

Bidding for a Good Day

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A LOT OF NASTY STUFF happened in early morning hours in the harbour of the great city of Anchorfall. This was hardly surprising, of course. There really was nothing at all to the fact that the Dwellers of Twilight nested there. The bigger problem was that certain people elected to conduct “legitimate business” there.

This “legitimate business” included all sorts of terrible things the folk of the dark was far too honourable to participate in. For example, Owninson’s Docks were here. Most of the ships and boats that had been built there lay, with their commissioners, on the seabed just outside of Anchorfall Bay. The latest of the ships had been launched early this morning; two protagonists of our story took a short breather on their way, and stood a while guessing how far the ship could go before sinking. Unlike the ship in question, they got to their destination safely and in due time.

Some other businesses of this kind included Pyraxier’s Bookbinders, which was always under many sorts of pressure, ranging from mere verbal attacks to flames, from reasons ranging from content of the publications to the quality of the work. Another was Villard’s Paint Kitchen, an establishment that was flourishing and selling its products actively despite of having certain quality issues to iron out, and being having headquarters in a quite rainy city.

And, of course, one of these questionable businesses was Virgusson’s Auction Hall.

The mood in the auction hall could only mean it was morning. The stench of the expensive pipe tobacco floated in the air, and the rays of morning sun came from high windows and shone through a thick layer of smoke. The light revealed an assortment of aristocrats and agents authorised by them – and, in the corner, a pair of companions that one could assume could be found in this kind of a place, but that one could not imagine being regular customers; shady, yet inconspicuous.

The other of these, a young woman, was thinking of the situation. She thought—in a moment of insight—that the crowd gathered here looked like a flock of owls.

She, on the other hand, resembled a raven, while her companion resembled the Varmian drunk eagle.

The two figures were Faira Ativel and Lex Egrain. Faira did, indeed, resemble a raven with her long black hair, black outfit, and slender build, though her character was quite not fitting; she was usually much more cheerful than what most ravens were imagined to be. Varmian drunk eagle was a large species of birds of prey, known for its stubborn, a bit erratic and random behaviour; in this case, the comparison was apt. Lex didn't drink much, but last night, he had worked late, and he had not yet got his morning coffee. Lex was a typical man of Varmhjeml: Brown-haired, tall, but not very stocky.

“Sold to the young gentleman with a brown coat who is standing in the corner.”

Lex did not react in any way, mostly because he was admiring the works that were coming later. Only after Faira bumped him to side he saw the item being sold – this painting really did catch his attention, how could it not – and the auctioneer who looked at him.

“Huh?”

“Yes, you, sir.”

“B-but I wasn't bidding!”

The auctioneer grinned meanly. “Well, your nose seemed to be terribly itchy, and you would have surely scratched it in a moment. . . .”

“I tried not to scratch, really. . . .” Lex coughed.

“And it would not have been an acceptable bid, in any case”, Faira said.

“Now, look, sir”, the auctioneer said, “You were the only people in the whole hall who showed any kinds of interest at all. And here, you can withdraw your bid before the item is sold. This is an auction, sir; one has to be very careful, vigilant and observant! Please pay on the desk on the left.”

Faira looked at the flock of owls. The city of Anchorfall and the whole country of Varmhjeml was under the grip of growing apathy that one could almost touch; no one knew what was really going on. The only people that were spared of it were smart people – both those with good reputation, such as thieves and rogues like Faira and Lex, and the scum and mud of the society, like the lawyers, bankers, and of course, the fine gentlemen at the auction halls.

The flock consisted mostly of people who had got rich with amazing luck, and nobles of fifth generation. They had been watching this item being sold without blinking their eyes, knowing they wouldn't want this kind of piece of trash, and the auctioneer could interpret any sign as a bid. . . just like the complicated rules of the auction demanded. In this case, the most important rule was “the auctioneer is right.”

Lex sighed. It was time to pay, or they would soon meet some very unpleasant people.

AUTUMN DAWN TURNED slowly to morning. The air was damp. The two companions walked to their meeting place through the alleys of the docks, admiring the play of shadows and sun's light on the roofs of the old residential houses.

They arrived to a small park a stone's throw or two from the auction hall. Faira tried to remember which duke had been honoured with a park, and that was difficult when the statue in middle of the park had been taken away for repairs after one quiet anarchist had taken its arm. The repairs took some time because no one could remember a thing about the duke in question. Ah, exactly: Istvayn Adelev, 16th Duke of Euvolachia, often known as "The Forgotten". Definitely the laziest member of the royal family of Adelevs, often called the black sheep. Who would, in these days of apathy, repair some lazy fellow's statue?

The companions sat on a bench. Faira leaned, tying her hair to ponytail while watching the birds in the beautifully orange birches. The birds twittered, buzzing almost startlingly quickly from tree to tree. That alone provided her with a lot to think about.

Lex, on the other hand, spent his time studying his notebook, adding some helpful notes to his diary: "Voghsday, 8.IX.626: morn. In auctn f/ Vryn. Bght: a painting for Vryn, & a great and ter'ble ptng by xidnt." In the notes he added: "Be Really Smart in the Auctions."

The bells of the temple of Megyntia announced that the morning was half past. From another direction came a rat-like small man in grey cloak. The most striking feature of him, however, was his grin, which was so wide it could be seen from great distance. Few people had a smile that extended literally from ear to ear. The man was Vryn Barefeet, also known as the Fun-Vryn, an art expert and a part-time comedian. Faira and Lex thought he was relatively all right. Not all agreed, however: many disagreed about his sense of humour. He tended to cause confusion in auctions in many ways, often to make sure he won, and that got him denied permanently from entering the Virgusson's halls.

"Top of the morning to you, oh cheerful cat-like beauty, and to you, our town's unchallenged master of puppet's strings and like." Vryn smiled, thinking of the first meeting with Lex. Vryn had tried to escape from his clutches, but regrettably Lex never left home without his rope – that journey had not got Vryn too far. "Well then! Did you get what I asked for?"

"Hello, Vryn, and why, sure, we did..." Faira handed the Item no. 62 from this morning's auction to Vryn. She couldn't see herself what was so interesting about it – a small painting of a shepherd girl. Faira admitted that she didn't know much of watercolour paintings.

"Hah! What would this city do without Shadowhawks. This really is it! A real Graulveyr, you really can't really be mistaken about this particular style. Hmm, must be from the period he was in Anchorfall, so it is from either year 548 or

549... not sure, but I think it was painted on the hills near Harshwood. See, the old buildings from the west bank of river Arthyl are right there, on left”, Vryn mumbled. “I was very lucky to meet you. You can keep all money that was left, like we agreed.”

“Well, that’s what we wanted to talk about”, Lex said. “You see...”

“Well now! A deal is a deal!” Vryn barked. “And you also got to see a lot of really fine art this morning...”

“...getting sold to rich airheads, whose only joy in life is to waste tons of money”, Faira said so uncharacteristically bitterly that Vryn winced. “Would you listen, Vryn? You see, a few other people seemed to want this painting, too...”

“Won’t be surprised, Graylveyr’s works aren’t traded very often...”

“... and poor Lex accidentally spent all of his pocket money, and then some, on this... uh, if you can say so, interesting painting...”

“Is it there under the cover?”

Lex nodded.

“May I see it?” Vryn said, getting interested again.

“Well, uh, I don’t know if it’s a very good idea...” Lex said weakly. Faira groaned quietly and seemed almost as crushed as Lex seemed depressed.

“Why, don’t be shy, just show it to me already...”

Lex handed the painting to Vryn, who almost dropped it as he saw the painting in its glory.

“Well?” Faira asked.

“Preposterous.” Vryn seemed throughout insulted, and neither of the companions seemed to remember when was the last time they saw Vryn in a state where he was not at all amused. Art, after all, in its many forms, was a sacred matter to him.

“Oh, it’s *officially* awful?” Faira said. “And here I thought it was some kind of triumph of experimental artwork. Well, I know next to nothing about paintings”, she said, thinking. “Well, I really hoped I was wrong though”, she added quickly as she saw Vryn starting to get angry with her.

“This is not even a real painting.” Vryn looked at the painting carefully, thinking it might have some sort of artistic idea, but even after careful examination, he couldn’t think of anything. He had to stick to the facts. “This has been painted with house paints.”

“House paints?”

“Yes! See how this has flaked when it dried on the canvas.” Vryn wondered. “And no one uses this distasteful shade of green in artwork.”

“Well, that’s true”, Faira laughed. “Not really on the walls, either!”

“And this is not even really a painting, someone has just poured paint on canvas. If I were you, I might find out who did this.”

“Why not.” Faira grinned widely.

“Wait a moment. . .” Lex said. “You don’t mean. . .”

“Yep. Lex and I will start looking for a mysterious painter who paints with house paints and doesn’t sign his work.” Faira smiled. “And Vryn, this will be the last time we help you to bend the rules of this particular auction hall.” She smiled at Lex, and said, “Otherwise, this might get really expensive in the future.”

“**W**AIT A MOMENT”, LEX SAID as they headed back to the auction house. “We are looking for the painter of this disastrous thing?”

“What? You’re not interested of the story behind this painting? I am, I really am.”

“Uh, never mind. Forget I asked.” Lex sighed. He knew that when Faira got some bright idea, nothing could turn her head.

“You don’t have anything better to do today, or do you?”

“Well, not really. I suppose this will be more interesting than a game of darts with Fryn and Giles.”

“Oh, yes, The final match of the championship tournament of the dart game sub-organisation of the Shadowhawks entertainment department. . . once again”, Faira said. This good-reputed band of thieves organised a lot of varied fun for its members, and none had boring time on or off duty. “Why don’t you try football like all sane people. I’ll go play with the Orphanage folks this evening”, she said, as they stepped in the auction hall storage clerk’s office.

The storage clerk was a short, old man, who squinted at them from behind enormous piles of notebooks. The room was full of works of art, all neatly grouped. Apparently, the clerk was working on the items of the next auction. The assistants carried numbered items to another storage room next to the auction hall, while unnumbered items were carried in from a bigger storage room.

“Ah, how can I help you?” the clerk said, picking up sturdy eyeglasses from the top of a nearby pole and putting them on. Lex winced; the invention was new, but while he had seen eyeglasses used by a few monks and scholars, this particular model was a little bit scarier for some indescribable reason. “Oh yes, I remember – you bought a painting this morning. . .”

“Yep”, Lex said. “And now we’d like to know who painted it.”

“Hmm. Not many people ask that”, the man said, and took another notebook from his side. “I wonder why. . . unless I’m going too far with these questions?”

“We’re just curious”, Faira said.

“Let’s see, Item number 41. . . no, 42? Uh. . . Lex. . . Egrain?” He squinted at the smudgy autograph Lex had left behind.

“That’s right”, Lex said, hesitating a bit and with a little bit of blush. He wondered silently if it had been wiser to use a false name, but at the time of the purchase he had still been far too stunned to think.

“I’m sorry, but for this particular painting there is no further information, aside of the fact that it was supplied by Stefan Uvregt’s warehouse. We get additional information only for unusual items, such as the main attractions.”

Faira closed her eyes. “I see. Well, thank you for your troubles in any case.”

“You mean you know that fellow?” Lex said as they waved goodbyes to the clerk and left the auction hall behind.

“Well, not really. But I have heard the name. I think it was your friend Giles who ran into him last year when there was one case of forgeries. Grycian cod sculptures made out of fresh fish, for crying out loud. . .”

LEX GRABBED STEFAN FROM HIS COLLAR and dragged him to the wall with one swift move. “In the name of the itches of the warts of the demons in the deepest reaches of Nine Hells, don’t you go annoying me. . .” Lex screeched, with a fearsome grunt, right on the face of the very worried art dealer. “Thanks to this painting thing, I didn’t have any money left for coffee. I won’t go home before Faira goes, and the longer you stall this, the longer it takes before I get home and get coffee. And the longer I stay without coffee the more annoyed I am. GET IT?”

“Right!” Stefan squeaked. “I didn’t mean you any harm. Let me down, will you? No need to get all rough on me, okay?” After Lex got calmer and dropped him on the floor, he sighed with relief. “I was jus’ saying I don’ know whose painting it was, see. Want some?” He handed a coffee mug to Lex, poured something on it from the pan – even when he guessed it was far too liquid in Lex’ case, but he just guessed it might calm him for long enough time. “I hope you like it, through roasted Coleman bean, not a droppa cream. Well, right. . . those paintings o’ yours.” Stefan threw himself on his comfortable chair holding his cup, sighed happily and reclined. “I have no idea whose painting it was. I jus’ reserve the paintings about week before they go to the sales warehouse, and they go there right from the artists, packaged all nicely.”

“So you don’t actually see the paintings that go through your warehouse?” Faira asked.

“Nope.” Stefan shook his head. “Always wrapped on paper or cloth. I hand the artist a bag of gold, put a tag on the thing that has six times as high price, and carry ’em away to the warehouse.”

“So wait a second.” Lex said. “This was the reserve price, the auction house takes a bit from top of that. . . ouch.”

“Not a cheap hobby, you know”, Stefan said. “But if it helps, I’ll let you look at the ledger.” He took the thick book from the shelf next to him, and handed it to Faira. “It has all of the artist I’ve dealt with.”

“Let’s see. You paid. . .” Faira asked.

Lex sighed. “144 ducats.”

“Good grief.”

“Don’t remind me. Please.”

“All right, I won’t.” Faira smiled. “It has a lot of artists, so it’s easier to just check those artists that have been paid around twenty ducats.”

“There’s plenty of them, still.”

“Yep, but see: Anchor Road, Half Verst Alley, again Anchor Road, Sailor’s Alley, Hangman’s Loop, Sail Street, another on the Sailor’s Alley... almost all of these are in the harbour and on the east side of the bay. Cheap apartments. And we know what’s the best clue to find this house, right?”

Lex thought. “The ickly green.”

“Yep. I’ll write down these addresses, and then we’ll go looking for a house with a surprisingly ugly colour.”

THE LATE MORNING TURNED to afternoon. Cold morning winds had ceased, and two thieves examined the harbour houses on the last warm moments of the autumn. They did not dare to go asking any nosy questions right away from anyone; they knew it was wise not to ask anything about weird paintings for no particularly good reason. Therefore, their first clue was certain colour.

It was a bland shade of green, which, despite of all anger that had been raised against it, could occasionally be seen in the harbour area houses. Faira suspected that Villard’s Paint Kitchen had “accidentally” mixed a whole lot of this paint again, and was “forced” to sell it away at grossly discounted price before people caught wind of the news.

The Paint Kitchen would have been their first place of inquiry, but regrettably, Faira and Lex had bad memories about Villard’s bodyguards, who had not liked, at all, the appropriate but – according to them – quite stupid and inquisitive questions. Therefore, Faira and Lex wandered around the harbour streets and asked the locals if there had been any renovations in the neighbourhood recently.

“So, what are you up to tomorrow?” Lex asked Faira when they took a break, and headed to the restaurant three blocks away – at least they let Faira to get food on tab.

“Well”, Faira sighed, “They said that Gauthovel manor had a vacancy for a cleaning maid”, she said with a big smile.

Lex grinned. “Oh, cleaning maid places have to be fulfilled. You could get to clean stuff up that way.”

“I went to talk to them yesterday. I will get the place for sure.”

“How’s that?”

Faira smiled. “Well, it pays to stay under the window to listen. ’Well, listen, Margaret, this was the best applicant so far. Not a single glance at the candlesticks!”

Lex laughed as they walked around a corner. A little bit ahead, they saw something that made them wince. “Oh, look at that!”

“Well I’ll be darned”, Faira said.

Ahead of them they could see a house that had been painted recently with a disgusting colour. To be exact, the same colour that now adorned the abstract work they had acquired that morning.

They walked closer. It was a two-storey house, a bit squat one nevertheless; a simple wooden house that had seen better days.

As they got closer, they got even more thrilled, though not thrilled the same way.

They could see in through the second-floor window. The indoors painting was probably not done yet: painter’s ladder stood in the middle of the room. And on the top of the ladder sat a man – with a rope around his neck.

“Damn it, no!” Lex growled. Faira and Lex ran. Many precious seconds later they were on the front door.

“One, two, three, go. . .”

Faira and Lex slammed the door together with their shoulders. It didn’t budge.

“Not locked, but I can’t get it to open”, Faira said as she examined the door a bit. “Must have been barred from inside.

“What kind of idiot makes the front door open inward?”

“Not been robbing in the old town lately?” Faira asked as they ran toward the kitchen door. “Almost all old houses have a door that opens inward.”

“Heh, what’s worth stealing in old town anyway?” In a less serious situation he might have laughed. Now he merely roared as he recklessly ran, at full speed, at the kitchen door. “Haaarrgggh. . .”

Faira knew Lex would usually survive without bruises from the odd tricks he did, but now she was worried – if only for a short while. This door wasn’t quite as well barred as the outside door: it broke away easily from its hinges and flew half across the kitchen with Lex. Lex was used to rough landings and got easily up, still clutching the unharmed package with painting.

“And up! . . .” Faira shouted. They ran around the kitchen table on different sides, rushed to the hallway, almost tripped on the carpet, and found the stairs easily on the other side of the hall.

Upstairs, they saw many doors. All other doors were open, and no one could be seen inside. One seemed to lead to the room they had seen, and was locked.

“I suppose this one opens outward!”

“No problem. . .”

Faira carefully picked the lock pick that seemed to work best with this particular lock type. Lex had always liked her nimble fingers, especially when the town guards were after them; in this case, there was a quite different reason to hurry. Despite of that, she could get the lock open before Lex could blink his eyes.

With hearts heavy with worries and bad feelings, they stepped in.

“OH!” FAIRA WINCED as they entered the room they had seen from the street.

Worries rolled off of the hearts of the two rogues. The man they had seen from the window, lied on the floor next to the ladder, sobbing quietly.

“Good man! What’s wrong?” Faira came to him and helped him to sit. He was acting along, if a bit reluctantly.

“Got to keep on. . . even if it’s hard. . .” he said at last.

“Well well there. . . things can’t be so bad that you need to end it all. Never will be.” Faira said and smiled widely.

“T-thank you, ma’am. . . and young sir. . .”

The three sat on the floor close by for a while. The man slowly stopped his sobbing, and seemed happier with some company around. He was middle-aged, broadly built, bald, with a curly beard, a bit darker skinned than the rogues; perhaps he was of Coleman or Tharkaian roots.

“Who are you?” Faira asked.

“Antonus A-a-altikulolamos”, he said, with a trembling voice. “A-an artist.”

“Why, nice to meet you!” Faira said with a smile. “I’m Faira Ativel.”

“Lex Egrain.”

“Pleasure to meet you both. . .”

“Wait a moment? The famous Altikulolamos?” Faira asked as the man shook their hands, still a bit sadly.

“Oh, wait a moment – the royal court artist?” Lex asked.

“N-n-no. He’s my brother. But I s-suppose I’m not very bad either.”

Then, they heard someone coming up the stairs, screaming. “Master! Someone’s broken through the kitchen d. . .” the younger man, almost looking like Lex but younger and thinner, arrived to the room and was startled to see his master with strangers. “What is going on in here?”

“Well, lad, I suppose your master tried to kill himself”, Lex told the youngster grimly.

The boy didn’t say anything. After a moment of stunned silence, the artist got up. “I would not have done it, really”, he said with deep, stern voice; Faira had no doubts he really meant every word. He did not seem like a man who would kill himself, or even put a rope in his neck even for jokes. But why had he done so?

“Well, it sure looked like that to me”, Lex said.

“I just felt so terribly alone”, Antonus explained Lex. “In the morning, Boris” – he pointed at the frightened boy – “came to explain that my painting was sold away at the reserve price. That was nothing. Then he went away, and my wife starts screaming, for no reason at all, that this is a very boring place to be, packs

her things, and said she will jump aboard the next pirate ship passing this way.” He went quiet for a moment. “I don’t know what I would have done if I had not seen you come here, but I really wished someone would.”

“Actually, it was about this painting we came to talk about. . .” Lex said as he opened the package.

“This isn’t my painting, it can’t be!” Antonus said. “But. . . it’s about the same size, the frame is same, clearly Boris’ handiwork. . .” He looked at the painting for a while, thought furiously, and then slowly looked at Boris, eyes flaring with rage. “What is the meaning of this?”

“I-I didn’t. . .” Boris stammered.

“Out with it! You didn’t mess things up again, did you?”

Boris took a deep breath. “Forgive me, master.”

Antonus looked at Boris sternly, but smiled then, calming down quick. “Very well. Now just tell us what happened.”

Boris hesitated. “Well, last week, I packaged this painting for the trader. One of the workmen was carrying their paints in. He almost poured it on top of the painting, but I took the jar from him and. . .”

“. . . and then *you* spilled the things on top of the painting?”

Boris swallowed. “Yes. Time was running out. I packaged the painting and sold it to the trader. I went to the auction this morning and this man here bought it with the reserve price.” He seemed really embarrassed. “I didn’t dare to tell you why it sold so badly. You never cared about the prices, master.”

“Oh mine, what a mess.” Antonus burst to laugh – resonant, loud laughter that made the renovator’s scaffolds and tools resonate. Faira smiled – the man’s crushing depression seemed to be gone. Boris didn’t seem too amused, though, as he suspected what was coming to him.

“And now”, Antonus said, “My dear Boris, you will get another job.”

“Oh no.”

“Don’t you ‘oh no’ at all. You will remove the layer of paint very very carefully, before the painting is completely ruined. If something has to be repainted, I will do it myself. This young gentleman and madame here, who cheered my day by popping in for a visit at the right time, deserve to see what the painting really looks like.”

“Oh?” Lex said.

“Have you ever met mr. Virgusson, the owner of the auction house?”

“I believe we had the pleasure of meeting him once.” Faira said. “Or it kind of depends, in regards of that pleasure part. . .”

“Well, I hoped this painting would sell at a terrifying price, before Virgusson caught wind of it and stopped it.” Antonus tried to find something from under the pile of supplies and junk in the corner. “It was a bit of a disappointment to hear how little it stirred people – believe me, my wife’s departure this morning was

still a bit bigger worry though. Well, I suppose life will turn out fun. Maybe my brother will find more profitable job for me.”

As he spoke, he took a human-shaped doll to the ladder and put the thing to the noose. He came to the companions, and handed Lex a charcoal sketch of the original painting.

“I called the painting ’Your own profit’, but I suppose you don’t know that, the art traders do not think the names of artists or paintings really matter these days. It would be nice to know, how long it would have taken before the Virgusson’s associates would have found me...”

Faira and Lex smiled as they compared the doll and the sketch. Even when the figure that hung from the ceiling bore only passing similarity with the auction house owner, the sketch had more similarities. They had seen the same enraged face before. In this picture, Virgusson tried to catch, with his last bits of strength, paintings and money, desperate and unsuccessful. Around him, paintings ascended to the heavens, while his beloved coins and his own body was falling to the fires of the inferno below.

THE END

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