

Of Mice, Men, and Blades

I blearily became conscious of my surroundings as I woke. My first surprise was when I tried to stretch and found my hands bound to the chair I had woken up in. It was good work, too, each of my fingers was bound, along with my wrists – to prevent escape, you understand. I could have gotten free of them in time, of course, but I doubted that anyone who was holding me this tightly would give me much time to stew. I checked the limits of my bonds and found that I was tied hand, foot, head, and tail to the chair. I was also nude, to prevent any other trickery on my part.

I suddenly became worried for my blades. What had happened to them? Were they being taken care of? Who had them? Surely anyone, even the most common thug, would be able to see the workmanship in those blades and hold onto them, even if only for a little while. Still, this did nothing to ease my worry, and I felt truly alone, as I hadn't for months.

Sudden footsteps in the hallway snapped me out of my reverie, and I looked up to see a short, stout figure enter my chamber. He was a rat, with glossy grey fur and a most remarkable shifting quality to his eyes. Then he sneezed, and when I saw his snout change from grey to black, I knew I had finally had a stroke of luck. This was Lord Tobias Pettigrew, the man I had been searching for for nigh on a month. Unregistered shapechanger, financial criminal, and all around not a fun guy to be around, he had also ordered a hit on my friend, Aves. And now, it seemed, he had captured me and was holding me for whatever purpose.

I met his eyes as he turned to look at me. In them, I saw a deep-seated malice reserved only for those you loathe. Not a word had been uttered between us, and he already despised me like one might and old rival. A new record for me.

Despite the fiery hatred in his eyes, when he spoke his voice was deep and sonorous and he greeted me like an old friend. “Ah! Lord Inesius! How excellent to finally meet you! I've heard quite a bit about you, you know.”

His manner caught me off guard, but only for a moment. “Lord Pettigrew!” I responded with a degree of false enthusiasm, “How nice to see you! I'd get up and greet you properly, but I am rather indisposed at the moment.”

He waved his hand dismissively, “Of course, of course, but now we should get down to the reason for my visit. Why are you collecting information about my feud with Lord Cyanis and his family?”

The change in his demeanour was like fire and ice, clearly meant to unsettle me into divulging, but I was prepared, so I replied calmly, “I am afraid I cannot divulge that information at present.”

He nodded, as if the question was merely a formality, and gestured into the shadows behind me.

A grim-faced leopard approached with what appeared to be a doctor's bag, but I knew it's true purpose. He pulled a long, slim, serrated knife from the bag, which only purpose was to inflict a slow, lasting pain, and began.

I've been tortured before, but never by someone so experienced in the art; I divulged no information, and, hard as it was to concentrate, I managed to get a few fingers free of their bindings, though I didn't let on as such, before my assailant left me. In the interring few minutes I managed to get my entire right hand free, at the cost of a little blood, and all of my left fingers. I continued to work on freeing myself as Lord Pettigrew re-entered and began questioning me. I didn't really pay attention to any of his questions and steadfastly ignored him, though I made sure to keep eye contact, so that he wouldn't see what my hands were doing. Finally, disgusted, he turned and prepared to leave, but before he did, I spoke at last. "Before you go," I said, "I have a question for you." He turned his head and raised his head inquisitorially, "My blades," I asked, "What has become of them?"

He grinned maliciously before responding. "Oh, those old things?" he said cheerfully, "They're at the bottom of the river."

I threw myself at him bodily, then, and only the fact that I was still partially bound to my chair prevented me from killing him outright. As it was, I still knocked him unconscious and broke the arms off of the chair I was tied to, since my upper arms were still bound to it. Those bindings were the work of a few seconds, after which, after which I slunk out of my interrogation room before anyone came looking.

The sheer magnitude of the place I was held in struck me as I moved along my furtive path. While this place was still in the city, as I learned through windows I passed by, it was like no town home I had ever been in before. It was built more like a manor than a city house and I surmised that it must be on the outskirts of the city, for there was no private home this large in the city proper. Eventually, however, my wanderings chanced me upon a stroke of luck. An ornately carved door stood all by itself in front of me. Being the natural troublemaker that I am, I went and opened the door, and lo and behold, I had discovered the chambers of my dear Lord Pettigrew. In his closet, I found clothes of all different sizes, including one set that fit me almost perfectly. Of course, I was not above a little petty revenge, and, on my way out, a set of curtains just so happened to fall down, and a chamber pot just so happened to get kicked over, and the headboard of his bed just so happened to get torn from the bed and destroyed.

In any event, after I had walked a certain way away from Pettigrew's rooms, I caught sight of a servant girl, and, though it hurt my honour to do so, I put on my best haughty lord impression, and called out, "You there! Wench! I was led astray by some other wench whore and have lost myself in

these abominable halls. You will escort me to the front entrance, so that I may make my departure.”

The accent wasn't quite right, but by her glare at me, I could tell it was close enough for the girl. Still, she curtsied slightly, and said in a strained tone, “Of course, my lord.”

After a few minutes brisk walking, we arrived at the front entrance to Lord Pettigrew's manor. I nodded to the girl as I walked past her, making sure to cement my manner in her head more than my appearance. As soon as I had walked out the door, I rumbled up my clothes and set out towards the city proper. I passed by a few other servants on my way off the property, but they just assumed I was another servant and let me be. Soon, however, the wide streets of the suburbs gave way to the looming buildings of the city and I found myself in familiar territory. I made straight for Aves' safe house, and was relieved to find it still intact. As I entered, I saw Aves pacing about nervously, but when I entered, he immediately had a blade at my throat.

I looked him in the eye and slowly removed the blade from it's position over my windpipe. “Nice to see you too,” I said dryly, “If this is going to become a regular occurrence, perhaps I should start wearing a gorget?”

Upon recognising me, he immediately put the small knife he had procured away, and instead slapped me across the face. “Where the ten hells have you been!?” he asked somewhat angrily, “Caliope has searched half the city for you, and I was inclined to join her. You'd better have a damn good reason for disappearing on us.”

I rubbed my face where he had slapped me, and replied evenly, “As it happens, I was until just recently being held by our good friend Lord Pettigrew. His hospitality leaves something to be desired. On a related note, I'd recommend switching safe houses before he sends a search party after me. Oh, and have you seen my swords?”

That last comment got his attention. “You mean you don't have them?” he asked, “That doesn't bode well. Lord Pettigrew isn't generally very kind to the prized possessions of his enemies. You can bet he will do his damndest to destroy them if he has them.”

I kept control at this news, though only barely. The shadows around me seemed to boil, and the faint outline of a cuirass and greaves began to form around me. I realised what I was doing and quickly dismissed the shadows, but my emotions still boiled beneath the surface, and I knew that the next time I saw Lord Pettigrew, I would kill him, no matter the situation. “Where's Caliope?” I asked carefully.

Aves looked at me strangely, “Why do you want to know?” he asked. I could understand his line of thinking - I had almost just charged back to Lord Pettigrew's manor and assaulted him - but that did nothing to ease my frustration.

“I need to know which half of the city she's searched, so that I can search the other half for my

swords.”

“Did someone say something about swords?” I recognised Caliope's voice and turned to see her holding both of my blades wrapped in a blanket. It's the strangest thing, seeing those blades again, it was like my whole world had been knocked off kilter and was suddenly set right again, just by knowing that those two blades were safe. I ran over to take them from her and as I did, I noticed that her hands were red and slightly raw looking.

“What happened?” I asked, nodding to her hands.

She looked at them, then back at me, seeming surprised that I had noticed. It only took a moment, though, before she responded by gesturing at my swords. “It was those blades of yours,” she said, “I found them at the place where I imagine you were captured, but when I tried to pick them up, they burned my hands something awful. I imagine those who nabbed you had a similar problem. I came back with that blanket a half hour later, and they were right where I left them. People seemed to be avoiding them.”

I unwrapped the blades from the blanket around them, hesitated a moment, then firmly grasped both hilts and... nothing. I turned to Caliope and shrugged, blades still in hand. She cocked her head inquisitively, but said nothing. Aves approached me, and nodded politely toward one of my blades. “May I?” he asked.

I shrugged again and put one of my swords on the table in front of us. Aves hesitated a moment, as I had, then grasped the hilt as I had. He didn't have hold of it for more than a half a second when he let go again, swearing loudly. “Gods, that's painful!” he shouted loudly, shaking his hand in the air, as if to cool it off, “And you experience no pain when holding those blades?” he asked.

I shook my head, a bit confused now, and Aves sighed. “Then it would appear that those blades really are something special. They appear to have bonded with you to such a point that nobody else can wield them... unless... Sar, if you would, I'd like to try grabbing one of those blades again, but this time I'd like you to give it to me.”

I nodded again and presented the blade to him, hilt first. He seemed much more hesitant this time, but grabbed the blade just as firmly, and this time, there was no instantaneous recoil. “Strange,” Aves muttered, “There is an odd tingling sensation in my arm, and the blade feels strange in my hand, but you have allowed me to wield it, so the blade allows it as well. Very odd...”

I took the blade back gently from him, and he seemed only too eager to be rid of it. I hefted the blades once more, before sheathing them behind my back in the sheaths I had received from Caliope a few moments before. I turned to Aves. “So we have discovered another odd property of my blades,” I said, “This is nothing new, I have always known these blades were special. But now we have a need to

move you to a new safe house and then to discuss how we will punish Lord Pettigrew for the most egregious oversight of allowing me to escape from his grasp.

Aves nodded at me and grinned slightly, then, before I could turn to leave, he asked me, “By the way, where did you get those clothes? They're hideous.”