

Ranek the Smuggler

Part 1 - That damn Javenian

Thick mists covered the narrow streets of Idon Koresh, and a chilly autumn rain hurried late drinkers homewards. Somewhere in the night there was the sound of a cart slowly being dragged through the shadows, a low and careful murmur breaking the silence. If anyone but the Duke's guard were awake (and sober) at this hour, they would maybe have seen a figure making their way along the most deserted back streets. A figure that certainly did its best to avoid any of the aforementioned guards.

This figure was Ranek, and it wasn't his first time making this late-night walk. But every time, he swore it would be the last. His cart wasn't big, but it was filled with hay that was getting more and more soaked by the minute. It would be a loss of profit, but that couldn't be helped. He couldn't turn back now. The rain was turning the back roads into mud though, and that could be a real problem. Thankfully he didn't have far to go, but the way back would be harder, especially with the extra cargo that he was about to pick up.

He finally arrived at his destination, a great building that was no doubt Lenorian in construction but adorned with all manner of Javenian decorations. Silently, he put the cart to rest at the back of the building in the darkest corner he could find, and walked around to check for guards. The Javenians had their own soldiers, extremely dangerous but also not very keen on standing out in the cold. After making sure no one was skulking around, he sneaked back to the cart and walked down a slippery set of stone steps to a door leading into the cellar. He knocked carefully, ears on edge, and waited for an answer. But there was no reaction, only silence. Panic started creeping into his heart. He considered just running and never looking back. But he told himself there were way too much money on the line to give up so easily, so he knocked again. Suddenly, the door opened slowly and a bejeweled hand motioned him inwards.

Eager to get out of the cold, he slunk in. A cloud of scents and perfumes hit him as he stumbled into the cellar, which looked more like some outlandish parlor, adorned as it was with exotic cloths and fancy furniture. Shelf after shelf was filled with colorful bottles, marked and sorted – according to

effect he assumed. And in the center of it all stood the Javenian in charge of this little basement of wonders, clad in soft and flowing clothes that hinted at and accentuated his exotic shapes. The man was wearing a Duke's worth in jewelry made of metal and glass, and Ranek couldn't help noticing that there was more metal than fabric covering him. His head was almost completely shaved, leaving only a few light curls at the front. Besides the traditional tattoo that all Javenians wore, his face was painted in a veritable rainbow of colors, making Ranek wonder if the Javenian had prepared just for him.

"This weather does not agree with you, fair Ranek. Not at all," the Javenian said with a smile that could melt butter, leaning against a support beam.

"I can't say I agree with it either," the Lenorian said, taking off his soaked poncho. "But I have to admit it keeps the streets empty. Do you have the stuff ready?"

The Javenian sighed slightly, swilling a glass with some outlandish liquor. "I don't know why I keep expecting at least a little bit of social chitchat with you... but it's all business and dealings. Like a Seran, just with less finesse."

Ranek hesitated. He wanted to be out of here as soon as possible, but dealing with the Javenians meant playing along with their fancies every now and then. Strange though they were, they could be of tremendous use and the Javenian would surely be a good ally in the future.

"I, uh...Forgive me. Suppose the rain and cold gets to me, and I still have a long night ahead. How, um...are you doing well?" he said, trying to smooth things over.

The Javenian smiled incredulously and looked at Ranek as one would a child telling tall tales. "Oh my, don't strain yourself too much, now," he said as he walked over to Ranek, and gave him a small kiss on the nose. The Lenorian flinched a bit, still unused to those strange customs. "But I appreciate the sentiment. I am doing rather well, all things considered. Your people are crude but friendly, and less hesitant to approach us these days. Of course, there's the occasional scuffle, but it's rarely anything

serious.” As he talked, the Javenian went over to the shelves holding the countless number of brews and potions, picking out certain ones and placing them in small crates. “And you, fair Ranek? How fares your life? I’ve hoped to see you at our terrace, I confess.”

“I...get by,” Ranek said hesitantly. “Times are tough. Smuggling these potions of yours brings in a good amount of lidas, but it seems like you can never have enough these days. I don’t even want to think about how it would have been if your people hadn’t come in to repel the Rakkhari,” he paused a moment, as he chased away dark memories. “They would likely still be here...”

The Javenian paused, and looked at Ranek with a mix of curiosity and amusement. “Did I ever tell you why I came to this mudhole of a city in the first place?” Ranek shook his head. “Well, once it was decided that our soldiers were going to be sent into Lenori to help fight off those southern brutes, word started going around that they wanted to send normal citizens as well. I think I told you before that I come from Rach Varna, so contrary to most of my people, I had actually spent some time to get to know your people.” Then, he paused and took a big bottle and a glass from the shelf. “Care for a drink while we work?”

Ranek eyed the bottle, an intricate piece of glasswork depicting two bodies in a close embrace. His experience with Javenian drinks was mixed at best. But the night was cold, dark, and far from over. “Sure. Not much though, I still need to dodge the Duke’s men tonight.”

“Well, we would not want you to fall prey to them, now would we?” the Javenian said with a smile, pouring a glass of fine spirits which filled the room with a sweet, fruity scent. “Pretty Ranek, beaten senseless by brutes who does not understand his plight...” He handed the glass to Ranek, who apprehensively drank from the glass. Exquisite. And potent.

“So, where was I,” the Javenian mused, as he went back to packing down his wares. “Ah yes - I had some experience of your Lenorian ways from before, so I had a slight...interest, you could say. It was hardly easy to get permission to go, however. It took a lot of favors and dealings, but as you can see, here I am. Now, you have probably heard enough stories about

how our Havoc Battalion cut into this Duchy and drove back the Rakkhari, so I won't bore you with that. But what you might not know is exactly what kind of people our Senate sent in their wake..." The Javenian threw a mischievous glance at Ranek, who was listening intently.

"What do you mean? ...do I want to know?" Ranek asked, now rather unsure of himself. He'd heard a lot of rumors and stories about the Javenians who had come to Lenori after the war, but it was hard to tell what was true and what was tales.

"Well, even if you wanted to, I could not tell you everything about them," the Javenian continued. "They'd have me executed, you see," he said with a wink and a smile. "But what I can tell you is that there may be more going on than you know. And in the coming time, I can be a very great friend to you. If you should wish me to be."

There was a long, silent moment when the two men just looked at each other. A gaze with a thousand meanings hidden behind a sly smile met a worried look from underneath furrowed brows. Ranek tried to find words, but failed.

"I left Rach Varna and came here for two reasons, fair Ranek. The first reason is that I wished to be a part of the great work that is being done here to unite two peoples. The second is that I was called upon by our priesthood to serve our faith, the Ember Prophetess and the nine Gods and their Master. And this brings us to what I will ask of you in return for these potions this time..."

By now, Ranek was feeling cold shivers and pangs of fear, as if he had stumbled into the lair of some crazed beast. But there was little to do but listen, he realized, and did his best to meet the Javenian's gaze.

"What I ask, is that you bring twenty of your countrymen to our terrace in two days, around the time when the sun sets. Whether they are men or women makes no difference, but rather people who would like to hear what we want to say."

"And what will you do with these men and women?" Ranek asked with a

low, nervous voice.

“Oh, we will do nothing but treat them as honored guests, of course! We shall drink, eat, feast and take pleasures unknown to your people. And then...” The Javenian’s voice grew hot and fierce as he looked Ranek deep in the eye. “Then we will talk to you about the true Javenna, lay bare the truths known only to our people. The ultimate honor we could bestow upon you.”

Again, silence took hold of the room for a good while before Ranek summoned up the courage to speak. “I...suppose it shouldn’t be too hard to find people. If you guarantee their safety?”

“Why of course! We did not come to your aid just to start a bloodletting of our own - and I hope that you don’t harbor those kind of delusions about me of all people?” the Javenian exclaimed with feigned shock.

Ranek had to avert his gaze, blushing somewhat. “No, I - no. No, I would not think so. I’m just...a bit drunk I suppose. Drunk and tired. I will gather the people for you.”

“I am glad to hear it. Now then, with that said, let’s get these final potions into the crates, so you can head on your way,” the Javenian said with a satisfied smile.

They packed the last dozen bottles down into crates, after which Ranek carried them out to his cart. By now the rain had grown worse, and the streets were filled with puddles. The walk back would be harrowing. He hid the crates filled with potions under the hay, making sure that they would make as little sound as possible. Even though the rain drowned out everything else, he couldn’t take any risks. Finally, as it was all packed and covered he returned down to the basement.

“Everything is loaded and hidden. Now I just need the list,” he said to the Javenian, who was wrapping up a piece of parchment in a cover.

“Perhaps I should not give it so easily then, but keep you here for company

a while longer, eh?” the Javenian said with a wily smile. Ranek was used to this, but still had a hard time keeping his composure.

“I really need to get the cargo away from here as quick as possible,” he said, trying to get out of there quickly.

“Pfuuu, of course...” The Javenian sighed with disappointment. “Take your list then, and vanish into the night...” He stepped close to Ranek, gave him the wrapped parchment, as well as a soft kiss on the cheek. “But know that you are welcome here at any time,” he added with a smile.

“I, uh...thank you for your hospitality,” Ranek mumbled as he tightened his poncho. “And good night.”

He felt the Javenian’s gaze on his back as he went out the door into the rain, cheeks hot with embarrassment. It was not that he hadn’t fooled around with men before, but the Javenians were so...brazen about it. So shameless and eager. He had to admit to himself that it scared him a bit, and maybe that was what made him so uncomfortable around this man. But these thoughts were soon drowned out as he had to start pulling his cart through muddy back streets. Once more, he cursed himself for not getting a hold of a reliable companion to help him with this part. There was nothing to do but push through though, the illegal potions he had hidden in the cart would get him in endless trouble if he was caught. However, the rain gave him good cover, so even though he got stuck in puddle after puddle, he at least wasn’t being watched.

Then, suddenly, he could hear voices somewhere in the night, coming towards him. He froze instantly, trying to figure out what to do. There were two of them and they certainly didn’t sound like drunks on their way home. For a second he considered hiding under the cart, but an abandoned cart would be even more suspicious. He would just have to take a chance. But soon he could make out the voices more clearly. It was two of the Duke’s men, sullenly going their rounds. He tried to just keep his gaze down and pass them, but they stopped when they saw him.

“What do we have here...?” one of the men started. “Are you alright boy?”

Ranek swallowed and looked up at them. He hesitated for a moment. “Yes, no problem at all...I just fell asleep and couldn’t get home in time before the rain. But it’s not much further now.”

“Are you sure?” the other man asked. “That hay is pretty much ruined now, why not just leave it until the morning?”

“Oh, no, I couldn’t do that...couldn’t face my, uh, my father if it got stolen,” Ranek tried, getting more and more nervous. Suddenly, his back started cramping, and he realized that he had to put the cart down. But he dropped it too hard, and the bottles made too much noise to be hidden by the rain. The guards instantly grew more hostile. Smuggling spirits was not much better than smuggling potions.

“Is there something else in your cart than the hay there, boy?” one of the men said, his eyes thinning. The other one stepped closer to Ranek, with his hand resting on his blade.

“I, uh, I...” Ranek’s eyes flickered from one guard to the other. His heart was pounding so hard he thought it was going to break his chest. This was do or die. “I just...”

“Just what?” the guard who seemed eager to draw his blade spat out.

“I just...it’s just a bit of apple brew and small work drinks that I wanted to hide from my father. I promise. He drinks too much and...we just get thirsty while working,” Ranek lied so hard his tongue went dry, but it was his only chance.

The guards eyed each other with a suspicious look. “Show us, then,” one of them said, nodding to the cart. Ranek realised he couldn’t decline. So he stepped to the back of the cart and reached in. The guards looked at him closely as he rummaged around, trying to find a bottle that wasn’t clearly from the shelf of a decadent easterner. Finally, he found one that was simple enough, and showed it to them. In the darkness, it looked just like any other drink. With a little luck, they would buy it. “There, you see, simple apple brew.”

Then one of the guards took the bottle from him and uncorked it. Ranek's heart sank, and panic was clawing at his stomach. The guard sniffed the drink and took a swig. For a second Ranek considered just running away. He had no idea what effect that potion would have. Pretty soon, the guard's face twisted into a grimace of confusion.

"This doesn't taste like no apple brew I ever had, boy," he eyed Ranek, and gave the bottle to the other guard, who had a swig too.

"Yeah, this stuff tastes pretty fishy. What sort of foolery is this?"

"Are you pulling our legs boy?" the one guard started drawing his blade. Once again, Ranek started thinking about running for his life.

"I - no - absolutely not! It must have just been a bad bottle, no foolery, I promise!" he tried, backing away from them in case they would try to arrest him.

Suddenly, the guard who was approaching him started swaying and stumbling. He put a hand to his head and slurred something incomprehensible. And then he fell to the ground with a wet thud. The other guard looked at Ranek with confusion, before slowly slumping into a pile on the ground. For a moment, he just stood absolutely still in shock. Then he snapped out of it, and rushed to check the guards. They were both still breathing, luckily. He didn't understand what had happened, but he knew a chance when he saw it. As quickly as he could he dragged their bodies to cover, making sure the poor idiots wouldn't drown in the rain.

Then, he took the cart and pulled for dear life. By the time he got back to his house, his back was almost split in half, and his hands were bleeding. With the last bits of his strength he unloaded the crates into his house, and finally got to shut the door and get out of his soaked clothes. As he was sitting by a crackling fire warming up, he read through the list that the Javenian had given him. Mostly there was just the usual - mending potions, strength increasers, joy drinks...but there were some new ones as well. At the very bottom of the list it simply stated "Sleeping drink - 5 flasks". He took a writing coal, struck out the 5 and wrote a 4, and went to sleep.