

### Three (Scott) Here We Go Again

Arat collected the letter off of his porch and watched as a tall, slender figure trotted off down the road and into the shadows of the night. For a few moments he simply stood, staring at the stranger, trying to get some clues as to who he may have been. His speech was already known to him, Wessfieldian, he'd heard it spoken in his days but did not recall that particular voice. His dress told him nothing either, since he was able to see only a heavy riding cloak laying across a single shoulder and nothing more. He had no mount tethered outside and as he trotted on foot back into the heart of town, Arat could only guess where he made for. Was his horse stabled at Matmars? Was he making for the docks where he had passage back up the Inner Sea towards his own homeland? The options were many and when Arat could no longer see the stranger, he decided to let it rest and closed the door.

He would have learned more perhaps if he'd opened the door and accepted this letter in person. A choice he had first decided upon, But that was quickly laid to rest when he caught a look at himself and saw he was wearing only his breeches. Hardly the attire to accept callers, even one so late. So he had asked the messenger to set the letter on his step and waited till he heard him set foot off the porch before opening the door. And now here he was, standing in the darkness of his sitting room, clutching a rolled parchment which he knew not of the contents. For a moment his mind seemed to travel off somewhere until the soft purr of Nyrin brought him back home again.

"I suppose I should see just what was so urgent to wake us at such an late span." He said aloud as he made for the lantern resting on his mantle. Treading lightly across the floor, he peeked into his room and then into a second, being sure the voices did not disturb his family. "I cannot imagine what it could be." He added as he went back into the sitting room.

But he could imagine. In fact he was already playing the many possibilities in his head as he set the cloth wick to flame. Was it a message from the folk of Loberon seeking aid from the wild wolves that often times wandered from their home in the Barvarion Forest. Or mayhap a letter from his friend in Santoning... no that was unlikely, why would it be delivered to him in the middle of the night. What if it was from the King himself, perhaps some evil has arisen someplace and his aid is requested....

Did the messenger not say it was from Rathcar?

Arat looked down at his feet and saw Nyrin sitting there, staring up at him. Even though he was not human, Arat could see a look of his familiar's inability to understand the works of the human mind.

"Of course." He said matter of fact, sitting down in his chair beside the hearth, carefully placing the lantern down on the table beside him. The parchment in his hands was of fine quality, soft yet quite durable. As he rolled it over in his hands, he saw that there was a wax stamp as a seal and closer inspection revealed it was a familiar mark.

"It is definitely Rathcar's letter, my friend. This parchment is elven and this wax crest is indeed our winged friend's own brand." Arat studied the mark, a crescent moon set with a single star in its heaven. Seeing this brand brought Rathcar's face in his head. His hair black as his own, his features narrow, ears pointed, skin dark, eyes that twinkled with such life as Arat had never known. And the mark on his cheek, a crescent moon with a single star in its heaven. He ran his fingers over the branded wax seal, seeming almost able to feel his friend in his touch. At last he took up a small dagger (the same he had taken up when he had heard the stranger outside) and slipped it between the rolled parchment. The sharp blade went easily through the wax and as he

unrolled it, more thoughts raced through his head. What urgency could Rathcar have that needed my immediate attention? Is there trouble somewhere in which my aid is needed? Perhaps something is wrong with Rathcar, what if he is ill...?" He felt his hand tremble slightly as that last thought passed through him, causing the parchment to shutter. Finally he unrolled the scroll in his hands and his eyes widened when he saw the dialect. The words within were written in *douiluv*, an old form of elven, in fact, a form long unused by the elves of this world. Rathcar had taught Arat this language both ciphering and scribing, ages ago, a form they only used when the utmost secrecy was in need. His eyes wandered through the flowing script, the letters elegant and almost musical, finally he read what was written:

My Dear Arat,

*How fare thee and thy family? It has been many seasons since our paths have taken the same way, too many indeed. Though I have wished to visit your fine city on many occasions, I find my duties have not allowed. This, however, has taken a turn for the best. For I am in need of thy aid. I cannot disclose details in the chance that this letter be intercepted. Only this I can say, I will be at Sapford come first planting. Meet me at the Brynwood Inn, where I will be lodging. Speak of our meeting to nigh a soul from here on. As I have stated, I cannot say why I beckon thou, only that it is important. I await thy arrival with great anticipation. Tell Kristel and Tirem that my ki is with them always.*

Your friend,

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Arat rolled the scroll up tightly, rapping it lightly in his open hand when he was finished. Staring out through the window into the night, he played the words of the letter over and over in his head. He could not begin to guess as to what the contents meant, but there was no question as to his decision. Thinking of the time of season it now was, the First Planting was nearly a full Turn coming. Figuring that Sapford was at least some twenty and two moons ride from Arnen from his recollection, he had little time. Ponder did he do little of, however, for as he sat in his sitting room, one thing was certain, he was leaving Arnen again.

Little did he sleep that eve, tossing and turning, anxious to be on the road again, even more so to be with his elven friend. He lay in bed for most of the night, not wanting to awaken his sleeping mate. In the end he simply lay on his back, staring at the ceiling, thinking of his friend and all the times they had spent on the road together. When at last he decided not to fight his anticipation. Outside his window, it was still dark and the first light of dawn was yet two spans ahead. A task he had taken up too many times to count, he prepared to leave his loved ones for a spell again. From the wardrobe in his bedroom he quietly searched for his pack. There in the back, tucked behind several pairs of boots and other bits of clothing, he found it, unused for far too long. . Along with several pieces of clothing, spare boots, trousers, tunics, and jerkin, some pieces suitable for cold of Winter if Rathcar's plans kept him away that long, along with clean pairs of breeches, he took his bundle and slipped silently out of the room. In the sitting room, with nothing but a lantern to see by, he set to packing his gear. From within his pack he found his bedroll still in place and after a quick inspection to be sure it was clean and untattered, he laid it out on the floor. Next he took his clothing and laid them inside the open bedroll, along with some items of personal necessity which he added before rolling the whole bundle up into a nice

tight roll. Into the pack it went along with two blankets, one of which was of thick wool and quite warm on cold nights in the open air. With that task now complete, he turned his attention to his next step. In the corner of the room, beyond the light of the lantern, stood a large oaken cabinet. Taking up his light, he strolled towards it, hearing it calling to him like the whisperings of old ghosts. From within his jerkin pocket (his traveling jerkin on which he now wore along with the rest of his traveling wardrobe of tanned trousers, heavy tunic and worn and comfortable soft high boots) he retrieved a key and set it to the padlock that sealed the contents of the cabinet. Removing the lock and releasing the steel hinge, he swung the doors open, doing so slowly so as not to cause them to *squeak*. Once fully opened, he stepped back, marveling at the contents inside.

After some time of deliberation and often times spoken decision making, Arat had his saddlebags filled and ready for travel. Inside were items he deemed necessary for a long ride ahead, lantern, flint and tinder box, rope, spikes, items of healing and first aid, cookery, and what dry goods were available in his pantry. Of course other items included his crossbow and score of bolts and both daggers he always carried on the road. The first was slipped into his sword belt, the second tucked safely in his boot. When he thought he had everything and was closing the doors, he stopped suddenly. Pulling them open again he searched inside for what he knew not ... until he spied it. Hanging on a single peg against the back, behind his good cloak was a wineskin. He reached out for it and took it in his hands and at that moment felt a tingle race through him. As if the simple skin were filled with power or some ancient magic, a tickle was sent racing up his arm. But as he gazed at it he remembered that it was more than just a wineskin and the words of a long time friend came to him. "*Save this for our next journey, my friend.*" Arat threw the skin over his shoulder and a smile spread wide across his face. "I look forward to sharing this with you again, my friend."

The last task ahead was his side arms and these he took quite seriously. They were two swords, Orthinel and Vhegeance, both were set over his mantle on pegs for all visitors to admire. The first was a short sword the latter much longer and able to wield with both hands if needed. Both blades were of exquisite craftsmanship and even in the dim candle light of the room, glistened with gold and gems of unknown wealth. These were truly two special blades and though they have a tale behind them of their own, it will not be told here. He took both of them from their showplace, working each one with the skill and grace of a true master. Satisfied with their feel, he took a box from the mantle and set himself down in his chair by the hearth.

By the time he returned the cloth and container of fluid to the box, the morning rays were falling over his porch roof and the lantern had burned clean of oil. Standing and stretching his muscles, Arat returned the box to its proper place and admired his handy work. Both blades were now as sheen as the finest glass, the shorter ones steel able to reflect his own face, while the longer one's crystal-like blade seemed to radiate the morning light. Orthinel was slipped into her sheath at his side and Vhegeance her place on his back by baldric. Standing tall and proud, like a man made hole again, Arat took a deep breath and filled his nostrils with the familiar scents of his home. As if not quite ready to let them go, he held his breath, his eyes dosed. At last he let go with a long, steady exhale and smiled. His final step took him to set a quill to parchment. His words were quick and direct, knowing Kristel did not like his excuses and flowery sentiments when he wrote his notes. Like always, he told her that he loved her with all of his heart and that he would return as soon as he could. He told her to kiss Tirem and to be sure to let Whyllly know if they needed anything. When he was finished, took a hunk of wax and where his sword pegs now lay empty, stuck the note to the wall beside. Looking down to see his familiar sitting at his feet,

gazing up at him, knowing what all of this meant, Arat reached down and scratched the panther's head.

"Nyrin, come, it is time to go."

Out back behind his house sat a small stable. It was nothing fancy but well built to stand against the elements. As the sun rose over the horizon, sending the birds to chirping and the barking of distant hounds, Arat came out of the stable door, with his treasured steed, B'ar in reign behind. He lifted himself into the saddle and urged his mount forward, giving his home one final look over his shoulder, half expecting to see his mate and their child peering out him through a window, they were not. He was out of town within the span, having first two stops to make. The first was to his trusted houseman, Whylly. Whylly was a good-hearted old soul whom once lived with Arat before he met Kristel. He would tend to the house and see he was looked after proper. When Arat and Kristel had their child and he finally decided to settle back in Arnen for good, Whylly took up residence elsewhere, only calling on Arat now and then like an old woman. Anytime Arat would leave for any length of time, Whylly would look after his family, seeing they were well cared for and got everything they needed. His second stop was to the market where he needed to purchase some minor foodstuffs for his journey. While inside, he was greeted by Ogelby Benner, the good shopkeep and Tuck, an old timer who didn't do much of anything lately save talk to folks to pass the time. As soon as Arat said he was leaving town for a spell, both men jumped right in, asking what sort of mysterious land he was off to, or what evil he was setting out to slay. Arat only chuckled at them and said nothing, since he himself knew naught of his plans. At last he left Arnen behind, heading out from the main road, not feeling the need for stealth. He planned to head northwest through the Ilbain Forest, cross the Ryn River and out across the plains. He had taken this same route before and both he and B'ar knew the roads well. There was not much danger to note Darden now governed by a goodly fellow and at last cleaned up of the ruffians, thieves, and the like. He would make Loberdon by the morrows moonset and would stay at a local inn before heading north and towards the mountains. He felt good, as good as any man could feel under the open skies. It felt good to be under the saddle again, hearing the creaking of leather, listening to sounds of birds chirping, the leaves blowing in the trees. Sure, he had been out in the forest several times over the years, but not like this. This time he had his saddlebags and packs, this time he was on the road for a goodly spell. By midmorning he was crossing the Ryn and would be out of the forest shortly after. He loved the forest, having such fond memories of it. This was the where his father and uncle had taken him as a child, teaching him the ways of land, where his dear friend Tormyk had taught him even more as an adult. Of course it was also the forest where his true home lay, Hanbain, and also where he first met his familiar, Nyrin. The Ilbain held many memories for him, some fond, some dark, some hard to forget. His entire life was held within these trees, sewn within this soil, known among these creatures....

"Horses draw near."

"What?"

"Horses, at least four, moving up stream towards us."

Arat realized he had been daydreaming. Luckily B'ar knew the trail or he'd surly been knocked clean by a low hanging branch. Nyrin's warning shook him back into reality and he reigned his steed to a halt. Sitting up in the saddle, Arat listened for the sounds Nyrin had spoke of, searching through the sparse trees for any sign of approaching riders. He was only a half revolution from Arnen, still in civilization, so it was unlikely they were bandits. Still, his hand

fell instinctively on the hilt of his short sword as he waited for these riders to come into view. His wait was not long, for within a tick, just as Nyrin said, four horses came trotting along the river bank towards his position, each carrying a rider. At first he couldn't tell who these riders were, but as they got closer, he caught sight of their clothing and knew right then, they were elves.

"Greeting *vloija*." Arat announced as they rode to him. Their dress told him that they rode from *Tra'brdyl*, an elven populace of Arnen. They were four males, each fair-haired, fair skinned, and eyes of sparkling emeralds. All four had swords in girth and bow and quiver slung across their backs, but Arat was not threatened by them for he had been to their city many times. He did not know these four by name yet he called them *vloija*, the elven word for friend.

"*Sigri vloija*." Returned one of the four, raising an open hand. "Are thee Arat?" The second part was in common tongue.

"Aye, I am he. What brings *Tra'brdyl* along the Ryn this revolution?"

"We have come by the bidding of Lor Rathcar."

"Rathcar?" Arat was unable to hide his surprise. It was too much that he be sought out twice in so many days by his elven friend, and know his curiosity was turning into some sort of a game between them.

"Aye." The elf reached into one of his saddlebags and brought forth a glass decanter containing a clear fluid. "He bade us to seek you out ere you left the *Andolain*. He said for you to drink this potion, that it would protect you."

The elf handed the flask to Arat who took it without a word. He studied the contents, unable to learn anything from the clear liquid. Removing the cork, he sniffed it, finding not an odor either.

"Protect me?" He said at last, not yet drinking it. "Protect me from what?"

"Lor Rathcar said nothing of its powers, only that were to drink it immediately."

There was no reason for Arat to doubt these elves. He held all elven kind with great honor and never had his feelings brought him harm. "Well then, if Rathcar says to drink it, then here goes..." He threw his head back and swallowed the liquid in two easy gulps. It went down without distress, for there was not even a taste to this strange brew. He corked the glass container. "Seemed easy enough, though I do not know from what I am being..." Before he could finish, he lost his grip on the flask and it hit the ground. Before he could react, he lost his grip on the saddle and toppled over, landing in front of the elf's horse. He hadn't reached the ground when the world went black and the last thing he could remember thinking was why the glass did not break.

"Fear not Nyrinugathar, we have done your *Mu'vloiga* no harm." The lead elf was on one knee, speaking into Nyrin's ear, stroking his fur. The other two were tending to Arat while the fourth held B'ar. Nyrin had raised his hackles the moment Arat fell, ready to protect his familiar, confused as to what the elves had done. The elf had spoken to him at once, assuring him they were doing no harm to Arat, letting him know all was well. Although Nyrin did not have the link with these elves as he did with his Arat, he was still able to somehow know what this elf was saying to him, able to feel he was telling the truth.

"Your *Mu'vloiga* will be leaving this place, our task was to prepare him. Lor Rathcar awaits him on the other side. This was the only way he could be retrieved swiftly, for the road was too long to take by his own means. He will be fine. However he must go alone, for the spell works only on elves and the like not on beasts. So you and his steed will return to *Tra'brdyl* with us. There you will remain until the proper time comes."

Nyrin looked into the eyes of the elf, and the elf knew the panther understood. Still, the elf saw the sadness in the beast's eyes, understood that the two familiars had always been together to protect one another. He understood the pain the beast felt and did not wash away the tear that welled in his eye. While he soothed the panther, two of his companions lay Arat flat out upon the ground, setting his gear and a pouch on top of his chest. One of them then drew a line in the dirt around the body and stepped back. "*Kri'lu Lor Rathcar.*" He said in elven and before all of their eyes, Arat vanished.