my legs to the stirrups ensured I would remain seated, and then I set out in pursuit of my enemy.

He was less than a dozen feet ahead of me before he heard my approach. My dashing racehorse overtook his canting strider like he was standing still, and he barely ducked underneath my lashing stroke. That finally knocked the self satisfied grin from his face. He stared at me like he refused to believe I still lived. The warhorse reacted fluidly, however, going into a charge as its rider whipped his saber free. My mount dashed past his and I took a wide, looping curve to come back to him on the flat sands. We were each fighting right handed, and so directed our horses to pass each other on that side. My left shoulder was the injured one, and that arm could do little but hold the reins to reassure the skittish racehorse

His great stallion set itself. There was a moment where we were committed to our paths that even my nimble racer and his better trained destrider could not turn in time to avoid giving the other an advantage. In that moment I hurled my blade point first into his stallion's head. It passed through the skull almost without resistance until the hand guard slammed into the horse's skull. Instantly the beast stumbled and pitched forward. A gesture called it soaring back to my hand and into a vast circular stroke at my tumbling enemy.

He was good. Even from the crumpling charger he rolled to his feat and parried my stroke. Unfortunately for him my indestructible blade had yielded a few uniquenesses to my fencing style. Among them I had no need to protecting my edge. My blade met his, edge to edge, just above the pommel, and the dashing speed and power of the gelding underneath me did more to drag my weapon across his blade than my tired arms. Roughly halfway through the stroke I sheared through his whip-like saber and then his forearm behind. His hand, still clutching the broken sword, tumbled to the sand.

I dashed past and reined in. The gelding reared, and spun almost entirely on its hind legs, coming back

down so I was facing my enemy. He was staring at his stump in shock. A sudden amputation has that effect on people. Like the chest wound, it had already stopped bleeding, and now ended in a puckered white bump.

“Now, creature of darkness, who are you?” I bellowed.

Shaken from his daze, he looked up at me. With that he sneered. Yet he said nothing.

“I know you can talk, you did so to Salation when you showed yourself that you might threaten her in her home,” I told him. “Cease this taciturn obstinacy, and explain yourself.”

He looked at me then with gloating in his eyes. With his good arm he tore away his jacket, and displayed the scar across his chest. After that he dumped out his pockets, showing me nothing but lint, and gestured to the dead warhorse's sides. I stared at him confused, before noting the saddlebags had been removed. The one armed man looked back at me, as if that had some fell import.

“Write it in the sand, then!” I snapped.

Silently he grabbed his own wrist, and without removing the blade from his severed hand wrote 'clock?' in the black sand.

He didn't have the clock. He also couldn't speak.

“That wasn't you?” I demanded.

He nodded, grinning widely. I spent a bit of my waning strength to tell truth from lies. There was nothing there but sadistic glee and honesty. Furious I charged him, beat through his hastily razed guard, and cut his body in half from crown to hip. As I bisected him the edges of his flesh caught fire like kindling. To be sure I glared at him until his body was a tiny pile of smoldering ash. That gave me enough time to cut my vest apart and bandage the innumerable small holes in my legs. Now I wore a shirt, improvised shorts, and stood barefoot. I had sharkbite marks on my shoulder and legs. The ant heads I left in because their death rictus had locked the jaws shut. That helped me stop the bleeding. After that I darted off towards Lookshy. It really was a pity about the horse though.