

It was safe to say that Trace had never experienced a sensation quiet like this. Sure, it was already his fourth time on deck cleaning duty, but as they now approached Soulan's equator, Trace had never felt a sun beating so hot, not even during the warmest of the summer months in any of the southern kingdoms. And yet, with the sea breeze around him, the sensation was a blissful one, as he felt the sun's warmth and the cool air at the same time, tingling his skin. With his bronzed-brown Trydis kingdom skin, he wasn't worried about his skin burning. He kept his clothing light, storing away his cloak for the past week, wearing a sleeveless over short, and loose leather pants. He traded in his boots for sandals so his feet could breathe more. The only item of clothing a little extraneous was the sword along his back, its scabbard fastened along his back. He didn't want it lying around anywhere in case one of the crewmen to get curious, so he kept it with him at all times. Thankfully it was light enough that it didn't add much extra weight. And so, he continued to focus on the task at hand, deep scrubbing the decks of the Goodwind.

"You're in a cheerful mood."

"Captain Pyce," Trace said, as he stood up straight. "Is there something I can help you with, sir?"

"Yes," the captain said. "You can take a break."

"Sir?" Trace said with some confusion. "I appreciate your concern for my well being, but I promise I can keep going. I'm staying hydrated, and my temperature isn't running high."

The captain shook his head. "That's not what I mean, lad. It's your first time crossing the Middle Sea, isn't it?"

"Correct, sir."

Captain Pyce walked towards the front of the ship and waved Trace to follow. "Leave the mop."

Trace did as asked and ran to catch up with the captain, walking with him up the stairs and onto the ship's bow. About three other crewmen, and the first mate, were there already.

"Captain Pyce," the man named Davis said. "Will you tell us what this is about now?"

Pyce pointed forward. "Keep watching he said."

Trace and the other's stared ahead. He stared intently, looking for any signs of what the captain was so excited about. Perhaps he had seen some whiteback whales and gathered the nearby crew to watch for them.

"Aaaaaand, there."

Trace blinked twice trying to figure out what exactly happened. They all turned to give the captain blank stares. Trace saw First Mate Ricard smiling

widely, chuckling mildly.

“Captain,” Trace said. “Was this some sort of prank?”

“My lads, I want to welcome you to the other half of the world. You are now officially in northern waters!”

The four looked back and forth at each other. “How can you be sure?” one said.

“See that island over there?” he asked them. “I once came by this path at night, and noticed by the stars we were right on the equator. Ever since, I’ve used that island as a marker during the daytime. I’ve made a tradition ever since to tell first time globe travelers they’ve made it to the other side of the world. Congratulations, you lot.”

They all smiled. “Thank you, captain.”

“All right, you lot, back to work! We’re losing sunlight. I want this ship spotless by nightfall, you hear me?”

“Sir, yes sir!” they shouted.

Trace jumped down the stairs and picked up his mop, resuming where he’d left off. He was smiling at the thought. For the first time, he was officially in the north half of Soulan. It also meant that the journey was half over. One more month at sea, and he would reach his destination. He could only hope that this destination actually existed.

Trace ran his finger through the storage crates below, looking for the one containing ginger. He had gotten the chart from the captain specifying the order of everything, but the one with ginger didn’t seem to match up. He wondered if he was holding the chart the wrong way.

“Aha! Here it is.” It had been buried under some other herbs and spices. “Be right with you, Marcus. Just need to mix these ingredients together for best potency.”

“Thanks. I don’t know what was in the fish tonight that made my stomach start churning.”

While their ship was not a fishing vessel by design, every day they’d drop a small net to catch, to save on rations and supplies. It only took one undercooked fish to lead to some food poisoning.

“Here you go,” Trace said, handing Marcus the vial of finished mixture. “Just don’t smell it before you drink it.”

Marcus downed the whole vial, and immediately after was coughing and banging his chest. “Don’t know how much better I feel, doc.”

“Just take it easy tonight, and let the medicine do its work.”

“Alright. You haven’t let us down yet, doc.”

At the beginning of their journey, some of the crew was skeptical of Trace’s medical expertise given how young he was. But as time went on, and symptoms began to develop, some of the more desperate members tried Trace’s remedies to great success, helping with everything from seasickness to stomach viruses. When Trace ran low on his own medical supplies, Captain Pyce allowed Trace to raid the storage crates, as long as he only used a little. Soon everyone, save the captain, who just calls his young crewman “lad,” were calling Trace “doc” as a term of endearment. It seemed odd to Trace he had a nickname at all, given Trace was already a single syllable. But he didn’t mind, so long as they were all healthy.

They went to the crew quarters and both went into their hammocks, Marcus to rest, and Trace to get some reading in before bed. Along with his sword and a small sack of money, this one book from his father’s library was the only thing he was traveling with. That, and a pair of playing cards he used as bookmarks.

While he was concentrating, the rest of the crew also had cards out, gambling away their pay at the game of 3 Card.

“Red Flush!” Giles called out. There were loud groans from the other players, one of them slamming his fist on his last card.

“You boys in the next round?” one asked, calling over to the hammocks.

“Too tired,” Marcus said weakly through his shirt. It lay over his face to try and block out the lamplights.

“What about you, doc?”

“Not tonight, fellas,” Trace said, eyes fixed on his page.

“Aw, come on doc, you say that every night. And we just got paid today, so how about one hand.”

“Ah, leave him alone, Denz,” Giles said, paying with his pile of emeron coins. “If he doesn’t want lose his money, he’s allowed to hide behind his book.”

“Oh, it’s more that I don’t want to leave the whole crew broke,” Trace said.

There was a silence in the room.

“Ok! Now that’s a challenge if I ever heard one. Doc! Doc! Doc! Doc!”

The rest of the crew chanted, while Marcus held his hands over his ears as tight as he could.

Finally, Trace closed the book and leapt on the ground. “Alright one hand, but only because if I don’t play Marcus won’t get any sleep.”

Everyone put in a coin. Giles dealt out three cards face down to each of the players. Trace looked at each one.

“Want to swap?”

Trace nodded. “Three.” Trace looked at his three new cards. “Fold.”

“Fold? We haven’t even flipped up the first card yet.”

“I had nothing to work with in either hand, and didn’t feel like bluffing. Now, I said one hand, and it was one hand. Thank you gentlemen, good game.”

As he got up, a hand grabbed his wrist. It was first-mate Ricard.

“Play in my place.” Ricard got up and took most of his money but left a stack of 20 emerons. “Whatever you win, you get half, how about it?”

“You sure you want to do that, sir?”

“Hey, if the man wants to let us win 20 emerons, who are we to judge,” Giles said, flipping his first card face-up.

Ricard smiled went over and examined Trace’s book. “Not sure if you lads noticed, but he uses an Ace of Spades card as his bookmark. Now, maybe you just grabbed something lying around, or maybe this game does mean something to you?”

Trace looked away and didn’t answer. Ricard then patted Trace on the shoulder.

“If you really have no skill at this game, you’re free to go back to your hammock,” he said, handing him back his book. “But if you really can live up to what you said, well, consider those emerons my wager on you. How about giving us a good show, doc?”

The “Doc” chant began again, and Trace finally relented, flashed a smile, and sat back down in Ricard’s spot.

“I want you all to remember this before we get started. I tried to warn you all.” He looked at his new cards to see what Ricard had given him to work with.

After about a dozen hands, the emerons were no almost evenly split between Giles and Trace. In the past month, Trace had been doing more than just reading while the others played. Every so often he would look up, and learn player’s tells and playing style. Learning the types that bluffed and those that played it safe when they had nothing. 3 Card was more a psychological game than a luck based one. It was getting into your opponent’s head, predicting their next move. There were many subtleties to the order you revealed your cards, and how to interpret what your opponent carried. Though had not played seriously in years, it seemed he hadn’t forgotten all that he had been taught about the game.

Halfway through his play, when he won three hands in a row, most of the players chose to back out while they still had some money. Some had even made a side pot betting on if Trace would take the game or not. He overheard

he was the odds on favorite, much to Giles chagrin. This was a good place to be. While Trace had literally nothing to lose, it wasn't his money, Giles not only had money but pride on the line. He would for a killing strike the first chance he had, and it would give Trace an opening to counterattack.

They were now betting 10 emérons to open on this next hand. Giles moved first, and flipped up the yellow nine.

Trace kept his betting face on, internally relieved it wasn't an ace. Now he wouldn't have to worry about an ace flush. He took a moment to consider the options. It was common practice to open with an ace if you had one. If all the players had no hands, the player with the most aces takes the pot (or split, if there's a tie for number of aces). Choosing to open with a number meant he had no aces, or was trying to lull Trace into a false sense of security. But Trace suspected it wasn't the latter. Giles was out for blood, and liked to make a show of forces with his hands. His face showed confidence that he had something to work with, either a flush, straight, even three of a kind.

It was his turn, and Trace decided to make a statement of his own, flipping up The Ace. Everyone gasped, wondering if Trace had the mythical hand. There were only three cards in the game of the black suit. The aptly named "The Black," "The Ace," and "The Jack." All three together made the unbeatable hand of "Blackjack," but if you didn't have all three, there were few hands you could make. The hand was rare, and so most plays of the black cards were bluffs, hoping your opponent didn't want to risk encountering the top hand. There had been many stories of people losing thousands of emérons or more to actual Blackjack hands. The question was, would Giles back down or play on.

The second round began, and each person had to ante up again to keep playing. Trace added another 10 emérons.

"20," Giles said, raising.

Trace called the bet. He flipped over his second card, "The Black."

The rest of the crew murmured, wondering if this would be their chance to see a real Blackjack. The bet on Trace winning was taking more and more bets for and against him now.

Giles flipped over another nine, this time the blue one. He was showing a pair, a winning hand if nothing changed on the third cards.

Now Trace was nervous. He didn't have "The Jack" to complete the blackjack hand as his third card. What's more, he wondered if the red nine was now the final card of Giles left to be flipped. Having a specific hand, meaning a hand requiring three exact cards, would be the win for Giles. Only an ace flush or blackjack beats three of a kind, and Trace had neither.

He needed to decide, did he take the risk, or play it safe and give Giles the

hand. Live to fight another day.

“All in,” Trace said. This was it. If he it was three nines, the only way to win was to bluff, and hope he could convince Giles he had the mythic hand.

Giles burst into laughter with a huge grin. The side bets were done, and now everyone stared intently waiting for the results.

“Seeing you play tonight, on any other hand, I might believe you have The Jack under your last card. But I know you don’t. Call, all in.” And that’s when Giles flipped up his last card. “The Jack.”

The smiling and laughing continued, as groans of those who bet on Trace to win groaned around them.

“What rotten luck. Trying to bluff the legendary hand only for single opponent to have the card instead.”

“Actually, I’d say it was quite lucky. Or did you forget there’s one additional winning hand these two cards can make?” Trace smiled and flipped his last card. It was The Club, the “C” ace. “Ace straight! That beats pair. You lose.”

The groaning and cheering flipped instantly as those betting on Trace to win surrounded him with hugs and slaps on the back, before they went to gather their money. Giles knocked the pile of emérons in furor and went out of the room.

Trace went over to grab his sack to put half the coins inside, and carrying the remaining half in his arms. He went over to the far wall where Ricard was leaning.

“Guess you were right to bet on me after all. I was nervous he had three of a kind the last hand. I have to admit it was fun to feel that thrill again.”

Ricard didn’t seem to react, and only stared down at him with a cold look. That’s when Trace realized he was holding the book Trace was reading. Open.

“Follow me,” Ricard said coldly. “You can bring them to my personal quarters.”

Ricard was one of the only crew member, aside from the captain, who had his own personal quarters. Both were on the other side of the ship. As they crossed the deck under the night sky, Trace had a feeling he knew the thoughts in the first mate’s head.

He stopped by the mast. “Is this about the book, sir?”

Ricard turned around, and drew his knife.

Trace dropped the coins and made a run for it, but Ricard grabbed him by the shoulder and slammed him against the mast. He held the knife close to Trace’s throat.

“You know I do most of the book keeping? It’s a task I pride myself in, and it lets serve my captain well. Unlike most of those men, I’ve been reading since I was a boy. Taught by my own mother. I saw the words on that page. On every

page that I flipped through. They all had the same word, somewhere on every sheet of paper. Magi.”

“Sir,” Trace said, doing his best to remain calm. He felt like he could overpower the first mate if he tried, but didn’t want to make the situation work. He wanted to talk it out. “It’s a history book, that’s all. Not any book of spells or any taboo subject matter.”

“You take me for a fool? I read the chapter you left your page marker in. It told of exploits of the Dragon Knights, the warlords of the Great Magi War.”

“I’m interested in the history of our kingdoms, and the Great Magi War is a part of that. That’s only reason I’m interested.”

“That wasn’t history. It was propaganda. Painting those monsters as heroes. I even know its author was a magi sympathizer. So tell me, boy, of all the books covering that period of our history, why that one.”

“I thought...” Trace spoke carefully, not wanting the movement of his throat to meet the edge of the knife drawing closer to his neck. “I wanted to have another perspective on those 200 years.”

There was a pause, perhaps as Ricard considered what Trace had said. Then he moved his eyes down and to the side. “Show me your hand.”

“What?”

“Show me your hand, or it’ll be your throat!”

Trace inhaled and raised his right hand. Swiftly, Ricard pulled away the knife and made a small slice into Trace’s palm. He winced but kept it open, knowing what Ricard was doing.

Ricard watched intently, as the darkened, red blood came out. It wasn’t glowing.

“I’m not a magi sir. I did a blood test with the captain and it was the same result. I would have happily shown you if you asked nicely.”

Ricard finally lowered his grip and let Trace go. Trace held his hand and headed back for the crew quarters, when suddenly he felt a tag on his back.

Ricard pulled out Trace’s sword from its sheath. He held it up to the moonlight to get a better look at it.

“Not a magi, eh? Then what is a non-magi doing with a sword made of dragonscale.”

“Give that back, sir!”

“Answer me!” The sword was lowered, and the knife raised again. Trace was ready to charge the man to reclaim his property, but knew if he did, it would lead to a fight to the death.

“You always have this sword with you,” Ricard said. “Never showing it to anyone. Keeping it out of reach from prying hands. What secret are you trying

to hide?”

“I was trying to avoid this! False accusation from misunderstanding. I’m a doctor. I want to defend myself, but I’m not interested in killing anyone. Dragonscale is good for that, its unbreakable but blunt, it can only bruise, not slice.”

“It’s also the rarest material in existence. And you just happen to have not just scale but a crafted sword made of it.”

“There are plenty of humans who wield dragonscale swords. But I told you, I don’t want to kill, that’s why it doesn’t have runes applied to let it absorb magic. I inherited the blade, it’s a family heirloom, just like the few dozen dragonscale blades wielded by the knights across Soulan.”

“Those are families of noble houses. You, you dress like a commoner. You offered work service just to join us. You’re hiding something, so you better come clean boy!”

“Ricard, but in the great deep are you doing!” Captain Pyce walked out from his quarters. “You two are shouting up a storm, how am I supposed to get any sleep?” His eyes zoomed in on Trace’s hand. “Why is the lad injured, Ricard.”

Ricard held up the sword to the captain. Pyce let out a small gasp.

“This was the sword he’s been carrying all along, captain. And I discovered his book was magi propaganda. Two very odd coincidences if you ask me.”

Pyce turned to Trace. “Show me the cut.”

Trace did. The blood was still red, and still gave off no glow.

“Ay, coincidences indeed. Now give the boy his sword back.”

“But sir you don’t think—“

“There is no substantial proof! What were you planning to do, Pyce? Gut this boy with your knife and let him bleed out on the deck as he dies? Check every ounce of blood to make sure none of it glows?! ”

“Captain, if he is a magi, we’re doing something illegal transporting him.”

“And if he’s just a human with a dragonscale sword and a magi book, then we will be left with a dead innocent and you will have his death on your conscience for the rest of your days! Is that what you really want?”

“No!” Ricard said, lowering his head. “No, sir.”

“Well then, I suggest you return to your quarters, Ricard. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Dismissed.”

Ricard handed Trace back the sword. He knelt down to pick up his coins.

“Ricard, dismissed!”

“Yes, sir!” He took what he could and left the rest.

The captain then examined Trace's wound. "I have some bandages in my quarters. Come."

"Thank you, sir, but I still have some of my own. Don't worry, I can apply it myself."

"Very well. Good night, lad."

"Good night, captain." Trace headed back and sheathed his sword. As he went below deck, he breathed a huge sigh of relief that he had been able to hold it for so long.

As his blood began to glow white, Trace focused on the wound, and using his magi abilities, mended and sealed the cut.