

The sun sets earlier in the Valley, at least that's what people say. Certainly, the darkness is more complete. The lighting after dusk is haphazard, and the buildings irregular, casting countless passages and corners into murky shadows that seem to be made for lurking, skulking, or any number of other activities that unnerve the honest citizens from the hill tops.

Lighthall was not unnerved in the valley. He had been dealing with these people for most of his life. He was watchful, though. It was important to be on one's guard in the Valley, and even though Lighthall travelled with ten armed men, he studied his surroundings carefully. Some day, perhaps, the Mouse would sweep this whole area clean. It was a blemish on an otherwise glorious city. Lighthall had a few business interests here, but they offered meager profits. Mostly, the Valley was a place to find people to do unpleasant work for little pay, while they lived out their short lives steeped in booze and squalor.

They were approaching Lower Market Street, which was Lighthall's least favorite place in the entire Valley. The notion of a street devoted to commerce pleased him on some level, but out in the city, Market Street was hardly different than any other, with shops and apartments side by side. Only here, on Lower Market, was the street used as it had originally been intended. Few of the hawkers-- to call them merchants would demean many honest men-- contained their wares in shops, and even those who did maintain meager storefronts were not shy about joining the dense throng that harassed anybody unfortunate or unwise enough to traverse the street. A man of Lighthall's standing attracted far more attention than most, and the shouts started well before he turned into the motley marketplace.

It was regrettable that Grainger considered himself some kind of populist, and that this led him to maintain his mock court on Lower Market. It was perhaps more regrettable that Lighthall was forced to deal with the man. Lighthall doubted that the men who ruled Silt, or the Far East, or even the barbarous priests in Fellnia, would allow an extortionist like Grainger to operate openly-- to even be afforded some respect and unofficial responsibility.

Lighthall stared straight forward, walking quickly in the pocket that his men opened in the crowd. Any of the hawkers who made so bold as to try to wave some worthless trinket in

Lighthall's face, was pushed indelicately aside, as was anybody who did not move to the side of the street with sufficient haste to let them pass.

They walked over a flagstone with a worn engraving marking the spot where Lower Market would intersect Haderian Street, had not hasty and zealous construction obstructed passage to and from Lower Market in all but a few places. Lighthall started counting the stalls on his left. The entrance to the twelfth stall was given a relatively wide berth by the throng, despite the silver displayed there that was a good cut above anything else in the market. A handful of men and women lounged near the entrance, looking disreputable but regrettably more alert than his own guards on the occasions that Lighthall surprised them on duty. It had been the tenth stall on his previous visit, and the sixteenth the time before. He now had no doubt now that the entrance to the Poorman's Union moved. The Poorman's Union was an institution whose very name was disingenuous. Lighthall knew few men-- and women-- so wholly dedicated to enriching themselves, and with as much talent for doing so, as those in the Poorman's Union.

Grainger's guards made no move to impede him, though one of them rose and walked ahead of them, taking a lamp from a peg on the door and leading them through the storefront and into an unlit wooden passageway that took a handful of turns before merging into a more permanent brick hallway. Lighthall clenched his teeth. This was unlikely to be a pleasant meeting.

Not long after Lighthall and his men made their disruptive charge through Lower Market, Leyda watched in amusement as another man caused a disturbance of an entirely different nature. She had a tedious assignment this week-- sitting in a shop that sold cloth of moderate quality and watching who came and went on Lower Market. If the wrong people came-- she had never actually been instructed about who these people might be, but presumably they would come in force-- she would hurry a couple hundred yards from a back door and slam the back door to the silver shop. She wasn't sure what would happen from that point on, but she

guessed that it would take the intruders some time to find the entrance to Union Hall.

The man was Endrev Berekker, of course. She had never seen him before, but his elegant yet casual attire, his confidence, and the touches of grey framing a handsome face all matched the descriptions she had heard. What confirmed it, in her mind, was the Islander that walked beside him with a large sword and the calm authority of one who used it well. Of all the leading merchants, only Berekker put Islanders in positions of authority. It was even said that he preferred the company of dark women.

The Islander walked beside Berekker with a stony dignity. Berekker smiled at the merchants who tried to entice him to their stores, and gave cursory glances at the items that were thrust in front of him. His man stayed impassive and alert, ignoring everybody. They moved easily through the crowd, and although people pressed in close trying to attract attention to their wares, the two somehow managed to avoid being jostled, or even touched. Then suddenly, Berekker stopped. He reached out and took a beaded necklace from the hand of a merchant in front of him. Leyda could just barely hear his words over the crowd.

"This is finely done. Is it your own work?"

"Sir, yes. Well, no, sir. My wife makes them."

"How much do you want for it?"

"Four pieces silver is the typical price, but for you I'll make an exception. Give me three silver for that, or five for that and another like it."

Berekker laughed.

"Do you think that I became this rich as a fool? I'll give you one silver for both."

The merchant could not help smiling for a moment before assuming an indignant look.

"I know you do not intend to insult my wife, but please, sir, be reasonable. I assure you that I will be soundly beaten if I return home with a silver for these fine works. I will take four silver in coin, or five in scrip."

"Be careful, my friend," Berekker warned, "if we become engaged in serious negotiations, you may find yourself going home without the clothes on your back."

The crowd had quieted somewhat, enjoying this rich man who played the game of the marketplace, and this drew a couple guffaws.

"Name your price then, but be so kind as to make a serious offer this time."

Brekker turned to the man beside him.

"What do you say, Catyan? What are these necklaces worth?"

The Islander took them and inspected them without interest.

"Give him three silver and let's go." Catyan was impatient.

"Three silver?" Brekker looked in mock dismay at the merchant, who wore a broad smile. Brekker's man had lost the game for him, before it had even begun in earnest. Brekker untied a purse from his belt and handed it to the Islander, shaking his head.

"Very well, Catyan, pay the man what you will. I fear for your future, though. Some day your muscles will begin to fail, and without muscles or business sense, I'm afraid the only position left for you in my organization will be doorman."

Catyan opened his mouth, as if to object, and Brekker looked at him with a mischievous smirk.

"I think your negotiation skills would benefit from some practice. Be so good as to keep that purse and do some shopping for me. I think I'd like..." Brekker looked around dramatically, "one of everything."

This met with a roar of humorous approval from the crowd, which pressed immediately in on Brekker's man, as Brekker himself slipped deftly away, chuckling to himself. Leyda gave a quick laugh aloud at the expression on the unfortunate Catyan's face, then returned to her seat to watch the endless stream of people coming and going from the market.

Lighthall had been disinclined to like the man, but Brekker's demeanor when he arrived five minutes late in Grainger's audience chamber enraged him. The man strode in unapologetically, wearing a smirk that made it clear that he was, for whatever reason, extremely pleased with himself. He did not arrive with his infamous retinue of Islanders-- in

fact, he arrived with no protection whatsoever, aside from a dagger at his belt. Lighthall had brought ten men as a show of strength, but found now that they made him look weak. Both merchants were under Grainger's protection for the duration of the meeting, and it was obvious to everybody present that Lighthall's ten men could be dispatched handily by the thirty-some archers standing in the gallery of the torchlit room.

After a cursory greeting, Grainger had lounged in silent disinterest, inspecting the sleeves of his silk tunic for nothing in particular. There was only one chair in the room, occupied by Grainger, on a dais at the front of the hall. Below the dais were a dozen long, unwashed tables, where Grainger's thieves could gamble and drink themselves into oblivion, though the room had been cleared for this occasion. Lighthall had stood uncomfortably, marvelling at the presumption of the aging thief on his throne. Lighthall was out of his element, among these burglars and extortionists. He would gladly have delegated this aspect of his work, had there been anybody in his organization worthy of such responsibility. He could sit at a table with the Empire's elite-- the lords and ladies, even the Candle, or the Emperor himself-- and feel charming and respected. At the Poorman's Union though, he was extremely conscious of the scrutiny that he bore. He was being judged, and not favorably, by these men and women who undoubtedly resented his station, all the more so because he had come by it honestly.

When Berekker strode smugly into the hall, Grainger sat forward. Berekker did not so much as acknowledge Lighthall or his men. Instead, he inclined his head slightly toward Grainger.

"We have gone far too long without making each others' acquaintance," Berekker said. They two merchants were forced to stand, like supplicants, at the foot of the dais.

Grainger sneered ever so slightly, but Berekker was unfazed. He put his hand to his belt, and there was a brief commotion among the archers in the gallery.

Berekker held out a sheathed dagger, and said, "I gather your son will be coming of age in a fortnight. Business may take me from Merendir, so I thought I should bring my gift today."

Grainger nodded to one of the men who stood at his flanks, a stubble-faced bruiser in a

sleeveless doeskin shirt that showed off his prodigious muscles and tattooed bands in geometric patterns. The man's necklaces and bracelets clattered audibly as he came to fetch the offering for Grainger. Lighthall found everything about this scene thoroughly tasteless.

Brekker continued to fawn. "Your heir will need a good knife, and this is one of the best."

Grainger pulled the knife from the sheath and held it to the light. The blade was milky white and so thin that it nearly disappeared for a moment when Grainger turned it. He brushed his thumb against it critically.

"It was made by a smith named Fil Eirer in the Far East. His skill is unsurpassed in this generation, or in any recent generation. It is made from Yeneshan ore. It will darken if it is exposed to sunlight. Its strength will not be diminished, but its value will diminish considerably. It has been at my side for quite a few years now. I trust your son will use it well."

Grainger returned the knife to the sheath without betraying any appreciation of the gift. Lighthall smiled to himself. Brekker's attempt to ingratiate himself seemed to have failed.

"I have important matters to attend to." Lighthall snapped at Brekker. "State your business and let's have this done."

"Three more of my men were assaulted on the docks last night," Brekker said, "One was killed, another severely injured."

"What does that have to do with me?" Lighthall asked.

"It was your men who assaulted them."

Lighthall exchanged an amused glance with the captain of his guard.

"If your men were not so dark..." Lighthall suggested, "they would invite less trouble."

Brekker turned to Lighthall for the first time. Lighthall felt his amusement fade under the cold stare, but kept his smile up and refused to look away. After a long time, Grainger spoke and ended the contest.

"What terms will you offer for a truce?" The head of the Poorman's Union sounded bored.

"I did not come to negotiate a truce," Brekker stated.

Lighthall started to open his mouth to say something, but scoffed instead to cover his

surprise, and asked, "Then why am I wasting my time here?"

Lighthall had spent long hours last night working out the terms he would offer, the minimal terms he would accept, and his bargaining strategy.

"I don't know why you are here," Berekker replied. "I came to talk to Grainger. I can only assume that he invited you."

Lighthall thought there was a hint of amusement on Grainger's face, and he fought a hot flush in his face.

"As long as you are here," Berekker continued, "I will say this: Your time is past. Do not hasten your irrelevance by beginning fights that you are not prepared to finish. Leave us now. I have an important business with the Union."

Lighthall stood for a moment, nearly quivering with rage. Grainger said nothing. Lighthall could not repair his dignity by staying, and so he turned on his heel to walk out, snarling "You'll regret this."

"I doubt it," Berekker said to his back.

The word in the valley, among those who sought to sell their muscle to the merchants, was that Berekker was on the way up, and Lighthall on the way down. It was clear to everyone in the room that this was what Berekker wanted them to believe, but Grainger was not convinced. Berekker had handled Lighthall well enough, and made him look foolish. Grainger had seen enough newly-made men, reckless and inflated with early successes, brought low by arrogance, and Berekker was no longer even young. Grainger's wager was still on Lighthall, but he was glad to have a chance to take his own measure of Endrev Berekker.

"You should have offered him terms," Grainger told Berekker, "Having Lighthall as an enemy is a waste of energy."

Grainger should know, too. For years, Lighthall had refused to pay for any form of protection from the Union, and much blood had been spilled as a result. It had taken the deaths of several city guards, and the subsequent intervention of the Mouse, to end the feud.

"I am not concerned with Lighthall," Berekker said flatly, "I am concerned with the safety of my men."

Grainger foresaw the direction that the conversation was headed, and it displeased him.

"Get to your point." There was lazy malice in Grainger's voice.

"The captains of my ships pay you well for protection while they are in the harbor," Berekker told him.

"And?"

"And the longshoremen, whose salaries I pay, pay dues to the Union as well."

"And you are dissatisfied with the protection that I provide?" The room grew tense at Grainger's voice. Berekker seemed to be unaware that he was putting Grainger in a dangerous mood.

"I am dissatisfied that my men are routinely subjected to slurs and violence," Berekker said. "We both know that the protection you provide at the docks does not come from your patrols. The service that you provide comes from the influence that you have over larceny in the city, and your ability to retaliate against parties who embarrass you or devalue your contracts. The patrols are incidental. I would go so far as to say that they exist only for show-- a dramatic touch that makes your services seem all the more valuable to the ships' captains."

Up in the gallery, one archer in particular listened attentively. He kept up on the affairs of the merchants only as much as necessary to avoid ending up in taverns that were full of people were hostile to the Union. Berekker was making a pitch, though, and whatever he was pitching was sure to be something that would interest a woman he knew. She would buy him drinks, and favor him with her attention for a while. He never got to hear Berekker's proposal, though, because Grainger had decided that Berekker was making some sort of pitch, too.

"This is an uncivilized way to discuss business," Grainger said. "Come."

Grainger rose, maybe a touch more slowly than he used to. He walked without further comment through the door at the back of the hall, followed only by his lieutenants and Endrev Berekker. Without even thinking of it, both men touched gold as they passed the treshhold--

Brekker pressing his thumb against a ring that he wore, and Grainger touching his earring--
keeping the ancient ritual of the Tradesman.