

## II

Relan was woken up by the jail warden, as he opened her cell.

“Relan a Kets. I have orders for your release, pending you pay your fine. You have some visitors.”

Relan sat up on her makeshift bed of a straw mattress and some less-than-white blankets. Then it hit her. The events of the previous evening have a way of catching up with anyone, like this. You wake up in unfamiliar surroundings, unaware of how you got there, thinking ‘God, I wish I hadn’t had so much to drink last night’ or ‘I wonder what her name is... Hell, I wonder what she looks like.’ For Relan, it was slightly different.

“Where am I? Did you say ‘my release’? Have I done something wrong at all?”

“You were arrested last night for events relating to the fight at the Hammer and Sickle. Your friends are here to secure your release... If I were you, I wouldn’t want to keep them waiting... Please?” Relan slid off the bed, still collecting her thoughts. She ran her fingers through her hair, trying to untangle the knots from the previous night. (This is common throughout the universe, as whatever state someone’s hair is when they go to bed, it will always end up in an intricate system of knots.) She left the cell, and was greeted by not only the jail guard, but two of his more burly looking companions, who would not have seemed out of place in the Gorilla enclosure at the local zoo. (If they had got a zoo in Relovas, that is. In Relovas, the word ‘zoo’ could either mean ‘place where you can get a good kebab’ or ‘where criminals go to die, half Kronep entrance fee.’) They nodded at her and one of them attached a set of manacles, with solid finger pieces attached. This gave no quarter to spell casters in general, because all the ‘waiving of the hands and gesticulating of the fingers’ could no longer be achieved. The same effect could have been achieved, just by applying a club to the back of said spell caster’s head, but that was now viewed as barbarism and had been outlawed several years ago, due to one unfortunate case, when a victim complained posthumously and vociferously. They left the jail itself, one in front of her, one behind. The jail warden took up a position to Relan’s right, and he looked about as out of place as his two companions would look attending a black-tie function. He could not seem to fall into pace with Relan and the guards, and the mountain of paperwork under his left arm kept threatening to fall on the floor.

The desk sergeant sat at the main reception desk, the usual overweight, former beat officer, who plodded enough streets (The one’s with inns and taverns on mostly) to earn his place in the warm with nothing but paperwork and shift patterns to worry about. There were a few chairs arranged along the left hand wall, as a sort of impromptu waiting room. Aldrea, the Halfling and Perit the monk sat there waiting. When they entered, Aldrea jumped up, excitedly, while Perit stood, leant on his staff and walked slowly over to the desk.

“Relan a Kets, you were arrested last night for malicious spell casting in the Hammer & Sickle last night. The fine is forty Kronep.” Perit took a pouch from around his neck and placed it on the desk, in front of the sergeant.

“I think you’ll find it’s all there, sergeant.” The sergeant picked up the pouch and tipped its contents onto the desk. He counted the coins back into the bag, looked up at Perit and smiled.

“Everything seems to be in order here.” He turned his attention to his guards. “Release her...” As the three walked out of the watch house, Aldrea exploded at Perit.

“What did you do that for?” Her little face was red with rage.

“Do what?” inquired Perit, innocently.

“The fine was only forty Kronep, so why, in the name of Nirlepip, did you pay him sixty?!” Perit smiled a little smile and cast his gaze into the sky.

“Well, he did such a good job and everything... Plus, we didn’t actually pay him anything. It was the money you stole from those Orcs last night.”

“How did you manage to get that? I hid that away for a rainy day.” Perit turned to look at the little Halfling and stooped down, so he was eye to eye with her.

“Didn’t you know why Cherf was asked along, Aldrea? You compliment each other so well.” He winked at her and hauled his body weight up on his staff. The look that Aldrea gave to the rising figure could have started a small war. Perit turned and walked off, followed by Relan and the grumbling form of Aldrea. Relan kept herself between her two friends all the way back to the Hammer and Sickle, where the rest of the group was seated around one of the only tables still standing. When Relan entered the pub, the owner, Hordaf nearly threw a fit.

“Wait a second. She can’t come in here, Perit. She’s barred!” The three new entrants stopped in their tracks, with Perit having already undone the clasp on his cloak.

“Might I enquire as to why Relan is banned?” Hordaf’s fingers tensed around a length of wood, which was part of a table leg last night, but had been fashioned into a club, by the application of an Orc to the table at high speed.

“She started the fight last night. She was arrested for it.” Upon hearing this, Perit just did up the clasp on his cloak and turned to his friends sitting around the table.

“Well, my friends... It seems that we are no longer welcome in this establishment.” The gang sitting around the table got up as one and began moving towards the door. Hordaf was not, by nature, ignorant. He was however, by nature, greedy. He could tell when his profit margin was about to vacate the premises.

“But you know what I always say, Relan... Forgive and forget... that sort of thing.” The Elf stopped in the doorway, turned her head towards the stout barman and smiled. She then walked over to the bar, placed the palms of her hands flat on the counter and looked into the eyes of Hordaf. When she spoke, it was so quiet, that only he could hear her velvet tones.

“You know as well as I do, that I stopped the fight, rather than start it, don’t you? Just nod.” Hordaf’s head barely moved, but he did nod. Relan’s volume picked up so much, that it shocked Hordaf like running a large current through him.

“A round of your finest drinks then, barman. We shall be merry after my injustice.” She lowered her voice to the whisper again. “The first one’s on the house... and you can have one for yourself!” Hordaf nearly swallowed his tongue.

“What? Now hold on a –.” Relan turned around and raised her voice once more. The group was beginning to spread out across the bar like a wine stain on an expensive table cloth.

“Aldrea, come here and help me get the round in.” The little Halfling toddled over to her.

“Tell Mr Hordaf what the bill for my release came to. I was about 90 Kronep, wasn’t it?”

“Yes Relan, it was. 90 Kronep we had to scrape together to get you out of prison.” Hordaf was beginning to realise that the money would be written off as a loss, anyway, so he may as well try and sweep this one under the carpet.

“Okay, what’ll you lot have then?” He produced a tankard and began to fill it with ale, as many barmen across the universe have a talent of performing when the regulars are in town.

“The boys are going to drink the usual, but we...” She nodded barely perceptibly at Aldrea “are going to have one of those nice bottles of Norn’s Pass. I like the chill in this kind of weather.” (It should be mentioned that the wine from the region, known as Norn’s Pass was inaccessible until only recently, due to a large number of ‘accidents’ befalling the adventurers and would-be merchants who ventured to this region to ‘explore it’s delicacies’ (Loot, rape and plunder, though not possibly in that order.) The tribes of Norn’s Pass have since realised that they need not try to stop the merchants, for they bring with them thing like insulation and food other than their staple diet of Yak. The wine itself is as cold as the mountain it was brewed on and it keeps this temperature, even in extreme heat. This saves the brewers the task of writing ‘serve chilled’ on the bottle.)

“I’m sorry my dear, we haven’t got any bottle of Norn’s Pass left. Is there anything else you’d –“

“I know where those Orcs who smashed the place up last night are. They can come back with some friends, if you’d like!” As quick as a bolt of lightning, there was a blue tinted bottle placed on the counter. The label had a cheaply-drawn cartoon of some picturesque snow covered mountain tops, which looked nothing at all like Norn’s Pass. Hordaf scraped the wax coating off the cork and removed the cork. Not many people were used to hearing bottles of fine wine (Especially not as fine as this one) being opened in the Hammer & Sickle. Everyone looked around, as the glass was filled halfway full and proffered to Relan. She took a sip, swilled it around her mouth, closed her eyes and allowed herself to become properly Elvan for a while.

Her senses exploded into an array of tastes and smells. Her mind raced to the far away settlement, known as Norn’s Pass, where the air was crisp and clear. There was a fresh coating of snow on the ground and she was standing in the middle of a group of yurts. A wolf howled in the distance and she could hear someone chopping down a tree. She opened her eyes and swallowed the liquid.

“Wow.” As she spoke, her voice only came out as a hoarse whisper and was accompanied by the mist of a cold morning. She sat down, breathless.

“Put another glass on the bar, Hordaf. I’ll just take the beers over to this lot.” Aldrea grabbed the tray of beers and manoeuvred deftly between the punters. She arrived at the table, without spilling a drop of the amber liquid, which was vastly inferior to the amazing wine that Relan had just sampled.

“Drink up, ‘cos the next few rounds are cheap ones!” She declared in a hearty, triumphant voice. Relan had regained her composure and had made her way over to the table, complete with the bottle and two glasses. She sat down and poured herself another glass. Clearly she was out to enjoy herself for as long as was possible. A tear had formed in her eye and lingered, as she gazed into the middle distance, returning to the dream world of Norn’s Pass.

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Many of the shops in Relovas catered for the needs of the locals, some of them for tourists and their wealthy religious backgrounds. You could buy a lot of things in these shops, but Relovas was where most of the wares were made, so there never seemed to be a shortfall in goods to sell, or traders to sell them, for that matter. Lomlin had decided to frequent one of these shops before they left the city. Marchai's General Wares was the name of this particular shop. It was run by Marchai, a Dwarf, who, by the definition of the word shopkeeper, ran the shop. He also had a business for certain less-than-legal Dwarven armaments. Most people thought that the Gnomes had come up with explosives. (By-and-large, this is essentially true. However, the Dwarves have come up with many ingenious way to use the explosives for mining, cultural festivals and warfare. The policing of the anti-explosives laws had become a sticking point for the city guard some years ago, when it came to searching Dwarves for any offending articles. It was made a by-law, three weeks later, that any dwarf who, when watched for more than 30 seconds, did not explode, was not carrying explosives.) The owner looked up from his counter stool, when he heard the bell clang. Dwarves never did things by halves. This bell could have evacuated a large supermarket. He removed the jeweller's loupe from his eye and closed the wooden case in front of him.

"Long time since I saw you in here, ob Dravan." Lomlin strode purposefully over to the counter and climbed up onto the raised shelf, for customers of a vertically challenged nature.

"Marchai, my friend. I am in need of some equipment for travelling. It needs to be waterproof and sturdy, but above all, I need it on a budget."

"What sort of things did you have in mind, Lomlin? I may have some stuff in stock to meet your needs." Lomlin began to browse along some of the shelves, while Marchai left his stool and rounded the counter. Even for a dwarf, Marchai was short. No taller than three and a half feet above the ground. His hair was long and grey, with the beginnings of a receding hairline and a short beard. Some of the dwarves in the city had chosen this beard, as the weather was so warm, that the traditional long, plaited beard was just not practical. A vast majority of the city Dwarves were loath to actually shave their beard, but some had embraced it as the latest fashion. Lomlin had apparently found what he was looking for. He pulled a rucksack off a stand and observed it with a critical eye.

"What would you be looking to carry in a pack so large, Lomlin?"

"Oh, just the bare necessities... a tent, a bedroll, a large keg and tankard, that sort of thing." He smiled, thinking of how big a keg he could fit into this pack.

"So, you're not thinking of taking anything like food for instance?"

"Not when I'm travelling with a hair-foot. She can do all the cooking, and when all else fails, I even have a wizard to fall back on." The older Dwarf raised an eyebrow upon hearing this.

"You know your father wouldn't approve."

"You say that as if he's approved of something that I've done sometime during my life. He never has a good word to say about anything." He folded his arms and looked straight at the shopkeeper. Marchai was the first to back down.

"So... what sort of tent were you after? A nice cosy one man affair or will you be catering for anyone else on your journey?" Lomlin pushed his long hair back over his ears, apparently deep in thought.

"Aye, that's a thought... You'd better make it a four-man tent."

"Four man? You are more generous than I thought, Lomlin." Lomlin sighed and admitted the truth in the privacy of the shop.

"There's only going to be two men in it... I was providing shelter for the Half-Orc, Brek. It's just that I don't want him sleeping any closer to me than he has to!"

"Okay, Lomlin, I see your point. Marchai heaved a large bundle of Canvas and wood onto the counter, along with the backpack.

"Now then, would there be anything else?" Lomlin considered this for a moment and then pointed at a rack on the other side of the store.

"Those blankets, you say they will keep you warm in the harshest of climates." Marchai turned his head toward them.

"Yes, I do say, and yes they do."

"I shall have one of those, please." Marchai fetched a ladder and manoeuvred it around the room, so he could climb to the shelf with the blankets on.

"Just out of interest, Lomlin." He scaled the ladder and rooted around in the pile, to find the right size "What sort of armaments will you be carrying on your trip?" From his side, Lomlin raised a shaft of wood, with a spear tip at one end and a large, sharp axe head at the other. His left hand produced a small lump hammer from his belt and he proffered them to the Shopkeeper.

"These are my weapons, if that's what you're on about." Marchai looked upon the axe with an impressed look on his face, while he looked less than pleased with the hammer.

“What do you intend to do with the hammer? It is not the best second weapon available, plus you already have two hands full of guard’s axe when you are in combat.”

“I keep the hammer in reserve and for those jobs that a guard’s axe would not be best suited.”

“Jobs? Such as what, Lomlin?”

“Such as putting up the tent, for example. I shall need something sturdy to knock the pegs into the ground, will I not?”

“Aye, you have a point there. Tell me,” The merchant beckoned Lomlin a little closer to him. He lowered his voice accordingly. “Have you ever thought about dispatching your foes from range?”

“And how would you mean me to dispatch my foes from range, Mr Expert?” Marchai walked around the back of the counter and pulled a rather sturdy looking box up onto the top. He took a key from somewhere within his beard and unlocked the rather large lock on the front edge. He pushed open the box, reverently and proffered the contents to Lomlin.

Gazing in wonderment at one of the most exquisite pieces of Dwarven craftsmanship, Lomlin remained speechless. Every part of the crossbow gleamed. The wood was freshly waxed, the metal finely polished. It had a look of sleek potential about it. The potential to bring death, from this crossbow was amazing.

“There is no way, that I could possibly afford such a masterful weapon. I’d be so afraid to use it.” Lomlin’s voice was barely a whisper. Marchai shut the lid, and the magic of the moment died away.

“Come with me, Lomlin. I think I can find something more suited to you.” Marchai walked into the back room and he placed the box into a large, heavy set chest. This was secured by a large lock, which had another key, secreted in Marchai’s beard. (Don’t ever be surprised by what dwarves can fit into their beards. They are able to carry things which would not normally fit into a space so small.) When Marchai had locked the chest and replaced the key deep within his beard, he turned to Lomlin.

“Over here,” he nodded his head over to a dark corner of the room, “is what you are looking for.” Marchai walked over to a workbench and opened a cupboard in the front of it. He pulled out a tray filled with clay jars from within and proffered them to Lomlin.

“Well, I’ll be damned. Sticky fire. I never knew you sold that stuff here.” Lomlin was clearly impressed with the surprise delivered by Marchai.

“Sticky fire is an old name, my friend. I call this stuff Troll-bane. This stuff is better than any magical gizmo you could think of, for getting rid of trolls.” (Trolls are large creatures, standing maybe eight to twelve feet in height and they have attitude problems. They believe that everyone else smaller than them was put on the earth to be squashed by them. This is of course false, but that doesn’t stop the trolls from trying. They come in a variety of colours, ranging from dull grey, to a fresh clay-brown. They are highly intolerant of fire and have been known to run away from chain smokers, because they lit up. Fire and acid are the best ways to deal with the common Troll. Any other method has proved to be only temporary, as their wounds heal incredibly quickly, possibly even resulting in the regeneration of lost limbs, including in some circumstances, the head.)

“I see.” Lomlin mused. “And how much would some of these set me back?”

“I’m currently selling them at the price of fifteen Kronep each. How many would you like?”

“That’s a bugger... I only have forty Kronep and I could really use four of those there things.”

Marchai raised an eyebrow, in question of his kinsman’s attitude.

“I’ll tell you what, Lomlin.” He took two vials from that tray and placed them on the bench top. He replaced the drawer within the cupboard and took out another, similar one. He took two of these vials and placed them next to the original two. “These two,” he indicated the second two vials “Are currently in development. I don’t know the full extent of what happens when they are used. I’ll sell you these at half price, if you come and tell me what happens when you get round to using them.” Lomlin’s eyes widened at the mention of ‘in development’ but he still stroked his beard in consideration of the offer.

“You realise that I still can’t afford the price you are asking, what with all the other stuff I have purchased from you.”

“You still have not bought those products, yet... But, because you and your family have been so kind to me over the years, I’ll sell you your tent, blanket and these four presents for the sum of fifty Kronep.”

“This is a done deal. Lomlin drove his hand behind his beard and produced the pouch that Eltran had given him last night. This left him with no money, but a friend who owed him a favour in Brek, the Half-Orc would have to be willing to cover expenses for a while.

“The older models have a wick sticking out. Light that and throw. The compound will ignite and burn your foes. Hopefully, the newer lot will not require lighting. According to one of the alchemists at the Foundry, this stuff burns when the clay breaks. Try to stay on your feet!” Lomlin attached the vials to his backpack, using the convenient loops of string, attached to the side through a small eye, also

made from clay. He walked out into the main shop front. He removed his pack, opened the top and stashed the tent and blanket in the main compartment of the large bag. Marchai followed and stood at the counter, counting Kronep back into the small pouch. When he had finished, he walked around the counter and shook Lomlin firmly by the hand.

“May Misratx guide your blade to the hearts of your enemies, Brother. And may Rec’y mur deliver you safely to your destination.”

“Thank you, Marchai. I know that my destination will be here, eventually. I shall return, to tell you how well your merchandise works, I guarantee it.” And with that, he left the shop, to find his friends, for one last day in the city of Relovas.

Meanwhile, across town, the author launched a sinister plot device...

A tall, thin man, with slick black hair, a pencil moustache and a look of suspicion on his face walked into his bedroom. He was wearing a smoking jacket and carrying a brandy balloon, which was generously filled. He placed the balloon on the dresser and turned around, facing the open door. As he pulled the door to, he removed his jacket, and was temporarily blinded by a flash of light from a struck match. There was a man standing behind his bedroom door. He had been waiting for some time and was now slightly impatient.

“By the hells, Renil! How many times must I tell you to use the door, like everyone else?”

“Well, you did say to let you know when I had garnered some information, boss. I have some and I thought it best if I did not disturb you whilst you were entertaining guests.” Renil, as the man was identified was wearing black. No, black would not be the way to describe it, as black involves colour and light actually being present at some point along the line. These clothes were all the colour of darkness, allowing the wearer to blend into any sort of dark surroundings quite effectively. He was well presented and could make himself suddenly a member of normal society, by adjusting one or two items of his apparel. He had gloves over his hands, but they concealed large, expensive rings beneath them, so he could look like a member of the aristocracy at the very least. His soft shoes were not made for comfort, but for the lack of noise they made as he walked.

“I meant, why did you not inform the butler and come in normally?”

“I did. I rang the doorbell; your butler opened the door, only to see no-one. He walked out onto the steps and I slipped in. From there, it was easy to gain access to your room, because I knew you would turn up here eventually. I just had to wait.”

“Indeed. You had better accompany me to the study then. We must discuss things of the utmost importance.” The man led his intruder / employee through his house to a lavishly decorated study. Three of the walls were taken up by bookcases and one large lectern, currently beset by a map of the Southern Marches. The fourth wall was solid glass. It would look quite impressive had it not been dark... and raining. The man walked over to the desk, where he took a seat. He steeped his fingers and looked over the top at Renil. (People in control always do.)

“So, Renil... You have some information for me.”

“I do indeed.” Renil remained standing and clasped his hands behind his back. He strode around the room, with long slow strides, as an army officer might, when discussing minor strategic decisions.

“This would be information regarding the priority case of one Eltran Junra. Vlant the Merchant hired her for a little work, as you probably already know.” No response was given from the boss, who just continued to stare at part of the design on the rug. He seemed engrossed.

“Mr Rushall?” Queried Renil. Rushall moved his head only slightly, perhaps to get a different perspective on his piece of rug.

“Do continue, Renil. I may not be watching you, but I am fully aware of you and your voice.”

“Sir. The first assumption we must make is that of the seven ‘men’ she promised to Vlant, that she is one of them. She may not be so well equipped during a fight, because she does not look particularly well built, nor does she carry a weapon, save a dirk at her side. I did recognise that she carried the Anvil of Nirlepip around her neck. She is probably a healer, so is probably useful.” Rushall raised an eyebrow at this.

“Go on...”

“I followed her to one of the less desirably bars in the city... It goes by the name of the Hammer & Sickle. She nearly gave me the slip-“

“Do not bother me with details like that. I just wish to know about the personnel.” His voice was calm and quiet, as if he was a hunter, stalking his prey.

“She met with four people there. A Half-Orc, I think. All of those roving races look alike, so it could have been any of them. He is large and muscle-bound. I saw him fight. Very scary, but very

effective I am quite worried by the size of his sword. A Dwarf fought as well with him. They are both well versed in the study of the bar fight, but we shall have to see if the open country makes men of them. And as for the two women sitting at the table, I can see a clash of ego on the horizon. There is an Elf, who is quietly reserved, but she objected to this trip, because she fears for her life. I think she is paranoid. She can use magic to a minor degree, so we shall not have to worry about her particularly.”

“Even the most powerful of mages must resort to little spells, should the occasion call for it. We shall not overlook her, just in case.” Rushall sat back in the leather chair, placed his hand over his mouth and drummed his fingers on his cheek. He removed his hand and placed them both on the desk, palms down. “Who else do we have in her little retinue?” Renil used this moment to glance at a small notebook in his left hand.

“Well sir, there was a girl sitting at the table with them. She could not have been more than eight years old. Surely they could not be thinking of taking a child on this trip?”

“What was she wearing on her feet?” Asked Rushall. This question completely threw Renil, as he was not expecting it.

“Tell me, Renil, have you ever heard of a Halfling, before?” Rushall stood up and walked over to one of his massive bookcases.

“No sir, I have not. Why do you ask?” Rushall found the book he was looking for and thumbed idly through it. When he had found the page he was looking for, he placed it on the desk, facing Renil and gestured for him to read. Renil did so and was somewhat miffed, when he discovered that this being was probably about the same age as him, although she was still as small as he was at the age of eight.

“I see... What could someone of her –ahem- stature possibly contribute to this venture?”

“Well, the element of stealth is always useful, with her size. Plus, she could act as a scout, with less chance of becoming spotted; her chances of survival are quite high.” Rushall closed the book, with a snap and replaced it on the shelf. “And what about the other two people in this little group?”

“She went to the bar and was shown into the cellar, by a young man, tending the bar. When she returned, she dished out four pouches to the group at the table. I believe that would count as their advance money.” He paused, just long enough to let Rushall absorb the information regarding the expenditure of capital, by one of his underlings. “I would also, therefore, assume that this barman would be member number six. He has experience of fighting for the bar, so should be treated with care, but he is not built for it, like the Dwarf and Half-Breed. Shortly after this, she left the pub and I followed her once more.” Rushall raised his head, upon hearing this news.

“Where did she go?”

“She entered the Great Foundry through a small side entrance. It was then that I lost her, so I returned to the Bar, in case she was to return.”

“And did she return?”

“Yes. She shared a drink with her friends and various people around the bar came and spoke to them, but no money changed hands.”

“And then the obligatory fight started. I dislike the fact that you came to me with an incomplete report, but six members is better than none, so we shall have to wait and see.”

“I have one other piece of information to report, sir.”

“Spit it out then, my good man.”

“I sent a message to Mr Spireclimber. I requested his services on your behalf, to ensure this venture succeeds.”

“I see.” Rushall steepled his fingers once more “Do you realise just how much Spireclimber charges for his services, these days?”

“The last time I used him, it would be around fifteen hundred Gold Kronep well spent, sir.”

“Well, now it stands at two thousand Kronep, which I cannot afford to part with.” Rushall looked visibly disturbed by this news. His mouth had become one thin line along his face, parallel to his moustache. “You are to accompany them. Make sure that they do not interfere with the plan and, should Spireclimber choose to grace us with his presence, use him and then get rid of him.”

“How, do you mean, sir?” Rushall had had enough of Renil’s presence, so he strode around the desk and looked him straight in the eye.

“I mean for you to kill him and save me my two thousand Kronep. Do you understand?”

“Sir, many men have tried to kill Spireclimber and failed. I don’t want to be turned into some greasy puddle, or worse.” Rushall took a blade from behind him and pressed it neatly into the gut of Renil. Renil gasped, when he felt the point prick him just under a rib.

“You would rather chance your fate against me? Leave now, so you may prepare yourself.” Renil turned and walked out of the room, shaking slightly.

“Fool.” Muttered Rushall, to himself. He sheathed his dagger and walked back to his desk. The brandy bubble still sat there, with its generous measure. Rushall picked it up and downed it. He then sat at his desk, opened one of the drawers and withdrew a quill, some ink and paper.

He wrote for some time and paused, to reflect upon what had been said during the short, but informative chat with Renil. He made some notes in a small ledger, which he put away in his desk drawer. When he had finished writing the letter, he rolled it up, sealed it with a blob of wax and pressed his ring into it. He rose from the chair and walked over to the fireplace, where there hung a bell-pull. He gave it a sharp but short tug. Within ten seconds, a short, thin man with thinning white hair entered the room. He was wearing a black suit, white shirt and black bow tie. This was the proper attire for a butler, as always.

“You rang, sir?” The butler allowed the words to fall sleekly off his tongue, in the fashion of a quintessential English butler.

“Ah, Billingsworth. Please would you be so kind as to take this message to a tavern in the city, known as the ‘Pewter Mug’. There, you will find a merchant, who goes by the name of Vlar Langstrom. Please deliver this to him. There will be no reply, so no need to wait for one.” He handed over the sealed letter.

“Langstrom? Would that mean, he is a merchant from the Northern Reaches?”

“Indeed, he is. Do not let the place of his birth bother you. He has not been back to his homeland for some twenty years.”

“I shall deliver it at once, Sir.” Billingsworth turned and left the room, leaving Rushall alone.

“And, if he messes this one up he shall never go back there ever again.” Muttered Rushall to himself. He was getting agitated, and this was never good. It meant that he was not totally in control of the situation. He walked out of the study, shut the door and locked it.

The day before the caravan was due to leave Relovas produced another dire display of weather. It started off overcast and just when the sun began to peak through, reinforcements arrived for the patchy cloud, bringing with it a more virulent rainstorm than the past few nights had suffered with. This rain reached the ground and the streets were awash with mud and worse. There were few good places to be today. One of them was a tavern, right in front of the fire. The other was at home, wrapped up nice and warm in bed.

Relan a Kets was neither. She was walking through the city streets, wearing her rain cloak. Eventually, down a side street off Smith’s Parade, she came to a familiar door. She knocked three times, before entering. She knew that the occupant knew it was her. She walked in, stripped her dripping cloak off and hung it on the hat stand, just inside the door. From within her cloak, she removed a large leather bound book. It was perfectly dry, as always. She carried this through to the main room of the house.

“You took your time, Relan.” Said a voice, as she entered the main Study, if you could call it that. There were two large desks, covered in paper. Books, tomes and grimoires took up all of the available shelf space and then some. There was a collection of dribbly candles on the larger desk and a skull. By the fireplace, there was a large, impressively carved wood and leather chair. An old man was sitting in it, watching the girl enter the room. His head moved, allowing him a better view of her, as she approached.

“Master, I came to speak with you.”

“This is something of which I am well aware; otherwise you would not be here.” Old people tend to get cranky, and being an Elf, he was older than most, so he was more cranky than most as well.

“I came to say goodbye. I wish to put your knowledge to the test.” He raised an eyebrow, upon hearing this.

“My knowledge? Why not put your own to the test, so you can make your own mistakes and learn from them?”

“Because it is your knowledge, in my head, Master.”

“This point is true, but I believe I should ask you things like ‘Why?’ and ‘What makes you think you are ready?’.”

“Well the first one is a simple answer, Master.” Relan pulled a chair from the smaller desk and sat on it, facing her venerable master. “I believe that, experienced as you are in the field of magic and mage craft, there is only so much you can teach me. I must journey forth and experience the world myself; to gain a better understanding of the techniques and practises you have taught me.”

“And to the other question?”

“Well, I would say that even though I may not be ready, I have the ideal opportunity to practise, while in the company of people I trust. My friends are leaving tomorrow, to guard a merchant train. We go as far as the city of Heraptal. What happens after there, we have not yet decided, but I’m sure we shall, either on the way, or at the journey’s end.” The Master raised a smile and stood up.

“Very well,” He clicked his fingers and suddenly, the candles in the room were all alight and the old wizard was wearing his finest robes. They were a bright scarlet, edged with fur of some kind. There was a scattering of the obligatory sequins and magical insignia. It made them look like the stars at sunset. (Only with a lot more red) He had a hat, which matched. It was a pointy hat and the whole outfit just said to everyone ‘This man is a wizard; respect him, lest he turn you into a frog.’ (Not literally, you understand, as that sort of thing is reserved for wizards, who are more ego than actual knowledge.) He walked over to Relan and laid his left hand on top of her head. His right hand was a blur and suddenly, it was holding a six-foot length of polished mahogany. The surface shined, as if it was brand new, but this had so much age, that it had a mind of its own. It also had a faint aura. It glowed ethereally in the light. A dim blue corona, which watched the world.

“I, Corasset Delta Thistlewick, scribe of Pollao, do hereby confer upon you, Relan a Kets the title of Journeyman Mage.” He removed his hand from her head and returned to his chair.

“Is that it?” Relan said, raising her head. She noticed that the robes had gone and so had the staff. Thistlewick was a very powerful mage. She was very privileged to be taught by him. She raised a smile.

“Yes, it is. You may go forth and explore the world, just as I did, once. I shall give you the greatest piece of advice, once given to me by an old friend. He said to me ‘Don’t fear death... You might be glad of it someday, so don’t keep running from it.’”

“Was he human, Master?” The old wizard looked up at his student quizzically.

“Yes, he was. Why do you ask?”

“Well, they don’t live very long, so they don’t fear death as we do, because they don’t mind leaving unfinished business.”

“That is an interesting notion... I shall mull over it later.” Relan moved about, uneasily. Something was playing on her mind.

“Master, will you be taking on another apprentice, now that I am gone?”

“I don’t think so. I am getting old.” He smiled and his eyes glazed over. “Maybe I shall retire and find myself somewhere, far from the city.”

“Will you continue to study your magic?”

“I’m not sure... Why does this suddenly interest you, Relan?”

“Well, if you aren’t going to be using your staff...” Her voice trailed off into uncertainty. Thistlewick suddenly sat up in his chair, fully aware of the situation and its consequences.

“You think that I should give you my staff?” His tone was calm, but it thinly disguised a deep pit of disgust underneath it.

“Well... maybe if you were to retire...” Relan knew she was stood over the Abyss, but could not stop herself plunging headlong into it. Corasset stood up and summoned his staff to him.

“This is not any old piece of wood, you foolish child. These things don’t get handed down from wizard to pupil. They die with their creator. Do you know why?” He bellowed. Relan shook her head, once more the pupil.

“They die, because wizards with any sense know to attach them to their very soul, so they can never become lost, or abused.” Corasset was shaking. He sat down in his chair and took a moment to calm himself.

“Staves are things I cannot teach you about.” He was breathing deeply, almost laboured. “You must learn about them for yourself. If there is anything else I can help you with, then ask me. If there is not, then please leave me to my thoughts.” Relan turned and walked over to the door and opened it.

“Thank you, Master... For everything you have taught me.” With a tear in her eye, she walked out of the door, pulled on her cloak, and strode purposefully into the rainy day.

Relan walked slowly, but purposefully home. When she entered the house, she removed her cloak once more and walked up to her room. She sat on the bed and stared at the wall. A tear fell from her pale blue eye and ran down her cheek.

*Why did I have to ruin it all by being so greedy?* She asked herself. She stood up, walked over to her door and locked it. Then, she walked back to her bed, lay down and began to quietly sob.

“Why did you fly off the handle at her?” A voice from a dark corner asked. Corasset looked up at one of the dark corners of his room and smiled.

“I cannot allow one of my students to leave due to greed. I have taught her much, but she needs to learn a few lessons of her own.”

“Like what?” A blue-grey bird of prey dropped down from its unseen perch and settled on the back of the chair. Corasset rolled his eyes.

“Well, I cannot teach her to keep a cool head in the heat of battle, though I have no fear that she will learn this quickly. What’s with the new appearance, Galol? Galol, Corasset’s familiar, looked at him and spread his wings, for inspection.

“I thought that *Falco columbarius* looks much more fetching than *Corvus corvax*.”

“I agree. You are smaller and more agile than you were, but did you really have to pick the Merlin?”

“Well, it just seemed the right thing to do.” Galol sat there, motionless and he doubled in size. His feathers all suddenly became jet black and there he sat, a magnificent raven.

“I think that you look just fine as a raven, my friend,” said Corasset, with more than just a trace of emotion in his voice. “Come, we must pack.”

“Where are we going now?” The raven took flight, as Corasset stood up. He landed on the Wizard’s shoulder.

“We are going to observe Miss a Kets, to see that she doesn’t get into trouble on her first trip away from the city. We would not like her and her friends to get waylaid by a hoard of trolls, whom they could not deal with.”

“Of course not.” The raven chuckled, as they ascended the stairs.