

Chapter 1 - Delivery

A stiff wind blew down the long street of Aldarni on a crisp spring day. Cars clattered along the old stone road and the crowds stream past the slight man standing in the doorway of a boarded up old bookshop. This man would have once been considered a great man but now he is simply a criminal. This man, Vance, is a wizard.

You wouldn't know this by looking at him. There was no long grey beard only a face covered in three days worth of black stubble, a cigarette clasped between his teeth . No flowing robes but he wore his favourite thigh length blue coat, white dress shirt, grey trousers and vest. He was patting himself down looking for a pack of matches. Each pocket patted down found a different small notebook all a different size and shape to the one in the previous pocket, many small books are needed in this wizard's world as it make it obvious that you're a wizard when you carry around a huge leather bound tome. Each books contents were different and extremely mundane to anyone who didn't know what they were looking for. They were encoded to hide their true magical contents. A handgun was slung in a holster from his left shoulder. A simple question to ask in this instance would be to what Vance's crime is, the answer is also simple, as being a wizard is illegal here.

A slight cough escaped his lips and he ran a hand through his short tightly curled black hair, obviously he had forgotten to bring matches. Vance lent forward casting a keen green eye up and down the street looking for the cobalt hats of Aldarni's constables, not seeing any and with another slight cough, he turned his back on the street huddling into the enclave. He muttered a simple incantation under his breath and with a flick of thumb against fore knuckle a small flame began to flicker above his thumb which ignited the cigarette. Then with a quick flick of the wrist it winked out at his command. He inhaled deeply, let out a deep sigh and looked down the street one more time this time looking for the courier who was meant to be coming. He pulled out his small silver pocket watch and found they were five minutes late.

Aldarni was considered by most to be a vibrant idealist modern city. The ones who said this would point out all of the tall buildings and the streets wide enough for two carriages or automobiles. The people were a mishmash of different cultures and ethnicities. It was only through speaking with someone that you would know their origin as the people of the world had been intermingled longer than even written memory. The problem with this view was it ignored a good many things.

“Mr Vance?” A young voice at his elbow asked, Vance closed the watch and looked down at the young boy a brown paper wrapped package clutched to his chest. In most instances he would have corrected the boy. Vance was not his family name or even the name he had been given by his parents it was his chosen name and he had made the decision to just choose one name to cut out the formality, it had had the opposite effect in most instances. Vance nodded in response and the young boy handed him the small package, Vance paid him two silver coins and a grin split the boy’s face as he turned and ran down the street. As soon as the boy was out of sight Vance checked the package, not opening it but looking along every seam to make sure it had not been tampered with.

Vance had been waiting a good while to get his hands on the book the package was meant to contain and the Delmonie’s had finally been able to obtain and delivery a copy to him in leu of a cash payment for a job. Vance glanced down the road in the direction the boy went and then tucked the package under his arm beneath his coat and headed in the other direction in order to get home. The boy had actually ran in the direction Vance normally would have gone so he wanted to be careful. Just

because the package hadn't been tampered with visually didn't mean anything.

The streets were bustling but not packed at this time of day, though this may have been assisted by the fact that most people were at work. A large number of buildings in this area were boarded up as they had once been used by different kinds of wizards and alchemists, used for supplies and to provide crafts. On roughly every second building was a poster or two, telling those who looked at them of the evils of wizards and all things magic. "He who speaks with a devil's voice is a threat to us all, report any wizards to the protectors in blue" was one such example. Vance didn't look at them as he walked past.

He kept an eye out on his way to make sure he wasn't followed, the path home was not a direct route by any description, zig zagging back and forth, ducking in and out of alleyways. It was a fine balance to keep an eye out for anyone following him while not looking suspicious. Once he was confident he was not being followed he finally headed home. It would be mid afternoon by the time he got there.



Home in this instance was on the second floor of a small second-hand bookstore, 'Good-Natured Novels', it was mostly full of garbage. Mrs Hewitt -the store's owner-rented the flat for a reasonable rate and luckily didn't ask too many questions about the strange sounds that sometimes came from upstairs, she also collected the mail which was nice, it was simply too bad about the woman herself. Vance allowed the cigarette butt to fall from his mouth and then stamped the ashes out with his boot toe and cast a quick spell to dispel the smell of the smoke, it was simply less effort. Vance's arrival was announced by the small bell above the door, the sound made his jaw clench.

“Ah, Mr Vance” Mrs Hewitt's voice was not shrill like a whistle or sharp at all, yet somehow it still seemed to grate him as though he were a piece of cheese. Mrs Hewitt was a skinny woman around the age of sixty, her hair was grey streaked with black and always pulled into a low bun. Her face had more frown lines than smile lines. As always she wore a navy blue dress that looked as though it would strangle her, and a dark brown wool cardigan that made Vance itch just looking at it.

“We have been over this Mrs Hewitt, just Vance is fine”
Vance’s reply was what he always said, she never listened.

“Yes, we have and I have told you that a lady should not address a bachelor in such a way.” her tone was imperious without any need, as though she were speaking to a child.

“It just seems redundant to provide a title while using my given name. Any mail?” Vance retorted changing the subject to something that wouldn’t give her leverage to pry.

“Yes actually some mail arrived for you today, quite a few letters actually and just so you know the one that’s open was open when I picked them up. I don’t know why you would want to receive mail from that awful man. But we have established that you don’t want to talk about your uncle” the man wasn’t Vance’s uncle but the previous archmage of the city -and Vance’s teacher- who was currently living in exile. Mail from him was always checked. There were many people outlining the ‘evils’ of wizards and all things linked to magic, Mrs Hewitt was one of the worst kind of these. The fifteenth proclamation had only been in place for five years but most people seems to have forgotten all the good that

wizards and magic had done for them, or quite simply they chose not to speak of it

“Thank you Mrs Hewitt. I'm just going to head up stairs to do some work” Vance took the small pile of mail quickly from the desk, and started heading to the back of the store to the small staircase to his flat. Mrs Hewitt called out asking what work that would be, he didn't respond. She was always trying to find out what work he did, he always made sure to deflect the question. Normally saying he did freelance work, she assumed that meant writing. He let her go on thinking that way. This is because although writers may be looked down on in some circles, doing freelance magical work was a different matter. His work was mostly for criminals but when what you do is illegal, you can't be too picky about who you work for.

At the back of the bookshop was a door that led to an external stairwell, he normally went through the store in order to pick up any mail or get any news. The mail today was mostly bills, a few letters from contacts in other regions, the letter from his teacher and a notice from the bureau of magical management. The notice was for another inspection in a weeks' time, apparently the letters to his master has raised their suspicions that he was actually a practitioner. The inspections were always

painful as you needed to prove your innocence, the inspectors didn't really know what they were looking for which made things a little easier.

As Vance climbed the staircase he drew out the door key with his free hand. Reaching the door he saw a flash as a cat appeared at the window next to the door and greeted him with a meow, Vance sighed in response. As the door opened the cat was already there, smaller than average with fluffy black fur except for the tail which faded to a light brown at the tip of the tail. It gave another excited meow.

“Yes, hello Tallow” Vance said in greeting as he stepped over the cat who tried to rub against his leg. Vance knew that Tallow was here, they lived together and got on quite well. The problem was that Tallow insisted on acting as though it was an actual cat, even though it wasn't.

Did you procure me any fish?

The voice that entered Vance's head was not his own, it was smooth as silk and always polite. Tallow was actually a spirit bound in a body of concentrated magic energy, realistically he could manipulate himself into any form of roughly the same size but insisted on being a cat.

Tallow was able to communicate telepathically at a short distance, it was also able to vanish and reappear in an instant to an extent that would make any actual cat jealous as it did not need to move between the two points. Vance closed the door and walked to his desk where Tallow already sat in a small box specifically there to keep it from sitting on a book and demanding to be petted.

“No, I didn't get you any fish, we've been over this you don't need food as you don't need to eat. Therefore I don't know why I should spend my money on food that does not go to any use” Vance sat the package down on the desk along with the letters.

I am well aware I do not require sustenance, I simply revel in the experience and taste. As well I do believe that it may be considered peculiar by others that you do not feed your feline companion.

“Tallow if someone comes here who does not know what you actually are, then I will make sure to give you some food to keep the illusion that you are actually a cat. But seeing as how that is extremely rare I won't be worrying about it for a while. Plus I really don't have the money to buy fish even for myself, if this is the wrong book or doesn't have the information I'm after then I'm going to

regret not taking money. When I have money for fish though I will give you some, okay?” Vance was rambling, he did that when he began to worry.

Tallow then started to purr happily at the prospect of getting fish. Vance began to examine the seams of the package to check for any tampering, he then drew a letter opener along each of the seams and then cut the small string that wrapped and held the paper wrapping closed. Nothing happened, Vance exhaled a breath he had forgotten he was holding. He removed the wrapping and saw the book he had been searching for over the last few months “Aiakos Damora’s treatise on the histories, magics and artefacts of Taralvor volume 2”, Vance did not understand why the author had chosen such a long title.

So, your researched has deduced that this tome contains information about the codex of which you seek?

“Yes, Aiakos Damora was an expert on magical items several centuries ago. I have the knowledge that he researched the codices of the world and so hopefully we will be able to figure out a way to find them. If we're lucky, at the very least it will be a good read.” Vance began to flip through the tome carefully as a cursory look.

The text was in an extremely cramped hand and was heavily annotated with multiple diagrams and sketches of different objects, creatures and places. As Vance flicked through he found multiple pages were missing, shit. As he reached the last page he discovered a diagram on the reverse of the back cover, it was unlike anything Vance had seen. It took the structure of a summoning circle a large ring on the outside filled with text, but the script was in a language although similar to Arcanum but they were slightly off and the combination of characters was unlike anything you would normally see. At the centre of the diagram was a circle intersected by two smaller circles that did not touch in the middle, eight semi-circles connect to the outer ring, each containing a different rune.

“What the hell is thi-“ A loud knock interrupted the question before it could be finished, Vance glanced out the window and could see two men standing there.

“Tallow get off my book. I’m coming one moment”

Vance called out as Tallow curled up on the tome pretending to go to sleep, taking the time to hide the book would be suspicious but a cat sleeping where it shouldn’t, was commonplace.

Standing out on the small landing were two men, both were larger than most. The first seemed friendly enough if you got past the repeatedly broken nose, the second one had a face that gave the idea he only ever ate lemons and other sour things. Burly fellow number two was on the lookout, inspecting everything as though it owed him money, they seemed uneasy. Vance cracked the door.

“Hello gentlemen, can I help you?” Vance’s mind began to reel, it was too soon for the Delmonie’s to want something else. Could they be from another of the major crime families? Or something different.

“You’re uh, Mr Vance right?” Burly Fellow One asked straight to the point leaning in as though a person’s name was some big secret.

“Just Vance is fine, what can I do for you?” Vance reached into his jacket and wrapped his hand around the handle of his handgun, feeling the runes inlaid into the wooden handle.

“We need ya to come with us. To, uh meet our boss” Burly Fellow One was getting rather nervous, neither of them were reaching for weapons but men their size could handle a skinny fellow like Vance.

“Ey Trav, you best be careful. He’s a Slinger, Mr Varadin said we need ta be real polite. Rememba?” Burley Fellow Two finally spoke, seems as though he may actually have been the brains between the two. Kilroy Varadin was the head of the Varadin crime family, a very superstitious man, he didn’t know much of magic and so tried to err on the side of caution..

“Rick! What are ya doin? I thought you weren’t meant to give a Slinger ya name or they’d curse ya!” Burly Fellow One, - Trav- was starting to go into full panic mode now. In the underworld had taken to calling wizards ‘Spell Slingers’ or Slingers for short. The amount of superstitions that arose around Wizards since the fifteenth proclamation came into place was ridiculous. Some of the superstition the Varadin’s gang held were a little odd.

“I’m not going to curse you,” Vance stepped into the conversation, releasing his gun. To be honest he could curse Trav if he wanted to, wouldn’t even need to know his name. Vance addressed Burly Fellow Two -Rick he figured- “So Mr Varadin wishes to speak to me?”

“Uh, that is why he sent us Mr Vance, would ya like to come with us?” Rick gestured down the stairs, down to

the street as they most likely had a car waiting on the street.

“Just Vance please, and I will, just be a moment, need to grab my ... hat” Vance replied before quickly closing the door, the fact that his flat cap was sitting next to the door was not the point. He turned quickly and walked back towards the desk, Tallow moved away quickly knowing Vance’s intent straight away.

So you plan to sequester the tome? Do you really think some vagabond will try to steal it?

Vance simply gave the not-a-cat a flat stare.

I understand now, none of my other masters have been as paranoid as you. Different times I do believe, apologies.

Vance quickly snatched up the tome and hid it underneath a floorboard near the desk, casting a quick enchantment to cover the space. Vance cast an eye quickly across the simple space before turning to the door and ensuring to grab the grey cap from the hat rack by the door. He then followed the two men down the street and to their car.