

## Chapter 7 - The Hereafter Does Wait for Some People

(1)

“- [Orsur Kelsier](#), Alterac Trade Magnate (Embattled), Merchant Adventurer (Former) .-“

*Light, let my spirit be keener and my heart be bolder as my strength grows less.*

The priests often chided people for only praying when they needed something, but Orsur Kelsier never understood that, even as a child. Most people hated being carped at, especially by people they never met before and much less for literally nothing. He couldn't imagine divinity appreciating having their time wasted any better. The virtues preached by the Church were all about solving your own problems, didn't that mean you were *supposed* to keep your praying to a minimum? The Light itself was supposedly impersonal too, by that logic it cared for useless begging even less, didn't it?

*Look at me having a crisis of faith.*

Orsur paid his respects to Great Tyr and Saint Mereldar, and left pondering how the Light seemed to lack the vicissitudes and vagaries of its agents. The Light's agents were kind, wrathful or what have you depending on the story, but the degree to which they supposedly intervened in the world was inversely proportional to the canonicity of whatever scripture you happened to be reading. The priests were at least real people, and their claims to power rooted in moral decency weren't empty boasts. At least for those that actually got the Light to respond. Unfortunately, none of that made it any easier to know what to expect of the Young Saint. A very unfortunate predicament when fate seemed determined to force him to throw himself at his mercy.

*The Fel Void curse all the 'bandits' and their 'noble' masters to the Twisting Hells.*

You'd think that the purge would have them 'worthies' less prone to pillaging their own country, but apparently not. In fact, it was the opposite. Before the king's... *lapse*, you could at least trust 'bandits' not to venture too far from their camps, never mind sack trade convoys above a certain size, especially those with commensurately armed protection. After all, their on-and-off patrons needed the country's trade to continue functioning in order to make all the gold they needed to waste on hidden blades and power plays. This went doubly as long as you had enough noble banners on your wagons. Or Dalaran's. Even the most infamous 'bandit'

lords tended to leave you alone then, bribes and tolls notwithstanding. It was why even merchants of high means like himself still preferred to attach even their biggest and best defended wagon trains to high profile caravans where possible. Sure, it was expensive, but the extra coin was actually less than having to pay all those aforementioned ‘tolls.’

Even the king’s men had been especially invested in the safe delivery of his alchemical shipment, and not just because of the usual concerns about volatile substances. He got favourable rates not just because of how large it was, but also because it fell under Crown priorities, now. It was enough to confirm all those rumors about actual war preparations that the nobles had been so badly pretending to suppress. Orsur even managed to consult with his old acquaintance that he accidentally helped catapult to the high echelons of the assassin’s guild, back during his adventuring days when he didn’t know the Ravenholdt name from Thoradin, and even he said all the retinues and shipments in the caravan were legitimate.

Imagine his shock when he learned that the highest-profile caravan of the year got sacked by ‘bandits’ despite having not only all the aforementioned identifiers, but also that of the *king*. Oh, how Orsur cursed his past self for not heeding his gut instinct *not* to toss in every last scrap of liquid funds and collateral. And to think all he’d wanted was to pay it forward.

*Here I am talking smack about my past self. Well, joke’s on me, he ruined my life!*

The safest bet of his merchant career had turned into a disaster, he didn’t know who was responsible, he didn’t know how many attacked, he didn’t know who all survived, and he certainly didn’t know any specifics. Like any lives or goods that were conspicuously prioritised or ignored compared to the *other* noble or guild cortege that had attached itself to the same expedition. Never mind the king’s! How Master Narett didn’t hold it against him for wasting his greatest sale since before Orsur even entered the trading business, Orsur had no idea.

*And all at such a terrible time! The trade expedition was supposed to finance our new enterprise, not bring me to the brink of bankruptcy!*

All his attempts to stave off bankruptcy – or worse – were failing one after another. The goods and properties he’d put up for auction were seeing lacklustre response. The information bounty he posted on the notice boards attracted people that were either lying or complicit. All at a time when he didn’t have the coin to keep bodyguards because he needed every scrap to pay his agents’ legal fees instead. Half his agents outside of Alterac City didn’t respond to their communication, despite the high expenses he’d incurred over the years to buy Dalaran

transmission stones. The other half had been arrested on suspicion of fraud and their possessions confiscated, it was absurd, corrupt magistrates everywhere, damn them and their buyers! None of his other sources could get him details on what happened either.

*And now the others in our little conspiracy are eyeing me like a rash to divest themselves of.*

He'd expected it of those who thought he was trying to undermine them, to pay coin for a stronger control of their future enterprise. But even the ones he expected sense from were looking askance at him now. He could understand disdain at request for handouts, Orsur certainly disdained asking for them. But he did not expect the turnaround in attitude to be quite so farcical.

*They certainly appreciated me spreading false rumors and otherwise confusing the whole city about our little golden goose. On my own coin no less, toadies aren't cheap when all you can get is whatever dregs didn't pass muster with the highborn.*

Orsur tried to understand their suspicion, craftsmen and their guilds had a low opinion of merchants for not actually producing anything, while most merchants – and especially merchant *guilds* – tended to respond to that contempt with equal amounts condescension. But understanding and accepting were vastly different things.

*And it seems the Young Saint is suspicious of my best intentions as well.*

The lodgings he had rented for him had gone unused. The only reason the innkeep had anything useful to say was because of how tall the young man was now. The only person who knew the right things to say to claim the lodgings was a 'big lad' that only stopped by to inform the innkeep he wouldn't be using them, thank you kindly and please reimburse my benefactor, before wandering off. The 'big lad' had been joined by a shorter but heavily armed, cloaked companion as he turned the corner, but that was all the innkeep knew. The man had been thoroughly distracted afterwards by 'that little spot of bother a few days past.' A very quaint way to describe a certain duke and his ridiculously long procession of captured 'bandits' personally delivered to the gallows. Orsur appreciated the refund, but he would have appreciated a one-on-one with their saintly patron a lot more, even if that wasn't why he rented the quarters originally.

*At this point I might be better off not attending the meeting at all.*

But he would. He still had his pride.

Finally, he arrived. The city's newest and rawest building. Gloomy too, by virtue of them deferring on whitewash and panelling – and most walls – until they could consult with the mastermind behind all the new *features*. The well-to-do from nearly every trade in Alterac wouldn't normally gather in a construction site, especially for the sort of discussion that could change the face of their country. It was why they decided to hold it there and now regardless. Orsur thought it was foolish, the others weren't half as discreet as he was, it was too much of a risk. But his latest woes meant the others made the final decision without his input. Because it wasn't their fault he was too busy elsewhere, they later said.

That he was only 'busy' keeping his innocent people out of prison made no seeming difference. Orsur wondered if they even cared enough to find out. He hadn't asked, because if it turned out they knew, he might have switched out one of their coins with one of his. The resulting fall from on high would have been tragic and impossible to blame on him, but he was not a that sort of man no matter how often he contemplated it. The merchant's trade was a cutthroat business, but he took pride in his self-control. He never killed anyone except in fair turnabout when the law failed. That was what his years as a merchant adventurer taught him.

He climbed the stairs up to the first floor where the only finished room was. Orsur greeted the others, who were all present already. They showed varying amounts of caution, suspicion, and very little sympathy. Orsur wore his face stony, but inside was absurdly relieved. Their attire was *mostly* what people would dismiss as them dressing down for inspection at a dusty worksite, especially with the uncreatively named foreman Mason Zidar there to 'show them around' in absence of the crew on their day off. More importantly, while the room looked recently swept and dusted, and the chairs and tablecloth were new, they were also foldable and lightweight. This was the room where the construction crew ate and rested, that it still looked the part meant there hadn't been a whole army of servants and delivery people coming in and out of the place for days.

Since everyone looked terribly eager to get back to what they were doing before he arrived, even if that something was literally nothing, Orsur dragged a chair over to the wall and sat down to review the latest paperwork from the magistrate's office. The others were doing well in waiting for the golden goose to arrive before sitting down at the table, but tacit approval was all they seemed willing to accept from him. If that.

*How am I supposed to work with these people long-term? You're only supposed to compete with your competitors, not your business partners!*

Well, prospective ones in this case. They clearly didn't expect to work long-term with him, anymore. The hedging of bets was so painfully blatant, it made Orsur wonder how they got as high as they got in their guilds. This behaviour was what self-fulfilling prophecies were made of.

Dare he hope they *all* belonged to that atrociously lucky sort that had only precipitated the *good* kind of self-fulfilling prophecy up to this point? If nothing else, that was definitely the sort of blind luck he would like to see rubbing off on him right now.

"He's coming," said Gavin Slipknot. As a Master Fisherman, Orsur had no idea what the man thought he could contribute to their nascent enterprise. But as the first person to ever enter a business partnership with their young patron – for a new fishing line spun from *oil*, somehow, that had catapulted him to the forefront of his trade – he had arguably the greatest right to be there. "Quick, everyone get ready."

To Orsur's astonishment, almost everyone stopped what they were doing and began straightening their clothes and hair. Oh, what a change this was from the suspicion and condescension that everyone once treated the Young Saint with! Had it only been a year? Not that he himself had been much better, despite being the only one of this lot who *did* have a background that should have made him more open-minded. But how could any of them have known that the Light had sent down a once-in-a-century genius, back then? Most people still didn't, even the whole 'make people think the Young Saint is three different people' ruse required very little effort on their part, at the end of the day.

Madam Seamstress Tayer was still disbelieving of her assistant's reassurances that yes, your grey hairs really are all out of sight, madam, when the knock came.

Master Builder Zidar adjusted his blue collar and tugged on his cuffs one last time – *you came just as dressed down as the rest of us, man, get a grip* – and opened the door. "Master Hywel! Come..." The man gawked at their patron's height – when *did* he get so big? – before mastering himself. "Come in, come in, we've been expecting you!"

*Making him think he's running late is not the best start.*

"Master Zidar, hello. I hope I'm not running too late."

*Case in point.*

Also, Wayland Hywel's voice had grown deeper too.

“Not at all, not at all, we just happened to arrive early.” *Obvious lies are even worse.* “Had to make sure the place was tidy and all, you know how it all goes I’m sure.”

Wayland Hywel had to stoop to get through the door, they already had the first item on the ‘things to fix as soon as possible’ list. “Well, this is quite the gathering. Greetings all.” Orsur stiffened when the young man’s gaze passed over him, it felt... *extensive*, somehow, had the Light been so self-evident in his eyes before? But they still looked the same, blue with not a hint of gold, although his hair- “Hello to all the new faces, and to the old I’m glad to see you’re all doing... actually only mostly well, Master Keyton, you’ve been injured recently.”

The Master Blacksmith went from gaping at the lad’s size to gaping at his insight. “Erm... Aye, I suppose so, Young Master, but it’s all handled, I’ve always got me some potions nearby.”

“Well, whatever you took wasn’t quite enough. Small cuts, big bruises, a recently broken femur that hasn’t fused right, something heavy fell on you along with a bunch of smaller but sharper things, an accident unloading a crate of weapons or some such I assume?” Wayland Hywel waved down with a finger on the way to the table and the Light came down on Smid Keyton like a column of gold. “There, it’s fixed. Please stay behind after the meeting, though, so I can finally do something about that black lung you’re developing from all the metal flakes and smoke you breathe every day. If anyone else has someone with degenerative diseases, please stay as well so we can discuss it. I’ve developed my skills some.”

*Clearly*, Orsur thought breathlessly as the overflow from the spell washed over the rest of them, making him feel like he’d just gotten out of bed after the best night’s rest of his life. *Does that mean he can actually cure such things, instead of merely ease their burden like the priests?*

Visibly shaken now, Zidar showed the Young Master to one end of the table, lingered strangely in place for a moment and... didn’t take the other end as Orsur was sure had been the plan.

*Well I’ll be.* Orsur rapidly reassessed the situation as he waited with everyone else for the Young Master to sit, before following suit. Orsur knew they’d taken pains to make sure they wouldn’t be sitting higher than their holy patron, pointless though it now turned out to be. The lad was bigger than them by a head. At least. *But this...* Zidar was a master builder, foreman, technical owner of the building – at least until the work was finished – and ultimate instigator of their little scheme. He was also the only *guild* master among them, on top of being a master

of his chosen craft. Orsur had been certain he would claim the head of the table. *Either there was more than one decision made absent of my input, or he only changed his tune right now.*

“Right then,” Zidar cleared his throat, and Orsur had to actively remind himself that this suddenly deferential man was the same one that could make army sergeants feel inadequate with how he ran his work sites. *I’m missing something.* “Introductions first. You know master Slipknot already of course, Young Master Hywel.”

“Glad to see you well, young sir.”

“Likewise.”

“Please be also known to Master Chef Ademar Burch, the one responsible for the food spread you see before you. On his left is, of course, Master Blacksmith Smid Keyton. Next to him is Madame Tayer, senior supervisor of the Fowl Feather tailor guild, next is—

“—The young lady standing behind her?”

“Right, of course, my apologies, her assistant, the young miss...?”

“Ava, my darling keeper of all things stationery,” the matronly woman graciously filled in. “I’d be thoroughly lost without her.”

The girl pretended indifference. Surprisingly well too. “You exaggerate, missus.”

“Quite,” Zidar cleared his throat. “On her left is Melissa Blackthorn, head of the Blackthorn merchant house. Her specialty is in trade abroad.”

The long-haired woman, the only person besides himself who *didn’t* fret over her pristine own appearance while preparing to welcome their guest of honor, inclined her head. “A pleasure. Behind me is my nephew, Albert. He will be my contact at those times when I am not in the city.” Not ‘when I am unavailable’ but specifically ‘when I’m not in the city’, a statement of commitment if ever there was one. “Alas, I expect it to be the case quite often. I am considering a partial shift away from foreign trade to the more domestic arena.”

*Ah, the vulture is already pecking at my corpse, and I’m not even dead yet!*

“There on your right you have Mark Tarren, representative of the miller’s guild over in Tarren Mill.”

The young man nodded, face stony. “My father wanted to come himself, but he bid me ask your forbearance while he finalizes his part of the legalities of your new partnership.” At just

over twenty, Mark was the youngest person there, after the Young Master himself. “He is happy to convey that the waterwheel-powered hammer has proven a monumental success with the local smithies. He has named you equal partner in the endeavour. He conveys he is most eager to explore any other ideas you might have, and has an additional proposition for you, one which he assures you will have no bearing on your existing arrangements whether you accept or refuse-“

“And which can, of course, wait until we see to today’s agenda,” Madam Tayer interrupted, not entirely idly. “At the very least it can wait until we’ve finished introductions.”

*Getting ahead of yourself there, boy. Also, am I the only one who remembers Hywel is the only one who doesn’t know what we’re here for?*

“Quite right,” Master Zidar hastened to move past the impropriety. “Next is Jace Brakelond, a senior in the Horologe Clockmaker’s guild.”

“An honor.” The man had several ‘bandaids’ on his face – another of Hywel’s creations, and currently the major source of *Tayer’s* income, at that – a testament to how thoroughly and often he shaved despite being one of those unfortunate men whose blood ran perilously close to the surface of his skin. “I also count a fairly able jewelsmith among my friends. I am actually representing him today as well, as he is working on an unexpected high-profile commission.”

*Good thing he didn’t drop it, or we really wouldn’t be able to call what we’re doing ‘discretion’ even in our dreams.*

“You know Master Orsur of course, the owner of the Merchant Adventurer merchant house. He’s our current authority on domestic trade.”

*I’d thank you for not tossing my woe out or leaving me for last, if I didn’t know the real reason.*

“Embattled, currently, but I’m willing to defer on my personal drama until it becomes relevant.”

“Something I’m sure we all appreciate,” spoke Master Burch before Melissa could. The man’s diplomacy skill left much to be desired compared to his cooking, but Orsur appreciated the thought all the same. Even if he would have preferred to find out *now* if he should expect more than passive aggressiveness from Blackthorn.

“And finally, next to me is my son, Beran. You’ll be delighted to know that he’s now the world’s first creator of a working oil distillery!”



“*Fractal* distillery.” Seeing as Zidar himself was nearing his fifties, his son was actually thirty himself. The man stood and nodded at Master Wayland. “Your design worked just as you described. Samples have already been delivered to our local alchemist of mutual acquaintance for testing. I foresee much business in the future, regardless of how today goes.”

Finally, everyone was seated. Quiet. Watching. Waiting. The empty seat at the head of the table loomed strangely in the lull.

“I’m glad to meet everyone,” Wayland Hywel finally said when the bizarreness of the situation had been sufficiently indulged. “Now could someone please tell me why we’re all here?”

*Yes, could someone please do that?*

“Quite.” Mason Zidar finally did what a host should have done via their original invitation. “Master Wayland. As the ultimate source of all our best and newest breakthroughs, we would like to hear your thoughts on establishing a new guild.”

(II)

“Master Hywel – or Wayland, may we call you Wayland?”

The Young Master blinked. “I’m willing to reciprocate whatever compromise between formality and familiarity best fits our degree of acquaintance.”

Surprisingly vague for an otherwise earnest person, but not unreasonable when you weren’t sure what approach to take yourself.

“Master Wayland then.” Mason nodded. “I’ll be blunt – those few among us cursed with the wisdom of experience have discerned some of your vision. With respect to its likely impact on our world as we know it, we have gathered here to give it all due mind. However, that’s where the problem lies – we’ve little *besides* due mind to give. The knowledge, the expertise, the manpower, tools, facilities, infrastructure, what you call ‘industry,’ all the things you’d need to make your vision reality simply don’t exist.”

“Well,” Mason’s son hedged with a glance to his father. “‘All’ might be a bit of a strong word.”

“Oh, you don’t have the means to make good on your breakthrough,” Madam Tayer said with a scoff. “Your father, at least, clearly knows it.”

“Which is *why*,” Master Mason grunted. “We believe the only option is to do it all ourselves, even if we need to set the foundation stone by stone. We know you’ve enriched yourself fine, Young Master, from our various individual arrangements, Light knows we certainly have as well. But we’ve reached the limit of what can be done this way, we feel. So we called you here to ask if you can see yourself working as part of a proper guild.”

Madam Tayer refused to leave her point unfinished though. “What he means is that demand already far outpaces the supply of your mortar, for one, seeing as it’s exclusive. That’s just one of many problems.”

“We’re each our own snag as things currently stand, essentially,” said Master Blacksmith Keyton. “In every area that matters.”

“Also, even if alchemists start growing on trees *and* come up with ubiquitous uses for your new oil off-shoots, all the oil goes to the soap and lamp makers anyway,” Tayer added, which Beran scowled at but did not refute.

“I’m sure the Young Master already had ideas for that though,” Zidar said, turning to look at him expectantly. “Am I right?”

“... Sadly no,” Wayland Hywel admitted with casual humility.

The looks around the table made it plain that Orsur was not the only one who’d gone, at some point, from extreme underestimation to extreme *overestimation* when it came to their golden goose.

“I’ve explored both steam and internal combustion,” Wayland elaborated. “The former spawns ravenous elemental spirits, and our alchemist of mutual acquaintance has informed me that Dalaran has long since confirmed much more trouble about internal combustion – oil-based engines, I mean. As in, it can break permanent tears into the Firelands.”

Everyone sat back at that.

“At this point I’m just running face-first into the Arcane, and all my attempts to get a consultation with a mage have been stonewalled.” That added a pall of scowling resentment on top of the uncertainty. “I don’t suppose we have an enchanter here? I’d planned to try looking one up again the past few days, but I was otherwise diverted by other developments.”

*Just two weeks ago I would have been able to get both.*

"I *might* know someone," said cook Burch, surprisingly. "Well, leastwise I might know someone who knows someone. My supplier from the Sparkling Pestle should definitely have someone she gets her enchanted vials from. Can't speak to how many middlemen might be involved though. Them mages are picky."

"I can attempt to collect some tomes on the topic," said Melissa Blackthorn. "It might be harder than usual, however, with that Dalaran toady kissing up to the nobility lately. You can feel the smell of approaching overenthusiastic magic policing a mile away."

*Everyone expects the Dalaran Inquisition.*

An awkward silence descended on the room. Orsur couldn't blame the others, he didn't expect their dream of being the first ever engineers' guild in the history of humanity to be kneecapped either, starting out. *It's really our own fault though. We should have had someone put the idea forward first, getting ahead of meddling nobles be damned.*

Hywel, though, didn't seem at all undone. "Mister Tarren. What was it you wanted to bring up?"

With clear reluctance on his face, Mark Tarren stood and leaned forward to hand Wayland a scroll. "My father offers his firstborn son as an apprentice if you are at all willing to pass on your knowledge of 'engineering,' if indeed it lives up to the name."

*This is news to me*, Orsur thought in carefully hidden astonishment. The firstborn son in question was Mark himself, right there.

"Excuse me?" Keyton broke in with clear affront. "We're here to see about creating the world's first ever engineering guild but your father's already trying to poach?"

*Oh, someone actually deigned to say it? Also, it's just mankind's first guild, the gnomes are a whole nation of them.*

"Certainly not, and I'll be thankful not to hear any more slander aimed at my father, sir. I'll remind you this here enterprise is his brainchild every bit as much as yours."

*Par for the course for the folk outside the city, to cheerfully barge through everyone else's business. Points for pretending erudition so well, though.*

Wayland Hywel gave a small, exasperated sigh.

The ratcheting tension immediately stalled in the face of shared chagrin.

*Not bad.*

The lad not even of majority age beheld the full grown man offering, not at all wholeheartedly, to become his apprentice. “I assume you’ve been learning under your father up to this point.”

“Naturally.”

“By your speech, I might hope you know your numbers and letters as well?”

Young Mark looked affronted. “Of course!”

“What about builder tools? Pencils, paper, rulers, compasses, triangles, water level?”

Tarren lost some of his hostility. “I’ve passing or better familiarity with them, yes.”

“Hammer, screw, screwdriver, spanners, sandpaper, how many kinds of wrenches can you name? Also, have you ever used an anvil?”

Tarren suddenly didn’t look sure of himself anymore and slowly sat back down. “I’m familiar with the first few, but do you mean different size wrenches? I’m afraid I’ve not had cause to use an anvil, no.”

“Alright. What do you know about lightning?”

What?

“... Just about what everyone else does, I imagine.”

Somehow, Orsur doubted that ‘it’s the anger of the spirits of the air made manifest’ was the answer Hywel was looking for.

“That’s pretty much what I expected. *If* you think you can stomach *eventually* studying under someone years your junior, it’s not impossible.” The Young Saint was uniquely expressive. “That said, while you *might* have the intellect, only deeds can speak to your creativity and, more importantly, I’m afraid you don’t have the foundation.” Wayland Hywel managed to be both kind and free of condescension even when telling someone how inferior they were. To their face. Somehow. “Engineering is the creative application of science, mathematics and verifiable evidence for the purpose of making, building or innovating... well, practically anything. Devices, machines, buildings, methods of doing all the aforementioned, creating entirely new materials, even reforming entire organisations if you can think abstractly enough. I don’t claim to be a master of everything, but I do have enough going on that I can’t spare time teaching the basics. At least for another few years.”

Orsur carefully memorised the very thoughtful looks everyone else exchanged while that display unfolded. Nobody seemed indulgent or mistrustful, despite their fresh disappointment of learning their divinely blessed benefactor still had some limits. Certainly no one looked amused. At least not at Hywel.

“You’d be better off doing a... actually, do you even do those here? Apprenticeship tours, let’s call them. When someone goes around learning the fundamentals of several different trades without actually becoming bound to any? Or anyone, for that matter?”

*Here? As opposed to where?*

Mason Zidar looked thoughtfully at Mark. “How many trades would that be, exactly?”

“Construction, blacksmithing and natural philosophy are all a must, but I’d strongly appreciate something highly reliant on manual dexterity as well. I suppose I could ask my father to teach him a bit, cobbling demands enough from the hands, but I’m loath to burden him right now. Jewelcrafting especially comes to mind. And definitely clockwork. The skills needed there would be *extremely* useful, I don’t suppose I can prevail upon anyone already here for this?”

“I don’t see why we shouldn’t,” Zidar said, at once giving his endorsement and looking meaningfully at Jace Brakelond. “Our own clockwork expert should be able to think of someone, I’m sure.”

“As readily as I’m sure Master Zidar is eager to take the lad on himself.” The other man replied with a pointed look back at their host. His reply to Hywel was considering though. “I am tentatively open to the notion. I’ll bring it up with my friend as well, when I next meet him. That said, we’d still need something *discernible* in terms of future business to make such a personal and time investment, even if we find ourselves lacking the palpable projects we hoped to see today.”

Orsur was seriously beginning to wonder what they all had even been hoping for here. They hadn’t even told the boy or his *father* what the agenda was, how was Hywel supposed to prepare... Actually, what was he even supposed to prepare for? A job interview? New business deals? A pitch to make him guild leader, maybe, three years short of majority age? Orsur supposed them treating their golden goose with deference and respect *now* was laudable, but they still seemed to fall short of treating him like an actual person.

Wayland brought up his bag from beside his seat and rifled through it briefly, before pulling out a... folder? It looked like a very large envelope or book cover, only black as coal but flexible as paper. Opening it, Wayland looked through several papers before handing one to the clockmaker. "Do you think making that is within your friend's capabilities?"

Ah. The Golden Saint to the rescue once again. What a shame that this will only enable more of this foolishness in the future.

Brakelond skimmed the paper, then looked taken aback and read through them more carefully. "Silver wire?"

"The physical specifications must be *very* exact. I'm particularly invested in the thickness and purity."

"... This is extremely long wire, what you're describing here. I'm assuming you've not gone completely mad and want to make silver fishing line, no offense master Slipknot but I doubt you consider silver sturdy enough for the job."

"Maybe in a lure," Gavin replied, not entirely unserious. "But somehow I don't think that's what you're talking about."

"I've not concocted a means to rapidly duplicate documents." By which did Hywel mean he *knew* of such a way? Other than copying by hand? Or magic? "So I'm afraid you'll have to share this one. Though, while Master Brakelond goes over that, perhaps the rest of you can give your thoughts on what I mean to use it for." Thus saying, Wayland produced a second, thicker folder which he passed on to the other side of the table.

Orsur tried not to look too disappointed, but it became harder and harder as time went on. Those looks on their faces were not the sort one easily suffered watching in silence. Becoming mankind's first engineering guild was already a tall order, never mind the dangers of malicious rivals and even nobles likely wanting to take them over in the future for their own ends. But what he was seeing now made it look as if these people were seeing something even bigger looming over their future.

"I believe this to be in my friend's capabilities," Brakelond said. "May I keep this to show him?"

Wayland looked apologetic but firm all the same. "I'd rather err on the side of discretion for this. You can verbally convey whatever you can memorise, but I want no writing of this

circulating, for now. I'm not just saying that because it's not written in code. You'll understand once you've read the rest, I hope."

He certainly could stoke curiosity.

*And isn't it interesting how the young lad has thoroughly taken over the meeting? Orsur glanced at Zidar. Not that our host seemed to go out of his way to stop him.*

Finally, the pressure of the stares on their side of the table saw the document given over into their hands. Orsur reluctantly passed on eavesdropping on the ensuing whisper storm in favour of leaning over to read along with the others. By the time Zidar decided to rise from his chair and stand over them to do the same, he was thoroughly engrossed.

No, that term was not strong enough. He knew no term strong enough to describe what he was experiencing right now. He *had* been closer to his mind breaking, back in his youth when he still had to use his coin as much as his knives to get from one market to the next. But he'd never been rattled so much by a document, never mind one outside his specialty. That he more or less understood what was written was as amazing as the contents were unbelievable.

Flow equations, motive forces, lodestones, magnetism, the interactions that could be had without them even *touching*, the most surreal of mathematics...

*Water plus copper equals... lightning?*

No, it was even deeper and simpler, somehow, water was just the most immediately available source of motive force. What really happened was that Wayland Hywel had figured out how to pull lightning out of *rocks*.

Wayland Hywel had figured out how to *make lightning without magic*.

*But why? For what purpose?* Orsur thought dumbly. *And even the Church agrees with the mages of Dalaran that lightning is under the ultimate claim of the spirits of air, am... Am I looking at sacrilege?*

But that was just page one. The rest was entirely given to practical applications.

They were...

Magelights without the mage, heating, cooling, refrigeration – he'd never heard of that word before – self-driving machinery, mechanical forces beyond anything anyone could dream of, plumbing without having to demolish a chunk of the neighbourhood to build a water tower,

never mind build piping over half the capital, with this you could actually harness the springs further down the mountain, all of that on demand, in the home even.

Material purification. Mass production. Automation.

The telegraph.

*Bloody hell, the world will be unrecognizable in less than fifty years!*

“I’m keeping the wireless applications back for now, until I’ve managed to properly assess their impact on the mystical elements that have so inconveniently impaired my other projects. We wouldn’t want the air spirits to decide to kill us all for being too noisy, for example.”

Zidar leaned heavily against Orsur’s chair. “Young Master. Please. Don’t joke about such things. Not all of us have hearts as steady as yours.”

“I’ve seen it happen.”

*WHAT?!*

“What do you mean?” Asked Melissa Blackthorn, her composure finally cracked. “What did you see? A vision of the future?”

“Are we ushering in the world’s destruction?” Keyton joked. Badly.

Wayland shook his head ruefully. “No. It was something in the far, far past, the world was far different, before the here and now, you’d never have heard about it. And it had nothing to do with electricity or air elementals, it was... well, he fancied himself a god and he thought humanity was too loud. Didn’t turn out the way he’d hoped, but mankind had a hard time for a few centuries.”

*What are you talking about? How can you talk about it so blithely?* Orsur looked at the others. *Is seriously no one going to follow up on that?*

Apparently not.

Finally, Smid Keyton sighed and scratched his shaggy hair. “Fuck me. Alright, fine. Let’s turn the whole bloody world upside down, why not?”

“Don’t complain about getting exactly what you wanted.” Melissa Blackthorn sighed and cradled her perfectly powdered forehead. “Alright. Alright, clearly we underestimated the investment we would need, and which we would be thoroughly willing to put into this.”



“Clearly,” Keyton grunted. “My forge is looking a mite inadequate right now.”

“The guilds will *riot*,” Slipknot said, and why the hell was he being so gleeful all of a sudden?

“I can *try* to shoulder the financial burden for this, to start with,” Melissa went on as if she hadn’t been interrupted. “But I’m no longer under the illusion that my coin will be enough. Even if I try and fill in the void that Master Kelsier so inconveniently dumped in our lap, that will still take considerable time. I’d much rather not need the distraction.”

*Well damn, that’s a lot less backhanded than I expected, but..* “So glad to know I only rate as a distraction,” Orsur Couldn’t help but snipe back. That woman’s oh so dignified grousing always made her so unattractive, it was a real shame. “You really shouldn’t do that, I’m not out of business yet.”

Blackthorn favored him with a gimlet eye. “That’s a different tune than the one you sang before, or so I’m told. Have you come into a sudden windfall in the past few days?”

“That’s all down to how this meeting goes, now isn’t it?” Orsur admitted, feeling remarkably unashamed as he finally got to unload some of his frustration. “I know well the sorts of games of passive-aggressive one-upmanship you play, woman. But I’m telling you now, for the first and last time, I don’t play games. Not when lives are on the line, I’ll remind you.”

Blackthorn stared at him for a long time. He stared right back.

Finally, she broke eye contact and daintily rubbed her nose. “Fine. You’ve made your point. Much as I enjoy competition, if we’re to seriously enter this enterprise I’d at least it be of a healthier sort than this.”

“I’d rather not have competition at all,” Orsur groused, finally giving voice to the one, major misgiving he had with these people he’d expected so much better of. “Competition is for competitors, not business partners and certainly not *guild mates*. You don’t see *me* trying to poach anything, do you?”

Mark Tarren glared at him.

Madam Tayer scoffed at the sight. “Don’t you glare at him, boy. Your father was far out of line, and you just as much for not making a proper judgment call, you’re bloody well an adult, you should know better.”

Tarren turned stony once again. “I’ll be sure to let him know you said that.”

“Please do.”

“*After* you leave, which I hope will be *after* we’ve thoroughly dined and wined,” the poor cook still sued for peace, poor man.

“Forget the food, we really do need to think of the other guilds!” Keyton bemoaned loudly. “The other builders will love us, but I’m a blacksmith and I can already see the disaster coming. All the other blacksmiths will hate us! They’ll think we want to drive them out of business, and we will, the ones that don’t change fast enough! And... and the weavers! The thread spinners, the seamsters, Madam you know what I’m talking about, you must.”

Madam Tayer did, indeed, know. “And what do you want me to do about it? I’m just one woman with a few friends and understudies. And if I’m reading things right, I won’t even need more than that. Why should we even care, exactly? They can bloody well suffer the consequences of our actions like every other person.”

*Harsh, but true. If life was fair we’d all be dead.* “Competition is the lifeblood of commerce. Sometimes, you even win.”

“Forget the guilds, what about the highborn? I don’t want to think what the nobility will have to say about this, or... the king!” Tarren snapped, even as he said what they were really dreading the most. “They’ll eat us alive. We’ll have to set up elsewhere, we can’t do this in the capital without *something* going wrong, surely?”

“It *has* to be here,” Zidar groaned as he collapsed back in his chair. “This is where all the business is going to be, *everyone* with a title will want their homes renovated with... wiring and... and new plumbing! We’ll need to bring everyone we know into this, how will we ever vet so many people?!”

The Light passed over them like a wave of youthful inspiration.

Their tirades cut off. Their hearts calmed. Their minds cleared. Their all too justified nerves settled at the back of their minds, present but distant enough that they could no longer interfere with reason.

When Orsur managed to look at their saintly benefactor, Wayland had his chin his hand and was watching them with undisguised fascination. Then the lad looked right at him. “Master Kelsier. You said you were having trouble. Please tell me about it so I don’t need to do any more guessing, hmm?”

Woodenly, Orsur complied. He laid it all out, evenly and concisely. The Light... didn't make his troubles seem any less monumental, but he no longer felt like they were insurmountable. He felt... brave.

No one interrupted him. No one looked at him with disdain or suspicion either, for a wonder. Some were even looking at him with sympathy again. He hated to see it, but was also grateful even if he didn't show it. While it lasted.

"And so I'm practically bankrupt," Orsur finished. "The increased tariffs and contract poaching by the court was already straining my operations, all my other business peers can attest to it. But now, not only have I incurred a historical loss, but half my agents all over Alterac have suddenly been arrested. I *haven't* engaged in any of the things they're accusing them and me of, but with communications cut off I can't categorically confirm that my agents are as clean. I'm expecting the magistrate's next summons any day now, to talk about all the new 'irregularities' again. I know the people to solve this, but I can't bring them on my payroll if I don't *have* one."

"Well," Zidar said awkwardly. "Well, I sympathize, surely, but this isn't exactly what I usually mean when I say that everyone has problems."

"Of course not," Orsur said darkly. "Friendship should never mix with money, I know that well enough."

"Still," Slipknot ventured. "You can hardly fault others for doing the same as you."

*Why the hell are even the fishermen this jaded?*

"I don't really get it, though," Tarren said, his confusion so blatantly fake it was painful. "You seem to have enough for bribes." Of course, why wouldn't a bloody milkdrinker from the arse end of the hinterlands think he knows everything? "Or will you claim you've not been greasing palms with all this in and out of the magistrates office while-?"

"Do you want an honor duel to the death?"

Tarren shut his fool mouth.

Orsur glared him down with a look. "You have a lot of experience with bribes, is that it?"

Tarren had the audacity to glare. "I'll thank you not to insinuate--"

"Insinuating is a damn sight better than what you just displayed, *boy*."

“Didn’t you pay yourself a thousand gold while leaving everyone off with a pittance,” Madam Tayer suddenly threw in.

What is she -? “That’s not...”

“You even let go of your bodyguards.”

*This is why none of you managed to climb any higher in your guilds, your management skills are only less shit than your judgment!* “My people are unjustly courting the gallows, woman, what do you expect me to do!?” Orsur was glad for the Light’s blessing their benefactor had cast, because he was sure he would otherwise have wanted to *throttle* that hag. “Oh blast it, forget it, if you won’t even let me finish answering your own questions, there’s no point in me saying anything else.”

“Actually, maybe you should,” Blackthorn finally lived up to her name, though Orsur, bizarrely, still wasn’t sure who she was stabbing. “There seem to be a lot of unresolved feelings. I, for one, am dying to know everything you kept back. Your reputation is not of such an untalkative man, especially during such an event. What *has* been on your mind, really?”

*If your brain suddenly exploded, would it even mess up your hair?*

Across the table, Wayland Hywel caught Orsur’s gaze. The man felt like the sun came down from the sky to sear his mind clear while he listened to the Young Saint talk about demons and dragons over butter cake. He blinked heavily several times, feeling dazed.

*His eyes... were they golden just now?*

“We should do it.”

Eh?

Everyone looked at Wayland Hywel in absolute surprise.

All the pleasantness was gone from the young man’s face. All that was left was total, calm, unvarnished judgment. “I feel the need to explain something, because clearly no one here understands. When someone in a leadership position gets paid a ‘fortune’ right after a disaster that leaves the entire enterprise in shambles, odds are good he won’t see any of the gold. That coin is, at most, a ‘retention boon’. It’s how you incentivize the one in charge to stay on and see the fallout all the way through. Because otherwise there’s nobody left with access to or understanding of the records, the contracts, the accounting, nothing. All of that needs to be

managed, leveraged, and in this case, presented to the court and arranged to be unwound in an orderly manner.”

Orsur clenched his fists and pointedly didn't look at any of the others. How was it that the only one who actually understood anything was a *child*?

“Now, the security always should be the last to go, in my opinion. But in this case, they apparently *were* the last to go. Clearly, Master Kelsier stopped paying them because at this moment they are more a burden than help to his priority of saving the people actually essential to his business. None of this is invalidated by the fact that he paid money to do all this work to himself. That money is a financial and legal necessity to wind it all down, and even the most honest magistrate will recognize and encourage this. Now, perhaps he did have to pay bribes, but honestly, are we going to pretend Alterac isn't overburdened with obstructionist third son bureaucrats?”

No one said anything.

“As galling as it is, paying to grease palms is a necessity in this city. Overall, it seems to me like Master Kelsier is only looking to afford those people of actually relevant skills he needs to help him avoid messy court complications that could land him and all his *innocent* people in the dungeons, or worse. Somebody needs to swear to the court that all his accounting is honest and true. That he's doing this himself instead of paying someone else is, honestly, more nobility than I've seen from all the king's court.”

That... well... curses, now he was getting all misty-eyed.

“Master Orsur. You're asking for a loan, if I'm understanding right.”

Orsur nodded stiffly. “That's right. I'm willing to put up my share of the guild ownership as collateral.”

“Yeah, we won't be doing that.” Wayland Hywel decided, putting a sudden and final end to the absolutely farcical pretense that anyone was in charge there but him. “If we're seriously going to form a guild together, there won't be hanging threats. We won't be doing handouts either. We can just offer a contract of remuneration to be doled out in portions over the next year. I expect that's what you're doing yourself with your essential employees, while this mess is dealt with?”

“They-“ he cleared his throat, felt a bit cloggy there for a moment. “My people are more interested in stable employment than to cut and run with a quick and dirty paycheck.”

Wayland nodded, then gravely stared down everyone else. “Taking responsibility for a collapsing business is no small matter when the courts could have you de-handed or hanged. We’ll need to see if we can pay for the legal defense of the agents as well. Call it an investment, this won’t be any different than co-opting any other business fallen on hard times, which I assure you we’ll be doing a lot of in the future. To be honest, I expect this to be the first of many challenges coming our way if you’re serious about this enterprise. Call it our trial by fire if you wish. I’m now putting this matter to a vote.”

There was a long silence.

Then Melisa Blackthorn, of all the devils, leaned back in her chair and said. “I second the motion.”

*That... that’s it?*

“Thank you, milady.” Wayland nodded. “Everyone, please be ready to vote by the time we disperse. In the meantime, now that we’re done with the histrionics, let’s see what we can do so everyone comes out of this ahead. I have a few ideas that should turn out lucrative for each of you individually while our main enterprise gets off the ground.”

*That’s it?*

They talked forth. They talked back. They ate food. They drank wine. They talked back and forth some more. Their saintly patron spoke of miraculous medicines, spinning wheels, canning, punch cards, ways to make cotton almost as fine as silk, wool almost as soft as cotton but still wick sweat and heat, brocades, soda, baking soda that had the master cook salivating, blow torches, spot welding, steel forging methods never before seen, uses for copper that could make it more valuable than silver, a miracle metal you could only smelt by mixing it with an invisible underwater rock – what in Heaven? - he didn’t stop until he had something that could make each and every one of them rich even if their grand plan never found its wheels. By the end of the day, the prospect of future profit had well and truly soothed whatever wounds anyone and everyone had suffered at the cruel hands of facts and common sense.

They voted aye to take on all of Orsur’s legal expenses for the next year, with just one absentee and Tarren abstaining on account of lacking his father’s authority.

*That's it?*

That's all it took? The greatest trial of his entire life... His problems were all solved, just like that?

*I-*

He...

*I need to-*

He needed...

*... I need to know what you call prayers when you're just giving thanks.*

(III)

“-so I suppose this is the best framework we can devise, for now,” said Zidar when they at last finalized their preliminary guild charter. “This should give us the sort of formalized, professional arrangement that prospective clients will take seriously, while still letting us procure all the materials, products and services unimpeded. Well, relatively speaking. We’ll need all of that for the sort of multi-layered and complex projects and renovations we’re expecting now. Especially if we’re going to pool enough funds to finance assembly lines – while we can expect them to pay for themselves within months, initial investment should still be considerable.”

“Not to mention this will spare us having to seek noble patronage,” Orsur said idly. “Having one holding our leash would rather put us at risk of losing other nobles as clients.”

“All of whom will want *everything*,” Zidar grunted.

“Specially with how tense things are right now,” Keyton scowled. “Feels like all the orders I’ve been getting have been for swords, knives and more knives! What are they even preparing for? Those aren’t proper war arms.”

It was a rhetorical question. Everyone knew what was going on that the king’s purge had only made worse instead of better.

“And they so love their vanity,” sniffed Madam Tayer. “But we need to use it fully if we’re to hope they don’t impound us and pass a law to forbid anyone but the nobility from owning such scalable means of production. It won’t be easy on the nerves though. What do you want to bet they’ll want everything to look the same even after the work?”

“Lightning lines may be possible to install unobtrusively,” Mason tried to be optimistic. “But plumbing can’t, especially if they want hot water, we’ll need to do a lot for that, it will probably take fake walls and higher flooring to conceal things. We’ll need mass production running as fast as possible, at least for the woodwork, they’ll want fine, identical flooring, wainscoting, panelling... practically every known trade expertise will need to be involved.”

“We’ll need a foundry before I can commission the proper gear work,” Brakelond noted, crossing his arms. “I hope your peers will pull through, Keyton. One blast furnace probably won’t be enough.”

Keyton gave Brakelond a deadpan look. “You don’t say.”

“We may need to look outside the country as well,” Blackthorn mused, swirling her wine glass. “And that might be our biggest hurdle, especially for clients who want certain magical effects or enchantments integrated. I’ve been hearing stirrings about Dalaran imposing tariffs on their side. There’s already been a wave of renegotiated contracts with harsher terms.”

“Truly?” Brakelond frowned. “Why would there be tensions with Dalaran? Do we need to see about divesting ourselves of the Auction House as well?”

“I’m not sure,” Melissa admitted. “If we did, though, we’d hardly draw too many eyes after how many others have already done the same. It all depends on how quickly we can grow our guild auxiliaries.”

“Well, I’m certainly relieved that so many high-placed experts didn’t gather just to tell me my inventions are too troublesome,” Wayland Hywel jested before he left the others to grumblingly draft copies to all the paperwork required. The tall young man came over to Orsus then instead. “Master Kelsier. A private word, please.”

“Of course.”

As soon as they were nearer a corner, Orsus felt the air... do something and suddenly he couldn’t hear anything from the others, and even looking at them was hazy like... like looking through steam? Or hot air from a fire?



This was *not* the Light's work. He'd seen enough to know that much.

"I need to know what all was in that shipment you lost. Please be thorough."

*Oh no...* Orsur complied. Wayland Hywel just looked down at him until he got to the alchemical shipments. Then he began asking very specific questions.

When he was done, Wayland rubbed a hand over his face. "I'm hiring myself out to help with your ledgers."

What? "I'm... not sure I understand."

"There was an ambush on Duke Angevin's retinue just two days out via the Valley pass, you heard about it yes? They set up a rockslide which they *would* have set off using an alchemical mixture which, in my admittedly fudged estimates, would amount to just about the same ingredients as your shipment."

Orsur's heart sunk to the bottom of his stomach. "Oh."

"We'll have to confirm it with Narett, but I'm quite strongly inclined to that conclusion. I can't begin today, there's another obligation I have to discharge first. But from tomorrow or at least the day after, I'll be able to stick with you at least for the next month or two. Officially I'll cross your T's and dot the I's, I can do that much. Unofficially, I'll *try* not to do too terrible a job as a bodyguard. I hope you'll let me vet the people you mean to hire on as well, I've developed my skills there some too."

"Yes! Yes, of course." What was happening right now? Was Orsur such a loose end that a literal Saint thought-

"Do you already use double entry bookkeeping?"

"Yes."

"That'll make things easier. Now if you'll excuse me, I need to finish my business, and hire a carrier to let my family know, I also need to have the things I got on my errands delivered..."

*What did I do? What did he do, who had he offended?*

"Anyway, let's draw up a contract for that too." The air wall dispersed. "Master Keyton! And Master Slipknot as well since you're here anyway, if you could please witness this here little thing."

*Little thing, this is my life!* A literal saint divine couldn't see a way forward for him except being escorted everywhere by a walking divine intervention. Wayland Hywel had just offered to drop everything just to prevent him from getting his fool self killed, why was this happening? The king's own men had – Jorach had said – no, Jorach wouldn't set him up, surely? They had history – and there was no point – blast it all, since when was *he* an easy target?! It was ridiculous!

Keyton and Slipknot both gave them odd, searching looks when they saw what document they'd drafted, but they exchanged a look and didn't ask questions before adding their signatures without comment.

Orsur parted with the others feeling at once elated and alarmed.

Half-way home, a man at the corner of Well and Fowler revealed himself as a moneylender. Orsur actually considered the shady offer until the interest rate was implied. Instead, he detoured and mentioned the man off-hand while dropping some wine with the 'brave crownsmen' of the guardhouse a neighbourhood over. The Gilnean Sweet was wasted on such thugs, but sometimes your only option was to lean on the resentment of the rival officer for not getting as much bribe money. It was probably too much to hope that the usurer would have his hands cut off, but at least this way it wouldn't be just the *honest* merchants having a hard time.

He reached his neighbourhood uninterrupted after that, finally. Dare he hope for an uninterrupted sleep?

“Caw.”

Orsur almost stumbled and gaped at the bird. It was a raven. A raven had just cawed. Not like a real caw, it said 'caw' as if it was a human saying it.

“It's making fun of us,” said the wife of the most distant neighbour he still bothered to stay familiar with, where she was putting clothes up to dry across the fence. “It spent the past few days waging a one-fowl war on the entire flight of pigeons loitering around the market. We, of course, all yelled encouragement, and then tried to make it feel welcome after it actually won, if you can believe it. Now it likes to haunt people and say 'caw' at us.”

“Caw,” the raven said, fluffing its feathers and then flying off to say 'Caw' at... a raggedly cloaked thug. One who looked up to glare and shoo the bird away, thus revealing his face. The face of the guard sergeant from the neighbourhood where the moneylender had been.

*What the devil?* Orsur thought, pretending nothing was wrong as he nodded in goodbye to the woman but took a detour through the next side alley. *What is he doing here? Was he in on the swindler's doings? Is he angry I tattled on him? But he can't have already found out, and to do this in broad daylight...* Orsur took off his cloak, turned it inside out and put it back on with its hood up before peered around the next corner. *Thuggish disguise, but you can't completely hide that posture and the armour beneath the cloaks. There's a whole squad here, doing... not the worst job of staking out a place I've ever seen, damn.* He withdrew to the shadows. *My home is being watched. Do they mean to arrest me? But then they wouldn't need to dress up like ruffians.*

Withdrawing further, he retraced his steps and left a different way than he came, hoping nobody would think to ask the woman about him. He... wasn't guilty of anything so he didn't *need* to resist arrest, but after what Master Wayland told him, his gut instinct was yelling loudly to go quietly anywhere *but* their direction.

He wandered the streets on a circuitous path as he tried to reassess his situation. When he was one street away from his favorite inn, he detoured right through the place. Casually informing the innkeep that his erstwhile guest might come over in the following days after all – *good thing we settled on this as the meeting spot for the morrow* – he then borrowed one of the rooms. Once there, he turned all his other clothes inside out as well, turning from red and blue to the grey and black of chimney sweeps. He also attached a fake beard and moustache he always carried just in case, and put on a pair of very thick spectacles. *One should always maintain good habits, and two-faced clothing remains one of the best.*

Orsur went down to the den and sauntered as if he belonged there, just as two of the same guards came in, their hair more tussled than windswept, they must have had more than a cloak to take off to look presentable again. *Whatever they want me for, it's not legal, especially if the sergeant won't risk showing his own face.* Orsur looked at the door and weighed the risk of exposure from making a run for it, against the likelihood that the guards would want to cause a scene. His disguise felt more and more thin the more he waited. The Survivor's Bag of Coins hung heavy on his belt. The day had given him little hope that he could trust sense and reason to prevail anymore. If either man had any brain in their head they might still see through-

“Whoa, now!” came the bombastic voice right as the guard Sergeant's roving eyes turned to him. “Good man, what's with that face? You look like you're contemplating murder!”

Who-? Oh confound it, of all the people he could possibly have run into, it had to be him. “Blindi.” It wasn’t even his real name, nobody knew what it was, the same way nobody knew where he lived, if he had family, what he did for a living, nothing. Oh, Orsur did *not* have time for this! “Still not sober?”

“Sobriety is for hops guzzlers!” The man got in his face and looked right at him as if his eyes weren’t both cataract-white. “What’s with the raincloud?” The booze breath almost knocked Orsur off his feet. “Want to talk about it? Shared woe is lessened you know! Come on, come on and let this old man buy you a drink!”

The old foggy talked as if he wasn’t the terror of drinking establishments everywhere. “I’m afraid I’ll have to pass.” He was already in trouble for crimes he didn’t commit, no way would he also be caught consorting with the man that had driven half of the purveyors of spirits in Alterac city out of business over the past fifteen-some years. “I just came out of an important meeting and-”

“Pssh, and that’s more important than spilling your woes over a pint?!” The man stomped all over his refusal, hooking an arm around his neck and all but dragging him through the throng of patrons, to which the guards rolled their eyes and looked away in disgust, well now!

“You know, on second thought why not?” Orsur changed tune, feeling only slightly guilty at taking advantage of the old timer. The ruinous scale of the man’s bar brawls was exceeded only by his bizarre ability to evade reprisal. The few places that didn’t immediately throw him out these days only refrained because they feared noble retaliation. They thought he was some sort of spy. “My day’s been a real killer, I need to unwind – but it’s too stuffy to stay inside. I’ll take your offer outside, and only a sip!”

“Only a sip he says, kids these days, lily-livered and stomach made of wafer!”

*Whatever you say old timer.*

The next five-some minutes were spent indulging Blindi’s bombastic grousing and pretending to drink beer while subtly maneuvering them farther and farther from the door every time the drunkard stumbled into him. Not for the first time, Orsur wondered why those hapless nobles kept hiring this tippler to play Greatfather Winter every Winterveil. Unless they were *looking* for a reason to execute him? But surely it couldn’t be that hard to confect something, they did it for everyone else just fine. Half of the highest nobility were killed that way just last year, and now look! It was the ultimate source of the mess he was in right now.

“Thanks for the drink, Blindi, but I really have to go now, have a good day!”

“Definitely better than yours, boy!” *I’m forty*. “Ridiculous lad, can’t stomach an honest mug’s mirth, what’s the world coming to?”

Orsur almost let loose his barbed tongue that he was so careful not to unleash except on the truly deserving, but even disregarding that he was on the run, one thing stopped him – the old drunk somehow seemed to know *everyone*. If he *wasn’t* some sort of spy for the nobles, he must have dirt on those nobles *and* the ability to survive whatever they’ve thrown at him in response. Also, as insufferable as he was, he had just helped him dodge... *potentially* mortal danger.

He wandered the city until he was sure no one was following him anymore, then checked into a room at the grungiest inn he could find that still offered individual rooms. He wasn’t low enough to lead trouble to anyone’s door, nor was he desperate enough to resort to a flophouse where he would have a dozen innocents and no walls between him and knives.

He trapped his door and spent a tense, sleepless night listening to every voice and creak, intersped with peering through the cracks in the dirty curtains. He was almost ready to breathe a sigh of relief when dawn broke, only to spot cloaked figures stepping up to cut off both ends of the alley below.

*I definitely lost all my trackers before*, Orsur thought grimly. *That they still found me means expertise they never showed before, or magical aid.*

Pondering his options, Orsur changed back to his better clothes. The din from below became suddenly unnaturally muted, footsteps were heard coming up the stairs, all attempts to move silently up to his door failed badly.

Orsur grabbed his night bucket and threw it at the door just as the thug smashed through it. The man went down in a shower of piss and shit, cursing just as the trap triggered, giving the next two a full dose of powdered mustard as well, right in the eyes.

More curses, screams-

CRASH

Splinters and shards flew around him as Orsur jumped out *through* the window.

The drop was long. The ground came at him fast. He palmed a coin from his Survivor's Bag of Coins and tossed it down.

A pillow of wooly counterforce broke his fall *just* enough that his ankles didn't outright sprain.

He snatched the bouncing coin out of the air, then he was running – flick, toss – the thugs ahead were blown away one after another, the ones at the next bend got the same, beyond those were four – *so many, just for me?* – so he skid to a halt, turned the way he came and *almost* managed to make it out the opposite way before he was herded to a dead end – flick coin at the ground.

The counterpush threw him up just enough that he was able to grab onto the ledge and pull himself onto the roof. Barely.

“Hnngh!” Sharp pain made Orsur clutch at the side of his neck. *Agh, please, Tyr, let it just be a torn muscle, don't let it be the veins!*

“The fuck?” “Where is he?!” “He's on the roof!”

*Move, move!*

Orsur scrambled to his feet and stumbled the next half a dozen steps, seeing grey from the pain in his neck every time he tried to turn his head. *Fuck, I'll never live down scaling Ravenholdt Manor, will I?* His legs still worked enough to let him cross the next three roofs, then it was one more coin flick and he landed on the main street. None of his pursuers were in sight, but...

*Can't stay here.*

He managed to sprint, duck and power-walk all the way to the main city district, reaching the next to last street before the market square when the crossbow bolt smashed into his back.

“ACK!” He only didn't fall because a wall was in the way. *This is because I wouldn't let you throw my agents under the bridge, isn't it?* Orsur thought dazedly at... he didn't even know. He dug blindly through the Survivor's Bag of Coins as he half-ran, half-stumbled out of the last street straight into a knife through the gut.

“Hurkh.”

The steel was cold, but it burned.

“Finally out of tricks, you bastard?” The killer thug hissed as he pushed him back into the alley and out of sight.

Orsur felt the cut. He tasted blood. It wasn't the sergeant. He spat in the man's face anyway.

"Ugh!" The smug 'thug' shut his eyes in disgust.

Flick.

The coin shot up the same moment Orsur's other hand pulled out his hidden knife and stabbed the man down through the neck.

The guard's face slackened in shock. He clung to his knife like a lifeline as he fell. The steel burned even colder on the way out. Somehow, Orsur still grabbed the man's crossbow. It was loaded.

He unloaded it in the face of the next thug who caught up from around the last corner.

His legs failed him just as the sergeant himself caught up with him.

"Finally out of tricks you b-"

The coin fell just behind him.

The force blast hurled both of them through the air, out of the alley and into the open where the morning crowd was *just* thin enough that people managed to get out of the way. Orsur skid to a halt in the middle of the road, rolling to his back in full view of every stall and their throngs of customers. He felt when the bolt drove deeper in him, could feel his life leaving him even without actually feeling the blood gushing out. He looked at the nearest person and desperately gurgled out a- "H-help... Murderers!"

Finally, the screams came. Shrieks of shock, mothers covering their children's eyes and ears, the nearest men jumped onto the 'thug' to hold him down, loud and louder calls came for "Guards, Guards!"

*Got you, you bastard!*

It was a shit last thought, but it was his.

Death was a distended view of screams, confusion and more confusion, darkness oozing from the ravenous maws of some strange devil beast one fourth the size of the world, a tunnel of many colors ripping through it, wings flapping, a large, dainty hand reaching out to pull his soul away from the ravenous eldritch darkness trying to suck him in... Then his next great adventure in the arms of a beautiful shining angel was jarringly thwarted by the raven from the day before.

The black bird landed on the angel's shoulder in a flutter of wings and annoyance thick enough to blot out the great swirling vortex of heaven. "This is why I don't bother with anything less than *proven* mettle."

Below, someone in the squirming and yelling man pile finally uncloaked the thug and discovered the sergeant getup beneath.

*How could I be killed by someone so sloppy?* Orsur wondered in dismay. *Don't I even merit a proper assassin?* Perhaps Jorach really *had* done all he could for him if this was the best that could be rustled up. But still, they were so incompetent! *I've had to walk around the city over very long hours in order to stay atop the mess I'm in, why didn't they come for me before?* Why didn't they wait to corner him the next night, even, why do this in broad daylight? If it was a cover-up, it was the sloppiest he'd seen. Even the proper ones didn't often work. Even if everyone heard the official story, the truth always show up soon after from a dozen different sources. Even if his last gambit failed, everyone will know the truth within days regardless, no matter what the kingsmen say about Orsur from here out.

"It's never about fooling the people," the raven said in disdain. "People are too smart for that. The point is always to warn them 'this is what I say is truth and right, and you had better not say otherwise or step a toe out of line like this fool or else'. Your king's heralds and town criers aren't there to inform or persuade, they're there to humiliate. To make everyone party to the lies, the same evil."

"And so valor is almost impossible to find in Cities such as this," the Angel spoke, what a beautiful voice!

"Not much good sense either," the raven sniffed, glaring at him. "When the gods send you portents, you're supposed to heed all of them!"

*But what did I do?*

Suddenly, Light erupted from the ground in a great wall around the scene of the crime... just in time to stop the crowd from dispersing like the corrupt guard sergeant's newly summoned compatriots had nearly succeeded in doing. Cries of surprise turned to awe and hushed amazement. Orsur's murderer was struck silent just before he might have completely talked his way out of the situation. When had it all happened?

*How much time did I just miss?*



“Is it the priest?” people wondered.

They didn’t wonder for long.

“The Young Saint,” came the murmurs and pointed fingers as the tall young man in question became visible over the gathered throng. “It’s him!” “Surely not...” “He’s real?” “I thought he was made up by them nobles to keep us quiet!”

The murmurs continued on and on as Wayland Hywel walked up to stand next to Orsur’s dead body. The Light was bright upon his face, shining from a mighty symbol centred on his brow, bright but not at all blinding. He looked over the gathered people. Looked at the guards. Looked very closely and long at the foul murderer. Then he looked down at Orsur again and went to one knee to lay a hand on the gaping wound in his stomach.

“Your-you-citizen!” the murderer was visibly shaken and afraid, but still had the gall to speak up, here, now, how dare he? “You are interfering in an official Crown investigation. This man has... been convicted of fraud, larceny, and was suspected of several counts of murder, most recently that of a bailiff. He was not content with resisting arrest, but instead brought great harm to the officer and his protective detail, even killing two before finally being brought down for the safety of all. This was the last straw in a long life of disregarding all honourable duties. His idea of profit was to ruin the poor. He made his business out of jeering language, swindling, and extortion, tarnishing the whole course of his life with an evil reputation. He was prepared to allow no one's innocence among his competitors, but launched wrongful charges against all, and was at the height of happiness when something lamentable occurred in another's fortunes. He toiled most of all to undermine any other honest business by clever, underhand investigations, and even lashed out at harmless characters whenever he could find some treacherous opportunity to-“

“Have you no shame?”

The Light came down with the force of all Heaven’s judgment on them both, bright and terrible.

Wayland Hywel didn’t look up from the wound.

Haedobard Menag fell over dead, his mind seared blank, his spirit burned to cinders, his soul sent screaming into the ether to be pulled down into the ravening maws of-

“No.”

The angel's sword came down. The soul was cut loose of the seeking tendrils, free instead to be sucked up through the vortex in the sky to whatever came after.

“Not even for scum such as that.”

The maws screeched in outrage and unquenchable thirst but went wholly ignored.

The Light began to glow from within Orsur's injury, then a column of golden brilliance erupted through and around it, enveloping it, enveloping the Young Saint, enveloping *them* where they hovered on angel wings, latching on them, infusing them, rising further and further up like a great spire to pierce the swirling clouds, *demanding*.

*What is happening?*

“There are debts owed to me, val'kyr. By you and your high god.”

The raven squawked.

In *delight*.

“I'm not that easy!”

*That doesn't add up...*

The angel descended from the sky. From where his soul was held like a babe in her arms, Orsur saw the precise moment when her form became visible to all. The people looked upon at them and felt awe. Many fell to their knees. More were brought to tears. Prayers rose from all in sight, hushed and reverent.

“You would spend it on this one?” Her voice resonated loud and clear as a bell. “He is nothing, no one, barely a wisp on the winds of fate.”

*Am I truly so worthless? But then why-?*

“Yet you would still ascend him.”

“Even so he is barely worth my debt, never mind my lord's.”

“Then I'll just have to call that debt in bits and pieces as we go along.”

“You are bold, Prophet. But how clearly do you see the consequences that will result from this?”

“Clearly enough.” Wayland met the angel's eyes, unafraid. “Valor is but one part of worth.”

The angel gazed at the man. The man gazed back. The multitudes knelt all around them with baited breath.

The raven pecked the angels' ear.

"... As you wish."

The angel held Orsur out. Knelt next to his body, her wings unfurled above him like a baptism shroud. Lowered him over it, into it, taking all the Light the Young Master gave to weave together the loose threads of spirit, body and mind back through his soul.

Orsur Kelsier came back to life with the sweetest gasp of breath he'd ever experienced in his entire existence. The next one was even sweeter, and the next. And the next after that and the next after that and-

"Come on, Master Kelsier, up you go."

He obeyed, rising to his feet when tugged, putting one step after the other when directed, once again he realizing the truth a little too late. "We're going the wrong way," he rasped, pointing to the proper street. "It's that way."

"Then that's where we'll go, good man."

The crowd parted before them, knees bent and heads bowed.

"The guild," Orsur stumbled through his words, but where his body was still so sluggish that Wayland literally had to hold him upright, his mind was clear. "The others, are they – was anyone else-?"

"They're fine, as life goes. You were the only one aggrieved. They did choose your name for the guild, in the end."

*The Wheel Everturning.*

The words had much more meaning now than a day ago.

The guard at the far end of the market square stared at them, frozen in fear at their approach.

"... Y-your... Worship? We-I-I must request that you-"

"Next person who gets in my way I'll call the Light to judge like the dirty sergeant over there."

The guard swallowed dryly, eyes glistening while his breath rattled in his chest, then bowed his head humbly and stepped aside, falling to his knees in prayer like all the rest to let them pass.

“Come on, Master Kelsier. Let’s get you home.”