

IV- Foreigners

After only a short period of time that he spent being God-King, Morlicht already understands why his predecessors tended to rule from their own building. The throne hall is far from comfortable to say the least. The air inside is always terribly stuffy and the seat makes his back hurt even despite multiple pillows that he put on it. It appears that the chairs given to the advisors are more pleasant to sit in. Morlicht wished to hold the royal auditions in his room but Aharon strongly discouraged him, saying that it was an ‘insult to the tradition’.

And there were quite a lot of royal auditions. Following his miraculous escape from the assassination attempt unscathed according to the official version, he gained a lot of popularity. In reality, when he got back to the city his wounds healed quickly. The poison did not kick in either. Morlicht was completely fine after only a few hours of rest. This resulted in the Assirian people putting a lot of faith in him.

Unfortunately, Morlicht is not able to solve their problems. The priests avoid allowing ordinary, sick people inside the throne hall as they are painfully aware of the fact that he can’t perform such miracles as healing. Instead, most of Morlicht’s auditions are just him picking the correct advisor to solve the visitor’s problem for him. He has quite the knowledge himself but does not want to overstep – after all the priest-officials are much better qualified and more specialized than he is.

In the face of all this, Morlicht is worried about people finding out that he’s useless. He knows that Aharon is trying his best to keep the charade up but it is only a matter of time before people realize that the God-King is not solving any major problems or making miracles.

He spends a lot of time trying to push his limits and see what he’s able to do. Unfortunately, it isn’t easy to use his very limited divine powers. In fact, it is pretty much impossible to do just like that, meaning that he can only perform slight miracles when he needs them. The only thing that seems to work almost every time is stealth. Maybe it’s not invisibility but he can make it so that people don’t notice him at all which is pretty useful considering that some recognize him as the God-King.

The worst part about him being unable to perform miracles on a whim is that he is sure that there is a part of him that can do that. In fact, Morlicht feels like the more the things he wants to do align with that part, the more likely it is to comply with his demands. The problem is that he is unsure which things those are.

One day, Morlicht is sitting in the throne room and performing extremely boring kingly duties. It’s mostly just him being caught up on the inner affairs of the city and country by various visitors – he is told about such things as disasters that strike smaller cities of Assir. And he knows about those cities himself – knowing the country was a large portion of his education, even though he was raised outside of it. Sometimes he orders aid to be sent, sometimes he gives his blessing to those affected by the terrible event.

But this one encounter is not like the other bland and boring ones. When the military officer in full, ornate armor walks in, Morlicht knows that there is something interesting going on.

“We have foreign prisoners who caused public unrest. It only seems fitting that you personally judge them as God-King.” he says.

“There is no need...” Aharon starts but Morlicht interrupts him “I will do it. Where are they?”

Morlicht follows the guard down to the palace basement. He is led into a room where a very angry local man with a black eye is shouting at an equally angry but restrained by two guards woman with a light complexion and golden hair. A foreigner. The man and the woman are exchanging death threats, slurs and other unpleasanties while the officers actively prevent the girl from jumping to someone’s throat.

“Take her away.” Morlicht says, wanting to talk to the local man in peace. For some reason, he is really excited for it. After the two guards leave with the restrained woman, he walks up to the furious man.

“Let me see your eye first.” he says, carefully examining the wound. A plum-like discoloring encircles his left eye. It does look nasty but every wound of this type does. Fortunately, there doesn’t seem to be any permanent damage that won’t be gone in two weeks. He gently touches the area, wishing for the wound to heal but it doesn’t seem to be of any effect. Healing seems to be entirely beyond Morlicht’s abilities.

“It should go away on its own in around two or three weeks.” he says.

“Thank you, your divine majesty.” the man says, folding his hands in a thankful gesture.

“Now please sit down and tell me what happened.” Morlicht says, seating himself.

After taking his seat, the man begins speaking. He seems very angry about the whole incident. “This animal! I was minding my own business, selling some dates... She and that... that brother of hers approached me as if they were regular customers. But was I wrong! Instead of buying some fruit, the man tried to cheat me... and when I called him out on it, that bitch lunged at me and punched me in the face.” he points at his black eye with his finger “Scum like this need to be smitten! We should not be letting any of them into our beautiful empire!” he shouts angrily. Morlicht does not like the man but does not let it show. He needs to keep a good image in the eye of his citizens.

“Very well. I will personally see to it that she is punished adequately.” Morlicht says.

“Not just her but make sure that her brother-lover gets the same punishment! Those blasphemers are an offense to your glory, your majesty!” he keeps shouting. Morlicht puts his hand on the mans shoulder and says “No need to worry, you can go rest, good man.”

In seconds, he calms down and leaves as if he’s in some sort of a trance. Morlicht glances at his own hand, surprised that he was able to do something like this. Well, that’s surely a useful skill.

“I’d wish to speak to the woman now.” he tells the guards who already came back. A few minutes later, the furious woman is brought into the room. Now that she isn’t exchanging slurs with the date salesman and the situation is at least a bit more calm, Morlicht can take a good look at her. Blonde hair tied in a ponytail, militaristic clothes – her appearance seems to be very utilitarian. Around her waist, there is an empty sword holster. From the looks and attire, she appears to be Shailish. Quite a long way from here.

“Oh, so I’m worthy of the God-King’s time?” she scoffs and tries spitting at Morlicht but misses. She is noticeably less angry than earlier though.

“It appears so.” he says diplomatically “I would like to hear your version of the story too.”

“I demand a fair, unbiased trial!” she says, ostentatiously turning her head away from him. Morlicht chuckles quietly.

“I believe that having your faith decided by a God is the fairest trial you can get around here.” he says.

“If that’s the fairest, then there are absolutely no fair trials around here!” she proclaims. The guards restraining her arms are visibly concerned that they are about to witness the God-King’s wrath. But Morlicht feels no anger. In fact, he is enjoying himself more than he has in a very long time.

“Let’s presume that there are no fair trials in Sahvestar, maybe even in the entirety of Assir. Then wouldn’t it make sense to attempt to do your best in the biased, unfair trial that is happening here right now?” Morlicht asks. The expression on the woman’s face changes from intense anger, to confusion into a grimace that seems to indicate intense thinking. After good thirty seconds, she finally relaxes.

“All right. I will cooperate with your trial” she says calmly but with a slightly mocking emphasis on the word “trial”.

“Leave the two of us alone.” Morlicht orders.

“Bur, your majesty, she is dangerous.” one of the guards says, visible concern painting on his face. Morlicht looks him in the eyes and smiles.

"Do you really think that she is of any danger to a God like me?" he asks rhetorically "You can wait in the corridor up from here, it's the only way out, isn't it?"

The guards let go of the woman. She calmly sits down in the chair in front of Morlicht while the two men watch carefully in case she tries to pull something off. After nonverbal assurance from the God-King they reluctantly leave, but they do so while still glancing over their shoulders on their way out.

"So, your version of the story." Morlicht says, relaxing in the chair.

"Me and my brother went to buy some fruit. We ended up at that man's stand where my brother tried to bargain with him." she pauses for a second "And then the bastard begin aggressively waving his arms, yelling at my brother and insulting him and me... telling us to go back where we came from..." she stops as if she was trying to recollect her thoughts.

"And then what?"

"...and then I punched him in the face." she says with full confidence, as if it was a completely normal thing to do. For a second, Morlicht does not have a clue what to say.

"You do realize that's a crime, right?" he asks, just to make sure. He does not recall Shailand having laws where such things wouldn't be prohibited.

"But he was going to hit my brother if I didn't stop him!" she slams her fist on the table "Besides, if I wanted to hurt him I'd have used my sword." she adds calmly.

"And this is what landed you a personal audition with the God-King? Nothing more happened after that?" Morlicht asks suspiciously.

"He called the guards and I had to defend myself." she says.

"Don't tell me that you injured a guard as well?"

"No, no. Nothing like that. Only an idiot would attempt to punch an armored opponent." she assures him "I started running."

"So this is what got you here?" he asks. She nods.

"That's unreasonable."

"You're the God-King, not me." she shrugs.

"Give me a minute to think." Morlicht says. He knows well that the people expect him to give the woman a life sentence or, even better, stage a public execution. But he certainly doesn't want to do that as he believes that she deserves a few days in jail and a fine at most. The problem is that, to uphold his reputation, he cannot just do it the way he wants.

"What's your name?" he asks her.

"Thelma, why you asking?"

"Now listen to me, Thelma, I need you to pretend like you attacked me and I knocked you out." he says "Punch me in the face."

"What?" she asks incredulously "You want me to get myself publicly executed?"

"If you want to get out of here alive, I have a plan." he says "But it requires everyone to believe that I hold a personal grudge against you." Morlicht explains. He is unsure why he's so eager to get punched in the face just to save some random prisoners.

"I don't trust you." she says bluntly.

"If wanted you dead, I would just tell the guards that you'd be publicly hung in the morning and they couldn't been happier."

"So where do you want me to punch you?" Thelma asks, getting up from the chair.

"Nose, there will be a bit of blood and it will be authentic." Morlicht explains "Don't worry, you won't cause any damage that won't be gone by tomorrow." he assures.

"You sure?" she asks.

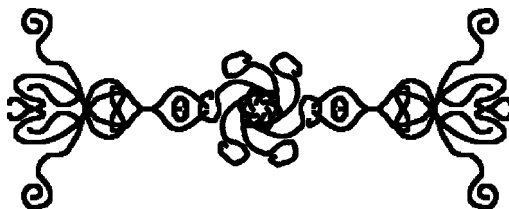
"I'm sure..." right as he says that, his head recoils back from a powerful strike. For a second, he enters an odd state of consciousness, similar to the one that he experienced back during the coronation but quickly returns back to normal. Realizing the pain he's in, Morlicht hisses.

"That was more than enough." he says, massaging his nose "Now you need to lie down on the floor and appear as if I knocked you out using my divine powers."

“Wouldn’t be easier to just knock me out?” Thelma asks, seeming not worried about the damage whatsoever.

“You don’t possess the regeneration powers I do.” he explains.

“Alright.” Thelma says and proceeds to lie down in a very exaggerated position. For a second, Morlicht considers advising her to make it more believable but he figures that it might only make manners worse. He sighs and goes to call the guards.



“We request that you to begin training a successor, Zahreen.” a familiarly distorted voice says. The two masked figures cloaked in black stand in front of Morlicht. Somehow, they managed to track him down in an alley even despite his best attempts to move around the city unrecognized. It’s been a long time since he last spoke to the shadows but it made perfect sense that they found him now – becoming God-King brings a lot of publicity, whether it’s a good or a bad thing.

“Zahreen is gone, I am Morlicht.” he says proudly. Ever since his ascension, he has felt like a different person. There was a large difference between Zahreen and Morlicht.

“Then we request the God-King Morlicht to pass on the knowledge bestowed upon him by Zahreen.” the other figure says. If the voice wasn’t so distorted, Morlicht swears that politeness could be discerned from the tone. Despite the formal request, it appears that the shadows are practically begging him to find a successor. There is no threat or anything of that sort, just a request that reeks of desperation.

“I will consider it but you must realize that, as God-King, I have other, much more important obligations.” Morlicht answers after a few seconds of thinking. This is not entirely true – he has enough free time to fulfill their request but he has other priorities. That man, his target, still hasn’t shown up despite the provocation that being crowned the God-King was. If he doesn’t show up soon, Morlicht will need to begin using his influence to search for him and, if it comes to that, time will be scarce.

“We are aware. But you must know that drastic change is coming, a crisis that goes far beyond the inner affairs of Assir.” the shadows says.

“What crisis?”

“We are not permitted to share the details. We are here of our own volition, so take this as a warning.” the distorted voice carries through the air “A friendly warning.” the shadow adds.

“If you bring me a candidate you deem worthy, I can teach them the secrets that you want passed on so much. But nothing more.” Morlicht offers. Most of the things that Zahreen’s master taught him is general knowledge, very useful for a king or a scholar but not unique to him – many educated people knew those. What really was important were the secrets of the Hollamanc – the things Zahreen used to ascend and become the god known as Morlicht.

He has no reason to distrust the shadows – they have been patrons of his master, his master’s master and many God-Kings before. If they were ill-intent towards Morlicht, he wouldn’t be able to do anything anyways. It’s only logical that he trusts them.

The two masked figures spend around a minute conversing between each other in muffled voices before finally turning back to Morlicht.

“We do not hold the authority to do such a thing.” one of them says diplomatically.

“In that case, find someone who does and I will train your candidate.” Morlicht states.

“Very well.” with those words the shadows turn back and leave the alley, leaving him to ponder the matter of things alone.

Right after their departure, the circulation of people through the alley continues. Morlicht wonders whether it was something the shadows did that earned them privacy or if people just knew better than walk through a narrow alley occupied by figures cloaked in black.

Morlicht continues his walk, thinking about the warning that the shadows gave him. If something was large-scale enough to bother them, then he needs prepare. The problem is that he doesn't know what he needs to prepare for.

Still, there are things that he can do to increase his odds of surviving whatever disaster there is to come. Even now, he needed to get Aharon's help to safely sneak Thelma and her brother out of prison. The priest was not pleased, to say the least. And, to get them a safe spot to stay at, Morlicht had to trust a few other priests recommended by Aharon. This was not ideal as he doesn't want to be dependent on the priest who, Morlicht is well aware, isn't entirely his ally and rather just puts up with his antics as long as they don't directly endanger Assir. Morlicht needed some allies of his own, some good people that he could trust. With that being said, he ventures to a place that he hasn't visited since he first arrived in Sahvestar. As he walks, he feels a pouch in his pocket slowly fill up with coins. It annoys him that this is the skill that comes to him the easiest.

Finally, he arrives at his destination – a bakery. He opens the door and the familiar, burly baker can be found behind the counter. His balding head houses a large mustache and a warm smile, one of a kind that sight of it makes a person feel safe. He does not pay attention to Morlicht though as he is currently serving a customer. Morlicht waits for he is a polite god.

When the customer happily leaves with their bread, it's Morlicht's turn.

"What can I get you?" the baker asks him. Only now Morlicht realizes that he is still camouflaged. He does not understand exactly how his own camouflage works but it seems logical to him that it makes him appear inconspicuous and unmemorable to bystanders.

Having realized that he appears as a regular customer, Morlicht removes his disguise, transforming from an ordinary man into his true form. The baker lets out a muffled gasp, having recognized him as the God-King.

"What is your name, good man?" Morlicht asks.

"Awad, your holiness." he says, bowing in a way that his head barely sticks out from above the counter.

"And tell me Awad, how is your wife doing?" Morlicht asks, realizing that he remembers his previous conversation with the baker crystal clear.

"She's doing well but how do you know that I'm married, your majesty?" the baker asks.

"You mentioned her the last time we spoke."

"Your majesty, you must have mistaken me for some other plain, ordinary baker... I have not had the honor of speaking to your holiness before." he says apologetically, visibly concerned about the fact that he is implying that the God-King can be wrong.

"You might not remember me well but I remember you..." Morlicht starts but notices fear and worry in Awad's eyes "I came disguised, as a beggar asking for something to ease the hunger." he clarifies, the signs of worry on baker's face falter "You were kind enough to share with me so I came here to repay my debt." he pulls out a pouch from his pocket and puts it on the counter with a loud clinking sign that indicates that it is full of coins.

"I cannot accept this, you are too generous, your majesty." Awad takes a step back.

"As your king, I order you to. If it makes you feel better, in exchange I ask you to be available when times where I require help come." Morlicht says.

"I will do anything for you, my majesty."

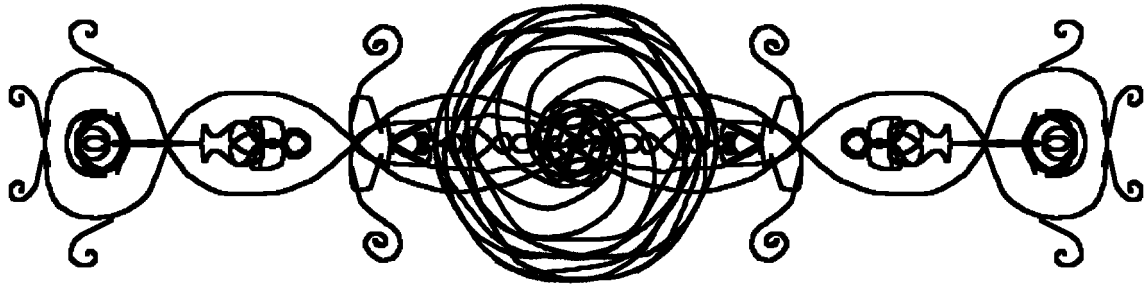
"Do not throw such words to the wind, I not ask you for anything that might be a danger to you." Morlicht says. The baker is baffled, not knowing what to answer. Morlicht feels bad for being so mysterious rather than straightforward but a part of him really enjoys this "And relax a little, you don't need to be so tense when around me. I mean you no harm and I believe you don't mean me harm either. So what is the point of being scared?" he asks.

"There is none, your holiness." Awad says. Morlicht wants to ask the baker to stop referring to him like this but from experience he knows that it's not the best idea.

"I will call on you when the time comes." he says and heads for the door.

"But why me?" the baker asks.

"A powerful man surrounds himself with those who are powerful. But a wise man surrounds himself with those with trustworthy hearts." he responds without turning back. Somehow, the voice reaches Awad just as if Morlicht was still standing right in front of him.



"Someone contacted me regarding your poster, Zahreen." the shopkeeper says to him. Shortly after his master was killed, he hung posters all around town asking for information about the whereabouts of the stolen sword. The runic weapon was characteristic enough that there was a chance it would draw attention. And it seems like it did. But why now, after this much time?

Later, Zahreen visits the address given to him by the shopkeeper. It is a small, obscure inn at the edge of town. A sketchy place, to say the least. A broken window, rotten boards – it is definitely not faring well. But it seems like the innkeeper is the only person who contacted him about the sword.

Inside, he is greeted by the owner – a short, elderly woman with so much makeup on her face that it's difficult to guess what's really under it.

"I have seen you weapon." she gets straight to business.

"Who had it?"

"A client of mine, less than two weeks ago." she answers "Does that satisfy you?"

"No, I need to know more."

"Then you have to pay." she says. It is a reasonable request as breaking client confidentiality is a large hit to the inn's reputation if word gets out. On the other hand though, it doesn't look like the reputation can get much worse.

Zahreen searches his pocket and reluctantly gives her a handful of coins. He is willing to pay a lot for this information but does not want her to know how much not to get ripped off.

"That should do it." she says, pocketing the money. It surprises him that she didn't try to haggle "He came here alone, badly injured. He paid upfront, much more than he needed to... I made so much money off of him..."

"What did he look like?" he asks.

"He was one handsome young man. Beautiful, porcelain skin and wonderful orange hair..." listening to the woman praising his master's killer's looks makes Zahreen blood boil but he just barely manages to keep his cool as the information she is giving is very useful.

"When did he leave?"

"Just a few days ago, it was... two days before yesterday."

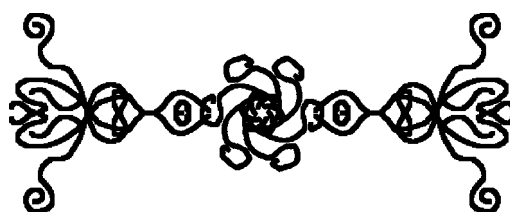
"So three days ago?"

"I'm pretty sure, yes. He didn't head back into town, he took the main road south." she points her finger in the direction where the road should be.

"Anything else that could be of use?"

"He was a very polite, young man. Very arrogant but soft-spoken and delicate..." she looks at the ceiling "Why are you looking for him anyways?"

"That's none of your business." he answers and leaves the inn promptly.



Zahreen stands in front of the cottage, the cold wind brushing his face. Dressed for travel, he is ready to disobey the orders and leave all of this behind. The wounds have already healed but the thirst for vengeance did not wane. He has long decided that there won't be a successor until his master's soul finds peace.

Leaving this place is difficult for him and looking at the building makes him want to go back inside. He spent most of his life living here and it feels difficult to walk away from this.

"I will be back." he utters to himself.

He takes the main road down, not trying to hide from anyone. After all, he is the only person currently living around here. The trees sway in the wind as if they were trying to wave goodbye to him. The forest feels different to him on that day.

After a long journey, he reaches the town. He stocks up on dried meat and other long-lasting food that wouldn't go bad in his backpack. The shopkeeper is initially surprised as the purchase differs vastly from the things he usually buys but he quickly connects the facts with the poster that Zahreen asked him to hang up.

The next thing that Zahreen needs to do is to get a weapon. After putting thought into it, he is almost glad that he did not catch up to the murderers armed with a shovel. With the ceremonial sword stolen, the only ones that he had left were dull training blades which were more likely to inflict blunt force trauma than cut through something. As a result, he needed a new sword.

In a large town like this, there was a dedicated weapon-smith. With the roads getting more and more dangerous every day, people needed something to protect themselves. And where there is demand, there is supply.

When Zahreen enters the store, he is offered many different kinds of weapons. It's mostly spears because those are cheap, easy to make, and do not take a lot of training to use properly. He kind of wishes that he could buy one of those instead of the much more expensive shortswords but a polearm is much worse for traveling. Besides, Zahreen is well aware of the fact that despite the spear's ease of use, he will still be much more effective with a sword.

He picks one of the cheaper ones – still much more expensive than the various spears that the weapon-smith has in his store. The weapon is of good craftsmanship though, and also comes with a scabbard that Zahreen can use to transport it.

Having acquired a weapon, Zahreen is ready to begin the pursuit of his master's killer.