

Pt. 1
In Which The Hunter Meets The Healer

I wake up later in the morning than I would prefer. It is understandable I would be tired after the events of last night, but after a certain length of time, sleep is a luxury and I can afford none. I grumble to myself and leave my bed.

There is a letter waiting under my door, stamped with a golden seal and free of the dust that surrounds it. It can wait.

I reapply my bandages and get dressed. I pull two eggs from my cabinet and crack them onto the pan, adding the few other ingredients as needed. The end result is not my best work, but that was to be expected.

I eat it out of the pan.

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My apartment consists of one room. If you visualize the door as being on the bottom, my bed is in the top right corner, the kitchen in the bottom left. My closet is in the top left, holding several sets of clothes and my tools. In the bottom right is the door, a side table on a sewing kit and several newspapers lie, and a small bookshelf I do not use. There is a large map with letters pinned to various spots on the right wall. There are no windows.

The owner of the housing complex provides no services other than providing the gas for the stoves. No-one who buys a room here wishes for anyone else to be involved in their affairs. I myself do not pay the owner for lodging, and thus do not know the cost of a room. I have never seen them, or if I have, they did not wish to introduce themselves.

It is standard practice for those who have purchased a room to ring a bell by the door before leaving. There is another bell by the way out that signals that we have fully left. This ensures the majority of us never meet. At least in this building.

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The letter is short, as they all are.

Thirteen are dead. Five more are missing. There is one survivor, recuperating in the Sanctuary of St. Jessaden. He only has two limbs remaining and will not be challenging to find.

Directions to the Sanctuary follow.

I am sure several more are missing than the letter references. This is an easy city to lose yourself in.

I head to the closet. I choose a sturdy pair of boots, as it will be a long walk. The coat I wore yesterday is still in relatively good condition, and I do not have time to repair it, so I put it on and place

the letter in the inside pocket. I strap two knives to my belt, their blades and hilts made of the same reddish-gray metal. I check that I have enough bandages and coin, returning the supplies to their place on my belt alongside a flask of water and a small notebook. I pull out a long case, placing it on the side table, the wood groaning and several newspapers fluttering to the floor.

I flip it open and pull out the axe.

The hilt is red bone, engraved with designs I found ominous in my youth. One might initially think it to be a femur, the only challenge to this assumption being its quite impossible length.

The blade is sheer black metal, perfectly curved. It has never stopped shining since it was crafted.

I strap the axe to my back. I wrap my face and neck in a red scarf, pull a pair of goggles over my eyes, and place a scuffy top hat upon my head. I head to the door and ring the bell, giving my neighbors the time to scurry back into their rooms.

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The streets I walk tend to blend together. With little exception, the same stones line the same streets, and while there is admittedly more variance in the people that travel them and how they do so, the look in their eyes and the direction those eyes are pointed tends to be the same. The buildings are similar still, old husks of wood or clay held together with scrap metal plating and rope. They are all sealed off from the air as best as possible, which means I have only heard of windows in the theoretical sense.

About half of the way to the Sanctuary, I stop by the market. It is as bustling as it always is at lunchtime, the smell of fresh food almost overwhelming the smog. There is a new band playing, worse than the one that usually plays on Tuesdays. I head to my usual vendor and buy a lunch for 5 coin, neither of us saying a word. I pull down my scarf and eat on the move, stopping briefly at Wall of Words, where a learned man writes job offers, rants, advertisements for upcoming sporting events and festivals, and anything else he is dictated for 7 coin. Occasionally, there is noteworthy information to be investigated in these entries, but there is nothing today.

I finish and pull the scarf back up, heading out of the market.

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The Sanctuary of Saint Jessaden is well-kept, which is not particularly surprising. Religious houses are second only to houses of wealth to be clean. It is still in a very old architectural style, one of dramatic spires and crenelations, which I am not learned enough in that field to directly identify. It was certainly constructed ages ago, as it contains massive and magnificent front doors that would let in vast quantities of smog if ever opened. The last time buildings here were constructed in that fashion was before my grandparents were born.

I am not learned enough in my Saintlore, though once I was quite proficient. All I remember of Saint Jessaden is an image of an elderly androgynous figure being torn apart by bears. That could be a

great many other Saints, but I can see several bear faces among the decorations of the Sanctuary. I decide to take this as confirmation.

I find the door inside, of simple wood. I knock.

After several minutes of waiting, I hear someone come up to the door, from the sound of it affixing something to his face as he does so.

A man in green and purple robes and a quite expensive breathing mask opens the door and ushers me in. If he says something, I cannot hear it through the tubes of the mask.

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After he closes the door behind me, I pull down my goggles and scarf. He pulls down his mask, "We do not allow the carrying of weapons inside our walls."

"Understandable," I nod and remove the axe from my back, "Do you have a place to hold them?"

"I... Please wait," he hurries down one of the hallways.

I wait.

He returns carrying a crate, placing it beside the door. I place my axe inside, leaning it against the door, and add the knives.

He is standing as far away from me as is polite, "Why are you visiting today?"

"There is someone here who has recently suffered grievous injuries. He would have lost two limbs. Is he conscious enough to answer questions?"

"I believe he is," he shifts in place slightly, "What are you planning on asking him?"

"I want to know what he saw and where he saw it," I glance towards my axe, laying blade-down in the crate, "Afterwards I will head towards that location and see what I can find."

He waits to respond, "I will see if he wants to talk to you. Do you already have an idea of... what you are going to find?"

He starts walking and I follow, "Not particularly."

This does not comfort him, "Is it some sort of animal? Perhaps an exotic creature that has broken out of a zoo in the Royal City?"

"That is unlikely," I pause, "Are you sure you wish to know?"

He shakes his head, "I imagine I can live with the uncertainty."

"You can."

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The room is on the third floor, the wall opposite the door a bright mural of Saint Jessaden, when he was younger, planting a tree. There is a shelf holding bandages, vials of presumably healing liquid, a nesting doll, and several religious books. To the left is the bed, on which lies the survivor.

He is a small child of perhaps 12, currently sleeping. His left arm and right leg have been torn off with great force. Both wounds are now bandaged, with small tubes of blood heading into his body from a mechanical box in the corner that pumps up and down.

The man sees that the box has caught my attention, "He had lost a great deal of blood. This technique has worked in the past."

There is more to that sentence, but he lets his face tell instead of his mouth. I nod.

The boy coughs awake, looking at me, "Hello?"

"He's a visitor, here to ask you some questions," The man's voice is different when talking to the boy. He slips into it easily.

"I am called Isaac Dressen. What is your name?" I try to slip into a similar voice. I fail.

"Edwin," he coughs again.

I wait until he is done, "What did you see, Edwin?"

He doesn't answer immediately, looking me in the eyes, "It was too fast and too loud."

He clearly is not in the state to offer further description of the experience. I make sure he can see that I am writing what he said down, "Where was it?"

"By the factory," he opens his mouth to say more, but stops himself.

Before I can ask, the man says, "Norrel or Sverden?"

"Norrel," Edwin responds, making it sound like one word.

I write it down, adding a note to ask the man for clarification later. I pause, "Thank you."

He gets out the first three syllables to 'you're welcome' before coughing. The man gestures for me to leave, and turns to fiddle with the box.

I close the door and wait.

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"Will he be alright?" The man and I are walking down the stairs to the first floor. It is the first words any of us have spoken since he left the room.

"He... will not die today. I have brought sleep onto him so the technique has greater chance of working."

"How many others were with him at the time?"

"He liked to hang out with three other orphans. Charlie and Stencil have been... found, and Sasha is missing."

I try to hide my discomfort at learning he is an orphan, "How old is he?"

"We are not sure. We think he is ten," he looks at me, and it turns out I was not successful in my attempt, "That worries you."

"It is nothing. Nothing that we can impact, at least. Is Norrel the name of the owner?"

"I was referring to the Norrel-Novak Cloth Factory. It is the nearest in the direction Edwin came from, and it has ceased production recently," he pauses, "Are you going to require payment once you are done?"

"No."

“Then I will guide you to it.”

“I cannot ask you to-”

“You are doing the work of a Saint. That requires a chronicler,” he does not have the look of someone who can be persuaded otherwise.

...

We have left the Sanctuary. My goggles and scarf are pulled back over my face and my weapons are back on my belt and back. He is wearing the breathing mask. I sigh, “If you are do this, I would like to know your name.”

“Oliver Wrasset. Acolyte of St. Jessaden,” he is looking up at the sky.

“Thank you. What are you doing?” I look up as well. Nothing appears to be piercing the veil of smoke above us, but perhaps he has better eyesight than me.

“Whenever one of the factories shuts down, there is a chance that the smoke will disperse enough to let through sunlight,” he goes back to looking up, “It appears not enough time has passed.”

I nod. After several minutes of silence, I succumb to curiosity, “What is Jessaden the saint of?”

“Nature and the wild,” his voice shifts, indicating he is quoting from scripture, ““Only in the wild can you find reality.””

I look at our surroundings. The only thing that spreads wildly here is pipes.

Oliver laughs, “This is an odd place to follow St. Jessaden.”

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We reach the Norrel-Novak Cloth Factory, which is indeed abandoned. As we approach an alleyway by the side of the factory, I hold up my hand to stop Oliver.

The sound of bones ripping themselves apart, accompanied by a sharp hissing, can be heard in the distance. It is getting closer.

I look at Oliver, “I believe you should run.”