

## 258: Opening

"Sixth floor, please," Mlem said cheerily to the attendant, negotiating the modest hand cart he'd purchased in the foreign market through the lift gate.

"We stop at every floor, outsider," said the lift operator, stifling an enormous yawn.

"Seriously?" Mlem asked. Giving him a second look, he saw that the man wore a small pin on the breast of his uniform that glowed orange and gold. Lift guild, probably. This city had a guild for everything. "You can't just...you know?"

"No," said the attendant.

Mlem directed his attention to the wiry, unkempt man who'd entered the lift just ahead of him. "What floor are you going to?"

The man froze like he'd spotted a charging bear—not that there were bears in this part of the world. The reaction stood out, as did the notable lack of a guild insignia. In fact, there was no color anywhere on him.

*Houseless? No, surely not. Likely a foreigner who's had a particularly rough night. What is he doing here?*

Looking away, the man mumbled an answer. "Sixth."

"You see?" Mlem said to the attendant, moving past the oddity as he situated his cart against the wall. The jolt of impact sent an apple—the crate of them being another recent acquisition

—tumbling. He snagged it smoothly out of mid-air, gesturing with it as he spoke before taking a bite. “No need to stop. Take us directly, my good man.”

“Someone else might want to get on,” said the attendant, heaving a long-suffering sigh.

“At this hour?” Mlem said after swallowing the succulent mouthful. “Please, I want to get set up before the rush.”

“Building rule, not mine,” said the man. “If you don’t like it, get off and go back to where you belong. Piece of advice? The price you get here for those and whatever else you’re selling won’t make the trip worth your time.”

“We shall see,” Mlem said, leaning against his cart. “Up we go then. At your pace, if you please.”

The attendant rolled his eyes and pressed his hand to the control stone. Runes flared to life at his touch, and the gate slid smoothly closed. There was the smallest of jerks, and the platform began to rise. Slowly, of course.

Mlem took another bite of his apple. Chewing, he adjusted his sword belt over his old orange robe, too baggy with all the weight he’d lost. His Ascension jacket was safely tucked away beneath the apple crate, along with what would have been quite the head-turning collection of oddments for the average traveling merchant.

Was such discretion necessary? Probably not. But then again, there was more than ten thousand Tel’s worth of goods in there. Most of the items were those he and Halgrave had brought with them, but some were bargains he’d picked up throughout the week while polishing his Zeelada and negotiating with the Entente through indirect correspondence.

"Second floor, residential," said the attendant tiredly as the gate opened to an empty hallway.

Mlem wiggled his eyebrows at him, taking another big bite.

"Mock all you want," the operator said, runes glowing again as the gate slid closed once more.

By the time they slowed for the final time—with no further riders, take note—Mlem was left with the decision of what to do with the fruit's core. Rather than toss it aside, as he would have in any other city, he slipped it into a pocket to deal with later.

"Sixth floor," the operator said, rubbing his eyes as the doors slid open. "Shops, restaurants, and roof if it weren't closed."

"After you," the unkempt man said.

"Why thank you," Mlem said, pushing himself up off the cart and grabbing its handle once more. He missed his journey cart, though it would not have fit his current disguise even if he had been able to convince Halgrave to carry it here. The goldplate was doing a circuit of the neighborhood and was supposed to join him any time now.

A few steps out onto the platform, Mlem's finely tuned merchant's senses sent him a warning. With barely a conscious thought, his hand shot out, catching the wiry man's arm by the wrist before he realized that doing so might not be the best idea in a town where everyone was awakened.

"Ah!" the man cried, jerked to a stop from his seemingly casual stroll with his fingertips a hair's breadth from the fruit crate.

"You could have just asked, you know?" Mlem said, swiftly selecting an apple and slapping it into the fellow's open palm before releasing him.

*So weak...*

"Get off— What?" the man said, looking dumbly at the ripe fruit in his hand.

"One of my associates has a rule, one that I liked well enough to add to my own collection." Mlem looked the fellow up and down again as the doors closed behind them, removing the uncaring lift operator from view. "Let's see. In Zeelada, it would be... If you see someone stealing food, no, you did not."

"I...what?" Said the man again, rubbing his wrist. "It was going to fall, and I just...shit. You're not going to believe that."

Mlem frowned, stroking his mustache. He was sure now.

*He is houseless, isn't he? Or he had a house and has one no more. My my. How unexpected.*

"Please, forgive me, honorable master," the man said, bowing his head. "I can pay."

Making a decision, Mlem smiled and snapped his fingers. "It seems you need more than an apple. How about a job?"

The man stayed like that for a long moment, then looked up, fake groveling giving way to suspicion. "There's a hook in this pie, isn't there? No one would just give someone like me work. Not even a foreigner."

"You will find I'm not an average foreigner," Mlem said, grasping the handle of his cart and beginning to tow it down through the cavernous indoor market. "I don't care that you're not awakened." He ignored the man's sharp intake of breath. "Come along and eat up. We've got work to do, and you'll need your strength."

"For selling apples?" the man asked skeptically, not moving. "What is this job, exactly? And what does it pay?"

"I like you," Mlem said with a laugh. "Let's start with two silver for the day and go from there. Your name?"

"Steeve Paid-Up-Front Omonica," the man said. His former apprehension seemingly under full control, he took a bite of the apple and spoke through it. "And I want three silver."

"Ha!" Mlem said, digging in a pocket. It took him a moment to extract the proper coin, which he promptly tossed over. "Mlemlek Not-Born-Yesterday Ko-Latti," he said as the man nearly fumbled the catch. "You'll get more once you've earned it. Now, come along. The liftman did us no favors. Only fifteen minutes left till dawn."

Humming to himself, Mlem led the way, towing his cart through the broad market street inside the building's top level. Shops and offices lined the avenue as they might in any other city, except built into walls. Deepstone made for sturdy construction, and the forty-odd meter rise to the ceiling left the space open and airy. That said, the lighting was dim in this pre-dawn hour, just barely enough to prevent spawns, and here and there, small shadows lurked—proof that this once-grand building wasn't in the nicest part of the city. There were a few people about, notably merchants like him, setting up stalls outside the larger establishments. He also

spied two members of the Lighter's Guild fussing over one of the larger dim spots where an enchantment had broken.

A sharp hiss from his new hireling brought him up short, just shy of their destination.

"What?" Mlem asked, glancing over his shoulder.

"Entente," Steeve said in a hushed voice.

Mlem turned to see him cowering behind the cart and raised an eyebrow. "Are they after you?"

"Yes. Well, no. Also, yes."

"Because of something you did, or because of something you are?"

"Look," Steeve hissed. "When Entente see houseless, they assume things. I'm not dumb enough to join Cascade or the like, but they—" He cut himself off with a curse. "We should head back toward the lift. If the Entente are here, it means trouble. Monsters. Dreamers. Something. Not hungry customers, that's for damn sure. The place they're guarding's been empty for years. People have just been going through there to get to the roof."

"Ah, so that is why it was so inexpensive," Mlem said.

"What?" Steeve asked.

Mlem chuckled, turning to nod toward the boarded-up, unassuming shopfront. "That property is where we're going, and the Entente are there because they're the ones I purchased it from."

"You...purchased?" Steeve asked. "Who are you?"

"Hullo, there!" Mlem called, striding forward toward the pair of Entente members—Defenders, from the tower shields, and ones he suspected he could identify from their matching bleached-white beards.

"Nothing to see here," said the one to the left of the large double doors. "Shop's been sold, and the roof's closed. If you're trying to get to the foreign market, take the lift down and go the normal way."

"And if I have the deed?" Mlem asked, removing a folded paper from his pocket and gesturing with it.

"Oh, you're Mlemlek?" said the one on the right. "Of Ascension? Working with Mouse and Tiger—sorry—Rain and Ameliah?"

"At your service," Mlem said. "This is my associate, Steeve, not of Ascension, but in our employ as of...oh...five minutes ago. You two would be...Estez and Henton Allensten, unless I miss my guess. Which is Leftbeard and which is Rightbeard? Rain refused to specify. He seemed to find it amusing."

The Defender on the left laughed, then raised a hand. "Estez, Leftbeard. Sounds like you know him well. He's not here, is he? Or Ameliah? Light, that's weird. In my head, I still want to call them Mouse and Tiger."

"They are otherwise engaged," Mlem said with a smile. "However, I shall pass along your greetings. Tell me, has First Mora ascended from the depths with you, or has she already

returned to Threecore?" He again gestured with the deed. "I wish to thank her for arranging this."

"She said she would be by later in the day," Henton said. "She is trying to find a post on the surface, but nothing so far. It's left her with some free time." He paused to yawn. "Here, we'll let you in. There's no keystone that works, so you'll have to get the lock re-enchanted. The Lighters have been keeping the lights on, but that's it."

"No matter," Mlem said, waiving a hand.

"We'll also be standing security for you until we get our new postings," said Estez. "This isn't the nicest part of the city, and Mora wants us to make sure you don't have any trouble with the local guilds."

"Gangs, more like," said Henton, shoving one door open with his shield, the hinges shrieking alarmingly. He grabbed the other as he walked through, opening it as well as he entered.

"That is kind of her," Mlem said, glancing back at Steeve, who was looking thoroughly off-put.

Henton cleared his throat. "Also, out of respect for your boss, I'll tell you upfront that we're here to watch you, too. Your pamphlets caused a bit of a stir at headquarters, as did all that back and forth with letters."

Estez laughed. "Maybe if you're interesting enough, we won't have to go back to Threecore."

"You have something in your teeth, brother," Henton said. He turned back to Mlem. "I liked it down there. It was quiet."



"Sounds terrible if you ask me," Mlem said, entering with a smile. "Bring the cart, please, Steeve."

Once fully inside, he paused to hold back a sneeze. The air was thick with dust, and a thin layer of it carpeted the bare stone floor, though disturbed by tracks leading to the light plates and down the hall. Apart from the enchanted fixtures and a few cobwebs in the corners, the room was empty. A stone counter ahead confirmed that this had once indeed been a shop, as did the barren shelves built into the walls. The hall behind the counter extended back some distance and branched off into rooms unseen. The only sound was that of the cart's wheels as Steeve struggled to negotiate it in through the door behind him.

"Shame Rain didn't come along," Estez said, idly worming at his teeth with his tongue. "He'd have this freshened up in a blink."

Mlem smiled, stroking his mustache. Reaching into his pocket, he removed the apple core and tossed it aside before going back to retrieve a glass sphere of roughly the same size. Within it glinted a trio of gems—white, purple, and gold, or rather, Purify, Detection, and Radiance.

"What's that?" Henton asked.

"An artifact of a sort," Mlem said, grasping the orb firmly in one hand, then taking three brisk steps before bowling it forward through the dust.

*I hope he's paying attention.*

"Shit!" Steeve cursed, the cart rattling as he abandoned it before the wave of blinding light.

*There we go.*

"Ahhhh," Estez sighed contentedly, running his tongue over his now immaculate teeth. "I guess you really do have crafters. You captured one of his spells?"

"Yes," Mlem lied, taking the crate of apples from the cart and walking after the orb across the now-sparkling stone to place it on the counter. That confirmed Rain had never revealed his anchors to the Entente. "Steeve, collect the orb and walk it through the other rooms."

"But..."

"Oh, come now, it's perfectly safe," Mlem said, dragging the cart toward the counter. When he got there, he turned, and what he saw made him frown. Purify hadn't quite gotten everything in the room after all. Steeve stood out like a grimy smear in the center of a pristine canvas. His worn clothes, while not especially dirty in the backdrop of the city at large, made quite the contrast.

*Ah, right. He is not on the list.*

Walking back to the cart, Mlem rummaged inside and removed a single stone from the set comprising the stone board. "Let me just tweak the targeting," he said, carrying it over to the glass orb. Mindful of his body language, he touched stone and orb together. He wanted to make it seem that the stone was a control key, which, in a certain sense, it was. He then carried both objects over to Steeve, and to his credit, the man didn't flinch away when Mlem touched the stone lightly to his chest.

Rain got the message. Purify flared more gently this time, leaving Steeve just as sparkling as the rest of the interior.

"There," Mlem said, pocketing the stone and dropping the orb into Steeve's hand.

"Impressive enchantment," Estez said. "Some sort of paired controller? Rune logic? Configurable exclusion criteria?"

"The details are proprietary, I'm afraid," Mlem said.

"What is this thing?" Steeve said, staring at the orb in his hands. "I have never in my life seen an item do... I had to use the bathroom, and now I don't. And the apple core is just...gone. That was Janitors' Guild magic. But it was so *strong*."

"The spell is called Purify," Mlem said, returning to the counter. "It removes filth, inside and out, and is strong because its original caster is strong. That is really all I can say. The orb is not something we mean to sell, but transactional services such as cleaning are—up to and including Tel extraction. Now, the rooms, if you please. The magic is not set to penetrate walls."

"But how do I trigger it?"

"It should trigger itself," Mlem said. "Simply place the orb in the center of the space to be cleaned. Go on now. Earn your pay."

"...Fine," Steeve said, gingerly carrying the glass orb out in front of him like it was both unspeakably fragile and devastatingly venomous.

Mlem smiled, returning to rummage in the cart. He removed his Ascension jacket and folded it across the counter before removing the bulky radio it had been covering. This he set on the

counter with considerable care as the two Entente Defenders moved closer to watch with interest. Again, he was careful to control his every move. This show was not to be repeated.

Rain wanted the Entente to know they had long-distance communication capability, but not how it worked. The radio was to be used in front of them once, then tucked away, and the stone board was not to be displayed at all. The true working of Rain's anchors would come out eventually—they were too potent a tool to hide away completely—but there was no need to hasten the process.

"This is not for sale either," Mlem said, working hard to suppress his inner showman as he extended the telescoping antenna. "It is a communication device similar to a speaking stone, but fragile and bulky. We use them because the range is considerably greater. Again, that is all I can say."

The faintest electrical whine filled the air as Mlem flipped the power toggle, then subsided as the indicator lamp glowed to life from the charge stored in the heavy internal battery. Depressing the transmit button, he cleared his throat, then spoke into the microphone in common. "This is Mlem, one-two-five. I have taken custody of the property. Communication is not private. Beside me, listening, are Estez and Henton of the Entente. They are known to the captain, and they say hello. Also in earshot is my newly hired helper, Steeve. Confirm receipt of message."

"I receive, one-five-four," crackled Lyn's voice from the speaker almost immediately, making everyone except Mlem jump. "Pause for relay."

"What was that crackling?" Henton asked. "And how much greater is the range over a speaking stone, exactly?"

"I cannot reveal that," Mlem said, rummaging again in the cart, this time for potions. He began lining them up on the counter.

The radio buzzed back to life. "Mlem, I have the captain. He says to say hello back and wants you to repeat that last name. Did you say it was 'Steeve'?"

"Yes," Mlem said, pausing to adjust the antenna, which was already quite hot. Even with atantum and valis worked into the radio's circuits and rykir in place of lead in the battery, they were really testing the limits of the design. "Is your connection as poor as mine?"

"It's not great," Lyn said. "Please confirm for me one last time. 'Steeve' as in 'Dysteeve'?"

"Why is that thing saying my name?" Steeve called from the hallway, staring back into the main room. "What else is it saying? I don't speak common."

"The captain seems to have taken an interest in you," Mlem replied. "Is 'Steeve' your full name, or is it short for something?" He glanced aside at Estez and Henton. "Rain says hello."

"Dysteevian," Steeve said, walking back into the main room. "Nobody calls me that. Who are you talking to?"

"Indirectly, the captain of Ascension, who I—and by extension, now you—work for," Mlem said. "I have a pamphlet here somewhere that you can read. Did you finish with the rooms?"

"No, and I won't until you tell me what's going on. What is that thing? Who *are* you?"

"This is a radio, and I am Mlemlek Ko-Latti. I believe I said that before. Ah, here is the pamphlet."

"Sorry, Mlem, the captain's really hung up on this," Lyn's voice crackled. "He wants to know if the words *'Irwin'*, *'Buscemi'*, or *'Jobs'* mean anything to your new friend. They sure don't mean anything to me."

Mlem turned to Steeve, offering him the pamphlet. "Do *'Irwin'*, *'Buscemi'*, or *'Jobs'* mean anything to you?"

"What?" Steeve demanded, though he accepted the paper. "I said I don't speak that."

Mlem pressed the button. "He says he doesn't speak that, and yes, 'Steeve', I said, short for 'Dysteevian'. Second name, O—"

"What the hells is going on in here?" said a new voice, and Mlem looked up to see Halgrave duck through the doorway. He wore his heavy armor, shining resplendent blue beneath his Ascension jacket. His golden Guild plate was also in full view, resting against his chest. Much more mundane was the steaming mug of something he held in one gauntleted hand.

"You took your time," Mlem said. "Stopped for tea, did you?"

"Yeah, yeah," Halgrave said. "Building is secure. The hooligans we saw next door cleared out the moment they saw me coming."

"Oh, come on!" Steeve shouted, having taken that long to get over his shock. He pointed at Halgrave. "A goldplate? You work with a goldplate!?"

Noticing his new hire was in grave danger of toppling over, Mlem snapped his fingers and pointed toward the ceiling. "Chairs. I need to buy chairs."