

My horse, which along the way I took to calling Wimp, didn't like the smell of blood coming from me. Most of it had off in the ocean, but I didn't have the time to really clean up. Now I was constantly urging Wimp to stay straight. Only when his racing gait outpaced the wind did he stop nickering unhappily at me. He did like to run.

I made directly for the nearest of the city gates, and passed through the encircling lesser city without pause. Only when I was in the killing field did I look carefully at the pathway ahead of me to notice that there were more soldiers at the great gatehouse than I had seen before. Suspiciously they were dressed in white and blue. In addition they were comparing the faces of everyone who entered or exited the city against a poster.

It had taken them nearly two weeks to put my face on a wanted poster for breaking into House Haid. Now, after two weeks, when I could have left the city at any time, they were checking all people entering or leaving. That infuriated me even as I dispassionately attributed it to military efficiency. Lookshy was a military city, home of the Seventh Legion, with all the good and bad that came with that. The worst part was that as ineffective as it should have been, the method was going to work. I couldn't very well turn around and ride back the way I'd come now. My bizarre appearance would attract close scrutiny as it was.

*Rush the Falling Water!* I prayed silently but with great insistence. *I'm at the Lion's Paw Gate on the south side of the city. I need to get through, and I'll need a miracle to make it. Do something useful!*

By the time I'd gotten that prayer out I was halfway there. The soldiers were waving at me to slow down, and so I did, dragging back on the reins until Wimp came to a walk. We approached the gate slowly, and headed for the express lane. I still had my bag of ill gotten gains from the morning. At a slow walk I could see that there were ten guards total, twice as many as had been here in the morning. My change in outward appearances should protect me from a cursory inspection, but when I got within the gatehouse itself it probably couldn't provide me more than a moment's anonymity. Not unless they were far more lax in their duties than I'd seen the soldier's of Lookshy before.

At two hundred yards one of the men watching the longer 'free line' suddenly broke from his post and ran around the arching front of the gatehouse. From my point some distance away I saw him make it to the moat in a slightly secluded point before dropping his trousers and voiding his bowels. Glancing back to the gatehouse, two more guards suddenly followed him. They scattered to different points.

When I was a hundred yards away, a second rash of illnesses swept through the crowds. It seemed one of them had not made it away from his duty point before suffering the sudden onset of illness. In reaction to the stench half other soldiers and a dozen people of the crowd were suddenly violently ill. The crowd involuntarily retreated fifty yards, and hands went to noses.

“Messenger!” I declared, as I passed the safety line and entered the area dominated by the smells of the gatehouse. People were boiling out the stairways in the back, fleeing into the city, as a miasma of sickness spread through the guards. Soon no one remained healthy, and the one soldier who kept to his post looked green as paint. His eyes were tearing against the revolting stench, and I must have seemed a wraith in the mist. I tossed him a dozen coins and rode past. He never compared me to the picture. I caught a glimpse of it from the corner of one eye. It wasn't a bad likeness. My list of crimes included theft, arson, assault, and vandalism, all of which I considered reasonable, but also breaking and entering, and blasphemy. I certainly hadn't broken in to the Haid estate the one time I expected them to know about, and hadn't performed blasphemy at all as best I knew. Had I not been holding my breath

and nose I would have sniffed disdainfully. Instead I rode past and into the city proper.

*Thank you, oh wise, capable, and helpful Rush the Falling Water, god of beans. I added silently. May a thousand blessings be upon you, and our ventures to regain you worshipers bring success as well as bring fame to your name.* Then, after a moment's consideration I added, *I'm impressed, by the way. Well done.*

Once I was past them I rode quickly through the city to the clockshop, pausing only to buy a cloak to conceal my injuries. Salation was unharmed, working in the window as she assembled some piece of artifice with painstaking care. She glanced up when I tethered Wimp out front.

“Hello. When did you get that?” she asked, confused as I entered her door. With her head she gestured to my mount.

“Earlier today. Are you all right?”

“I'm fine. Earlier today?” she asked in such a way to imply I should clarify.

“I told you. I'm the Bloody Baron of Black Cliff. I've come for your women and your horses, but you said I could only have one. So I bought my own horse, and now I've come for you.”

She eyed me suspiciously. “I've also heard you were a horse thief.”

“I am. It's what I steal while I'm kidnapping the women. Weren't you listening?”

She growled at me again. Putting aside the piece she'd been working on she walked past me to consider the lean racer. “He looks very nice,” she concluded, staying a bit back. She looked very nervous. “He isn't actually stolen, is he?”

“I acquired him legitimately,” I assured her. Technically, I'd won him in a crooked dice game. “Sort of,” I appended to tame my conscience. “I won him in a dice game.”

“Did you cheat?” she asked pointedly.

*Yes.* “Well,” I replied, carefully. “Let's say I was in a dice game and someone else was using loaded dice. Now it's against the rules to swap dice, but his dice were crooked. Is swapping the dice cheating?” I asked hypothetically.

“Were your dice loaded too?” she asked, still pointedly.

*Yes.* “But supposing, and this is all supposing mind you, that he had loaded is dice first?”

“Did you use loaded dice?” she insisted on the previous question.

“We're not talking about me,” I reminded her. “This is a hypothetical question.”

“Red, you stole the horse,” she concluded with a sigh.

“We're not talking about me!” I repeated, waving my hands.

“Listen to me very carefully,” she said as she turned from the horse to face me. She reached up and placed her long arms on my shoulders and took a firm hold of me. For a moment she kneaded my back. “Get rid of it, right now. You are not allowed into my house with that animal tethered out front.”

“They weren't even my dice!” I argued. “I stole them from him! He had two sets of loaded dice. All I did was switch his sets of loaded dice.”

“Did you win the horse in a crooked dice game?” she said again, very slowly.

“Yes.”

“Did you win using loaded dice?”

“Yes.”

“Get rid of the damn horse.”

“But I didn't cheat first!” I protested again.

“Red, I'm going upstairs to eat dinner with my mother. Then I'm going to bed, and then I'm having sex. If you intend to be present for any of that, you'll get rid of your stolen horse.” With an air of finality she turned and returned to her house, slamming the door in my face.

“They weren't even my dice!” I yelled through her open window. She shut it on me, firmly.

Muttering to myself I turned back to Wimp and walked him off. I decided I never should have said I acquired him legitimately. I should have simply pointed out that I hadn't stolen him.

Not much later I learned that Rock, my usual fence, didn't deal in horseflesh. He had a cohort who did, however. I went to him and negotiated the sale as quickly as possible. After I was done I stopped by a chapel to the Hundred Gods. Technically Lookshy was an Immaculate Faith city, but only a few gens like the Maheka really cared. Either way anyplace as cosmopolitan as it was and as centrally located would have some influence from the other prominent religions. Besides, the Realm was an Immaculate Faith nation, and as I've mentioned, the people of Lookshy had opinions about the Realm. Thus the Hundred Gods Heresy, or simply the Hundred Gods for those less derogatory, had chapels here and there. I dropped the profits I'd made from my foray into horse trading into a general offering envelope and wrote 'Rush the Falling Water' onto the lip. That should get him a few more services than the Immaculates allowed. As I was leaving I stopped, and considered the offering box for the hungry children of Lookshy. I sighed deeply. With that I donated the money I'd acquired by illegal means, which was all of it, to the hungry children. The wood carvings on the box seemed to be gloating at me. With that I returned to Salation's clockshop, worried that something might have happened in my absence.

She met me at the door. After looking around suspiciously she let me in. Once the door was shut behind me she stood with arms crossed and an eyebrow raised.

“Sold it,” I replied calmly. “And donated the entire price to the poor.”

“Are you sure?”

“Do I look like I'm swimming in stolen money?” I asked and spread my arms wide.

The gesture swept the cloak back, and revealed the shark bites, the gouging bites of the ant swarm, and the innumerable cuts and abrasions from rolling across crumbling glass. I looked even worse than I felt.

“You probably deserved it,” she concluded.

“What!?” I exclaimed.

“Well, it obviously isn't slowing you down, so it can't hurt that bad.”

“What if I'm just enduring a lot of pain?” I growled.

“I doubt it. You never acted that tough.”

If I didn't like the woman so much I would have strangled her. Instead I left to use her wash room and attend to myself as best I could.

While stitching shut my shoulder, I paused to consider what I was going to tell her. Our fight aside, I was expecting to sleep in her bed tonight. As soon as I removed my clothing, she was going to notice the injuries I'd taken. As I pulled a saw-edged tooth from my shoulder and matter-of-factly sutured the wound shut, I considered the bite mark. There was no chance it would be confused for anything but a bite mark. It was big, too. There wasn't much a chance she'd miss it. She hadn't noticed earlier because she was mad at me, but I didn't attempt to beguile myself she wouldn't notice later. Had I more energy I might have drawn an glamour around myself, but that would require I remain awake. When my shoulder was taken care of, I had a pile of shark teeth in the soap dish.

After that I addressed my legs. Most of the ant poison had been washed away during my swim, and that the rest had worn off during my near panicked ride back to Lookshy. As I pulled the remaining heads out and carefully stitched shut the holes, I noted that few of my wounds had gone above the knee, and none above the mid-thigh. For that I was very grateful. Judiciously I sent a prayer of thanks to the Unconquered Sun, my patron. With luck he wouldn't be jealous that the majority of my funds had gone to other divinities. The other shark bite on my leg wasn't as big as the shoulder wound, and I methodically treated that one as well. All that remained were the smaller scrapes from the glass and the abrasions from the shark skin, but those should heal quickly without care. I was considering myself in the mirror, ensuring I was as well tended as I could do myself when I heard a loud knock from below. Pausing, I slid the washroom door open and listened.

After a moment Salation answered the door. She asked, “Oh, hello sir. May I help you?”

“Yes, ma'am. I'm sorry to disturb you at this time of night, but it's very important. May I come in?” It was a deep, smooth voice. I'd never heard it before.

“Yes, sir. Please.” Footsteps sounded from soft soled sandals as Salation drew aside, and then more, these from heavy cavalry boots, as the man walked in. My blade came to my hand unconsciously, and I

crept to the top of the stairs. They'd stopped in the center of the workshop. Salation was locking the door behind them, and then turned to face the officer. Even lying down I couldn't see her face, given the steep angle of the stairs. The officer's back I could see perfectly.

He looked exactly like the one I'd open and then cut down. He was dressed in the same blue and green, sharp pressed uniform. Though his back was to me, his collar was emblazoned with the same ornate scrolling embroidered rank. At his side was a sheathed saber. I suddenly knew that if I looked into the street I'd see an identical horse to the one I'd killed only a few hours ago.

“Ma'am, I'm sorry to come on such an unpleasant errand, but I must. Do you know a man known as Stark Vision of Inevitability, or occasionally Crimson Wing?”

There was a long silence. Then very simply she responded, “Yes.”

“Are you familiar with who he is?”

“No, sir. I'm not.” There was a hidden catch to her voice, that even I barely heard, listening as carefully as I could. It was a the very quiet sound of betrayal.

“Does he come here often?” the cavalryman asked.

There was another long pause. This time she responded with a slightly louder vocal catch. “Yes, he does.”

“Did you see him this morning?”

“Sir, I don't understand. Did he do something wrong?”

“Ma'am, Stark Vision of Inevitability is a horrible human being. Do you know he killed his last wife?”

Silent and crouching by the head of the stairs, I winced as my entire body was suddenly hit with a crushing weight. The motion sent spasms of pain from my injuries that I barely noticed. Downstairs Salation reeled as if struck. Footsteps, unstable ones, from her soft soled shoes staggered sideways, as she dropped into her work chair. The officer took a few steps after her and left my field of vision. I got control of myself and stalked a few stairs down until again the officer was in my sight, but she wasn't.

“That can't be,” she said very softly.

“I knew his wife very well. There is no doubt.”

Salation sounded like she was on the verge of tears when she asked, “Why are you telling me this?”

“Because he took someone very dear to me when he murdered Lemora. He took someone away I'd sworn always to protect.”

Suddenly the tearing of my heart froze. My anguish suddenly ceased as it was supplanted by a silent, icy readiness. Salation's pain shifted aside to the realm of something to be dealt with later. Lemora did have bodyguards. They were all demons she had summoned and paid with the souls of innocents.

“Are you going to arrest him?” Salation asked. She was crying now. The tears wouldn't have started to spill down her cheeks, but they were building in her eyes. I could hear it in her voice. She was in incredible emotional pain, with her heart on the edge of breaking. The analytical part of my brain noted it was a carefully calculated, deliberately inflicted emotional cruelty that was taking her to the very edge of heartbreak. I left the shelter of the stairs, and stole down further. The man's back was still too me. One of his hands rested idly on his sheath. Salation was staring at the floor and her eyes were glistening.

“No, ma'am, I'm going to kill him. But first I'm going to kill you, so he loses what's most important to him too.”

Her had sank to her chest at his first sentence, but froze and suddenly whipped up. His blade came lose in one, fluid motion, as he said, “Just remember as you die, that it was you who-”

Agate hit him in the side, just above the ribs, and I parted him from waist to shoulder fluidly. Knowing what I was dealing with now, I set his flesh smoldering at the touch of my blade. In fact, I hit him so fast that he was still drawing when I completed the vivisection, and lacking an anchor his arm spasmed wildly as it hit the ground. It thrashed across the ground as it burned.

Suddenly worried that even after his death the demon might succeed in hurting her, I stepped over the convulsing arm and stomped down hard on the flat of the blade with my bare foot. The flailing twitching cut into my sole, but got no farther. Twisting my waist I drove my blade through the top of the burning corpse until the hilt was almost through the floorboards. Then I turned back to Salation, who was staring at me terrified and confused.

“I've gotten into more naked sword fights in this city than anyplace else in my life,” I commented blankly.

“Who, what, why-” she babbled, still with eyes full of tears, while she stared at me baffled.

I glanced at the severed arm and saw that the fire had enveloped all of it now, leaving a foul smelling pile smoldering on the floor. I stepped of the blade and knelt down in front of her.

“I'm sorry. I've lied to you, but only ever about who I am. I'm going to tell you now. Are you ready?”

She nodded, but there was something about her that told me there was no way she was ready. Still, I'd run out of time.

“My name is Stark Vision of Inevitability. You heard about the guy who trashed the Gens Haid manse? That was me, but I'll explain that in a bit. I'm a seventy eight year old Solar Exalted of the Eclipse Caste, what the Immaculate Order calls the Forsaken.” As soon as the words started coming, there was no stopping them. Details flowed like a river as I leaped from big fact to big fact with little intervening explanation. “For three years, up until this spring, I was married to a woman named Lemora. We lived in the Meander Mountains on the very edge of the wyld. I was a doctor. She was a witch. I thought she did little beyond minor luck charms and wards against disease. I was wrong. She practiced a form of soul-binding magic where people's lives are bound to stones after they die. She then traded these souls to demons for favors. That,” I pointed and the smoldering pile of wreckage that no longer even resembled something human. “Was one of the demons. She had married me so when one of my patients wouldn't make it, she would be prepared to grab them at the moment of death, and bind their soul. I

killed her, ruined her magics, and released every one of the imprisoned dead I could.”

The woman wasn't reacting to me. I don't know if anything I was saying was making it through. I kept talking, trying to keep my voice calm and level. It wasn't easy, but the words wouldn't stop.

“After she died I found an amulet with a bound ghost named Medor. At the time I didn't know his name, but only that he had lived in a kingdom called Aphor before the Shogunate fell. I promised to take care of his descendants as best I could after sending him on to Lethe. It seemed a good way to end the business with Lemora. First I went to Sijan, where I met an archivist. There was also a murdered ghost. From there I came here. At Gens Haid I was told that the archivist was dead, and that I had been framed for it. I didn't kill the archivist. I swear. But Haid and his minions attacked me, and during my escape I set his house on fire. That's why I'm wanted for that. Suffice to say I escaped, but I was naked. I found the alley where you were being attacked and intervened. I stole the muggers clothes and took you home. Since there were guards on the street looking for me I stayed with you for lunch. I always felt bad about that because I used you, which is why I wouldn't eat with you again for so long.

“Since I've come to Lookshy I finally figured out where I can find Medor the ghost's descendants, but I need to go to Murada to do it, and from there into the deep wyld. I found this out a couple days ago. But this guy, or another demon who looks exactly like him, killed the ghost and the archivist in Sijan and framed me for their murderers, and I knew that somehow they were going to try to hurt you, so I won't leave until I'm sure that nothing will come down on you because of me.”

I ran over the relevant details in my head. I don't think I had missed anything important, but there were a couple of points I wanted to be sure I elucidated.

“I didn't tell you anything because I didn't want to talk about Lemora, and I didn't know if you were a diligent Immaculate. If you were you would probably have to try to kill me, or at least report me to someone who would. Lemora I just didn't want to talk about. I always felt really bad about using you that first time, but after that I kept coming to see you because I liked you, and I still do. Please don't hate me.”

I stared at her at eye level, on my knees in her clockshop. She looked at me askance. Behind us the demon finally guttered out. Without looking I yanked the blade out of the pile of ash and banished it Elsewhere. Salation looked at me like she'd never seen me before and traced the lines of my shoulder with her fingers. “What happened to you?”

“This morning I was nearly eaten by a shark, after I was attacked by a swarm of possessed ants. Later I killed another demon. Actually, a whole pack of sharks tried to eat me, but they were possessed by a different demon. I don't know all the details, but they aren't important right now.”

“Oh,” she said quietly. She lifted her fingers from me and held her hands in her lap, where they started twitching involuntarily. I reached into her lap and very gently wrapped her small hands in one of mine. They grew still. “How things have you lied to me about?” she asked next.

“My name,” I replied. I thought carefully. “And about being a horse thief, because at the time I'd never stolen a horse. I still haven't, but I did win one while playing less than honest dice. But at the time I hadn't even done that. I'm also not the Bloody Baron of Black Cliff, because I don't think such an individual exists. The alliteration just appealed to me.”

“What about-”

“Absolutely not,” I cut her off, and leaned in very close to her face. I was resting all my weight on the seat of her chair. “I meant everything I ever said about you. I also meant all those things I did to you. Like that,” I added and kissed her. “And everything else. I love you, Salation, and if I wasn't Anathema and hadn't sworn to go rescue this ghost's descendants from the fae, I wouldn't leave you.” I paused. “Actually, I would probably still rescue the ghost's descendants even if I had not sworn to. That's the sort of thing I do. But I don't think that's what you meant.”

“It wasn't,” she admitted.

“Good.”

“But I'm not happy about it,” she added.

“I understand,” I accepted.

We considered each other from very close.

“What are you going to do now?” she asked.

“I'm probably going outside, because I think there is a demon in the shape of a horse tethered to the front of your house,” I said seriously.

She blinked at me. I think of all possible answers, that wasn't one she was expecting. “Wait, really?”

“I'd give it better than even odds,” I replied. “Without using loaded dice.”

“Are you intending to put on clothes?”

“It's either a demon or a horse. Neither one cares if it sees me naked.”

“What about people?” she asked.

“You've already seen me naked,” I pointed out.

“I mean other people!”

“I bet they've seen naked people too.”

“But they haven't seen you.”

“Well, if they want to keep it that way, they'd better not look out their windows.”

She changed direction. “What are you going to do after you go outside?”

“Figure out if that's a demon or a horse. If it's a demon I can just kill it, but not if it's a horse because then it won't go away, and you'll have a dead cavalry horse in front of your house, which would be odd.”

“That would be a very odd problem to have,” she agreed.

“Very,” I emphasized.

We paused at this juncture. We'd talked a nice circle around the issue at hand. Now only a hair's breadth remained between our faces, and there was nothing else to say.

Very deliberately, Salation put her arms around me. She snaked one over my uninjured shoulder, and the other around a part of my side that had few lacerations than the rest. She deliberately pulled me towards her, and met me with her very soft lips. “I will not have naked men running in and out of my house at all hours of the night. Before you go outside, you need to put on clothes.”

I took my arms off the chair and leaned in to her. Then my weight pressed against her, and I held her very tight. We stayed immobile for a long time, before I relinquished her to go find my torn and shredded clothes.