

## Chapter 6 – The Cozened Chase

“- July 11, Year 580 of the King’s Calendar .-“

“- Antonidas D’Ambrosio, Mage of the Advanced Research and Illumination Sect .-“

His findings were sinister.

At first he’d been vexed at being assigned to base sleuthing. His calling lay with the higher mysteries, not the lower, and his specialty was the research of *arcane* patterns, not human ones. But the Council of Six selected him precisely because of that reputation. He was sufficiently discerning and diligent as to be competent even outside his specialty, the Council told him. More importantly, it would make it less likely that the true purpose of his consignment would be immediately discerned by his fellow mages. His peers that had been entrusted with magical security in Alterac City. The mages he was now investigating while pretending to learn from them for the purpose of taking over one of the Auction House oversight positions later.

Not that they were Antonidas’ *main* concern, anymore.

For all that magical security was a service Dalaran had been providing for centuries, the kingdoms did not much appreciate having to leave such things in the hands of a foreign power. Antonidas didn’t blame them, and he would speak in favour of Dalaran gracefully accepting the new status quo when the kingdoms finally gathered the courage to break away from Dalaran’s monopoly in favour of home-grown magic organisations. Now that Stormwind had proven the idea viable with its Order of Conjurers, it was only a matter of time. Already many noble scions here in Alterac had studied in Dalaran only to come back and displace the Kirin Tor’s own appointees as warders, enchanters, researchers and court mages. It had come to the point where the Auction House security was the only place where Dalaran still had majority.

So it was most surprising that requests for investigation had come from the *nobility* of Alterac, rather than Dalaran’s agents here. What remained of the *highest* nobility, even. News of the young king’s purge had reached Dalaran faster than all other nations, and the Kirin Tor had understandably been keeping an eye on the situation. That no civil war broke out was close to a miracle, and even Strom’s reaction was strangely lukewarm. The latter, at least, seemed to be swiftly changing to the point where war might break out this very year, or next at the latest. But what did not change was that the remaining nobility had called on a foreign power to

investigate *their own affairs*. ‘Potentially subversive elements’ they called them, which had led to ‘ruinous information leaks and security failings’ at ‘all strata of interaction’ between Alterac and Dalaran, and even within Alterac itself.

The requests came with so many different envoys, in so many different wordings, and from many enough different sources that even the Kirin Tor didn’t know if the nobles suspected incompetence or malice. Or if they suspected it of each other, Dalaran, or the Alterac Crown itself.

Then, to truly throw the fox into the henhouse, a request to do everything requested by the nobles came from the Alterac Crown itself too.

The Council of Six wasn’t even sure the nobles and king even knew about each other’s entreaties. Or, if they did, they didn’t admit it. The only thing they *could* be sure of was Alterac aimed to use Dalaran as a hammer to get rid of their problems, and by extension take all the blame for the resulting fallout from their rivals and the king, and vice versa.

Asking the Kirin Tor to get rid of subversive mages when those saboteurs were most likely blood scions of their peers (if not originating from their own courts or that of King himself) made this a very sensitive issue. Antonidas had explained all this to the King himself, in a secret meeting that the Kirin Tor had arranged for him. Aiden Perenolde was suspicious enough of yet another foreign mage in their midst, despite asking for the job to begin with, however belatedly. The king certainly didn’t admit to such, but he couldn’t entirely hide his feelings despite his mastery of dissimulation. It made Antonidas certain that the man had only sent the Crown’s request after finding out about his nobles’ entreaties, in a bid to undermine and supplant them. A bid that was ultimately as successful as it was unnecessary, the Kirin Tor hadn’t planned to go around him in any case.

At least the king was mollified when Antonidas assured him his job was not to pull any seams but to find them. As discreetly as possible.

“We will, of course, share all relevant findings with the Crown,” Antonidas assured the man as the meeting was winding down.

“Relevant by whose standards?” the king asked mildly. Too mildly. “Go, mage, and try to do a proper job of it, unlike your compatriots.”

*Whatever could you mean?*

Credit to the Council's wisdom, they were right that Antonidas' unwitting peers were reassured by his academic leanings. The Council were also right that he would master this task as easily as all others before it. Once he figured out which principles of research and pattern recognition to conflate and *not* conflate relative to people's actions – and paperwork – he discovered an area of research that was, at the very least, moderately captivating, if not strictly necessary for his self-attainment.

Unfortunately, captivating became disconcerting and then disquieting within the space of a month. After weeks of shadowing his nominal seniors, circumventing them under illusory disguises to reach restricted areas (often as said seniors themselves), trawling through countless customer lists and transaction ledgers, questioning (or interviewing) various notables and non-notables all throughout the city (whose accounts were as consistent as they were mutually contradictory), and even magically disguising himself as the odd acquaintance or rival of the locals in question, Antonidas was reaching the disquieting conclusion that he was on the trail of himself.

Not literally, rather it was looking as if whoever or whatever was (or had been) at work in Alterac City had used his exact same approach to achieve his nefarious aims. Whatever they were. Or, alternatively, it was an entire unknown group of subversive mages. A possibility that Antonidas had trouble seeing plausibility in, as such people didn't come out of nowhere, especially multiple people with such specialised skillset.

Archmage Krasus, his contact with the Council of Six back in Dalaran, was sceptical. "Be careful not to ascribe magical explanations to what could be achieved with mundane competence." He cautioned him via projection. "Or corruption. Skulduggery can account for much, especially there."

Antonidas could see his point, the Alterac court was more decadent and deadly than anything he had imagined, even after thoroughly reading up on the Magrocrats. Additionally, despite the best work and pay incentives, corruption was inevitable in any monopoly and the Auction House was no different. Antonidas, of course, passed on the relevant names for disciplinary action and prosecution to the Kirin Tor or the King's representative as required.

What did not make sense, however, was that too many of the more catastrophic failures of diplomacy had happened in public or semi-public venues. Or, rather, in private venues nonetheless attended by many of the others ultimately doomed to the gallows – balls, hunts, feasts and soirees. Very uncharacteristic of Alterac if they truly were so competent at shadow

games, something Krasus and the Council agreed with. For all their decadence, the notables here were usually much more discreet, and their hired help tended towards the proficient or recently deceased. It was why Antonidas had so much trouble with what should have been a simple fact-finding mission. Moreover, many of the stories were conflicting even from the people least likely to be lying.

Not all of the nobles he'd managed to interview were as opaque as they thought. They were certainly skilled wordsmiths and hard to get a hold of, as he only got audiences by leaning hard on the pull of Dalaran (as the King refused to show his own hand), and often only because they were already in the city for other reasons. They were more than willing to gossip and demean their various rivals, but their stories didn't match up more than half the time.

“Even the ones least likely to be lying had differing accounts of the disagreements of the deceased,” Antonidas explained to Krasus during their communication. “Disagreements that led to bad blood on top of the inherited one. Someone recalled the then-yet-unhanged outbidding them on the same item. Another would claim someone bribed the Auction House staff to keep quiet about certain items on offer, and they only found out because of convenient information leaks. Other times, it was conflicts of interest over individuals secretly blacklisted.” Corruption and leaks which the Kirin Tor should have found out about well before this, even if it was beyond magical purview. “Even for the more personal feuds unrelated to us, some remember ridiculing each other, while the others recall threats. There is even a case where one remembers his compatriot being spat in the face while the other side remembers a brawl. And the times these events supposedly happened are inconsistent between their viewpoints as well.”

Looking through the conviction records of the nobles that saw their end at the gallows, the same pattern emerged. While defence testimonies were never going to match witness accounts or presented evidence – otherwise they wouldn't have been convicted in the first place – the *character* witness accounts told a different story.

“Even their direct enemies seemed disbelieving of their crimes in at least half the cases I could independently verify,” Antonidas reported. “Or at least disbelieving that they would be caught, never mind so embarrassingly. The biggest anomaly is House Angevin, who everyone agrees wouldn't be involved in any dark games, though the same number of people – if not *all* the same people – also agree that it could only have ended this way for the same reason.”

“Dissent is punished harshly in Alterac, it seems,” Krasus noted philosophically, shaking his head. “Especially when that dissent is to the good. Almost as harshly as trying to finally conform after lifetimes of the opposite.”

“Which does not seem to truly have been the case here.”

“Quite.”

Eventually, Antonidas concluded that the Angevin testimony was the only one genuine, and they were the only ones who had been truly innocent in the whole affair. Unfortunately, this also meant they were the only lead he could definitively dismiss, meaning he had wasted all that time chasing geese.

He found a new trail almost by accident, when he took a break from his prime investigation to look into the more recent developments that might be related to his cover. After all, that had to be maintained as well.

“What’s this?”

Very closely before the nobles of Alterac began suffering failures of discretion one after another, half the standing mercenary contracts on auction were taken down and replaced with almost identical versions, save the mention that they were ‘no longer accepting hits on child saints or their dependents.’

“I must be missing something important.”

Thankfully, this was material his cover was fully privy to, so he could just walk up to one of his local peers and ask.

“Oh, that.” The woman pursed her lips. “You missed quite the event last year.”

Learning that he had missed the emergence of the first non-ordained Light-using human in written history made Antonidas, for the first time, question whether he had perhaps buried himself in his tomes *too* deeply. His only consolation was that the news was still mostly rumors outside of Alterac, and the people who had since had dealings with this...

“A fourteen year-old boy? Or would he be fifteen, now?”

“Yes. We were all surprised, but the Archbishop himself spent hours of his visit over in Strahnbrad confirming it. He’s something of a local legend there now, and here too, though

you're not likely to run into him anymore. Last I heard he and his family had moved out to a farm somewhere."

"What is his name?"

"Wayland Hywel. A cobbler's son, if you can believe it."

Quite the local legend indeed, if people knew his name off-hand.

There might be something there.

Antonidas considered the reports of other investigators he'd read in preparation for this assignment. According to normal procedure, now would be a good time to go to the market, perhaps under a nondescript illusion, and casually inquire about this local legend. But he'd already wasted days on a tangent, and there was no reason he would draw suspicion for doing what anyone could do on a whim. He decided to forgo any disguise and instead teleported to Strahnbrad to talk to the local priest.

"The Council knew the full extent of my skills when they sent me here," Antonidas idly told his steed, Hengroen, as he led the gelding out of the stables. "Why didn't they supply this information when they gave me this assignment? Perhaps they were worried it would bias my investigation? I cannot imagine they did not know."

The cleric was surprised at his visit. Most mages did not attend church in his experience. Antonidas himself was not strictly pious, he certainly trusted his mastery of the Arcane over anything else, but he did believe. The priest was inordinately surprised by that.

"Perhaps faith is not the right term," Antonidas mused. "It is merely that the Light is a visible, palpable, quantifiable phenomenon, so it's not so much faith as acknowledging an objective fact."

This, to his surprise, was the best thing he could have said, because it prompted the priest to compare him to his very person of interest. They shared the same viewpoint, it seemed, which the cleric found inordinately remarkable. Antonidas didn't exactly understand why, his view was not exactly rare in Dalaran, but he did not say anything. The Priest turned out to be quite contrite as well, strangely enough.

"I cannot shake the feeling I was in some ways responsible for him leaving the city," the man confessed, an odd turn of phrase for an equally odd reversal of the standard convention when visiting a priest. "I heard rumors of him holding the Light's healing grace for ransom and

assumed the worst. I was perhaps too adverse during the annual sanctification of home and hearth. But enough of my maudlin gossip, did you have other questions? Perhaps you require healing?”

Antonidas politely said no and excused himself. There was no point in pushing now that the man had caught himself after his indiscretion. He paid his respects to Great Tyr and Saint Mereldar and left pondering the issue of average cobbler income. What it would take to overcome its limitations in order for a family of three to afford a journey away from Alterac City, never mind settling somewhere else. In the end, after teleporting back to Alterac he still went to the market to make casual inquiries, in disguise of course. He learned that no one had made a business of healing people with the Light, and later questions with his noble contacts confirmed the mysterious child saint hadn't sought patronage among the high and rich either. He did hear enough to prompt a follow-up examination of Auction House ledgers, however, though it took an embarrassingly long time to cotton on to his use of a fake name. They revealed that the child was either a genius inventor or a very good deal-maker. Whatever the truth, the numbers added up to quite a bit of coin steadily accumulating over the course of roughly half a year. Revenue, not one-time payments, though the Auction House was not privy to how these arrangements might have evolved or changed after the auctions were completed.

Most important of all, Antonidas slowly pieced together that *all* of the nobles that harassed the child had hung, and a fair few of them even had the King's *favour*. Though this seemed lost on the people he talked to. All they knew was that the people executed had been convicted of alleged crimes related to national security, and few to none of them actually believed the official story (and, thus, the Crown).

For the crown to turn on them, their crimes had to have been particularly heinous, Antonidas thought. Or perhaps not, considering the dark things the Crown itself had ordered that weren't as unknown as Perenolde wished. Alternatively, the ones killed knew things that might implicate the royal family in something they didn't want found out.

Following the record trail all the way finally revealed that the 'something' in question passed through the Auction House as well. But the records of 'what' had been expunged in accordance with the highest secrecy protocols. The ones reserved only for items that were later deemed of so high monetary or strategic value that they shouldn't have been put up for auction in the first place. These were the auctions that weren't privy to just anyone, things that dukes or kings might sometimes auction off to refill their coffers... or as bait in some manner of scheme.

For Antonidas, this meant he had neither the position nor the seniority to be privy to such information. And when he resorted to the means he'd been allowed *outside* his cover, he learned that everyone who had been around for the events had long since vanished or been found dead. And, in the case of the security mages, recalled to Dalaran.

He finally brought it up with Krasus in their communications. That was when Antonidas received his confirmation that the Council of Six had, indeed, sent him into this blind.

“We did not want you going into this assignment with preconceived notions,” Archmage Krasus at least had the grace to look apologetic. “Now that we have your independent verification, the Council can deliberate on a proper course of action.”

Antonidas did his best to keep his feelings off his face. “Am I allowed to know about the inciting incident now?”

“Very well. I suppose you’ve earned it.”

Finding out that humans had finally cracked the secret of dwarven gunpowder was one thing. Deducing that he could have found this out on his own by shifting some of his investigative efforts to the trade guilds, or even just the local Alchemist...

He'd *definitely* buried himself too deep in his tomes.

“You will be contacted in a week to discuss new directions.”

The end of the communication left Antonidas feeling adrift. It was polite of Krasus to warn him he would be reassigned now that the Council had gotten what they needed out of him. Antonidas tried not to begrudge the Six their manipulations, but...

He felt like he'd been set up to fail.

And... Something in all this felt too neat and tidy.

Someone tries to steal the golden goose, fails so many times – and so ruinously, however it happened – that the hired blades make common cause to unilaterally refuse additional hits on the fairy tale hero. Then, months *later*, some force takes it upon itself to confect the bloody downfall of all involved, thus avenging the saintly protagonist. It was a plot straight from a fairy tale transposed into real life. It was too neat, too fantastical, almost... scripted.

You could *try* to explain the conclusion as the king trying to secure an asset, failing, losing face, and then going to extreme lengths to eliminate the nobles who grew boldest in their



defiance from thinking him weak. But investigations weren't won through speculation. You could try to explain it as the Crown cleaning house *somewhat* more easily, except the same Crown was now facing war with its greatest rival while its grip on power was the weakest it had ever been.

*I need to re-assess.*

Antonidas spent a day and night reassessing all his findings. Unfortunately, his evidence only reinforced his initial conclusion of a different party. A malicious will. A will guiding events towards an even more sinister picture than a nefarious noble or king's plot gone sideways.

By why? For what reason? For what purpose? The highest nobles left were walking on eggshells, attempts to claim or take over the assets of the dead were mired in opposing claims (or never materialised), the bloodletting had all the people spooked, the guilds and freelancers were cutting out the middleman as much as possible instead of using the Auction House as freely as before, there was war on the horizon even as the Crown's grip on power was the weakest since Alterac's split from the Empire in the Fowl War. The last was in no small part because the only noble house of *genuine* virtue got caught up in the purge as well, *somehow*. Which, conspicuously, might leave the Crown without naval support or even control of much of its coast in the case of a domestic conflict. Never mind the military strength that a ducal family possessed. It was frankly astonishing that the nation had not devolved to civil war after such a purge. Or worse.

For all that there had been (and still were) so many ambitions and designs at play, none of this had worked out in favour of any of these interests and egos.

Antonidas' thoughts finally made what felt like the right course correction.

There was some sort of overarching agenda here, a single will, a will that could only have done what it did by taking the seeming of at least seven different people, in Antonidas' most conservative estimate, more than half of them high nobility. In the process manipulating the Crown of Alterac into the biggest slaughter of its highest echelons of society in the country's entire history. It was a frankly sinister display of... Antonidas wasn't even sure what to call it. Competence, influence, insidiousness? Individual power? Organisational numbers? Was this one individual or a group?

The common people themselves no longer trusted the King's word, when before the Perenolde family had been well regarded among the citizenry. And that was in great part because the

remaining nobles, both from the culled families and not, were purposely allowing leaks and rumors to run unchecked, unlike before. Most of them didn't even seem to be manufactured. In a kingdom like Alterac where everyone thought of themselves first, doubly so after such a bloodletting, this suggested either vengefulness or demoralization. Or both. So extreme that those involved no longer cared about the danger to themselves.

*No one* had gained more than they lost here.

*But.*

If the aim was to weaken Alterac from within, it had certainly succeeded.

“Audacious aims beget audacious methods,” Antonidas murmured to himself as he thoughtfully skimmed the scattered papers summing up his findings one more time.

Was it foreign meddling? Strom was the obvious culprit, but the kind of magical competence at work was uncharacteristic of the place, and King Trollbane had thus far failed to take advantage of the situation. Lordaeron? Same issues. Gilneas? King Greymane was in the process of negotiating a fosterage with King Perenolde, but nothing he'd heard or seen suggested that the Alterac side was doing this under duress. Stormwind? Too far removed and had practically no conflicts of interest with anyone for the same reason.

Whatever the case, there wouldn't be a need to antagonise Dalaran.

“Who are you?” Antonidas murmured as he beheld his dark materials. “What are you aiming for here?”

And how much of everything was this mysterious third, no, fourth party truly responsible for? Given the attestations of the people he talked to, the clergy and even the Archbishop himself, the notion that the child saint was some kind of ruse could likely be dismissed.

But history was rife with evil actors taking advantage of the workings of the good for their own nefarious purposes. In that light, the delay between the gunpowder fiasco and the noble shadow war – never mind its disastrous conclusion – gained a whole new meaning. Especially since it overlapped with whatever troubles managed to drive the young saint to flee the capital permanently. Almost like they were waiting for it. For him to get out of their way.

Or die.

Antonidas' task was only to find the strings and seams, not to pull them, but... he was reluctant to hand over the investigation now that he had come so far. He wasn't one to fall prey to the sunk cost fallacy, but his superiors wouldn't have assigned him to this task if they didn't trust his skills. They certainly seemed to trust his judgment, even after they themselves impaired it through their manipulations, however well-intentioned.

If nothing else...

He *had* always been rewarded for initiative.

“- . -“

Antonidas retrieved a particular case from his safe and unlocked it with the key from his spatial pouch, revealing what looked like an amulet made of many faceted pieces of crystalline quartz glued together. The Council had supplied him with a memory stone cluster to record the mystical imprints of the individuals connected to his investigation. The purpose was to have a way to determine if they were under magical duress or otherwise unnatural subjection. Not a particularly easy task since that relied on direct comparison to the Racial Common Denominator of Metaphysical Order periodically updated back in Dalaran, and the method was unable to detect *some* of the more subtle, long-term influences. Antonidas wasn't high enough in the ranks to know all the specifics yet. What he did know was that the record stone had to be transported there by mundane means. Sufficiently strong arcane exposure, especially teleportation, disrupted the recording matrix. Spirit was finicky, especially the loose traces of it constantly shed by people during those moments when their attention was aimed outwards, which was most of the time. Where attention goes, energy flows.

However, this would work to his advantage. Disruption to the recordings did not bring damage to the stones themselves, so he could always take new ones. He would need days to store new imprints if they were lost, but he had time. He hadn't turned in his findings, and so he probably didn't need to worry he'd be recalled before the deadline Krasus set. And he should be able to make do with the imprints of the individuals least likely to have any control over whatever proceedings these were, who were also the most easily accessible.

Such magic as the one he decided upon usually required reagents of particularly *personal* bent, such as skin, hair or blood, if possible. And its purpose was usually to exploit an existing connection, rather than establish a new one based on vague, personal understanding of what they *should* have in common. Or, in this case, who. It certainly wasn't designed to filter *out* sympathetic connections in the hopes of finding the one thing (person) they *unknowingly* had

in common in the caster's *opinion*, regardless of how fact-based. Especially when the 'reagents' were so fragile and the nature and criteria of those connections could be considered mental abstractions at best.

"I, who am avatar of the Order Immanent, am the one whose claim on What Is challenges the claim of the Rulers of Ages."

Antonidas D'Ambrosio had earned the Kirin Tor Sash of Supreme Acumen. For his paper called 'The Ramifications of refined Reverse Time Travel Phenomena into Quantifiable Magical Practice.' When he was *twelve*.

"The Five Dragons, the Five Masters, the Five Aspects whose Right is the World, whose Might is the World, whose Instrument is the World and whose Charge is the World. I hereby declare: the Right and Might and Instrument and Charge were not Won but Invested by Decree of Order. Let Decree of Order be superseded by Decree of Order. Let my Domain be the Domain of the Ruler of Ages, whose Right is the Present, whose Might is the Past, whose Charge is Fate, whose Instrument is the Entirety of The Passage of Time!"

The magical circle shone. Power flowed like the Sands of Time along lines of mana and chalk overlaid with the tiny spirit stones arranged along sacred geometry. Some dispersed along with the stored energy in a puff of mist, most absorbed them and changed course, overlapping, weaving together, converging on the pedestal upon which sat a crystal ball.

"Let the Truth be revealed to my eyes. Let they be seen, those turning against Mankind's Order, those by whose deceit and artifice did man turn against man, did man turn on himself, devouring the refuse of his lost Dreams, and not allowing Life its free and natural progression across Time, in order that they might supplant Order. Let they be known, that the souls they sought to claim may not fall victim to the Fel Outside."

The words commanded the space beyond space. The light shone dim. The crystal ball filled with mist.

"Let they be seen, that they may not persist in their doing for a cycle longer!"

The mist cleared to reveal a middle aged couple and three men in the middle of breakfast.

"Howard, are you sure you won't wait for-"

“Begging your pardon, Missus, but the Young Master has much bigger things going on than me. ‘Sides, it were your husband that hired me on, so it should be fine, right? I left a note with my thanks and best wishes too.”

“I don’t like it,” the man grumbled. “Have them *worthies* been making trouble for you? Because w-“

“Wish it were that simple myself,” Howard – was that even his true name? – interrupted his employer again, he was rather rude wasn’t he? “But with all due respect, which I assure you is greater than for literally any other man in the world, I’ve set my mind. Time on your farm has been more than I hoped for, but there’s other things in store for me than tending crops.”

“Shame,” one of the other men said. “You learned the trade fast, even though you were terrible at the start.”

“Thanks,” The man said dryly. “Also, fuck you.”

“Fuck you too.”

“My word,” the third exclaimed. “Such foul mouths in front of the missus!”

“I’ll let it slide for now,” said the missus in question. “But I’ll not stand for it once the babies arrive.”

“Aye aye, ma’am.”

Antonidas had to be *very* careful connecting the spell matrix to his own mental *image* of the man rather than the man himself, now that his makeshift anchors were depleted. Given the overreliance on mental abstractions that he’d needed to account for on the fly, he’d had to dispense with most auxiliary scrying parameters. He could tell neither distance nor direction, never mind zoom out to get a bird’s eye view of the place, and he wouldn’t be able to tell if the man would noticed the magic latch on to him unless he reacted visibly. Too high a risk just to get a reaction.

But Antonidas was very good at his craft.

The view in the crystal ball wavered but stayed on target even as the man rose from the table and made his way out of the house. It wavered more and more through the man’s brief travel preparations, he’d been ready since the prior day or longer. This was a problem, the spell had barely found its way, if his target changed locations Antonidas might not be able to find him

again, not with his spell ingredients used up. He'd seen his face and could scry for it again, but the odds that it wasn't the same one he'd wear tomorrow couldn't be dismissed. He'd caught the man just as he changed covers and he couldn't even decide if this was good luck or bad.

Antonidas barely had time to put on his battle robes, woven by his own hand with the pinnacle of arcane protection exceeding the best full plate, before the man was leaving the property outright. The image in the crystal ball wavered and stuttered the more distance he put between himself and the original spot of the scrying spell. Antonidas reluctantly cut the visual feed in order to divert power to the anchor, but he could make even that work to his advantage. Forming the weave for the Teleportation spell, he used his freed up focus to cast the best spells of protection, finally priming a Paralysis spell before triggering the leap. Arcane symbols surrounded him and the tell-tale whirl of space-time magic moved him across time and space right behind- "AGH!"

The fir branch slapped him in the face so hard he slipped and fell on the ground – "Ooof!" – or *would* have if not for the tree trunk right beneath his feet, as slippery as it was full of sharp vestigial branches, including a big one that didn't skewer him through the eye only because his armor spell lasted just long enough under the force of his fall, even on top of the subtle forcefield cast by the weave patterns of his robe. "Ack ..." The paralysis spell misfired into a pine tree as he lurched aside. The tree glowed a bit greener than usual and then nothing as he swayed on all fours, cradling his cheek with one eye shut beneath his fingers from phantom pain. "What?"

"The ecological succession that creates a deciduous forest starts with the greed of pines."

"Depelli!" His reflexive mana blast hurled the boughs away, but most of them just whipped back. He managed to shield his face with his sleeve this time, then Antonidas swung – THUNK – his staff caught in the trunks and his robes on sharp branches as he struggled out of... a pine thicket even a toddler couldn't get through, how? He'd targeted the spot right behind his quarry, what was the man doing in there, when, he was bigger than Antonidas, he couldn't have fit, how-? *He did feel my spell!*

"Fast-growing conifers colonize a suitable area and take it over, suppressing ground cover growth with their light-blocking needles."

The mage whipped his head around, trying to find the voice, both his eyes still worked even if one hurt, but telling direction of the voice was difficult, was this magic – no, echoes just got strange in thick woods, but he could still tell the path, follow him!

“As the pine growth becomes denser, this advantage backfires. The lower branches of the old trees die and infant pines starve in the darkness beneath the crowded sky.”

“Vento, viam meam succide!” His staff caught on a trunk again, but the swipe was still big enough to cut a large swath of the forest ahead to ribbons. “Depelli!” The trunks, lumps and branches were blown away in a cone ahead of him, and so Antonidas D’Ambrosio finally managed to break out of the underbrush. “Stop in the name of the Kirin Tor!”

No answer save the wind, he was on a serpentine mountain path but there was no one else – no, down there around the bend, a blur of tan and brown passed beyond the trees. “Hengroen, to me!” A portal of light appeared at his shoulder, from which his steed charged through all the way from the Alterac City stables. With a brief levitation spell, Antonidas jumped in the saddle. “Hya!”

His horse quickly charged down the path and turned the bend to find – there was no one, quick on his feet was he? “Go go go!” Another bend in the path and finally Antonidas could – still nothing!?! “Whoa, whoa, boy!” His steed dug furrows into the ground with its hooves as it skid to the halt. “Where did he go?”

Antonidas was half-way through another, short-range scrying spell when the man emerged from the trees on the right, crossed the thin trail and hopped down the slope on the other side to disappear into the brushwood.

The mage stared in shock at the sheer gall of – of – “HYA!” He charged down the path, around another bend just in time to see the man do the same thing just as he got there, he wasn’t even running, didn’t seem in a hurry at all, why that insolent – Silence Shell, Illusion on his steed’s eyesight, Invisibility, Ride the Wind. “Aer semita mea!” With a lashing of his reins, Hengroen galloped *on* the air down the mountain right over where he’d seen the man jump down. Antonidas couldn’t see through the tree cover below, but he made it down to the other path with time to spare and waited unseen and unheard in the middle of the path where the man was sure to emerge. Force Armor, Shield, Paralysis primed – again – now all he needed do was wait. He waited.

He waited.

... Where was he? Because unless he was setting camp in not even one square foot of space or going back up -

Antonidas' heart sank as he remembered a detail he'd overlooked in his rush. *The next bend in my path wasn't just a bend, it was a split in the road!*

Swiftly, he Rode the Wind back up the mountain, but the spell expired just as he reached the split and so he was forced to land his steed and gallop like any other horseman. He could cast it again, but this was too wily an opponent to waste mana, Invisibility and Silence Shell should still give him the element of surprise as long as the dust cloud behind him wasn't too large, why couldn't it have rained?

He skidded around a final bend in the path, the sand got in his eyes – why was it so *hot?* – but there he was! Stopped right in the path of an Alterac Footman Patrol, what luck! Drop Invisibility, drop Silence Shell. “Sto-“

“I SURRENDER!”

Antonidas and his proud steed experienced what is known as false start.

“I surrender! I admit it, I did it! I don't know what you think I did but whatever it is, I'll confess! Just don't let the wizard get me! He's crazy! Crazy I tell you!”

The false start ended in an open-mouthed, stumbling halt.

The man – Howard was *not* his true name, it couldn't be! – held his hands out to be shackled. By normal shackles instead of the mana-dampening ones Antonidas had in his spatial bag. The shackles belonging to a group of bemused and distrustful members of the Alterac Road Patrol. Bemused and distrustful towards *him*.

“See, he's been staring at me like that since he turned the bend!”

Antonidas D'Ambrosio gaped at the sight, aghast.

... He planned this! Somehow he planned this, all of it, he must have felt the spell watching him and then come up with... but in less than five minutes?!

The man's expression changed then, to something much more distant but somehow still present. Turned to look north. Glancing despite himself in the same direction, Antonidas saw only the mountains on the horizon, on the far side of Alterac Valley which lay far, far down below. That was where he'd been led, he belatedly realized. Those mountains were the last



great natural defense behind which Alterac City lay, but what was the man looking at? Did he have allies coming, was this just a ploy to buy time or-?

Above the mountains and beyond, the last specks of morning mist were suddenly dyed in a flicker of gold. A flicker that became a shimmer that lasted for a long, strung-out minute that arrested everyone's attention. Bizarrely, though Antonidas didn't feel anything from so far away, he still had the strange instinct that the Order of Things had just shifted like a sleeping giant after something had tickled its cheek.

He looked back to the man. The man wasn't looking back. He was sitting on a nearby stump, playing with his shackles. His now open shackles. The man promptly snapped them closed around his wrists again when he saw Antonidas looking and smirked at him.

The wizard glared.

The man went back to politely waiting for everyone else to remember they had a prisoner now.

Antonidas sat back in his saddle. His mana coiled tightly with the tension of battle, aimless and unsatisfied. Finally, the patrol remembered themselves. Responsibilities began divvying up between continuing their job and escorting their new prisoner back to their outpost, and from there onwards to Alterac City proper. They were completely oblivious that said prisoner could have slipped away in their distraction. Could still slip away. Only from the patrol of course – wait!

Antonidas drove his steed to catch up and had to use far too much cajolery and even needed to pull out the king's sealed authorisation to get the footmen to swap the man's bonds for his arcane dampeners. He almost wished 'Howard' tried to get away to spare him the frustration. He didn't even try though. He allowed himself to be re-cuffed and led off. Under the Alterac Crown's jurisdiction instead of the Kirin Tor's.

... He'd *obviously* planned this in advance, but how? Had he known about his investigation beforehand, somehow? From three days' travel away? How? There were few possible answers, all of them sinister, unconscionable! He *had* to be a mage himself, a wizard, no, a foul warlock, an insidious rogue of some sort, a demon even! Certainly something, he had to be. He had to be!

The alternative was that Antonidas had just been outmanoeuvred by a country hick. He would never be able to live down such shame.

...

What the devil was he going to tell the Council?