

III - Coronation

Morlicht walks out of the palace. But he isn't his old, homeless-looking self. With help from the palace staff, he had his hair cut, his beard properly groomed and even had a cloak made, one similar to the tattered one he wore earlier but, against his own wishes, fancier. He had a bit of a problem commissioning it as the priests who run the palace didn't consider his clothing request as attire worthy of a God-King. But once he said that it's his will as the future God-King and that it shall not be undermined, they reluctantly agreed on a compromise.

Now that the coronation is set to take place soon, he does his best to make the most of the peaceful time that he has left. He is well aware of the fact that once he becomes God-King, he can say goodbye to any anonymity that he has left. But for now, even with ordinary people already knowing about the upcoming coronation, he still isn't recognized by anyone aside from the palace staff. After all, currently he looks more akin to a wealthy traveling merchant rather than a king.

The problem is that he doesn't really know how to make use of that time. Despite the fact that he would rather stay in the palace and read a book, he wanders aimlessly, walking among regular civilians simply because he has a strong feeling that he won't be able to do it this way again. Even using his divine powers for camouflage likely isn't going to bring it back.

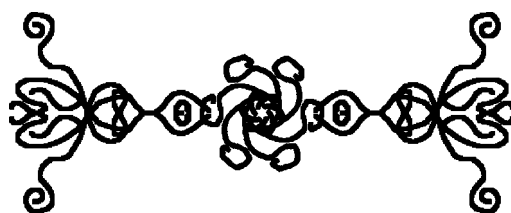
And so Morlicht wanders, sometimes giving coins to beggars and unsuccessfully trying to cure the sick. Is it really beyond his powers? Is all that Morlicht can do just puny things like concealing himself and creating coins? Having learned the history of previous God-Kings, he knows that the powers they held went far beyond parlor tricks. But at the same time, he is well aware of the fact that the miracles performed by gods have a theme which is not good news for him as almost everything that he did so far seemed to have a common denominator in trickery.

Even while spending most of this time outside, Morlicht is not able to avoid the priests. Despite him not officially being God-King yet, they are doing their best to make him learn all about the way Assir operates and prepare a smooth transition into the new rule. With Zahreen's education, he himself has a good idea of how the country works. Or at least how it used to work in times of the God-Kings as many of the things that they show him differ from what was in the scriptures. It is not surprising though as there hasn't been a king in such a long time that the system has changed.

The differences are not very significant. It seemed like they want to go back to the old system but still keep many of the improvements made during the interregnum which, as a result, is going to take a lot of work off of Morlicht's shoulders but will limit his power. For an ambitious and confident God-King who wants to do something grand and be remembered in history that might have been a problem but not for him. For Morlicht it's better this way.

Additionally, as expected, the unfriendly priest whose name Morlicht found out to be Aharon, keeps an eye on him. Even though he is visibly a very busy and important man, he finds the time to personally assist the other priests and priestesses when the upcoming God-King is involved. He does not seem to be making any more warnings though, instead he just watches carefully.

The days go by and the time of the coronation nears.



Somewhere else

In the dark, cold desert night, a small oasis is the only thing that's glowing. A man stands in front of a small, stone shrine in the middle of it. Beautiful, orange hair falls down to his shoulders and shines in the light that he himself emanates. His apparel is not fit for the Assirian climate – the short-sleeved shirt and a pair ankle-length pants are proper protection neither for the merciless sun nor the night-time chill. But he does not appear to be the type who cares about such things as he watches the shrine with his shining, brown eyes and a smile on his pale face.

The modest, plain granite structure appears crude in comparison with the luminous man in front of it. Shaped like a tombstone, with no fancy stonework, it does not seem to be dedicated to something. The only thing that makes it different from a regular, polished stone are the runes that it's inscribed with. Three rows of characters which meaning has been mostly lost to history and is kept a secret known only to few. The redheaded man is not one of them but understanding them is not necessary for what his business with the shrine is.

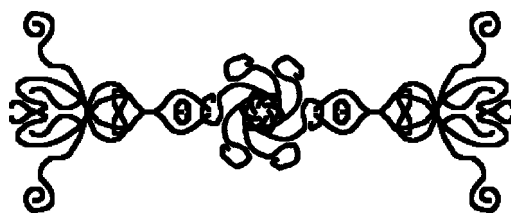
He turns away from the shrine and looks back into the darkness. His light dims a little but the cheeky smile on his face stays as it used to be.

"I need light to finish the work!" he shouts, his voice articulate and distinguished. The dark does not answer "And my own light does not count." he states as if he is conversing with someone. But nothing speaks back, leaving only the silence of the desert.

"I can feel you watching, why don't you trust me? I've done this many times before." there is something akin to indignation in the tone of the voice. The light dims further, encompassing only a small area around the man.

"Either way, I'm going to sleep now." he says as his gleam shuts down almost entirely "I know that you won't be here when I wake up but you'll be able to witness the fruits of my work the next night." having said that, he leans against a tree and closes his eyes, falling asleep shortly.

When the next night comes, the oasis does not exist anymore.



Sahvestar is a large city situated by the Ulzim river. Sandstone walls surround it in order to keep any night terrors out. And since changing the shape of the walls to increase the area of the city requires a lot of work, it comes as a surprise to nobody that the city is mostly cramped. The streets are narrow and there are almost as many buildings crammed as it is possible. To further maximize the usage of grounds, many of them have underground cellars and span multiple levels.

As a result of the specific layout of Sahvestar, the only reasonable place to hold large scale ceremonies such as a coronation is outside the city. While it is very dangerous to leave the city walls during nighttime, there is nothing wrong with having an event outside as long as everyone gets back to safety before dusk.

With only two days before Morlicht's coronation, the venue is complete and the rehearsals have already begun. Small groups of priests and the soon-to-be God-King gather outside the city multiple times per day to make sure that he does not discredit himself or the whole empire. It is especially important as the world is skeptical towards them having a king again. Which Morlicht considers completely understandable, knowing that many older people still remember Kriesbrin's reign. The surprising thing is that the people of Assir are, for the most part, looking forward to his

rule. When he walks the streets, he often hears them speculating about the upcoming God-King, almost exclusively in a hopeful or even excited manner. Seldom, he hears skeptical comments calling to remember the tragedy of Kriesbrin's rule.

The rehearsals annoy Morlicht. He struggles to find a reasonable explanation to keep having them after the few initial ones. It's not like he's making any mistakes or learning anything from this. But even after voicing his concerns, he is met only with roundabout answers of the "I'm not the one who decides this" type. Luckily, he knows that it won't be long before the coronation itself when the rehearsals will be over. Albeit, he is also aware that being God-King will bring a lot of unpleasant responsibilities with it.

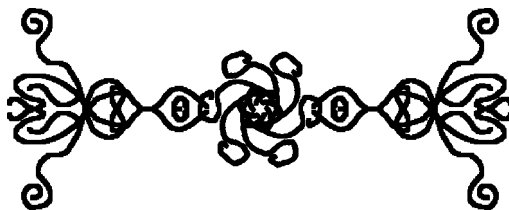
The day of the coronation finally comes and after the final rehearsal Morlicht has time to prepare. It's today that he is going to become king.

Morlicht sits in his room, dressed in his most exquisite robes. Four servants stand around the room as he can't be bothered to keep sending them away anymore. They always come back and he figured that a much better way to get away from the servants is to leave the room.

With a quiet creak of the door, Aharon walks in. He dismisses the servants with a quick gesture of his hand. They leave without saying anything. Morlicht wishes that they listened to him as well as they listen to the priest.

"Morlicht," he says. Aharon is the one of the very few people who refer to him by name instead of things like "your majesty" or "divine". He guesses it is a power play meant to remind him of his place.

"What is it, Aharon?" Morlicht asks, not getting up from the pillows.



"There is a very important matter that I need to speak with you about."

Sura stands in the middle of the crowd. Even though a lot of people have gathered for the coronation, she can still see the stage well. In times like this, she is grateful for her height – the only gift from her deadbeat father. Towering over most regular people, she can more than comfortably watch everything unfold from above others' heads. The only problem is that the event itself is boring.

Back at home, everyone was talking about the coronation and how Assir having a king again was going to change everything. For the past few days all that she could hear was either that it was the second coming of Kriesbrin or that a new God-King would bring prosperity. With how heated the arguments were, Sura couldn't help but also get excited for the event.

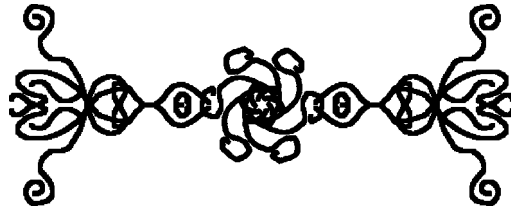
And now that she is actually there, it is far from exciting. Most of the ceremony is just some priest-officials recounting the deeds of previous God-Kings (skipping Kriesbrin, obviously) and talking about the upcoming changes in the empire. The soon-to-be does not seem to be the focus of the event whatsoever. Bronze-skinned, with dark hair and a short beard he looks like a commoner. In fact, the thing that stands out the most are his clothes – he is wearing something between a cloak and a robe that, even though studded with jewelry and decorated beautifully, has a mundane feel to it. Generally speaking, he looks like some random guy who ended up here by accident and wants to leave.

It does not appear that the general public shares Sura's attitude regarding the event. She can hear vigorous chattering all around her, definitely not an indication of boredom. It only gets louder when a priest-official emerges from the backstage building, holding the crown. To be fair, it is a truly magnificent piece of headgear. Made from several different metals and gems that seem to be thrown together haphazardly, it still somehow holds together and retains some sort of consistency. It is the product of centuries, customarily modified by almost every ruler to add something representing them to it.

The commotion in the crowd changes slightly. Sura notices ripples in it, people moving and making way for themselves. Someone accidentally hits her with their elbow while pushing through. The future God-King flinches slightly as if he has noticed something unusual. The priest walks with the crown in his hands, ready to put the headgear upon the man's head. The crowd calms down in anticipation. Finally, the priest gently puts the crown on the future ruler's head... and the God-King pushes the priest, making the man lose balance and land on his back a meter away from him. Gasps can be heard.

"Never again..." several people begin chanting while emerging from the crowd. Small crossbows in their hands... The royal guard members rush to stop them but they can't make it in time "Death to the gods!" they scream and release the bolts.

The God-King disappears.



The plan has failed. There are bolts sticking out from many places in his body and causing unbearable amounts but nobody else can see them. Morlicht is invisible. The agonizing pain fills his body but his focus remains oddly stable. Why didn't the bolts go right through him? He was able to do that kind of thing before to pass through a door. Why not now?

As everyone around is panicking, possibly due to his sudden vanishing or the fact that there is almost a dozen of assassins on the loose, Morlicht, who is still lying on the stage, plucks one of the bolts out to inspect it. It is a small, wooden projectile with a metal head drenched in his blood. It was shallowly buried in his chest. It was fired with too little force to cause any serious damage. The only way that those could have endangered his life would be if they hit his throat or face which they luckily didn't. Small, weak projectiles... they are likely poisoned but it doesn't seem like the toxin started working just yet. In that case, he needs to get to a safe place before it kicks in.

With great pain, he gets up and maneuvers out of the stage. Even though the attackers have already been restrained, it is very likely that they still have someone ready to finish Morlicht off in case he shows again. That means that he needs to get to Aharon - the only person he can currently trust. It was the priest who warned him about the possible attack after all.

Even in all the havoc, it doesn't take a long time to find the man. Tall, slender, well-dressed and calm - he stands out a lot in such a chaotic environment. The careful eyes of the priest are watching over the area to make sure nothing bad happens again.

"Psst!" Morlicht says, tapping the priest on his shoulder, stopping an in unexplained urge to pull some kind of a prank. The man turns around, confused. For some reason it amuses Morlicht immensely.

"I'm invisible." he says "And a bit of a human porcupine."

"Are you able to walk?" the priest asks discretely but it doesn't seem

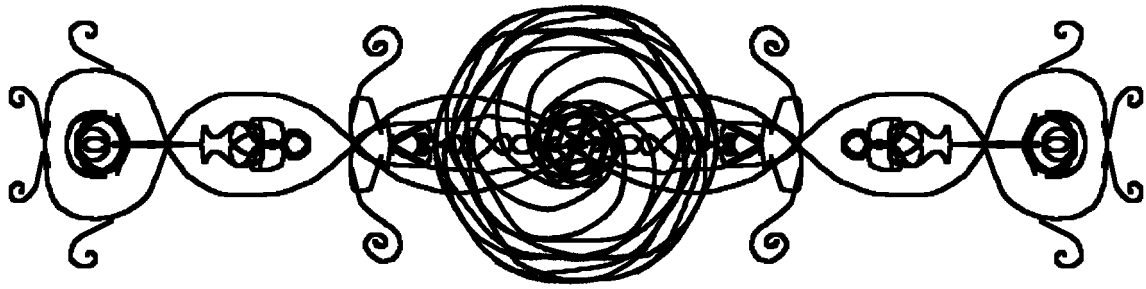
"Yes but I need you to escort me back to the city walls." Morlicht says "I think the bolts were poisoned and It would be a bit silly if I were to just black out on the way." he explains.

"And how do you want me to escort you while you are invisible?"

"Just hold my hand or something. And in case that I do lose consciousness, I'll become visible again."

"Your robe. I will discretely hold onto your robe."

"Alright then, let's get moving. Every single moment that we spend here increases the odds of me dropping dead on the way."



A few years ago

"If you are reading this, I'm probably gone." the first sentence of the note hits him hard but he continues reading "There is a portion of knowledge that I was instructed not to pass onto you. But now that I'm most likely gone, those damned shadows can't do a thing to punish me. Which means that, if I'm alive and well, please just put this note back and wait until I die before reading it." he smiles as the words are so much like his master that he has an easy time imagining her saying all of this out loud "If you are still reading, I ask you to reconsider as, if you are meant to receive this knowledge, you will probably get it officially from the shadows. But if there is a reason why you want it or need it, go ahead, I'm not stopping you." he does not stop to reconsider. Filled with rage and grief, he does not care about defying the shadows "Dig under the owl." reads the last sentence, after which the note ends abruptly.

"Dig under the owl?" he utters. A cryptic message, seemingly indicating that the knowledge that she wishes to pass onto him is hidden somewhere underground. The problem is that he does not recall any particular owls. Of course, he has seen owls multiple times in the forest but "the owl" had to be something particular.

With pain from his injuries still burning in many parts of his body, he goes outside and begins looking for the nearest owl hole. It takes him a quite a while but he finally finds one in a tree on the edge of the glade. Now comes the hard part – digging. He recalls digging the hole when he buried her. The pain that came with every move... it was especially more painful considering the fact that he did not have access to a large shovel which he lost during the chase and had to use a small, garden one instead. And neither does he have access to a new shovel now. He ventured into the town to stock up on food earlier but did not think to buy a new shovel.

He comes back to the tree with the right tool and begins digging. Every move hurts but not quite as much as it did the last time. He spends a long time digging before the thought that he was wrong comes to mind.

"The owl." he says, putting down the shovel and looking at the holes that he dug around the tree. There seems to be something about an owl that eludes him. A memory that he can't recall. What he knows for sure is that it's not here.

Later, when he is lying down in bed and reminiscing, something from the past calls out to him. A childhood memory, one of the early ones that he feels like should have been forgotten long ago. The owl.

He quickly gets up from bed, grabs a lamp and the shovel and goes outside. It's dark and cold but he doesn't care. He goes around the cottage, looking at the back wall with the lamp in his hand. Finally, he finds exactly what he has been looking for. A curiously shaped knot, one that he used to call the owl when he was a kid. It does resemble the bird to a certain extent but it annoys him that the master would rely on such a fleeting childhood memory to pass him information.

He traces down with his fingers from the knot to the ground, finds the spot and begins digging. The nightly chill makes him feel numb and somehow makes the pain less noticeable. It doesn't take long before the tip of the shovel strikes something hard. He moves the lamp closer to see what it is. A small, wooden box lies buried underground. A few more well-placed shovel movements and the use of leverage are enough to pry it out.

Upon opening the container, he finds a metal-cover book inside. The title “Hollamanc” is engraved into the metal. It’s very late and his body urges him to sleep but he knows that this is going to be a very long night.