

Trial by Fire

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This is one of my slowest works to date, and I figured I'd put it up here. It's an original story with original characters.

Main character is "Alexander", an elf rogue.

I hope you enjoy this!

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1 - Plans

Toying with his staff idly, a green haired elf rogue threaded his way through the crowded streets of Cha'rik. Not bothering to pick any of the pockets of this poor village, he instead opted to pause and check the looks of one of the buildings.

This one seems to be it. But this is hardly what I call a 'fancy' building... he wrinkled his nose in disgust. The building was an odd shade of blue green, but no color that ever flattered such a wide edifice. Not only that, the paint was peeling. Around the building, there were some attempts to beautify—the only thing left was dead trees and brown shrubs.

“Great...the city gambling pit,” the elf sighed, “Let’s see how to work with this—if I’m right, the bouncers should let me in.” he quickly dug a small, tattered piece of paper out of one of his side pouches to reread it. Well, this is Cha’rik, and I suppose this IS the gambling pit, if that sign in front of the door is real. Now...

“Hey, you! Off the premises!”

Whirling around, the slender elf nearly cowered at the sight of a burly bodybuilder who wore a black shirt tucked into a pair of gray canvas trousers. The man, presumably a bouncer, scowls, “Didn’t you hear me? Go on! Get!”

“I was told to come here! M’name’s Alexander!”

With this, the bouncer appeared thoughtful,

“Alexander, eh? There is supposed to be an Alexander coming today,” he examines the elf, “Doesn’t much sound an elfish name, but who am I to decide?” he moves aside, “Go in and upstairs, there’ll be a door to your left. It’s the boss’ private quarters—don’t go in there. The door you want is down the hallway from that one, on the same side.”

Going past him, Alexander opened the door with a final warning in his ears,

“If anything goes missing, there’ll be hell to pay.”

Once inside, the elf paused a second to allow his feline-like eyes to adjust to the dimness of the room. *Uhh, I think I preferred the outside.*

The air was thick with smoke, stinging his eyes like fire blown into them, and also making breathing nearly unbearable. A bitter smell of cheap ale and beer mixed with the smoke to leave a metallic aftertaste in the back of his throat. And the NOISE! Rowdy drunks were starting arguments over a particular card game not two tables away, groups of gamblers were watching this one woman dance, whooping and a hollering.

Trying to stay near the walls, Alexander picked his way around the tables. A narrow stairway was quickly dashed up before he allowed himself to register a claustrophobia inducing terror.

Pleased with himself, he eased the door at the end of the hallway open and peeked inside. A desk sat in the middle of the small room, with a big, comfortable chair (which had its back to the desk and a couple feet propped on the wall) behind it. In front, there was a single smaller chair that looked less comfortable than riding a dragon. Carefully, Alexander eased the well oiled door open and stepped in,

"I got your message. How do you think that I can be of service to you?"

The big chair whirled around, revealing an older man in work clothes. He had a neatly trimmed mustache, and thinning hair on his head, not to mention he certainly was not hard on the eyes.

A shocked look quickly went into a measuring one as this man looked the elf in front of him over. Green hair, tied in a low ponytail, went down to his shoulder blades. Green cat like eyes. Slight in the way elves are, with a rope belt tied over a blue violet tunic at the waist. Gray trousers, simple unadorned leather boots. A quarterstaff lazily was held to his side as the elf leaned against the door, giving every semblance of being calm and relaxed.

Good. If he could keep him so calm, then maybe the whole operation would work. But...

"I thought you used a bow?" the man's low tenor voice asked. Finding that voice pleasing to the ears, especially after that racket downstairs, Alexander smirked,

"I'm capable of that," he closed his eyes, and recited the chant to the latent spell on the staff in his head exactly twice. Beginning to glow with a faint brown light, the writings on it burst into a brilliant yellow color, enveloping the staff.

When the light faded back to brown, and then nothingness, in Alexander's hand was a bow—oddly, or maybe not so odd, it was roughly a third of length as the quarterstaff had been. The elf grinned, a bit tiredly, " 'S that what you wanted?"

Returning the smile, the man chuckles,

"Yes. I'm supposing that you were showing off and can do that without all the bells and whistles?" then he leaned back in his chair, "Have a seat."

Eyeing the chair, Alexander sat on the floor, "So, what do you think I can do for you now? And what was this reward you were speaking of?"

"This," and the man tossed a medium sized pouch of gold to him, "and there are three more where that came from if you succeed in your mission." then the man rubbed his mustache, chuckling as Alexander checked the gold, "I assure you, it's real. Suppose I should introduce myself--"

"You're Mac. It's on the note you gave me," Alexander put the gold back in the pouch, after satisfying himself it was real and that it wouldn't disappear. Then he tucked the pouch into a bag he carried with him, "Now I'm interested...what's the mission?"

"It's quite delicate, and you'll be using your bow more than anything," this was said with a slight frown at the staff, "You'll be acquiring some information for us. But, first thing's first. You must take a little 'test'," Mac put his palms on the desk and half rose, "To see if you're fit for the job, of course."

Scowling a bit, Alexander wonders if he ought to take what he had and run. The note had made no mention of a test...but still...there were three other pouches of gold waiting in case he got this information...

And on the other hand, he had no idea where he was supposed to go or how he was supposed to do anything. Then if he wasn't to succeed, he could have his hands cut off--at the MINOR part of the scale.

Then it wasn't helping matters any that Mac was standing like that. Made him feel like he was just some kind of bait.

Mac's hand moved to the back of the desk, making Alexander touch his knife on his belt defensively. But no, Mac was just getting a drink from somewhere.

That silent hesitation was NOT good, this Mac knew for a fact. And he knew it double when the elf had reached for his knife when he himself was getting a sip of his ale. Drastic times call for drastic measures..."Need I remind you that there is more gold, and then whatever you can get from the place?"

Finally, Alexander nodded. "Fine. It would be a waste of time to come here if I wasn't going to do anything," he adds suspiciously, "What is this test?"

"You will break into here at 12:45 tonight. My bouncers will be guarding the place. You'll be coming here."

"HOLD ON," Alexander held up his hand, "Break in, when you people are EXPECTING it? What's the sense of that?! That's just ASKING for me to be caught!"

Mac smiles,

"Well, if you can break in when we're expecting you, think of what you can do if someone's NOT. Are you going to be here or not?"

Blowing out a breath, the elf looks at the writings on his quarterstaff in irritation. Not only was he walking into an already failed mission--why else would there be so much money in it?--he was going to have to take a test to even get to his death. Which was going to fail, because they would be expecting him. That would mean all windows and doors would be blocked!

He closes his eyes for a second and thinks, *Well, I always say that I'm not going to be too careful in life to arrive safely at death...Looks like this one's going to have to be one of those times.*

Intently watching those green eyes open, Mac asks, "Will you be here?"

"Yes."

"Then I'll see you at 12:45. Leave so you can plan your attack."

2 - Test

Hidden in one of the so called bushes of that gambling den, Alexander stuck his knife back on his belt as he turned his staff to the bow. A bag containing arrows was slung over his back, as went the bow for ease of movement. He'd chosen a darker shade of blue purple for his tunic, and his gray trousers were lighter so as to emulate the shadows and light for inside the gambling den.

Well, here goes nothing... he eased to the door, and carefully tested the knob. Locked like he expected...well, time for drastic measures. Taking his knife, he carefully whittled the door frame away from the knob. When he had enough room, he turned his attention to the wood near the latch.

Holding the knob so the door wouldn't swing open, he picked up a piece of rope that was near his feet and uncoiled about a foot of it. This he wrapped around the nearby bush, keeping one hand on the doorknob. He tied the other end to the doorknob and slipped inside, praying that he had measured the length right as he hid under one of the tables.

The door didn't even creak. Perfect.

Alexander struggled to keep his elation down to a simmer, but that didn't keep the pleased smirk from his face. Of course, for every GOOD thing that happens, there is about three bad. And that three bad took the form of three bouncers. One by the stairwell, one by the right most wall--and one sitting at the table that Alexander had happened to duck under.

"Sheez, I wish that elf would get here where I can go to bed...can you believe we don't get paid extra for this?" the one above Alexander muttered.

"Yeah, well, what do you expect?" the one by the stairwell yawned, "I think he's already here, to tell the truth." a scraping sound, as if a blade was drawn from its scabbard, "I'm not going to give him a chance to get hisself killed by those people. Just end it for him quick."

"Ryin, that's murder!" the bouncer sitting at the table jumped up, to get greeted with a cool,

"And what the boss is doing isn't? How many people have died?"

"Only three."

"The boss has only TRIED three," Ryin shakes his head, then looks at the other two, "Let's spare this one. He'll only be cut in half, and left for the crows as he dies," he then taps the sword on the dusty floor, "No...I'll just run him through. It'll be clean, and he'll get a burial."

"Why do you care? There's a reason that the boss is getting the scum of the earth to do this!" the bouncer at the right wall shrugged, "There's plenty of them, and it saves the town from another thief. Not to mention that the courts won't get paid for executions, if they fail."

"So," the third bouncer sat back down, and reclined, "you're saying that thieves don't realize the dangers of their antics?" as an afterthought, "We could be counting the money, he has to come through the door."

Crouching under the bar area, where he'd went while the bouncers were occupied, Alexander shivered. Hadn't even started and there were people after his blood! He closed his eyes, willing his slight tremor away as he eased closer to the stairwell.

Ryin hadn't moved, Alexander noted with a slight frown. Half turning around, he dug through his pack. *No, don't want a smoke crystal. Cursed book won't help here--why'd I bring it! Dangit, where's my blue-flame rock?*

As he tried to find his rock, tiny pinpricks touched his back, causing him to draw a hissing breath and freeze. *Oh no...nonono...I don't want to die yet, I'm only twenty!!* he closed his eyes tightly, waiting for the burn of the blade through his heart.

The needles removed themselves, and he stands up.

After waiting for a near eternity while nothing happens, he slowly released the breath he had been holding. Trembling, he eases his eyes open--pupils dilated to their fullest and his heart running a marathon.

"Ttthhrr," a trill came from beside Alexander's feet, and something winds its way around his legs. Blinking, he looks down and sees a fuzzy, light gray cat with a black tail and ear look up at him, before it rubs his leg with its cheek.

He looks at the bouncers, who had dragged a safe from an indentation in a wall and had opened it. They were watching the one that was counting the money, not even paying attention to anything else.

Ducking back down, he glares at the cat and whispers harshly while scratching its head, "Are you trying to get me caught, you fuzzball! What are you even doing in here??" he closes his eyes in embarrassed relief, and then pushes the cat out of his bag, "You sound like a windmill, be quiet." he pauses a second, narrowing his eyes and feeding the cat a tidbit of meat. He then slung the rest over the bar.

The cat bounds over the bar and skids on a table, chasing the food. The money, which had been in neat little piles, scattered as if living prey.

"Where the hell did you come from!!" a bouncer yells as he tried to catch flying money. The other two begin to pick up money, as Alexander slinks upstairs. He bolts to Mac's office, and opens the door.

3 - Midnight Meet

Twisting the knob to open the door, Alexander takes his bow and pushes it the rest of the way open.

"Ah. Glad to see you made it. You've passed your test, I believe." Mac nods, a strange smile on his face. Glaring at him sourly, Alexander demands,

"Give me my money."

"Pardon?"

"I know a dark deal when I hear about it! Give me my money and find someone else to kill!" the rogue drew an arrow from his quiver and nocked it, "Give me my money, or this place will need a new boss."

Mac half rose, startled,

"N-now now...don't get excited!" he slowly reaches for a desk drawer. Alexander narrows his eyes and in a blaze of light his arrow forms a translucent, shifting glaze on it,

"Sour move gets frozen for life. Bad move just gets killed. Choose wisely."

"Just calm down. You asked for your money, didn't you?" Mac carefully holds up his hand--in which he now had a pouch, "Full of gold, half the price I promised you earlier--"

The glaze on the arrow shifted to be an aura of shifting greens and golds. "Why not all of it?" Alexander demanded harshly. Mac smoothly continued,

"We had a slight emergency, and one of the bouncers quit. He made me pay him everything."

"I don't CARE!" the young elf hissed through his teeth, with a faint trace of madness in his eyes, "Give me the money or your life..."

Changing his earlier plan, the boss man quickly did as he'd been told and opened all the drawers to the desk. Every scrap of silver, and every bit of paper money found its way to the desk and Mac quickly jumped away.

"I assure you...there's no murder intended. Just because the last group of people didn't make it doesn't mean it's murder. The last people died of their own foolishness, greed, and ignorance. If they'd stuck to the task at hand, instead of fooling around with whatever walked, they'd still be alive today."

His soothing tone seemed to have a slight effect on the elf's taugth nerves,

"It's their own fault?" the catlike pupils dilated again, covering his green eyes with darkness, "Yes, always blame the victims--after all, who can argue back?"

The arrows were down again...Soundlessly, where he wouldn't startle them back up, Mac walked to his desk and took a sheet of paper out of the middle drawer. "This is what was found after they died. The

first one he tried to lay up with someone's daughter, and the someone was NOT pleased. Here, read for yourself." he holds it out.

Not releasing hold on his guard, Alexander hesitantly reached out for the paper and took it. Only after glancing in Mac's direction, and positioning himself where he could see from the corner of his eye did he look down at the paper.

After a few seconds, the elf looked back up with a shadow of a smirk, "Fools to them. Well..." he trailed off, and cleared his throat, "I suppose I COULD do this...but you'll have to pay me again..."

"Of course, of course. That's an obvious thing, after such a fright. Now, it's late. Go get some rest, and I'll contact you as soon as I can get some more information on what you should do." Mac ordered, and scowled as the elf just stood there with the paper, "What now?"

"The money. Have it sent to the riverbank early tomorrow afternoon. I'll be there." Alexander turns on his heel--and turns back around, "I'll have free access back down won't I?"

"Naturally."

Stepping from the door into the slight chill of night, Alexander studied the paper in his hands. Yes, it did give him answers--coroner's answers--to the three deaths before him. And yes, it gave GOOD answers too.

He frowned. That was the problem. The answers were too good; too clear cut for the types of deaths those three had suffered. After all, if he'd had a wife and children, Alexander would have been sure not to leave anything short of bloody murder if he'd found someone sleeping with his daughter!

That the man had been found with bruises around his throat and a broken neck also set it a touch odd. You're bound to have some kind of weapon at your own home, why just settle for bare hands? Even a candle holder could be used in his own experience...

Better to not think of that though, keep his mind on this puzzle instead of the past.

Alexander realized with a guilty start that he was still standing outside the gambling den, so he began a stroll down the center of town. Besides, he reasoned, who else was gonna be up that early in the morning when there was trading and farming to do tomorrow? Surely not anyone that was interested in a coroner's records.

Back to the studying. Victim number two had tried to garnish a little too much pay from someone he had supposed to have been working for. He'd been found with both legs stabbed ridiculously too much, both arms nearly torn from his shoulders, and a noose around his neck.

Next guy murdered--the name gave Alexander a bit more than a pause. After a second or two's hesitation, the elf swore under his breath,

"They...I'd wondered where the old scat went..."

Forcing the swirl of dizziness down, he read that Shey had also been the victim of his own greed and want. Shey had decided that his ego had taken too much of a bruising for some reason or other, and had attacked the murderer in a drunken, red blurred frenzy. He'd been slit in the throat and left to rot. That sounded like him...but just an ego bruising? Usually Shey would give as he'd gotten. But then he didn't drink...Never when the two were 'traveling companions' and prospective victims for the other in a teasing game designed to keep both in top form...

Don't think of that right now, other things to tend to. Alexander stopped by a tree stump out of the way of the road and sat on it, absently.

Something else, he realized as he read over how the other two died. The other two appeared at first glance to have been done by different people...but it was odd in his mind that all three had something wrong with their neck in some fashion. Probably nothing really...

He'd study again after he got some rest, it WAS past the usual time when he settled down for a night.

4 - Dream Memory

"All right kid, listen up!" a tenor's voice, that had been ruined by many years of screaming at the top of its abilities, drew Alexander to looking at the owner of the voice. The human grinned, "You were off in fantasy land again, elf. Is that a common thing for your race?" a sneer replaced the grin. Alexander rolled his eyes,

"Funny a human accuses ME of going into a fantasy land..."

"Heh," another grin replaced the sneer, "You get sharper every day kid. But you better not take to swiping from me! You may be quick, but you're not quicker than my eyes, boy! So then, you were paying attention. What were we planning to do?"

"Ah..." Alexander blinked, and his green irises were slightly covered by black pupil, "We were going to go into the next town, Th'reha, and get some of those jewels from the middle of the statue. You're going to cause a fight and I'm going to pry the jewels off there," he then sighs, "But what were you gonna do with them after I get em? Shey, everyone knows they belong there."

The elf looks up expectantly at the human, who turned his back to pace a few steps away like he always did when there were too many questions and he was trying to decide how and what to answer. And as usual, Alexander studied him.

Shey looked slow, he moved slow, and sometimes he acted slow. Not to mention he was the ugliest thing that anyone in the southeastern side of Natlmr had ever seen. Teeth that would look more at home in a mule's mouth, a lazy eye that seemed to look at one of the WORST spots to look at a person...then that's not counting the whole body structure.

But then as the saying goes, looks are often deceiving and that was no different for Shey. Put him in a situation that warranted it, and he could throw knives through a person faster than it took them to even aim a weapon or spell. And his strength was completely unexpected in the middle of a brawl, that first impression would be thrown out the window.

Alexander would know this, because he'd watched Shey long before he thought the human knew of him—and once or twice he'd been the object Shey was fighting for. He'd have to remember to ask him to teach about those knives, Alexander KNEW he was fast enough for that. Just had to learn the skill...Green eyes looked up at Shey's stiffening shoulders and the elf braced himself for a 'pick and choose' explanation.

"All right kid. Everyone knows about the jewels and where they're supposed to be. Meaning that news will travel fast, correct?"

"Yes. Of course! There's no way we could get them off us."

"Wrong. We don't," Shey looked Alexander up and down, "Nothing says we have to be rid of them. Just because we place things don't mean that we lose them immediately. Don't ask, I won't tell you." he

smirked, seeing the elf draw an exasperated breath and mildly added, "Plus we went over this last night. You didn't pay attention?"

"Why are you so interested in that? You're TRYING to catch me!"

The open defiance in the boy's stance drew a laugh from Shey, "Perhaps because you catch yourself! So, not paying attention twice and trying to lie your way out of it...I get a third of your cut."

*Alexander shot him a glare,
"I want to strike you twelve feet under."*

"Then I'll be happy you can't," Shey said, in a patronizing tone of voice. He then smirks and musses the green mop of hair on Alexander's head, "Not too fast for me elf boy. Not too fast at all. Let's get a stab at those jewels now, Th'reha awaits!"

5 - Day 2

As the sun rose over the eastern mountains, a red breasted skybird chirped merrily. It landed near Alexander, who was still asleep, and pecked at the ground. When it swallowed it's breakfast, a cheerful bout of song followed.

Suddenly a fox rushed out at the bird, and tried to pin it to the ground with a half leap. With a loud scream, the skybird fluttered up to the branch of a tree, and kept scolding the fox, which had only a mouthful of green and blue feathers.

Discouraged that it couldn't catch it's meal the fox trots off, muscles rippling under the greyish red fur—but wait a MINUTE! It sniffed the air, and tracked the ground. Well, WHO in the world would leave a bag sitting at the base of a bush like that? And more importantly...is that where that intriguing smell was coming from?

A quick once over sniff of this brownish leather bag affirmed the first thought...there is most definitely some breakfast in there. The fox pawed at the middle of the bag, trying to figure out how to get into it. That didn't work, so it stuck its nose in the fold of the flap closest to the back and nudged a little. Aha! There it went...now if only that cursed bird would quiet down!

Alexander covered his ears with his hands. First he'd had some uneasy sleep because of his dreams of memories that he'd much rather stayed buried, then that BIRD started! He muttered under his breath, "Go sing somewhere else!"

This made the bird sing louder, if that could be possible. Sighing, Alexander opened his eyes—and was struck blind by the morning sunlight. Narrowing his eyes against that, he sat up, exasperated, "Alright, alright! I'm awake, whatever that matters to you bird, shut up now!!"

The skybird just looked at him, and decided that elves were ungrateful creatures. But that fox had tried to kill her, so...she started singing an alarm again.

"Can't ya see that I'm awake?? Sheez!!" Alexander rubbed his eyes to get the sun glare out of them, and after his vision cleared, "Hey! Get out of my bag, you cursed fox!!" he leaped up from his sitting position and grabbed his staff.

Uh oh, time's up, free breakfast is over! The fox darted away, still carrying a mouthful of grapes that Alexander had stored, the elf chasing after a few steps.

He knelt down by his bag and checked the damage. "I didn't say I'd share this with anyone! It was folded down, how did that thing get into this!" Rubbing his eyes again, he scowled, "Bird, why didn't you tell me instead of letting him get into my supplies!"

This drew an insulted warble from the sunbird. How nasty was this kid? She HAD told him that something was in his bag! Puffing her feathers to the point of looking like a ball of fluff, she just flew off.

Alexander cursed the morning. He cursed the moon and stars and all their children. He cursed the bird, and the fox. He cursed the bag for not being fox proof!

Nature breathed a sigh of relief; the elf had just gotten up so his magical blood didn't have time to warm up. But he needed calmed down someway, so the goddesses and gods of the land did what they always did—reminded him that it was his fault for not remembering lessons past in the form of something said by Shey.

This made him even more furious. Not only was his own fault, the past **WOULD NOT** stay in the past! So he lit a tiny ball of flame in his hand to watch the erratic flare outs. A not so common trick he'd learned, if he was angry at something he could control his temper and have a visible measure of how calm he was becoming if he took the time to watch his fire. *Besides*, he thought, eyeing the stream nearby, *no danger of losing control of it here. Don't matter how uncontrolled it gets, it's still fire and it STILL has to obey the laws of nature.*

As he watched the flame, it occurred to him that a game would be more worth his time and concentrated on that. First, that craziest flare would have to go.

Leaning against his tree after a sketchy wash off that could be called a bath, Alexander looked outward at the village he was in the day before and examined it. He watched the guards at the outside of the wall checking people's backgrounds and making sure they didn't carry too much of a certain product in. This brought a weary sigh from the elf, as he glanced over the wall at the tavern. The tavern was also the inn at Cha'rik, and they looked like they were already getting set for the day's business as they accepted certain drinks and foods through their doors, while turning away others.

Not many other places seemed open, other than the baker's and that wouldn't be open to the public for a few hours yet...definitely not the gambling den, which he could just about pick out behind the church building. Alexander wasn't about to go poke his nose around there until he got his money delivered this afternoon to the riverbank that he could conveniently see from his uphill camp. And well, if Mac decided to not pay him again, he got half the payment anyway and could just disappear. Though that would be a pity, a part of him really wanted to go on that adventure—no telling what all he could get from the unsuspecting people on THAT trip!

It suddenly occurred to him to wonder if Cha'rik was a village or a town. Villages didn't usually have gambling dens, and the farming areas were a bit out of the main cluster of buildings...though he had to question the intelligence of building a town in a valley, didn't it flood?

Before he got too far into that line of thought, tiny figures at the mouth of the stream caught his eye. A wiry fellow with grey hair took a few steps to the left of the water, and then started walking heel-to-toe as if he was measuring, under instruction from another dusky haired guy that was looking at a tattered paper.

The wiry one stopped after a few steps and, if his body language was any indication, he looked like he was questioning. An irritated hiss reached Alexander's ears,

"Tellin'...not...side!"

“Elcerth said...” a calm voice came from the brown haired one, “...wrong and astray?”

Well, that's an interesting response! Alexander thought, surprised at the reaction from the wiry guy. The poor thing had gone so far as to step backward and openly cower, closing his eyes from some unseen fright, *And here I thought that he could fight his way out of a tavern with both hands behind him! Who's Elcerth? And what about him brings so much terror?*

That glance toward the dusty haired man required a second look. The man didn't look much older than himself—and Alexander knew that he himself didn't look too intimidating but this guy, he looked like someone you'd see at home with kids, not standing there looking like he was about to kill the other.

After a few minute stare down, the wiry fellow shook his head and located a cleverly hidden shovel.

“Here?” at a nod from his companion, he began digging. Watching this intently, his cat's pupils dilated wide, the elf drew himself a small knife...if they were digging up some kind of money or something that this “Elcerth” had hidden, he had all intentions of causing trouble.

He idly considered a few spells to use in case he needed to escape, as he eyed the area. *Let's see...there's the stream I could run down if I failed and if I had the nettles in the area shoot out their spines in my wake, I don't think they could follow me well enough. Then there's the hill. Could stay uphill the whole time. Hmm...don't want to lead them here, Mr. “Elcerth” would be more than happy to send them after me.*

His eyes lit up a bit as the two he watched lifted a box from the ground...then he scowled disappointed as they lifted out a book from the box. Why such a giant box for that little thing! It couldn't be more than a little journal—if that! What a waste of effort on their part!

“This can't be right!” the wiry one exclaimed, loud enough to be heard clearly, “We were told to find his...” here, the brown haired one smiled calmly,

“It is, it is. Why would he bury something as unimportant as his monies? He has GUARDS to take care of THAT! No. This is far more important than anything that glimmers...” his voice became too quiet for Alexander to hear.

The elf didn't mind though. After all, a book wasn't anything for him to waste his time on. *And it'll be my luck that it's just a cookbook for Elcerth's wife. Women are possessive of the oddest things!*

Just then, the brown haired fellow opened the book in his left hand and traced a circle in the air with his right.

WOW! Alexander couldn't help but stare at the pink and green flare that sparked to life from the guy's hand, and that faded while dancing to its own silent and slow tune, *That's a spell! Book ain't no cookbook, it's a spellbook! Is this Elcerth a MAGE??*

Human magic always had intrigued Alexander. How was it that a creature with no magic in its blood could learn spells like they do? A faint memory remembered asking his parents how humans did something like that, but the only answer he'd gotten was a gruff mutter about filthy half breeds. Which didn't make any sense to his seven year old mind, and it still didn't make any sense to his twenty year old mind now.

Those humans began burying the empty box again, and the quiet *ssshhhing* of the dirt over the wood brought Alexander back from thought. He sighed, too bad he was waiting on that pay from Mac...he'd go check out this Elcerth person.

Ol' brown hair was showing off for the benefit of the wiry guy, Alexander noticed when he glanced back down toward them. Currently it was a rushing "stream" of gold threads that carried a brilliantly colored and slightly translucent ship. The ship delicately took wing while sprouting thin, pearly wings as the stream coiled into itself and disappeared.

The ship had other plans, however, and it gently lengthened out until it was the width of a tiny, new twig. As it stood itself upright, roots began growing from the bottom of it. Faint green color took over the brilliance of before and pushed upward until the tip, where a pink blossom opened.

As the blossom rewound time back until it was a seed and faded, both the wiry guy and Alexander gave a satisfied sigh. That one had wound down perfectly, and the brown haired guy didn't even know he'd captivated an elf with his spell. If he had, surely his ego would have been full to the bursting point; elves were the bringers of the magics that humans used and to impress one of those was to be akin to a master of the art!

With a grin, he asked his partner a question. Said partner just nodded, with a bright smile.

"Worth...digging," he had spoken decisively, and a lot more cheerfully than he'd been when they had begun searching, "...take it...Elcerth now?"

The elf watched as the sandy haired guy nodded, and as the two walked off. Well! What a show! And to think he was about to steal something from them! *Not that THAT makes any difference, I'd have done it anyway...* he amended quickly, with a cheerful tone to his thoughts, *That little magic show didn't make no difference at all, no it didn't!*

...I wonder how long it took him to learn to be that good?