

I

It was raining, as was the case nearly always in the city of Relovas. This and the night resulted in most of the population being located in their houses, the local taverns or in the great foundry, where it was nice and warm. On the evening in question, we shall focus on an inn by the name of 'The Pewter Mug'. Inside this high class establishment (there was still a large quantity of furniture still fulfilling it's primary purpose and even the staff had made an effort to make themselves look presentable), there was a rather large and wealthy looking man, covered in rings and other associated paraphernalia. He was sitting opposite a young, attractive lady who had a symbol comprising of an anvil around her neck. She was either a devoted follower or a member of the priesthood of Nirlepip, the god of smiths and artificers. They were currently having a discussion.

"You realise the risks of this job?" the man drank deeply from his tankard, not spilling a drop. Clearly, he had had a lot of practise at this particular task.

"What difference does it make if we don't? If we die, then you just go and hire someone else to do our job instead." She retorted. The merchant raised an eyebrow at this.

"Were that it was that simple, my dear." He tried unsuccessfully to suppress a belch. "Pardon me, but the caravan travels a long way through uncivilised territory, meaning that it would be rather difficult to replace you on the fly, as it were."

"I understand the risks, and so do my comrades. How much are you willing to part with in order to see your cargo adequately protected?"

"One hundred Gold Kronep for each person accountable for at the end of the journey." The merchant patted his vast gut, as a small brandy was deposited at his table.

"One hundred gold each at the end, with fifty each in advance." The merchant nearly choked on his brandy upon hearing this. "This cargo is worth a lot, as you say, so I'd like to make sure we are all prepared" The merchant placed his glass on the table, followed by the flats of his hands.

"How many people are we talking about in your little cohort?" He eyed his opposite number cautiously

"I shall supply you with seven eager bodies to do your bidding regarding the guarding of the caravan for the duration of the journey."

"Very well, I shall return momentarily." The merchant stood up and carefully, in the way that someone who has had too much to drink but does not want to show it walked toward the stairs. A few minutes later, he returned with a small pouch gripped tightly in his hand. He extended his arm out to her, proffering the pouch to her.

"Three hundred and fifty, as agreed. Dawn in three days, or some of my friends will be after you for repayment of the 'loan.' Do you follow me, Miss Junra?" The girl stood up, took the pouch and placed it in her knapsack.

"I gave you my word. You shall learn you can trust the name Eltran Junra." She smiled at him and turned, leaving the wealthy merchant to foot the bill. He just sat there, sipping his brandy in silence, like a chess player planning his next move.

His next move had already been carefully planned and was currently being played. You see, my friend, as an observer in these situations, I can let you into a few secrets which some of the protagonists cannot see. For example, as Eltran left the Pewter Mug, she was completely unaware that someone was following her. For down a back alley, there was a quiet clatter. The sort of clatter made by someone who wishes to keep the noise down, but didn't take into account the hazards of travel by rooftop. Roofing tiles have a habit of looking like they are firmly nailed down, then jumping from under your feet as soon as you set foot on them, no matter how gingerly. Fortunately, the tile had bounced off a cart loaded with very damp hay, meaning the last few feet of its journey had caused the crash, and not the sixty odd feet between the floor and its original home. The figure following Eltran jumped to the next rooftop, clinging onto a chimney stack to assist his balance. Things like that allow you to remain slightly ahead of the game, so keep an eye out.

The huge chimneys of the Great Foundry loomed out of the mist, like a giant burning castle. Eltran marched off towards them, as if she had to be there as soon as she could, possibly sooner. Her marching speed was quite fast, causing her follower to curse and reconsider his rooftop position. Still jogging after her, he unwound a coil of rope, found the grappling hook on its one end and dived down into the night. He slid deftly down the rope, flicked it and caught the grappling hook as it came flying down. He stuck his head out of the alley and checked the distance to his quarry. While rewinding his rope, he ran after her, stopping occasionally to check on her from the safety of a doorway or alley of some kind. His patience and periodic hiding was rewarded when she turned off the main road down a side street.

Eltran encroached upon the bar. This was one of the city's most notorious rough spots, but it was where some of her companions liked to drink. 'The Hammer and Sickle' Fortunately for the people of the city, Communism hadn't been discovered here yet, although if it had, the drinkers in this bar would have put a quick end to it for taking the name of their favourite bar in vain. This place wasn't just a bar; it was a fighting pit as well. It was the only place where you could gamble with your life and other people's lives at the same time as vast sums of money all while getting a good drink. Some people only left to get a decent meal. Who says that alcohol and violence don't mix? Eltran walked in, surveying the drinker's tables for a bunch of rowdy misfits, who she called her friends.

The group of friends to which Eltran belonged was a racial mix, which sometimes caused confusion. For starters, you had Relan. She was an Elf, not overly tall, but slender and agile. She did not appear gaunt, as that would not make her beautiful, but she was thin enough to look pretty. Relan also, like all Elves, possessed a set of elongated ear lobes, which extended above the top of her head. She wore a fine blue silk dress, which complimented her long [colour] hair and bright [colour] eyes. Seated next to her was a Halfling. She looked like a human child in stature, but was older than most of the other residents of the bar, with the exception of the Elvan community of the bar, which happened to be Relan alone. She wore subtle tones of green in her skirt and blouse combination and was busy drinking from a half-pint tankard. Halflings have appetites as big as any man and Aldrea was no exception. She was picking her way through the remnants of a whole roast chicken. Most of what was left was bones, but you would not know that she had eaten almost all of it herself. Most people cannot eat a greasy meal like roast chicken without smearing grease all across their faces, but Aldrea had eating a good meal down to a fine art. She had eaten everything with a nourishment value and was still eager to find more.

The group was rounded off by two men. Lomlin was a dwarf. He had a thick beard, some of it stuck to his face by the evening's beer which hadn't found his mouth. For dwarves, the beard is a way of making them look as if they can drink twice as much as anyone else, because it acts like a sponge. He was a heavy set dwarf, with broad shoulders and a large axe strapped across his back. His drinking partner was known as Brek. He was a Half-orc, a bastard offspring of Humans and Orcs. The Orcs are nomadic tribes, whose nature is considered by most to be barbaric. The men are unusually strong and the women are not much nicer. Most Orcs, or Orc-kin have distinctive tusk-like teeth in the lower jaw, which tend to jut out of the mouth constantly. Brek could keep his covered up, since they were small. All he had to do was keep a straight face and he looked almost human, albeit with slightly darker skin and a large, muscular frame.

The group was all seated at a table. Brek, the Half-orc and Lomlin, the Dwarf, were deep into a drinking contest and were probably incapable of walking, but since they were sitting down, this didn't matter yet. The other forms of 'entertainment' available at this particular establishment consisted of a wooden wall full of small holes, being pelted with axes, knives, bottles and in some cases, small people. There had been a target painted on it once, but extensive remodelling, caused by the weapons impacting with it had caused pieces to fall off and eventually whole boards had been replaced. The target had been repainted on these new boards, but over the years, it had gone from the traditional circles design to what Picasso would have done, had the owner got that sort of money. The central yellow circle looked like an egg on its side. The red circle had become pointy at the top and had started bleeding into the blue beneath it, while the blue itself had become more diamond shaped than anything. How anyone could possibly make circles with corners confounded most visitors, but the regulars had grown used to it. There was also a group of musicians playing, or rather trying to dodge the left over stock from the market, plates and yet more weapons. There weren't any small people being thrown here, as the connoisseurs of the music were not quite as aggressive as the competitors at the wall. Eltran walked across to the table with her friend sitting at and pulled up a chair.

"Much action tonight?" she enquired of the group.

"Well, there's a bloke over there, keeps shtarin' at me. An' if 'ee don't shtop, I'm gonna give im a piece of me!" Said the Half-Orc, drunkenly.

"Which bloke?" chorused the three women, tensing up slightly in case their volatile companion decided to do anything at all in his drunken state. The Half-Orc pointed a finger, struggled to keep it level and declared:

"Him! Standin' behind that lot at the table over there." The Elf got up, strolled over to roughly where the Half-Orc pointed and looked for the man. A short while later, she returned, clutching a piece of paper.

"Brek, this is a wanted poster, with a picture of a man on it. Pictures have a habit of staring, because

they can't move." She put the piece of paper down in front of the bewildered man, who downed another pint of what might once have been called ale.

"How would you lot like to make some money?"

"How much money, and how do we earn it?" Asked the little Halfling sitting at the table, sipping a glass of wine.

"Fifty Kronep up front, one hundred at the end... each. All we have to do is to guard a caravan of stuff as far as the west coast. Its only about fifty miles, we should be laughing." Everyone mumbled an agreement, except Brek, who had dosed off and was leant on the table, snoring gently. Eltran stood up, allowing herself a quick look around the room.

"I've got a few more people to see, but I'll be back later."

"What about our money?" The dwarf cast his gaze upon the young woman.

"Lomlin, I'll be back with it shortly. Don't fret so." And with that, she turned and walked to the bar, before the dwarf could complain. It was busy at the bar, the big shifts at the foundry had ended for the day, and all of the workers had fallen out of their workplaces and straight into the taverns around the local area. The Hammer and Sickle was one of the closest, so it suffered from the most trade. Eltran got to within about four people of the bar, and started trying to attract the attention of one of the staff behind the bar.

"Hordaf, get Cherf for me, would you." The big man, known as Hordaf, was the owner of this establishment. He turned around, walked to the back room and poked his head around the door. A short conversation followed, but was incomprehensible, due to the volume in bars such as this one. A short man with brown hair in a style all of its own walked out to the bar and up to Eltran.

"What can I do for you?" He bellowed above the din.

"I've gotta talk to you NOW!" Eltran responded in equal volume. Cherf sighed and opened the bar. She stepped across the threshold and he shut the bar top again. He walked along the bar, stooped and opened up the door to the cellar.

This was the bar's unofficial meeting room. It did once have a back room, but after a screaming maul broke through most of one of the walls a couple of years ago, Hordaf decided not to replace it and he increased the size of the bar instead. That was the 'quiet area' but the noise was just the same all the way through the bar.

Eltran climbed down the ladder into the cellar and stepped away from the ladder, to allow her companion room to get down. He slid down the ladder, with the air of a practised bar worker.

"So then, business or pleasure, Eltran?" he smiled, thinking that his luck was in. The eternal optimist was wrong again.

"Its business, I'm afraid, Cherf. Do you want a job at all?"

"Just in case you haven't noticed, Eltran, I already have a job." He walked over to a barrel and began setting it up for pumping.

"I can give you fifty Kronep now and guarantee one hundred more at the end of the trip. That works out at about fifty a day. I know that you aren't making that much off the patrons around here" Cherf lifted the tap off its mark and looked at Eltran.

"That's an offer I might be able to refuse. What is this job, exactly?"

"We have to guard a merchant's caravan from the sort of people frequenting the bar. It leaves in three days at dawn." She sat down on a barrel and started counting the contents of the pouch into seven piles.

"Okay, I can't refuse it. Pass me the money and I'll go do the rest of my shift." Eltran poured fifty coins into a smaller pouch and passed it to him.

"You won't regret this, you know."

"I won't have a chance to regret it. If this goes tits up, then we'll probably be dead."

"That's what I always liked about you, Cherf. You always see a thunderstorm in the distance, never just the rain."

"Thanks, I love you too!" He positioned the tap and hit it with the mallet. The barrel frothed viciously, but he fought admirably with it and came up smelling of... well, beer. Eltran left his vicinity, sniggering because her friend had just soaked his crotch with a fine, chilled ale. She walked back into the tavern, over to the four drinkers.

"Relan, Aldrea, Lomlin. These are for you." She deposited four small pouches on the table. "One each, and make sure Brek gets his in full." The Elf, Relan, took two of them and secreted them within her large sleeves.

"Hmm, now I'm just sure I can think of something to spend this on." She quipped, with a wry smile on her face.

"Arr, you could spend it on a few bottles of fine wine, or a big keg, like me!" Lomlin was getting into the swing of his own personal party. He drank deeply from his tankard, and then thumped it on the

table next to the Halfling.

"Your round, little one. Mine's a pint." Aldrea, the Halfling, placed her last chicken bone on the plate, got up, picked up the tankard and the wine glasses and wandered off toward the bar. Relan returned her attention to the priestess.

"Well?"

"Well what?"

"Look, you obviously have something to tell us, otherwise you wouldn't still be here or you would be drinking with us. You have done neither."

"Cherf has joined our crew. I thought he could be useful."

"What, old nimble fingers? I thought we were going to be guarding a wealthy merchant, not robbing one." The acid tones in her voice made Eltran look away from her companion. "Or did you have more than just a get-rich-quick scheme up your sleeve?"

"I was thinking that it could be more than just the one jaunt away from Relovas. Who knows where our adventures may lead us."

"Well, they could lead us to an early grave. Have you ever thought about the fact that we might just go in over our heads and die? I'm only 141 years old. I want to live long enough to be able to look back on my life and say that I led a full and interesting life."

"What's this?" You don't want to join us on our little trip away from the city for the first time of our lives."

"No, I'll join the trip to the West coast, but I don't think we should do anything except return to Relovas afterward." She stared the priestess in the eye, a vicious clash of ego. You could have toasted marshmallows in the airspace between their heads.

"You make your decisions regarding that, I'm just here to get you on this job." And with that, Eltran turned on her heel and walked toward the tavern doors.

"I thought she'd never leave." The Elf mused, while surveying the scene. The evening was picking up pace and the music was becoming more distorted, as they were slipping on the remains of the greengrocers stall, beneath their feet. However, most of the attention had focussed on the wall, where the Orcs were playing what could only be described as darts.

Eltran left the tavern, with a feeling of joy at getting a proper job and rage due to the words of Relan ringing in her ears. She strode purposely towards the foundry, its noise just something which happens all the time. - No native of Relovas notices the roar of the furnaces and the sounds of the machines, just like anyone who lives next to a railway fails to hear a train approaching. - At least the heat of the furnaces kept the rain at bay. She walked along Craftsman's Way, the main street around the Great Foundry of Nirlepip, god of smiths and artisans. The vaguely circular complex was huge (It was originally circular, but extensions and annexes to the smithies and shops had made the place look more like a sea urchin) Eltran walked casually up to a door in one of the walls. It looked like a staff entrance, as it was hardly the size used to import or export materials or finished goods, while it was not grand enough for the priesthood. The door was heavily fortified wood, with iron bars running the length and breadth of it to stop it buckling. She knocked at the big cast iron knocker and waited. The guard panel slid aside and a young looking man, with a shaven head looked back at her.

"Welcome, what can I do for – Oh it's you. Don't you ever sleep?"

"When I get time to, I have been known to take a quick nap. I see that you obviously do sleep, Brother!" The monk looked slightly startled that he was being accused of negligence at all. He was much more shocked when his brain got up to speed and told him that he was being accused of it by a woman.

"I was not sleeping, I was merely meditating. A lady such as you could not hope to understand."

"Don't try to fob me off, Brother. I heard your snores from the other side of the door. I am surprised that people can't hear you over the sound of the furnaces." The monk blushed. "Now are you going to let me in, or are you just going to stand there and try to disguise yourself as a beetroot?" The Guard panel slid back and a few bolts were removed from their holes. The door swung back to reveal the monk in all his –ahem- glory. Eltran stepped over the threshold, into the monastery.

"Thank you Brother. You may return to your duties now, for I shall not leave this way." And with that, she opened one of the two doors into the entrance chamber and left the poor sleeping monk's presence. Some time later, Eltran reached her destination, having negotiated lots of passageways through the monastery. Monks liked keeping unwanted visitors out and themselves on their toes. She did not bother to knock on the door in front of her. She just opened it and walked in. In the darkness of the corridor, the flare of a match being lit illuminated a face for a split second, before being used to light a cigarette.

The room was reasonably sized to accommodate one person comfortably. There was a bed, freshly made in the far right corner. The covers were nothing special, just there to serve their purposes of

covering a bed during the day and to keep a person warm during the night. A large wooden chest was positioned at the foot of the bed and it had the same sort of feel about it. Its purpose was to store, not to decorate. In the far left corner, there was a desk, complete with paper, ink and quill pens. One book was in the middle of the desk, open at a page full of writing. The bookcase next to it spanned the rest of the wall, not compromising for anything. The shelves contained literary works of varying sizes, states of repair and languages. The light from the window had caused some of the older volumes to fade slightly, and some could only now be identified by pulling them from the shelf to inspect the cover. The window itself had a small, but immaculate collection of bonsai trees. There were three, an Oak, a Beech and a dwarf Orange tree. There were six small oranges adorning the latter. About this time, most people would hear the familiar tones of a Boston native droning on about something like "Now, let's look at the evidence." and "Who lives in a house like this? David, it's over to you." But for the sake of many people's sanity I shall spare you from the clutches of Loyd Grossman... for now.

"And now for our home and studio audience... but not for our panel. Here's whose house it is."

There was a young looking man sitting cross legged in the middle of the room on a rug. This rug was the sole piece of furniture actually designed to be decorative. He had his eyes shut but at the same time, looked as if he was focussed on the Oak on his windowsill.

"What are you so cheerful about?" Enquired the man, as Eltran entered the room, nonchalantly. Eltran stopped and glared at the back of his head. 'How could he have known it was me?' She thought to herself.

"I've just got a job." She walked over to the desk and sat down, turning to face him. He had not moved from his position at the centre of his room.

"I thought that you already had a job, within the confines of the temple?" He remained inactive, his eyes still shut.

"Well, technically I do, yes. But..." The man opened his eyes and looked upon her for the first time. There was not much light, save for the enchanted torches in the garden, casting a flickering orange light over her features.

"I wanted to go and see the world, with my friends."

"Who else would be joining us on this merry jaunt?"

"Cherf, the barman at the Hammer and Sickle. I convinced him that he could earn more if he stopped working behind a bar."

"What about your drinking buddies?" He stood up and walked over to his desk. Picking up the tinderbox, he lit some candles, shedding some light on his sparse room.

"I thought they were yours too" she looked upon her friend, smiling as she knew she had beaten him in a discussion, no matter how small.

"Well yes, but I don't drink with... Well, not as much as you do."

"There, you see, you do drink with them. Now, I want you to come down to the Hammer and Sickle tonight. I am going to need a little help keeping them all out of the cells for a few days." She stood up and walked over to the window. She brushed her fingers against the leaves of the dwarf orange and then turned to look at him, casting her shadow on him. "So, are you in, Perit?" Perit stood up and walked over to her. She was quite a bit shorter than him, so he could look out into the courtyard, straight over her head.

"Yeah, I'm in. Go to the Pub, I'll catch you up." Eltran was a little taken aback by this.

"O-okay, I'll see you in a bit then." She turned and left the room, leaving Perit to stare into the courtyard. He didn't make a sound, but his lips shaped the word "bye."

The corridor was nice and cool, compared to the rest of the complex of the Great Foundry. Eltran stepped out into the maze, as the monks called it. It was more like a labyrinth, though the Minotaur had gotten bored and wandered off. It was dark, but lights around here made it less of a challenge and the monks had all spent a lot of time getting used to it. She walked off towards the back exit, as she had promised the door guard. As she was making her way down the corridor, she heard a scratch and saw the flare of a match.

"A little lat for visiting hours, Missy." The old man, now blocking her path said. He lit a crude roll up with the match and tossed the match to the floor. All you could see of him was a red dot, where his cigarette was.

"Brother Ptel, to what do I owe this honour?" Eltran smiled at the end of his cigarette.

"I just felt like a chat with Perit, but since you're here." He extended his arm down the corridor. "I'd like a word with you, as well, if you'd be so kind." She bowed her head in acknowledgement.

“Of course, Brother, it would be a pleasure.” They walked off down the corridor together.

“He learns quickly and my first impressions have been confirmed... so far.” He took a pull on his roll up, savouring the flavour and the burning sensation at the back of his throat.

“What do you mean, Brother? You always talk in riddles.”

“That stops prying eyes, or in this case, ears.” Ptel wagged his eyebrows at her. “And stop calling me Brother. In this kind of company, you can call me Ptel.” They stopped at a wooden door, which Ptel unlocked. He flung it open and stepped out of the way. Eltran nodded her head in acknowledgement and stepped into the room.

It was a sparse room, making Perit’s room look positively cluttered. A mat was rolled up in the corner, presumably bedding of some sort, while a small desk stood against the far wall. There was a bookcase next to it, illuminated by an oil burner suspended from the ceiling.

“Can I get you a drink, Miss Junra? Tea, milk, water, or perhaps something a little stronger?”

“Tea, please Ptel.” Her mind was working overtime to try and figure this room out.

“Bear with me and I’ll go and see what I can find.” He walked over to the bookcase and pulled out a large tome at the bottom of it. The title read: “Enduring the mind: Overcoming life’s greatest barrier.” Ptel fumbled around the back of the bookcase for a short while, cursing in the colourful way that only he could. Eventually, he pressed something and stood back up with a whoop of triumph. The whole bookcase slid aside, to reveal the true extent of Ptel’s room. The back room was full of stuff. (Not junk, because junk is useless and/or broken, but stuff. With stuff, you just haven’t found a use for it yet, with junk, there isn’t one.) The assorted paraphernalia collected here, was the result of a lifetime of hoarding. It wasn’t messy, there was just a lot of it. Ptel waded through his collection and to his stove. He put some water on to boil and opened a chest next to it. He found two cups off the top shelf and poured some milk into one cup and turned to Eltran.

“Milk, Sugar?”

“Milk please. Why do you keep it in a chest, Ptel?” The Monk turned and looked at her, as if to say: ‘Why do you want to know that?!’

“So... You want me to give away all my secrets, eh?” His face broke into a grin. “I had a Wizard make it at the foundry, some eighty years ago. It keeps things cold for me.” He poured some water into a pot, spooned a generous spoonful of tea leaves in and stirred it up, before putting a lid on it.

“I’ve got some biscuits around here somewhere... I just can’t remember where I’ve put them.”

“No matter, Ptel. Anyway, you were saying about Perit...”

“Ah, yes. More about that when the tea is made. Pull up a pew and I’ll tell you about it.” He walked over to the leather sofa and picked up a pile of books from it. He walked into the front room of his apartment and deposited them on the desk. Eltran sat down and took in Ptel’s ‘treasure trove’ while he dotted around the place trying to tidy up a patch of isolated mess. He finished slotting books and gizmos away and returned to the stove, where the tea was still brewing. He poured two large mugs of it and walked over to the sofa, offered one to Eltran and then sat down beside her.

“Now, about Perit... He is still young, correct?”

“That much I can work out for myself, Ptel.” Eltran rolled her eyes at the old monk, while he sipped at his tea.

“Don’t be facetious. I had to start somewhere.” He put his mug on the floor and lay back on the sofa.

“Anyway, what I was trying to say was that he hasn’t really experienced the outside world yet. You lot have all gone out on field trips with the school and seen some of the wild beasts out there. He hasn’t, because he was determined to do his training with me.”

“And that’s where I come in, is it?” Eltran drank some more of her tea.

“Not just you, your friends too. You all have a slight edge over Perit, so for the first few days, he’s going to need someone he knows around him.” There was an awkward silence. It usually chooses moments like this one to make itself known, and this was no exception.

“I’m the closest to a family that he’s got.” Said Ptel, in a voice edged with guilt. “I’d hate for him to go out into the world for the first time and not have anyone looking out for him... You’re his closest friend; you’ve been his link to the outside world all these years. I can teach him little more about our techniques, whereas you are the one who can show him life and how to live it.” Eltran looked at the tear forming in Ptel’s eye and her face broke into a broad grin.

“Oh, so the ‘heartless’ master wants me to keep an eye on his prized pupil? I never knew you cared.” Ptel’s face contorted in shock. He put down his tea and stood up.

“Heartless master?! How dare you call me a –“

“Relax Brother; it was your pupil, Perit who called you a heartless master. He always said that you didn’t care if you hurt him during sparing.” Ptel relaxed a little upon hearing this. He slumped down onto the soles of his feet from his tiptoes.

“If I hadn’t hit him properly, he’d never have learned to hit me back harder. Ptel picked up his cup and walked over to the stove. He put the cup down and turned to face Eltran. “So, will you help him?”
“Of course I will. I chose him to come with us, after all. He’s still one of us; he just knows different things, that’s all.” Ptel smiled at her. He glanced up at the wall, where there was a set of clocks. Some were quite ornate, while others were just plain constructions with little decoration.
“I think it’s time you went to the Hammer and Sickle. They will need you soon.” Eltran drank the last of her tea, stood up and bowed her head to the monk.
“Thank you, Ptel. I shall heed your advice.” And with that, she turned and left.
“Thank you, Eltran. Perit is blessed with friends like you.” Ptel got up and walked over to where she had been sitting, picked up the cup and proceeded to clear up. He allowed himself a coy little smile, when he hung the mugs back up on their ornate tree. He turned, walked out of his back room, shut the door behind him and strode purposefully out of his room.

Perit was standing at the window of his room, looking out at the rain (which was more of a steamy mist now, due to the heat) and the patterns the clouds traced across the moon’s surface. The door latch clicked and Ptel entered his apprentice’s room. He folded his arms in the fashion of masters across the world, looking over the apprentice and thinking ‘they might get it eventually.’ He strode across the room and stood right behind his apprentice.

“Come to chastise me, Master?” Perit continued to gaze out of the window.
“Chastise you for what, exactly?” He grinned broadly, possibly reminiscent of some kind of ape. Perit turned round, causing the smile to disappear without trace from the face of the old monk.
“Leaving... Don’t tell me that you don’t know, Master. There isn’t a snippet of information going around this place which you haven’t heard.” Ptel took a step backward, a move which was so infrequently employed by him, that he was a little surprised by it.

“There comes a time in each man’s life when he must face his life’s calling. You must go forth and find yours, my Brother.” Perit’s eyes widened when Ptel called him Brother.

“Master, why didn’t you call me apprentice?”
“Because you are about to become a journeyman, Perit. You are about to leave the sanctity of the monastery and travel the world. I have taught you nearly all that I know. You can learn more if you venture out and experience the world, yourself.” Perit just stood there in mute shock.
“Besides, it would probably be better if you left with your friends. They can be very valuable to you, as you will find out...”
“What should I do then, Master?” Ptel clapped a friendly hand on the shoulder of his apprentice.
“Well, they are all having a bit of a drink at the Hammer and Sickle. Go and join them, but watch what you say.” He walked over to the door, stopped and looked back at Perit. “Apparently, it’s a little rough, so be ready to avoid fighting. After all, we know how to use these fighting techniques so we don’t actually have to use them.” And with that, Ptel left the room. Perit just stood there for a few minutes, dumbfounded. Eventually, he gathered his thoughts and opened the chest. He took his robe and staff from them and left the building.

The Hammer and Sickle was its usual self, when Eltran returned to the war zone. Her friends were still in roughly the same place, drinking moderately. Cherf had come over to the table and was currently in a heated discussion with Relan, who was being very threatening with a very malicious tone and some graphic details. She wandered over to try and diffuse this situation, before they became the night’s star attraction.

“Just remember, nimble fingers, that if you so much as touch my things, I’ll make sure one of the boys renames you Cherf ‘no fingers’ Erant. Do you understand me?” All Cherf could do was grin at the angry Elf.

“I wouldn’t even think about stealing anything from such a lovely lady as you.” His grin was infectious.

“Good... I’m glad to hear it. But that’s my friendly warning to you.” She wagged a finger under his nose, threateningly. Eltran pulled up a chair, between the two of them and drove her head between them, like a wedge.

“I’m glad to see you two are getting along so well. I was afraid that our journey was going to be a little uneventful.” Eltran leant across to Relan and whispered something in her ear.

“Dravooi, verahn. Avrahd a klem nai.” (“Don’t worry. There’s a cart to separate you two.”) The subtle tones of Elvan washed through the conversation. Most racial languages were not used in large settlements like Relovas, but there were always some exceptions. Cherf looked at the two of them, raised his glass to them and declared:

“Good, I don’t feel like standing next to someone who might want to hurt me as much as any bandits on this route!” Eltran and Relan looked at Churf, slightly taken aback, since he had understood their supposedly private conversation.

“And how long have you been able to speak in the tongue-?” Relan was cut off, as a large chair kicked off the main event for the night. The rest of her sentence trailed off into the din, emanating from the wall, where a dispute over scoring had broken out, and now the furniture was involved. One of the Orcs in question had pitched a chair across the room, as he wasn’t about to wait for someone to throw one at him. Hordaf, the owner of the Hammer and Sickle, immediately removed the three bottles of spirits from under the bar and took them out into the back room. A few seconds later, he returned, clutching a club with a few nails driven into it at random angles. He was ready for some action.

The noise of the six Orcs drowned out most of the sound in the bar. Punches flew, spraying the target on the wall with blood and the occasional tooth. Some of the insults were getting quite personal.

“I should have known that a half-breed couldn’t count!” shouted an Orc in the direction of Brek. He just couldn’t quite control himself. He got up and ran towards the mass of bodies, adding himself into the equation. He dived into them, flailing limbs about, to deal maximum damage and increase the confusion. His bunched fist caught one of them and pushed him into the wall. He looked a little surprised at this and looked around for the culprit. Lomlin, the dwarf wasn’t far behind his companion. He just had to run around a few more people. He placed his armoured elbow in the groin of the nearest Orc, who bent double in his own world of pain. As he bent down, Lomlin punched him in the chin, sending him reeling back. He ended up lying limply over the bar, his fight over for tonight. Brek had a rude welcoming to the fight, as he was picked up by two of the Orcs and thrown back roughly where he had come from. He landed face down on a table, which broke his fall and in turn got broken by his fall.

There is one really bad thing that happens, when Orcs decide to fight. That is the fight moves around the place. This fight did just that. There aren’t many things in the world which will make the patrons of the Hammer and Sickle leave the building in fear for their lives. However, this is one of them.

Three dozen people tried to leave through the building’s main entrance all at once. Hordaf leapt over the bar and found an Orc, who was getting ready to join in the fight. He wouldn’t get the chance to join in, because Hordaf hit him in the back of his leg with the club, causing him to buckle under the bodyweight of a fully grown Orc. This Orc left the building via the window.

“Churf! Get the watch. It’s their turn now, ‘cos I’m losin’ business here!” Churf got up, jogged over to the bar, hopped over and ran out into the back room. Eltran stepped forward and dragged Brek to a place of comparative safety: as far away from the wall as she could get him. Since he was quite a large person (It’s the Orc in him.) this took quite a while to accomplish. While this was going on, Aldrea got up and sidled over to the Orc who had the encounter with the table. She proceeded to rifle through his pockets, lightening his load of any spare change and loose jewellery. Relan remained seated, sipping on her wine, observing the fight from a comparatively safe distance.

By now, the three dozen patrons had gotten themselves together and had nearly all left the pub itself. The empty doorway suddenly filled itself with a figure of a man, wearing a traveller’s cloak, with the hood up. Most people would have turned and fled the scene at this point, but he stepped through the door and walked over to the table where Relan was sitting. He removed his hood and looked at Relan.

“It’s a bit damp out, tonight.” Perit removed his cloak, shaking the more determined raindrops off his traveller’s cloak. He took a seat next to Relan and picked up Lomlin’s fresh pint.

“Indeed it is. And all those people running into the rain, instead of staying to watch the entertainment!” Relan sipped the last of her wine, stood up and cracked her knuckles.

“Well... You’d better go and help Eltran, or there’s going to be a Dwarf of ours in jail, when we are supposed to leave the city.” Perit raised an eyebrow at this statement, but put the pint down and stood up.

“Can’t a guy have a drink in peace?” He said, walking over to Brek’s legs and picking him slightly off the floor. Between the two of them, they managed to half-carry, half-drag Brek away from the fight and get some furniture between them and the immediate danger. A straggler broke off from the fight and came running up to Relan, but she just pointed her finger at him.

“Don’t get in my way!” she yelled, pointing her finger like a child makes an imaginary gun at him.

Both versions would have had a similar effect on this Orc, as he recoiled and rebounded from the Elf as if she was going to do something nasty to him.

The fight began to move again, Lomlin still being the centre of attention, but some of the Orc were having individual skirmishes in the middle of the scrap. It reached the bar, which enraged Hordaf somewhat, because the bar was the only part of the pub which was valuable. He ran from the window, where he had deposited a wannabe fighter, behind the bar, brandishing the club again, ready to defend his bar and his profits.

Relan moved closer to the fight and pulled a bunched fist from one of the pouches at her side. "Sweet Dreams" she declared, as she unfolded the fist and blew a fine silvery sand over the fight. The three Orcs who were engaged in beating Lomlin into a paste sagged to their knees and dropped to the floor, asleep. A pair of Orcs was still trying to make a hole in the wall with each other's heads. This was the only noise from the bar.

"I could have had them, I outnumbered them one to three!" screamed Lomlin. Relan walked over to him and placed her hand on his head.

"There, there, my little lawn ornament. I know you could have beaten them all, but I don't want you in jail before we even start our travels." Lomlin was about to protest, but he stopped, when he caught sight of the look on her face. Suddenly, a watch squad of four burly men, and a wizard entered the pub. The wizard caught sight of the two Orcs at the wall.

"Corporal, deal with them. Now, where's the owner of this place?" As if on cue, Hordaf snored loudly from behind the bar. Relan and Aldrea bit their lips to avoid bursting into fits of laughter. Lomlin strode (as big a stride as a Dwarf can) and stood in front of the wizard.

"That's him behind the bar. All the excitement must have been too much for him." Eltran regained some of her composure and approached the wizard.

"Sergeant, I really think that you should do something about these three Orcs here." She gesticulated towards the three sleeping Orcs by the bar. "I put them to sleep, so as to stop the fighting."

"I see. And how do you explain that then?" The wizard pointed to a sign hung over the bar, which read "NO SPELCASTING"

"Erm... Mitigating circumstances and diminished responsibility, Wizard-Sergeant." More watchmen had entered the pub at this point and were restraining the sleeping Orcs.