

Tales from 'The Rat'

Goldhaven

A Short Story by Matt Warrington

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Goldhaven

Gouchan and Nahille strolled nonchalantly down the main street of Goldhaven. Hells, they had nothing to fear. Two escaped slaves and carrying enough gold marks to buy a small mansion but there was no need to advertise the fact.

Nahille was quite obviously the most nervous of the pair; though anyone taking a more than cursory view of the pair would have noticed Gouchan taking a few more looks over his shoulder than was strictly necessary in this part of the city.

Goldhaven was well known as a ‘free port’ but also as a king’s town. From the apparently free town one could make one’s fortune, serve in the army, get a couple of victories under your belt. Easily done when your army was made up of ‘bought’ men!

Though slavery was the main business of Goldhaven. Most of the city’s economy was based on it and had been for the last two hundred years. A whole sub-class existed here. In Goldhaven you could be born as a commodity. But hopefully not for much longer. For years now, the anti-slavery movement had been growing within the city. Right minded and moneyed people were starting to question the system. Add the fact that ninety percent of the organised crime in Goldhaven was run by escaped slaves and you have a melting pot of insurrection.

Which, as it happens is exactly what Nahille and Gouchan were planning?

“Are you sure that this is a good idea?” asked Nahille. “His reputation is not a good one.”

“Does it matter?” Gouchan replied. “He has what we need and is willing to sell it.”

“But it’s *him*.”

Gouchan rounded suddenly on his companion. “Yes, it’s *him*. And do I really have to remind you exactly why we are dealing with *him*?”

Nahille became suddenly silent. The man that they were about to meet had the reputation of all the devils in Hell rolled into one. Thief, murderer, mutineer and the most feared pirate on all of the seas of the world. If the stories were to be believed, then this man had murdered

his best friend in order to inherit the ship that he now commanded. In fact, were they to turn him in to the King, the reward would be slightly more than the gold that they were carrying to trade with the monster.

But they were escaped slaves and not a legal part of society. Were they to even attempt to claim the reward, the best they could hope for was a public hanging. The worst did not even bear thinking about. Besides, he suited their purpose and years of living as outlaws had sharpened the movement's sense of self-preservation to a point where nothing was left to chance. Even now Nahille knew that members of the movement were watching their every move. Crossbows would be following them from the roof tops and seemingly normal citizens, about their daily business were actually hardened killers armed to the teeth and watching their backs. Nothing was being left to chance. Even the bar in which they were supposed to make the trade would by now be half full of their men, ready to act should things turn nasty.

But he had what they wanted and was willing to sell.

Nahille, resigned, nodded to Gouchan. "Let's just get this over with, shall we?"

Gouchan relaxed and clapped his partner in insurrection on the shoulder. They had been through too much together over the years to fall out over a slight case of cold feet.

The bar was called 'The Buccaneer'. The Captain had chosen the meeting place probably as much for the name as its location. Situated on a small side street, just outside the city centre, it was a place easily overlooked if you did not already know that it was there and its location and clientele had given it the reputation of the hangout of thieves, smugglers and pirates. The Captain had obviously deliberately chosen somewhere he would feel at home. Outside the bar, several horses were tethered and several men were lounging, drinking and smoking. From the roughness of their skin and the squint of their eyes, it was apparent that most of them had spent most of their lives at sea. This was not unusual in Goldhaven. The city was also a busy port and a veritable melting pot of races and creeds. Humans of all colours and

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religion, Elves from the west, tall and graceful with an irritating innate snobbery, Dwarves from the north keeping to themselves and only dealing with others out of necessity. Even the occasional Uruk was not unheard of, though they were usually slaves or hired muscle. In fact the only non-human outside 'The Buccaneer' was an Uruk. Unusually, its skin was as black as sea coal rather than the normal green. Its face was mostly hidden beneath a cowl, the shoulders of which were armoured with large, spiked pouldrons though the teeth gave away the nature of its race. The disc of a large buckler rested against its stool and a double bladed hand axe lay across the table at which it sat. The various humans were giving it a wide berth. Gouchan and Nahille did the same. The Uruk were a savage race with a tendency toward extreme violence. Normally they were only tolerated as slaves or bodyguards; that this one was apparently 'free' rang alarm bells for Nahille.

"Gouchan!" he whispered urgently. "Something is wrong."

He realised that he did not recognise any of the people in the street. He could not place any of the members of the movement that should be watching their backs. This could mean that they were just doing their job very well but it would have been reassuring to at least recognise a face or a countenance that was familiar.

"Don't lose your nerve on me now Nahille," Gouchan replied. "Too much is riding on this to back out now. Don't worry, we are not alone. The movement are watching our backs. If the worst comes to the worst, we have enough men in position to take the shipment by force and still have the gold for another day. All we have to do is find out where it is."

It was true. This meeting had been months in the planning and that he could not see their co-conspirators really did just mean that they were doing their job well. They were on the rooftops, they were about him in the street and more importantly they were inside that bar and ready to cover their backs should anything go wrong. Reassured, Nahille nodded his assent. Gouchan briefly clasped his friend by the shoulder before they both entered the bar.

As the door closed behind them the Uruk drained its tankard,

coughed loudly and spat on the nearest human who immediately, along with all his companions remembered that he was suddenly very late for an appointment elsewhere. As soon as they had gone, the Uruk stood, picking up its shield and axe and placed its self in front of the door. No one was getting in without either an invitation or a small army.

The inside was pretty much as expected. The usual compliment of old salts and barflies populated the place. Hooded figures haunted the corners, acknowledging the new arrivals with a glance, then turning away before a memory could be formed. Nahille caught a couple of knowing glances, as if these people not only knew exactly what was happening but, perhaps more worryingly, didn't care. In one corner of the room there was a card game underway. Swords were on the table, as was the etiquette. No one sat down at a bar in Goldhaven with a hidden weapon; it was an unwritten law that was 'apparently' adhered to.

As they entered, a young man (mid-twenties by Nihalle's reckoning) stood up from the card game and addressed them. He was clean shaven and short haired. He wore a knee length leather sea coat and a cloth tricorn.

"Gentlemen. Would you care to join us?"

Nahille allowed himself a glance over his shoulder. The door was not only shut but a tall female elf had positioned herself across the door. She was slim but muscular with the rudimentary gills of a Sea Elf and a sharp looking long sword at her waist.

Gouchan did not appear to have noticed.

"If you will excuse me sir, we are not here to play games."

"If you will excuse me *sir*, I think that maybe you are!"

There was a commanding tone to his voice that suggested that there was no real choice. Gouchan turned to Nahille, laying a reassuring hand upon his shoulder.

"Let me handle this, just watch my back, OK?"

Nahille nodded his assent but still was uneasy about the situation. The only exit was quite obviously covered and he could not recognise any members. He nodded toward the table. He could not

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watch Gouchan's back and the door but fate was rapidly reducing his choices.

Gouchan sat at the table and had a handful of chips thrown at him. The hand finished and he was dealt a pair of cards. Jack. Queen. Promising.

His opponents were the young man who had addressed him earlier, an older man with a short cropped, greying beard and dark flowing hair that reached past his shoulders, sporting a leather tricorne and a long leather sea coat. A well-muscled young woman, sporting a braided, military type jacket and an elf that, to human eyes, would have appeared about thirteen years old but Gouchan and Nahille knew better. But then elves had the ability to age as they saw fit.

Nahille found himself hoping to *all* of the Gods that the movement had managed to place a few people here. As front line back up he was starting to hear a few alarm bells.

The common cards were dealt, a seven. A three and a Queen, things were looking good.

The bet came round to Gouchan. He threw a half-dozen chips on to the table. The woman folded, Tricorn met his bet, as did the young man, Grey Beard and the young elf. The next card came down. A Queen.

“Your merchandise is out back,” said Tricorn. “Twenty barrels loaded on a regular dray.” He didn’t look up from his cards.

“Am I talking to Captain Lugus?” Gouchan asked.

“Don't matter a damn who you're talkin' to, deal's the same. Five hundred Marks and you walk away with it.”

The turn card was dealt. A Queen.

With confidence, Gouchan threw half of his remaining chips into the pot. The elf folded but tricorne and Grey Beard met the bet.

“Two hundred and fifty or I walk out of that door and everyone has wasted their time,” Gouchan replied with a nod toward the entrance.

The last card hit the table, a King. With a hand of three Queens Gouchan threw all of his remaining chips onto the table.

Tricorn folded.

Grey Beard met his bet.

“For some strange reason, sir,” said Grey Beard, “You seem to think that this is a negotiation.”

Nahille felt a stab of panic and turned toward the door. He found himself looking directly into the clear, green eyes of the sea elf. And though he couldn't see it (as he suddenly did not dare to move his head) could feel the tip of her sword pricking his throat.

“But tell you what, I'm in a gaming mood. Let the cards decide.”

“I have men in this bar,” Gouchan replied. “I have men in the street. If anything happens to myself or my associate, you will not make it back to your ship.”

He turned his cards. Two Queens on the table plus one!

Lugus didn't even touch his cards.

“Shit,” he replied. “I hate dealing with amateurs!”

His voice did not rise in either pitch or volume; he just sat back on his seat and made himself comfortable.

“I have to inform you that we arrived three days ago.”

Gouchan's hand strayed toward one of his daggers, just in case. He felt for a hilt that wasn't there.

“Looking for this?” whispered a voice, an inch from his ear. He felt something prick his back, in the rough area of his right kidney.

Grey Beard stood. As he did, he picked up his cards and held them up to Gouchan. Two Kings.

“We've been here for three days now mister 'I've got friends'!”

This time his volume was rising and he almost spat the last word into Gouchan's face.

“My people,” he shouted, “have been in place since we landed and were waiting for yours. We haven't hurt any of them, but they sure as shit ain't comin' to rescue your sorry arse. So please stop mucking me about and 'and over the bloody money!”

Gouchan handed over the whole pouch. Lugus sat down, folded his arms, sat back and put his feet on the table. Gouchan paid attention.

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“As Mr. Stryker said,” he continued. “You will find a fully loaded dray out back. Every barrel contains a full measure of black powder except for the ones at the rear and the ones directly behind the drivers.

“These contain a partition and each one will deliver a quart of ale if tapped, just in case.” The Captain stood and retrieved a sword from the table. It looked like a Drow blade, black but for the cutting edge. He sheathed it to his left hip, and casually dropped the money into his pocket. Then in a blur, he caught the other sword from the table. It had a curved blade and a design that Gouchan was not familiar with though its sharpness was not in question. He felt a small trickle of blood trace a straight line down his neck.

“And if you ever try to do me over again I *will* have you killed. Do you understand?”

Gouchan nodded with his eyes. Nahille had given up moving two cards ago.

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“Neathisar has the helm, Lugus, orders?” asked Telbar.

There was *no-one* else that Lugus would trust with his ship. Lugus and Telbar had history. *No-one* else got command of the ‘Black Rat’ in his absence

“Hold fast.”

Telbar relayed the order with a military bark. When they had arrived, Lugus had ordered the ship moored on a sand bar just over the horizon from the Capitol. This morning though, he had manoeuvred the ‘Black Rat’ to within viewing distance of the coast.

“I know what you’re doing,” Telbar advised. “But I question the wisdom. We could be seen!”

“Acknowledge your objection me old mucker,” Lugus replied and turned to grasp Telbar by the shoulder. “But there are moments that one has to see for ‘im self.”

As Lugus returned his eye to the telescope, a plume of black

smoke erupted from the centre of Goldhaven. Within seconds there came another from a different part of the city and Lugus could feel the brand upon his arm start to itch, as it often did at moments like this.

“I hate to remind you Lugus,” Telbar said, “But how much exactly did that black powder cost us?”

“A whole lot more than they paid for it, but every now and then ya ’as to make these sacrifices.”

As the sound of the first explosion reached the deck the third plume hit the sky line in a moment of vengeful purity. Lugus closed the telescope and pushed himself forcibly from the gunwale.

“Mind you, I never said I sold ’em all of it.” He winked to his old friend.

“Weigh anchor and set sail full against the wind! I think that we need to be a long way from here.”