

The Misaqht

I wasn't expecting visitors, but I knew they were coming long before they arrived.

On that evening I was wandering the ridges above the cave where I live, basking in the beauty of the last light of sunset. Even in a lifestyle of strict asceticism there must be time to appreciate beauty.

From my vantage point I could easily see the dust cloud on the horizon. I knew such a trail was left by the riding-beasts of the foreign invaders, so naturally I assumed it was a group of them traveling the rough, barren stretches of southern Ylelon for reasons that, doubtless, only they could understand. As they approached the base of my cliffs, however, I saw that they were Yd. There were four of them in all, two men on mounts of their own and a youth sharing a third with a girl of no more than fifteen. Yd riding on horses. How much had changed since I'd been away.

They stopped at the base of the cliffs, dismounted and waited. One thing, at least, had not changed: my people were still hesitant to approach a *misaqht*.

The Yd are a warrior race, you see. Confined to a tiny desert, assailed by wicked things of darkness, the people of Ylelon are fighters out of sheer pragmatism. Both men and women must be willing and able to fight for food, for water, for land, for their own safety and most of all, for the good of their tribe.

Those rare few who do not fight for a tribe, for whatever reason, are called *misaqht*. The word is heavy with implication. Most modern languages would interpret its meaning to include both "pariah" and "mercenary." For respectable tribesfolk to even approach a *misaqht*, while not unheard of, is an act of last resort. There would be no need to approach an outcast warrior unless the tribe's own fighters were incapable of defending it: in other words, if they were dead.

I made them wait for what must have been an agonizingly long time before going to meet them. They saw me coming from high on the hillside and became very nervous. Even the horses fidgeted and whinnied as I drew near. I perched atop a boulder looking down on them and stood with my arms crossed. In truth I was quite curious, but I sought to keep them on guard. Appearances, you know.

"Forgive our trespass," said one of the men, a rotund fellow with graying hair.

I said nothing.

"We have come to barter for your aid," the heavy man said.

Still, I said nothing.

The two men exchanged glances. I was making them even more nervous. Good.

Now the other man, strong-looking and of scarred countenance, spoke. "A group of Whites has taken to molesting our village. They have come many times this year. With their pellet-weapons they have killed many warriors and stolen many of our young girls for their sport."

Interesting. "You want me to fight them for you?"

"If you will wait for them in our village," the plump man said with a nervous swallow, "we will give you what comforts we have--"

"Do you think I live alone in a cave because I enjoy comfort, fool?" I snapped.

The scarred man sighed. "If you help us, we will give you her."

I looked at the girl on the horse. She would not meet my eyes, nor would the youth she clung to. I guessed he was her brother, likely sent by their father to ensure that the girl did not try to back out of being made a flesh offering, something she almost certainly had not been given a voice in. For the good of the tribe, of course.

"Agreed," I said.

The two men looked very relieved. Whatever the youngsters thought, they gave no outward sign of it.

"Excellent!" the scarred man said. "If you return with us this evening, we will--"

"You will do nothing," I said, startling them. "Your village is the one just beyond the ridge, is it not?"

Scar nodded.

"And the Whites that attack you? They come from the city?"

“Yes,” Scar said, “but we don’t know where--”

I cut him off with a raised hand. “Go back to your village. I will come for the girl tomorrow evening. Make certain she is ready for me.”

I didn’t say another word until they had gone. I could tell that they were confused, wondering how I planned to find a group of men I had never seen in a city of over a million souls. That was good. What fun is being an outcast if you cannot be mysterious?

Before I could find my unseen quarry in the city, I had to make the journey there. Doubtless the others were wondering about that, too. In that line of thinking they probably wondered how I survived here, surrounded by bare rock, dead scrub and little else. It probably would have damaged my carefully-cultivated mystique had they known that the very simple answer to both questions was counted among my few worldly possessions, nestled deep in my cave: a canoe.

For a man on foot, the journey from my home to the city is a trek of several days across scorching sands. For one with a canoe, it’s a short hike down to the beach, then a couple of hours of intense paddling across the bay. Crude, but effective.

I made excellent time and reached the city well before midnight. I hid my canoe under an abandoned dock, one of several such hiding places I regularly used on journeys of this sort, and made my way into the city. Among my own people my appearance was well-known and feared, but here among the foreign devils I was just one more native wandering the cobbled streets. The gaslight lamps cast their ghostly shadows across the narrow streets, while the empty calls of bells echoed across the harbor from the tall-masted ships.

Finding my targets was a simple matter. All I had to do was visit taverns and pawn shops and ask the right questions. Was anyone bragging about slaughtering a local tribe? Had anyone tried to pay for their drinks with Yd jewelry or tried to collect bounties on Yd ears?

In my fifth tavern a fat White heard me asking my questions and told me to mind my “savage’s business.” When he tried to force me from the building I broke his arm in three places and repeated my questions directly to him. After he admitted he “might” know who I was talking about and stammered out an address, I cut out his tongue to show him what a savage really is. No one in the tavern tried to interfere. Smart of them.

I went to the address I’d been given without delay. It was just past midnight. If this lead turned out to be wrong, I would have to move quickly to find the trail again.

The building was a storehouse for mercantile goods. I peered through a window and saw a group of half-a-dozen men, four White, two of darker races, seated at a table playing cards. One of the Whites was wearing a necklace of Yd design, a twist of brambles in a diamond shape with a white seashell in the center. I laughed to myself. Such a necklace was worn only by Yd girls who had achieved womanhood and were seeking a husband. No self-respecting Yd would give or sell such a thing to any White man, so I knew it must have been stolen. These were definitely some of my quarry.

I crept into the building through a side door that the fools had left unlocked, carrying a cobblestone from the street. Using the massive crates in the building as cover, I moved, silent as a shadow, close enough to the men that I could have spat on them. Then I hurled my cobblestone high into the air to the far side of the warehouse. It struck a crate somewhere with a great crash and clattered to the floor.

All six men leapt to their feet with guns drawn, ready for a fight, facing in the wrong direction. I already had my own weapon ready, another of my few possessions: a heavy steel knife I once took from a defeated foe.

I struck the two men nearest me first, slashing one’s neck and striking through the other’s heart with a single fluid stroke. A swift kick flipped the table upward to smack against the faces of three of the other men as they turned back toward the sound of their friends’ screams. I grabbed a nearby chair and brained the last man before he could bring his weapon to bear. I then broke two of the table’s legs free and bludgeoned two of the remaining men to death with them.

That left only one, the fool wearing a necklace for maidens that did not wish to remain maidens.

The table had broken his nose. He scampered blindly away from me until I stopped him by lodging my knife in his thigh. As he lay on the floor shrieking, I pulled the knife free and held the tip just before his eye.

“I will ask only once,” I said. “Tell me where the others are. Speak the truth, I will know if you lie.”

I was bluffing, of course. I had no special method for determining the veracity of what I was told beyond making the teller too afraid to speak anything but the truth. The fool babbled out where I could find his remaining companions, confirming something else I had only suspected: there was more to this group than just these six. It was difficult to imagine any group of Yd warriors being defeated by only a half-dozen men, “pellet weapons” or not, yet my source spoke of only three more companions. I thanked him by taking his life, but not until after I had taken his eyes.

By tradition I also took the left hands of the men to prove their deaths, along with their jewelry and money for purely practical reasons. The men’s presence in the warehouse likely meant that they were employed by its owner. Whether he sent them to harass the local tribes or merely turned a blind eye to their depredations I did not know, but the message I left for him in the form of the mangled bodies of his workers was unmistakable: the Yd may be an oppressed people, but we were not a conquered one.

The address the coward had given me was a place of a kind unknown to my people. To the Yd, physical intimacy was a sacred experience. No desert-dwelling race could frivolously face the health risks of sexual contract, so such encounters were limited to devoted couplings by ancient tribal law. The women of our clans were of necessity strong and independent: the foreign invaders’ mewling females and strange notion of “the weaker sex” were among the most incomprehensible and offensive things they brought to our land.

By this same token, the idea of a place where women peddled their very flesh was a strange one to our simple culture. It did not surprise me in the least that the last of the men I had been sent to kill could be found bartering for something that no Yd man or woman would ever accept as anything other than an act of love.

Two large men stood at the entryway of the tenement as watch. To others they may have been imposing: to me they were annoying distractions and I treated them as such. The lobby beyond was crowded with women in their ridiculous clothing and their customers. The blood-covered savage crossing the threshold drew attention instantly, as I wanted it. Most of the people present began to scatter, but one man near the back of the room, one I recognized from my source’s descriptions as a target, did not. Doubtless he thought, as he pointed an ornate pistol at my head, that he was about to become a hero to all those present.

The shot rang out. Many of the women and some of the men screamed. The bullet lodged in the ceiling just before the gunman struck the floor with my knife in his left eye. So much for being a hero.

The crowd vanished, dispersing in all directions. I retrieved my knife, collected another hand and waited. As I had expected, others began to appear through doors and from hallways to investigate the noise. Among the first faces to appear was one of my remaining two targets. He fell a moment later with my knife in his right eye, his reward for exposing himself to the sounds of combat so carelessly.

Panic reigned amongst the sheep. Men and women in various stages of undress flocked blindly past me. I could have taken any of them easily, but none of them fit the description of my last mark. Him, I found upstairs.

He was so intent on the woman beneath him that he was completely oblivious as I stole into the room, bloody knife in hand. The woman saw me and screamed; the man turned and lost three teeth to my driving blow. As he toppled out of the cheap bed, I had trouble discerning which frantic shrieks belonged to him and which to the woman fleeing the room.

The fool clutched at the nightstand and stood, twisting in place to swing the makeshift weapon at me. A simple strike ripped the thing from the burly fellow’s hands, another lancing through his blood-soaked beard to the stubs of his teeth brought more screams, more cringing.

I brandished my knife in front of him as he cowered against a corner, squealing like a stuck pig.

Were these truly the people that had cowed a proud Yd tribe? A handful of cowards and thieves with only a few weapons no true warrior would touch?

“You and your friends have been harassing a local tribe,” I said. “Tell me how many of you there were and where the others are.”

“Nine!” blurted the coward. “Nine of us! Three of us came here tonight, the others are at the boss’s warehouse.” Such loyalty to his comrades in the face of death.

“You speak the truth, so I will spare your life,” I said. The ruffian grinned, showing the bloody gap in his teeth.

“But,” I said as I held up my knife, “I still require your hand.”

The smile disappeared.

As promised, I appeared in the village the next evening. Some of the inhabitants looked surprised to see me. Perhaps they had hoped--or even expected--for me to die on my fool’s errand. The rest merely looked horrified.

The scarred man came to greet me in the bare patch of ground they laughably called the village square. He kept his distance as I took the bag of hands from my belt and cast it at his feet.

“Is the girl ready?” I asked.

Scar nodded sadly and gestured to two watching youths. They entered a nearby hut and emerged moments later, hauling the shrieking girl that had been promised to me by her wrists. It took them several moments of struggle to bring her before me.

“Bind and gag her,” I said. The youths exchanged nervous glances before looking to Scar.

“Do as he says,” he commanded.

More screams, more struggling. The girl was trussed, gagged with strips from an old sack and laid at my feet like an animal.

“As we agreed, the girl for the task,” Scar intoned. “You have saved us from the scourge that has plagued us for a year.”

“I did nothing more than stop one pack of cowards and weaklings from preying on another,” I said. “I see no Yd here, only victims.”

As harsh as my words were, I could see the truth of them in the villager’s eyes. No Yd warrior would have tolerated such an insult, yet these people turned their gazes from me. How my people had changed in the time I had been away. They were lucky I was only taking one young woman from them.

I slung her over my shoulder and left these people who disgraced the name of Yd behind, to their even greater shame. In my day no Yd warrior with a hand to carry a weapon and legs to stand on would have ever allowed one of the tribe’s daughters to be taken, not while they lived.

I carried the girl thrashing and screeching the entire way back to my cave. Once there I dropped her and unfastened her bonds. I wondered how much she had heard about me and what she expected to happen. Judging by the way she screamed when I bared my fangs and sank them into her neck, she had not heard enough. I drank her slowly, savoring the struggles and the shrieks.

It is the way of the misaqt to go into exile to seek perfection of our disciplines, but as you know now this is not the only reason I was outcast from my tribe. It is also the way of the misaqt to take only what you have earned, so I earned the blood I took by bartering with those who needed my skills. The endless wars of my people amongst themselves and with the foreigners provided me with ample opportunities to earn the blood they were so eager to spill. I outlasted them all, always seeking to perfect my skill.

The girl rose three nights later, but that’s another tale.