

Amber and Dain

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Preface: Aureliana

“The purity of living a sorcery-free life is worth the sacrifices,” Timonio preached.

Aureliana wondered why she had agreed to this ridiculous scheme in the first place. She certainly hadn't partnered with Timonio for his sense, intelligence, and imagination. He had other attractive qualities: good looks, charisma, and certain skills. He had come up with this crazy notion that the pure life for a sorcerer was one in which the sorcerer practiced magic only in strictly controlled rituals, and never used magic outside of the ritual.

As one of the most famous sorcerers of history, Aureliana was the last person anyone would expect to buy into his nonsense. It was because of the paintbrushes that she went along with it. In her youth, many centuries ago, she had some skill as a painter. Then the gods had blessed or cursed her with a set of magical paintbrushes and bottomless vials of paint. The magical paintbrushes enhanced her natural talent. Kings and queens, wealthy merchants, and powerful clerics paid a lot of money for her to paint their portraits, and she declined most of them. She had more wealth than she could use. Never again would she need to have the experience of being unable to wholly capture with paint the image in her head.

She missed the frustration. Maybe it was the centuries of age weighing on her mind. She wasn't exactly immortal, but near enough, and maybe it was mortality she missed. Mortality and imperfection. So when Timonio proposed this sorcery-free, or sorcery-controlled, commune, it appealed to her. And it amused her to see him so fervent and passionate. She painted pictures of him often, using only her own natural talent with no enhancements.

But she was tired of it now, and it was completely pointless. Sorcery was a natural act, no different than eating or sleeping. Most of the commune members cheated within a week. The sorcery within couldn't be denied. Aureliana didn't age, but Timonio's good looks weren't looking as good. His charm was not as charming.

She left the commune and went back to her favorite mountain. She built a little homestead high on the mountain and kept a flock of goats. In keeping with the theme of a simple life on the mountainside, she let her body age some. She would take on apprentices and train them not only in the practice of sorcery, but also in her philosophy of sorcery. She refined her technique on dozens of apprentices. Every apprentice was different. What worked with one didn't necessarily work with another. She sought out the most challenging cases, always looking for a unique student who would require a completely different approach than she'd ever used before.

Her students were almost without exception highly successful, renowned sorcerers.

Dromeda turned out to be a mistress of deceit. Dromeda would never be an exceptional sorcerer, but if she could claim to have studied under the great Aureliana, she could play the part. When Aureliana discovered she'd been duped, she made sure of Dromeda's reputation.

Sonina and Jabon were simply not very talented sorcerers. She took them on as an experiment. To what extent was sorcery innate and how much could it be trained? Both components were essential. People were either born with the ability to do sorcery or not. And people who never learned to control their sorcery either died violently or people around them died violently.

Lapath was one of her favorite challenges. Many sorcerers had despaired of ever teaching her control. Aureliana succeeded where they had failed. And then Lapath chose to settle down and have an entire village worth of children. Lapath used her sorcery to clean the kitchen and change diapers. Aureliana was never quite sure whether Lapath counted as her best success, or as one of her failures. Lapath claimed that the fine control required to use sorcery for such mundane

tasks, while at the same time listening to the distraction of crying babies and whining toddlers, was the most difficult skill she had ever learned.

One day an elf came to see her.

“I want to start a school for troubled young sorcerers,” he announced.

“There are three schools in this kingdom that train sorcerers. And hundreds of masters to apprentice with,” Aureliana objected.

“The schools are very competitive. It’s up to the student to overcome his or her background. It’s very difficult to find a suitable apprentice-master match, and then the apprentice is at the mercy of the master for so many years. So many sorcerers have rough starts. The nature of their talent creates strain in a family and a community. My school would take in the most troubled sorcerers and train them with kindness and compassion. I want to do what you’ve been doing with your apprentices, but for the non-exceptional sorcerers, the ones who can become good sorcerers but who aren’t going to invent spells that are named after them.”

She was speaking to an elf, so she did not bother to speak of patience. It would be decades before his school was what he envisioned. “It’s a worthwhile cause,” she agreed. She could fund it in its entirety, they both knew. But he would have to prove his idea to her first.

“I’m not here just for your money,” he said, “although the school will need funding too. I want you to teach in my school.”

“Absolutely not,” she said emphatically. “Take my money, go pick out some land and build a school, and leave me alone.”

He grinned cheekily. “It was worth a try.”

“Yes, and it also made me happy to be free of you for mere gold. I’m sure that was your plan all along.”

“You see right through me.”

“Fierguld,” she added, “spare no expense on the location or the building. There’s plenty of gold. In two centuries you’ll regret trying to save money at the beginning.”

For her part, she continued to train one or two sorcerers at a time into something to be proud of. She had reached an age that few others reached, even elves. Much older, and other so-called immortals either became undead or gods. She had no interest in either path. The third option had its appeal.

It had been a few years since her last apprentice had gone his own way to seek his destiny. Maybe it was time to go now, to let the mortal flesh fall away. What was she waiting for? She always said she wanted one apprentice who didn’t respond to any of her usual methods, one apprentice who would pose a challenge to her training techniques. Maybe she had figured them all out. Maybe there wasn’t anyone like that.

She didn’t travel anymore. She could if she wanted to. There were plenty of people who could do that for her, such as her daughter, and the headmaster of that new school. (It wasn’t new at all anymore.) She had given them all strict criteria to look for. They had sent her one or two students here and there. Lately, she had rejected them almost as soon as meeting them. There was no one new anymore. Everyone, it seemed, was a repeat of the same few people she had known.

Then a lone dwarf climbed the mountain, undaunted by the tales she had spread about her dragon ancestry (partly true) and her voracious appetite for flesh of intelligent races (not at all true. It did taste like chicken.)

She knew the moment she saw him that the young dwarf would be her last student. He was the unique challenge she'd been seeking. When she finished training him, she decided, it would be time to die at last.

Part 1: Amber

Chapter 1: Crusher leaves home to seek adventure

Instructor Marissa cautiously looked in Instructor Dain's classroom. It didn't do to startle him, or to assume that his latest experiment might not shoot flames at the doorway. Marissa sometimes suspected his close calls were not entirely accidental, as they tended to happen when he didn't want to speak to the intruder. She was certain he would not welcome an interruption for the sake of a staff meeting. He viewed staff meetings, everyone knew, as an utter waste of time.

He was not in the middle of an experiment. He was perched on a high stool at his laboratory bench, studying an ancient tome. The book looked like it might fall apart, and he handled it gingerly.

"Dain," she called quietly. She waited a moment until he looked up. His expression was focused and intense. Whatever he was studying fascinated him. "I'm sorry to disturb you. Staff meeting." His face fell into an expression of such dismay and sadness that was almost comical. She smiled. "I think Charity brought cupcakes."

"Cupcakes," he sneered. Nonetheless, she knew he would eat his share, and then some. They walked down the hall together. She walked slowly, otherwise her long elf legs would quickly outdistance his short dwarf legs.

Two dozen instructors already sat around the large table, waiting for Marissa to return with Dain. Headmaster Fierguld stood at the head of the table holding a sheaf of papers. He cleared his throat and waited for Dain to take two cupcakes and find a seat next to Marissa.

The staff meeting didn't hold Dain's attention as he munched a cupcake. His mind quickly wandered back to the book he had been studying. It was an original notebook of Tomar the Brilliant, and the passage he was studying detailed the origin of one of the most basic spells, sometimes called Candle Shaper. Shaping wax was relatively easy—well, it could be done quite

easy manually, but even magical wax shaping was easy. In Tomar's time, even the easy spells were new.

"We have a new student arriving, a human girl, 15 years old," Headmaster Fierguld was saying. Because most sorcerers had a pretty hard time of it when their unpredictable talents first manifested, the School of Sorcery had a tradition of making sure its instructors knew the students' backgrounds in some detail. Marissa nudged Dain, to snap him out of his reverie.

"Amber has been living with her mother all her life. Her mother made her father leave when Amber was very young, because he has the same magical inclinations that Amber displays. The mother believed that it was her duty to beat the magic out of the girl. Their nearest neighbor passed away recently, and the new neighbor noticed what was going on. She helped Amber escape, and contacted the father, who has arranged for Amber to begin training here."

This was not so dramatic a background. A few lucky sorcerers had understanding families, but all encountered at least some hostility from friends or neighbors. The general consensus of the staff was that Amber might be a shy, unhappy girl at first, but she would soon liven up as she made friends with children just like her. It was up to the staff to be kind, understanding, and attentive.

Headmaster Fierguld's eyes roved over the staff as he considered who to assign as a mentor to Amber. Instructor Marissa would be a good choice, but she was overburdened with protégés at the moment. Instructor Dain had few students, but that was because he was demanding and impatient. Instructor Charity would be a good choice. She was very patient, warm, and caring, and human just like Amber. Even now her eyes were filling with tears at Amber's sad story.

“Instructor Charity,” he announced, “I would like you to mentor Amber for her first few weeks here.” Charity sniffed and nodded, wiping away a tear. Dain rolled his eyes.

Dain quickly forgot about the new student and stayed late studying Tomar’s notes. The curious thing, he had always thought, was that pineapple was an essential component of the Candle Shaping spell. Most of the early codified spells were the work of a handful of sorcerers near Ellegia, and in those days, Ellegia had no trade with the tropics. How had Tomar gotten hold of pineapple?

His thoughts were still on the puzzle as he opened his door. “Dad!” his son greeted him. “I have a surprise for you.” His son, Crusher, bent down to embrace him. Crusher was quite tall, even for a red headed human.

“You do?” Dain returned the embrace. “What for?”

“Oh, nothing much.” Crusher took two steps back and lifted a basket off the lowest step. He lifted out of the basket a small, black and white kitten. The kitten blinked sleepily, yawned, and mewed at Dain.

“Oh my goodness,” Dain said softly. “A kitten?”

“Well, a kitten, and I have some news.” He said this happily, but just a little nervously. “I’ve been asked to join a team of adventurers who are going to root out the dire rats up by North Angle. Mayor Thelma asked me to go.”

Dain sat down by the fire, holding the kitten. The kitten nibbled on Dain’s finger. “North Angle,” he repeated. “That’s a week’s journey.”

“That’s why I got the kitten.” Crusher sat at the floor at the foot of Dain’s chair, as he had done since he was a toddler.

“Hm?” Dain looked puzzled.

“To keep you company while I’m gone,” Crusher explained. “Mrs. Wainright and Baker Jenkins will look in on you too. They’ll help you with the kitten, if you need anything. You can write letters to me, and I’ll try to write home too, when I get a chance.” Crusher talked and Dain nodded.

“Well, I’m proud of you,” he finally said, when Crusher ran out of words. “I know you’ve been working hard with Master Draca on your sword skills, and everyone out at North Angle will sure appreciate your help.”

Crusher still seemed concerned about his father. “I’m just worried you’ll be lonely,” he said.

“Ha! It was just me before I found you on my doorstep, and I never expected you’d be around forever. It’s your own skin you should worry about. Dire rats aren’t a joke.”

Crusher hastily reassured him that the team included a healer who was small and adorable, an elegant wizard who would magically enhance his defenses, and another fellow who fought with his fists and could strangle not just a dire rat but even a dire wolf with his bare hands. Thus distracted, he failed to realize that Dain’s heart was breaking at the inevitable outcome of raising the child who had won his heart two decades ago.

Dain named the kitten Rat. It tried to eat most things, not limited to Dain’s fingers, toes, knees, and hair, and under the circumstances the name seemed appropriate. He didn’t want to leave the kitten at home alone. After Crusher left, he didn’t feel like being at home himself. So he and the kitten stayed in the lab most days and long into the nights. Sometimes the kitten came home with him, sometimes it hid in the lab and stubbornly refused to come out when Dain was at

last ready to leave, so it stayed there all night. There were lots of places to hide. One of its favorite spots was in a cabinet where Dain stored a pile of furs. Sometimes a spell called for the fur of a tiger, or a badger, or any number of strange creatures, and Dain had paid good money for part of another sorcerer's collection of furs. But the favorite napping place of the kitten caused a problem.

Mrs. Wainright's nephew wasn't quite as smart as most people. He was supposed to go to Grasshopper Falls, a fair sized city a day's journey northeast, to visit some cousins. She asked Dain to make a potion that would make him clever for a while, just long enough to get to the city where his cousins would take care of him, and then a second potion to get him home. The potion was a simple one. It didn't take long to assemble and spell, and then it had to brew for a few hours. One of the ingredients was wolverine fur. The wolverine pelt happened to be topmost when Rat the Kitten took up sleeping on the pile of furs.

"Whatever you gave my poor boy," Mrs. Wainright wailed, "made him graceful but not nearly so clever as he needed to be. He left all his things in the station in Grasshopper Falls!" Dain traced the error to the cat fur on the wolverine pelt. He chuckled, ineffectually scolded Rat, and refunded Mrs. Wainright's money. Her nephew had arrived and returned safe and sound, that was the important thing. The lost belongings were not valuable. Mrs. Wainright would never have sent anything valuable with the boy.

Chapter 2: Amber makes a new friend

Amber was having a hard time of it. The attention and kindness of all her teachers was overwhelming, and stifling. She was accustomed to cruelty, and her notion of happiness was in being left alone. The teachers, particularly Instructor Charity, misunderstood her reticence for shyness. She wasn't shy. She just didn't like anyone, and didn't want to speak to them.

Her strength easily lay in Transduction Magic, and she was placed in Dain's class. He didn't teach the basic Transduction classes, he taught the upper levels. She was in Transduction II, the lowest level class that he taught. His impolite, demanding manner suited her. He didn't see the point in idle chit chat or social niceties, and he didn't waste anyone's time with such. He let her, and all the students, be, assuming if they had something to say or a question to ask, that they would say it. Most students did not thrive in his class and often sought assistance from the other, more approachable, instructors. But they did learn from him, even if they hated every minute.

Amber was sick to death of the parties, games, and club meetings that Instructor Charity dragged her to. Charity thought if Amber attended every event for every club, she would find the one she belonged to, whether it was the chess club, the brainball team, or the knitting bee. Amber thought if she had to go to one more of these ridiculous meetings she was going to scream.

At dinner she took the nearest empty seat, and noticed the girl next to her had her Transduction II text.

"Are you studying that tonight?" she asked. She thought she could use the excuse of studying to get out of whatever Charity wanted her to attend tonight.

"I was going to go to Instructor Dain's classroom and practice the Cooling spell," the girl explained, a little startled. Amber never initiated a conversation.

"Well, I will go with you, I need some practice too," Amber declared, linking her arm around the girl's. "What is your name?"

“Briselde,” she replied, astonished. As they walked down the hall, arms linked, Charity came bustling the other way.

“Amber,” she said, then stopped, confused.

“Briselde and I are going to Transduction to practice Reflection,” she announced firmly.

“I’m so glad you’ve found a friend,” Charity murmured as the pair marched off.

“Cooling,” Briselde whispered.

“Hm?”

“Cooling, not Reflection. Reflection is next week.”

“Oh. Right. Well, I might work on Reflection.”

Dain hardly took any notice of the girls as they practiced in the classroom that adjoined his lab. Amber easily helped Briselde master Cooling, then said, “You go on,” when Briselde suggested they leave. She wanted to make sure whatever event Charity thought she ought to attend was well over before she returned to the dorm.

After that, Amber frequently took refuge in Dain’s classroom. She never *needed* to practice, because Transduction Magic came quite naturally to her, but she enjoyed it more than any other kind, and she worked ahead from the textbook. If Dain took no notice of her, or any other student, Rat the Kitten paid attention to her, biting at her pencil as she attempted to write, chasing any little object that happened to fall, and sometimes just curling up on the table nearby and purring. And in fact, while Dain didn’t consciously notice her, he did begin to recognize her, both when she came to his room after school, and in class. When Charity came looking for her, he even knew Amber’s name.

Amber got bored with the textbook and began to experiment on her own. Transduction is dangerous to experiment with. Many of the early sorcerers had ended their careers, and their lives, in an experiment gone wrong. Amber knew this, but had the sense of immortality of youth and the arrogance of her own skill. She naively assumed her little experiments could not possibly pose a threat. If she could so easily turn falling-water-energy into moving sand, what could go wrong with trying the same thing with rising-steam-energy? It was just the same, only the opposite direction, and more powerful.

It was a small explosion, knocking her off the stool she had been sitting on, and singeing her eyebrows. It got Dain's attention. He left what he was working on without even covering his temperamental and unstable potion. He ran to her in a panic. She moved and sat up before he reached her and his panic turned into relieved anger.

"What are you doing?" he yelled. He ranted as he checked her for injuries, shining a light in her eyes to look for concussion. He continued to rant as he then turned to the table she'd been working, and his rant trailed off as he realized what she had been doing.

"Where did you learn this?" he demanded. "Who taught you?"

"No one, I just thought that if it worked with water, like in class today, that steam..." She was interrupted by a loud WHOOSH, a tall cylinder of fiery gas, and steaming green gobs falling in a ten-foot radius around the potion Dain had left unattended.

Dain grumbled and ran back to his project. "Ruined, it's ruined, and what a mess!" He extinguished the flame.

"Closing the barn door after the cows got out," Amber remarked.

"What's that?"

“It’s something my mother sometimes said,” she replied. “It doesn’t matter now if the flame is on or off, because your explosion already happened. Just like it doesn’t do any good to close the barn door after the cows have already escaped.”

Dain chuckled a little, and they cleaned up the large mess from his explosion and the smaller mess from Amber’s.

“If you want to experiment, you need to tell me exactly what you are doing,” he told her. “Remember, it was in developing the simple Blanket Spell that Finia lost her legs.”

The sorcerer Finia was trying to find a way to prevent frostbite. She covered her own legs in ice, and transferred heat to her flesh. Although she lost her legs, she survived, because the accident itself cauterized the wound before she lost excessive blood. She was able to perfect the Blanket Spell, now a standard for novice sorcerers, and went on to create a self-propelled wheelchair using falling-water-energy. When all the water had fallen, the user simply poured the lower bucket back into the upper bucket, and the process started over.

Amber nodded. His yelling and gruffness didn’t intimidate her. Her mother had dealt far worse, and the other teachers’ kindnesses made her uncomfortable, worried, and upset. As for Dain, he was startled, and more than a little nervous, that she actually came in the next evening and announced that she wanted to know more about controlling steam energy. Children frightened him, particularly girls. It had taken a great deal of persistence and eloquence from Headmaster Fierguld to persuade him to teach at the School of Sorcery, and decades of teaching had merely honed his child-avoidance techniques almost to perfection. He was not any more comfortable around the creatures.

Dain coped with Amber's curiosity by settling into lecture-mode. Amber perched on his high chair furiously scribbled notes as he paced back and forth, lecturing. They were both startled when Charity came bustling in.

"There you are!" she exclaimed. "Amber, it is 10 minutes past curfew, and you missed night role call!" Amber and Dain looked up, confused. It was quite late.

"We'll pick up here tomorrow," Dain said feebly. Amber smiled and followed Charity to the dorm.

"Headmaster," Charity called out as she knocked. Headmaster Fierguld wondered why she both knocked and called his name every time she came to his office.

"Come in, Charity," he beckoned, setting down the papers the accountant had given him to review.

"I wanted to talk to you about Amber," she said, sitting in the chair in front of his desk. He sighed. The girl troubled him, because she did not seem to be settling in to life at the School of Sorcery. She had not made friends, or any emotional connection with any person, as far as anyone could tell. Charity, when she reported on Amber's progress, always expressed optimism that very soon now, Amber would feel at home. But her reports never contained any evidence in support of this opinion.

"Amber is very good at Transduction Magic," Charity continued.

"Yes, I know. She's in Dain's level 2, isn't she?"

"Yes, that's right. And she's been spending most of her evenings in his classroom, studying and practicing."

“Oh? Perhaps she needs help from one of the other Transduction instructors? Someone who is more...approachable?”

“Oh, no, not at all. She and Dain have hit it off!”

Fierguld wondered if there was a student who also went by the name of Dain. “*Instructor Dain?*” he asked, to clarify.

“Yes! They get along swimmingly!”

“Dain is chummy with a student?” He was having trouble with this concept.

“That’s what I’m saying! So I was wondering, since Dain is assigned very few students to mentor, and I haven’t yet quite been able to forge a connection with Amber, if perhaps...”

“Yes, yes, of course,” the Headmaster agreed, “if she has connected to Dain...but he is so shy around children, especially girl children. Are you sure?”

“Come around to Dain’s lab tonight and see for yourself.”

Neither Amber nor Dain saw him. They were engrossed in a mess of bubbling vessels and serious incantations. Both wore large goggles. As Fierguld watched, he saw Dain reach out and gently push Amber back a bit from the table. He actually touched her! Fierguld marveled. He had long ago concluded that, against all probability and expectation, Aurel had been mistaken when she had declared that teaching would bring Dain past his traumatic childhood. But here she was, decades after her death, proving him wrong once more, as she had done again and again in life.

Charity only saw that Amber seemed at ease at last. Fierguld only saw that Dain had connected with a child.

Chapter 3: Message in a bottle

Soon after that, Crusher returned from his adventure, and Dain did not stay so late in the evenings. Amber missed experimenting in his lab. Her first taste ever of happiness in her life had been all too short. Without the evening experiments to look forward to, she lost all interest in her other classes, and each class change was nothing more than a brief interruption to her nostalgic reminiscing about last week.

Dain, who was now formally her mentor, did not notice. He never took his mentoring duties seriously, and he was not that observant anyway.

Crusher had a tiny scar on his forearm, where a dire rat had bitten him. It was so small, that Dain could not honestly say he saw it.

“Where? Oh, there. Yes, yes, that’s quite a scar, lad,” he lied.

“Feather, that’s our cleric, she could have healed it clean. But she asked if I wanted a scar to commemorate my first battle, and of course I did! Trudy has dozens of scars. He said it’s because he hasn’t always had the benefit of a skilled cleric like Feather. Feather’s a gnome. I hadn’t met a gnome before, except in Grasshopper Falls that once, when a peddler was visiting. They’re not very common around here. Feather says they’re not fond of the other races, and they prefer to keep to themselves. Feather’s a gnome of mystery, no one knows why she left her clan, if gnomes are so fond of their own kind. She’s not exactly beautiful, but she’s so cute I can hardly stop looking at her. But it’s Marin, the wizard, who pushed my buttons. She’s so elegant and sophisticated. But she won’t give me the time of day.”

But Crusher did not stay home long. In a week he was off again, to help Feather and Trudy and Marin find out why the cattle were disappearing from the farms near Middle Tree.

Staff meeting was the next morning after Crusher left, and Dain was startled to hear the other teachers complaining of Amber’s inattention and attitude.

“I hadn’t noticed,” he said weakly. “I’ll talk to her.”

During class, he looked around at the group. Was she more pale than usual? There was a definite uncharacteristic listlessness about her. With a twinge of guilt he realized that while Crusher was home, he had locked up the lab at the end of each school day without a word of explanation to her. As the class ended, he called her back.

“My son was home last week,” he explained. “I should have mentioned that to you.”

Amber just nodded agreeably, unsmilingly. He felt she didn’t understand.

“I could use some help this evening getting ready for the level 4’s project. Would you like to give me a hand with that?” he asked. At this she looked up. She looked him straight in the eyes, which were level with hers by virtue of their similar heights. This made him extremely uncomfortable, but he didn’t drop his gaze.

She nodded. “I didn’t know you had a son.”

“Yes, he’s a few years older than you. He’s human like you. I adopted him 23 years ago. He left home recently.” To his own amazement, his voice broke slightly. “Well,” he said gruffly, “I’ll tell you about his this evening. Off to your next class now, what is it, History of Magic? Pay attention to Instructor Marissa!”

That evening, he showed her the storage vaults in the basement. He unlocked a dusty cabinet door. Behind the door were a dozen or more drawers, each labeled with a year. He pulled out a drawer filled with corked bottles. Each bottle held only a single piece of paper.

“The level 4’s are learning the Message in a Bottle spell,” he explained. “Each year I have them turn in two bottles. One I use to see if they learned the spell. The other goes into the

drawer with all the others from that class. Every year I pull one bottle out of each drawer and we listen to them to see how well the message stuck after all these years. Here, open this one.”

He handed her a bottle marked “Year of Llama, 23rd cycle”, this was Year of Penguin so that was last year’s bottle. She opened it and a whisper escaped, “Doris is a Taurus, and the square root of pi is a blue curtain.” Amber giggled. Doris probably meant Instructor Doris Ironton, and the dwarf did look like a bull! She wondered what a blue curtain could have to do with geometry.

“Now try this one.” It was labeled “Year of Llama, 22nd cycle”, 19 years ago! She opened it but the message was mostly indiscernible. Only a faint “food here” escaped like a distant echo of a whisper. “Hear that? A really good one might last 20 years, but that’s it. Most of these student bottles don’t last five. Take the paper out now.” Amber pulled the slip of paper out of the neck of the bottle. “What’s it say?”

“The food here is ghastly,” she read. “Today we ate bubble and squeak. I think they made it from leftovers from when Instructor Dain was a child.”

“Ha!” Dain chuckled. “Maybe they did, and if the original was baked by my mother, it tasted just as good today as it did 150 years ago. What I want you to do now is put one bottle from every drawer into this basket. Bring them up to the lab and we’ll prepare a couple of our own messages for tomorrow.”

“What should I do with these?” She held up the empty bottles.

“Bring them with the rest. We’ll use those to make our new messages. Think of a good message to use. Something easy to articulate, nothing esoteric. Half these students don’t understand polysyllabic language.”

“What’s poly...”

“Multiple syllables. Words with multiple syllables. Like polysyllabic.” Amber looked downcast at the jibe, which was unlike her. He didn’t know what to say and awkwardly turned to leave.

“Are you really 150 years old?” she asked. He turned back.

“No, not really. I’ll be 152 next month.”

“Oh.”

Back in the lab upstairs, Dain showed her how to put the message in the bottle.

“I make the students write their message on two pieces of paper. One goes in the bottle, that’s so I know what the message was supposed to be, in case I can’t hear it very well. At least I can tell how close they got. The other piece of paper is the message the bottle will whisper. You only need to write it once. No one is grading you. Got it written? We’ll burn that piece of paper and hold the bottle so all the smoke goes into the bottle. Hold the paper with these forceps while it burns. There you go. Now say the words out loud, and transduce that into the molecules in the smoke. It’s a lot like you’ve been doing with that steam energy. In fact this is probably easier, I doubt that one in four of tomorrow’s class can do what you’ve been doing with the steam.”

“One hundred fifty-one is prime,” Amber recited clearly as she smoke filled the bottle. Dain’s eyebrow quirked, but he didn’t say anything.

“How do I know it worked?” Amber asked.

“Pull the cork out.”

“But then the message will be lost, won’t it? It only works once, right?”

“So make another. The practice is good for you.”

Amber pulled the cork out. Her own voice said clearly, “One hundred fifty-one is prime.”

“Oh! It worked!”

“Of course it did. Why wouldn’t it? Now make 5 or 6 more. Different messages. Make a couple that loud, and a couple much softer, and some in between.”

“Dain?” Amber asked as she assembled the empty bottles.

“Yes?”

“What is the point of a whispered message in a bottle? A piece of paper can be read multiple times, and it doesn’t decay nearly as fast. It can last for dozens of years.”

“At least,” Dain agreed. “I have a book my grandfather gave to me when I was a lad. That’s almost a dozen dozen years.”

“Oh.” Once again she was taken aback by his ancient age. She knew dwarves lived longer than humans. Dain was close to the midpoint of his lifespan, she guessed. “Anyway, what is the point of whispering a message into a bottle?”

“At the Mages’ Convention, you’d lose any debate with a question like that. They’d shout, ‘Magic for the sake of magic!’ at you, and that sort of nonsense. I like this one because it’s a good practical exercise demonstrating how we can manipulate properties of natural substances, in this case smoke. We manipulate the smoke to store our message. But there is a practical use for this spell. A piece of paper can be read by anyone who can read. This spell can be tuned to a particular person so only that person can hear the message. And on the other hand, a piece of paper can be read only by someone who can read. With the bottle you can leave a message for someone who can’t read.”

“How many sorcerers are likely to associate with someone who can’t read just? Why would a sorcerer need to leave a message for an illiterate peasant?”

“Well, my son Crusher is off on an adventure to investigate disappearing cows in a rural area that’s probably chock full of illiterate peasants. They hired him, and he better not be too

grand to leave a message for them if he needs to. Now he's not a sorcerer, but his team could include a sorcerer. It has a cleric and a wizard, no reason they couldn't add a sorcerer if the right one came along."

"How did you come to adopt him?" She had been wondering that all day.

"Well, that is a story. I just tripped over him. Someone left him in a basket here at the school. I was the first one to arrive that day, other than the residents, but they hadn't been outside yet. I didn't know the first thing about babies, never seen one in my life, but Fierguld insisted since I found him, I better take care of him until we found out more about him. The old weasel waited two months before finding another home for the baby, knowing full well I'd be too attached to bear letting him go by then." He stopped talking, suddenly aware that letting the wee babe go after 23 years was much more painful than letting him go after 2 months would have been.

"Better get those bottles made, before Chastity comes after you," he finished gruffly.

In quick succession she finished the six bottles, coming up with a funny message, a rhyme, even a song, for each one. She refused to leave until he showed her how to tune the message to an individual person. That was simple: burn a hair from the intended recipient along with the piece of paper, write the person's name on the paper with the rest of the message, and speak the name aloud at the beginning and end of the message.

"Of course, that's all just theatrics," Dain commented. "It's really all just an aid to focus your mind and your magic. If you're skilled, you can do it without the hair and all."

"And if you're not skilled, what do you do if the recipient is bald?"

"Any part of the person will work. You tell me, what else would work?"

She thought for a moment. "A drop of blood? Spit?"

“Very good, yes, either of those would work quite well. Now, off with you. It’s getting late.”

Amber’s attention in her classes improved, and he was careful not to miss a single evening without letting her know his reason for being absent. One winter day, he caught a cold and stayed home. He sent a message to Headmaster Fierguld informing him of his absence. He sent another message, this one in a bottle, to Amber, exaggerating the nasally tone of his stuffed up nose, and noisily blowing his nose at the end of the message, to “prove” that his excuse was genuine. He imagined her giggle when she got that message. He timed it so it would arrive in the middle of Marissa’s history lecture, and grinned at the thought of Marissa’s glare when her class was interrupted.

Fierguld gave a hearty laugh when Marissa griped about the interruption. “For the second time in his life,” he said seriously, “that man cares about a person other than himself.”

“Crusher improved him quite a bit, and now Amber,” Marissa agreed. “They are good for each other, if obnoxious. But it’s not the second person he’s cared about, it’s the third.”

“Third? You mean Aurel? What do you know about Aurel?”

“I don’t know anything about Aurel. I meant the kitten. I suppose it’s not exactly a person. But it is something he cares about outside of himself.”

“What kitten?” Marissa told him about the Rat the Kitten, and about Mrs. Wainright’s nephew. Fierguld looked briefly troubled.

“It’s good for him to come out of his own head sometimes, but it’s not good for him to get distracted and make mistakes. His is a tricky branch of magic.”

“But how was he to know…”

“He should have checked! He knows that. He *teaches* that. Check the purity, the freshness, the quality of every ingredient you use. How many students has he reduced to tears because the ginger was dry or the milk had gone off? He knows better. Old fool.”

“Maybe so, but why are you so agitated over it? Charity is far more careless and forgetful.”

“Charity doesn’t deal in Transduction. An illusion gone wrong is basically harmless, if a bit grotesque. Well, Dain Fireforge is growing up at last, and he’ll be better for it, if he survives.”

“He mellowed out a bit after he adopted Crusher,” Marissa observed.

“Yes,” Fierguld agreed slowly, “he mellowed, but he was still as self centered as ever.”

“Self centered!” Marissa exclaimed. “He’s terrified of people. I never thought of him as self-centered.”

“I’ve known him over a hundred years,” Fierguld replied. “He’s terrified of *children*. The rest of us are just not interesting to him. The most interesting person in his life, until Crusher arrived, was himself. Aurel did a lot of good things for him, but one of the effects she had was to convince him more than ever of his own importance, because *she* was so interested in him.”

Marissa felt more than a little awed hearing Fierguld refer to the great Aureliana, powerful sorcerer and part dragon, as “Aurel”, as if they were chums.

Chapter 4: A perfect moment

Although Crusher had promised to write, Dain received few letters. Dain wrote a letter once a week, but he was lucky if he received more than one letter a month from Crusher. Dain's letters were short. He never knew quite what to say. Crusher wouldn't be interested in how Tomar invented his first spell. He had never attended the School of Sorcery, since he had no sorcerous ability, and he did not know Dain's pupils. He knew some of the teachers, but Dain didn't notice the sort of gossip one puts in letters about mutual acquaintances, such as whose grandparents passed away or who just became an aunt, or perhaps a mother, for the third time. So Dain's letters were short, and mostly the same.

“Dear Crusher,” (for example),

I hope this letter finds you well. I am well. Rat the Kitten is quite large. It caught a mouse in the lab yesterday. I was dismayed to learn there are mice in the lab. But I am happy Rat is there to catch them. Although perhaps the mouse wasn't in the lab when Rat caught it. I believe it may have caught the mouse elsewhere, and brought it into the lab.

Your loving father.”

Crusher's letters, when they did arrive several weeks after they had been written, were full of details of chases, investigations, battles, deductions, and all the glory that goes into hunting what proved to be a geryon, a three-headed, six-legged cattle rustling monster. Warring tribes of kobolds in the area made the task more difficult yet. Dain read Crusher's letters out loud to Amber, who listened wide-eyed and enraptured to the amazing adventures. The letters also had a bit of romance, which Dain skipped over when reading out loud. Crusher no longer mentioned how elegant and sophisticated Marin was, but spoke of the exotic looks of a farmer's daughter, and the matronly attractiveness of the farmer.

Since Amber had learned the Message in a Bottle spell, they took up leaving messages for each other that way. They traded locks of hair so the message would only be heard by the intended recipient. Instead of catching Amber after class to tell her that he would not be in the

lab that evening because he had to run an errand, he could leave an empty bottle outside the door. Amber would know to uncork the bottle, and because he had tuned the message to her, only she would hear it.

Sometimes they had entire conversations by bottle, even though they saw each other during the day and could have held the conversation and then some in just a few minutes. “I know Charity means well,” Amber’s bottle said, “but she knows no more about the *ethics* of magic than Rat the Kitten does.”

“She can do the least damage teaching you nonsense about ethics and magic,” Dain’s bottle replied. “Headmaster doesn’t think ethics can be taught. He only included the subject because a donor insisted.”

“What was donated?” Amber’s bottle wanted to know. “A kidney? A liver?”

“The dorms,” Dain’s bottle answered.

“When do you think Crusher will visit again?” Amber’s bottle asked one day. Dain was reluctant to answer. He wondered why he was reluctant. Then he realized that he felt an unreasonable possessiveness and jealousy. Crusher was *his*, and he didn’t want to share. But it was only natural that Amber would be curious about the adventurer, since he had shared Crusher’s stories with her.

“I don’t know,” was the answer he finally put into a bottle, truthfully. Amber must have picked up on his reluctance. She did not mention it again.

The holidays came with the first snow. Most of the students went home, or to visit relatives. Many of the instructors and staff traveled or entertained visitors. A few students, like Amber, did not have relatives or friends who could take them in. Amber’s father visited her

briefly, but he lived his entire life traveling, and did not have a home in which to receive her. They were little more than strangers, anyway. Amber did not have much interest in the man who had abandoned her to the auspices of her insane and abusive mother. She did nothing to make conversation easier between them.

He felt awkward and guilty. When his wife had driven him away, he had seen her as a crazy wife but a loving mother. He had no idea that when he was gone, she would come to see the baby as a threat, and he had never come back to check how Amber was doing. He had thought he was doing the right thing by leaving his crazy wife to her own life. He felt guilty that his oversight had cost Amber a happy childhood.

Since Crusher was also gone, Dain had nowhere to be for the holidays. Before he had adopted Crusher, he had looked forward to the holidays as a time when he could really focus on his research. Although he still missed Crusher keenly, he was eagerly anticipating the empty school and the silent lab again. He was thinking about writing a treatise of the early life of Tomar, a biography of sorts, with technical descriptions of how the famous sorcerer had derived his earliest spells.

He made excellent progress for a few days. There were no classes, no pesky students asking questions or wanting to learn things, and even Amber was busy entertaining her father. He lost himself in his research and made a major breakthrough after deciphering the notes in the margins of Tomar's notebook. He discovered that Tomar had not actually invented some of the spells attributed to him. Tomar had traveled to the jungles of Kinkapi, where he had tasted pineapple and learned his first new spells. Whether Tomar had brought them home and no one remembered that he had learned them in the jungle, or whether Tomar had passed them off as his

own creations, was not possible to ascertain. At least in the confines of his own notebook, Tomar attributed the origin of the spells to the jungle elves.

After a grueling three days with her father, Amber bid farewell to him with relief.

“Amber,” he said at the door of his coach, “please write to me.”

She didn’t answer. She was thinking that she hadn’t received any letters from him.

“I haven’t written to you, I know,” he continued. “But I want to. I just...I never know what to say. I thought, maybe if you write to me, I could answer your letters.”

She nodded and took pity on him. “I guess I’ll write,” she said. “There’s not much to tell you about school.”

“I went to a school a lot like this,” he said. That surprised her. “It wasn’t a School of Sorcery. I think I have a little talent, but nothing like yours. That was one of the things your mother hated. I was hardly aware of it myself. She took it personally that I hadn’t told her about it before we were married, as if I had tried to hide it from her.”

This line of conversation made Amber distinctly uncomfortable. She wasn’t ready to learn about her family yet. She just wanted to forget that her mother, and her first 15 years of life, ever existed.

“I went to Cretania School and University,” he went on. “The dorms here, and the cafeteria, and the classrooms, really take me back. Some of your subjects are even the same, history and math, although I’m sure they’re taught different here. We learned about politics and law, preparing us to be, well, courtiers¹, I guess.”

“Maybe you could tell me about that, in your letters,” Amber suggested. He looked surprised.

“That’s brilliant! I will!” he promised. And then it was at last time for him to leave.

¹ We would call them lobbyists.

Amber went to her room and wrote a letter to him until lunchtime. The few students and staff still in residence ate in the kitchen during the break.

“Are you going to the Transduction lab after lunch?” the cook asked. Amber hadn’t thought what she would do for the rest of the day. That seemed like a good idea.

“I could,” she agreed.

“Will you bring Instructor Dain his lunch? He never remembers to eat during the breaks, and Headmaster tasked me with making sure he gets meals even though he doesn’t show up for them.”

“Certainly,” Amber answered. And so after lunch she went to the Transduction lab with a covered plate.

Dain was sitting in his most comfortable chair in the corner, the one that Rat the Kitten often slept in. Rat was curled up on top of the back of the chair, above Dain’s head. A low table in front of the chair was piled high with notes, books, manuscripts, and scraps of paper.

“Cook asked me to bring you your lunch,” Amber said. She waited. After a moment, Dain looked up, looking puzzled.

“Your lunch,” she repeated. “Cook asked me to bring it to you.”

“Oh. Thank you.” He pushed one stack of books to the right, another stack to the left, where it threatened to fall, and combined two smaller stacks of papers. That created a space just big enough for the plate. She put the plate on the little table.

Before her father’s visit, she’d had an idea for an experiment that she hadn’t yet had time to try out. She started to get some materials out, then remembered her first explosion and Dain’s warning. She glanced at him. He was again absorbed in his work. He’d hardly eaten anything yet. She watched him, undecided. Suddenly he raised his head.

“Did you need help with something?” he asked.

“Well, I wanted to try something out. But I guess I ought to make sure it’s not, you know, dangerous or something, first.”

“Ah! Right. Right you are. Very good. What are you wanting to try?”

“Well, smoke is basically air. But it can be made to hold a message. I thought, something more solid might be able to do the same thing, and hold on to it more firmly than smoke, so it wouldn’t deteriorate as quickly.”

“Theoretically, yes,” Dain agreed. “But how would you get the message into the substance, and out again?”

“Sand!”

Dain looked thoughtful. “It might work,” he said. He ate his lunch, thinking.

“I thought that very fine sand would be best.”

“In the upper cabinet left of the sink. Behind the smelling salts.”

Amber climbed the little ladder that was a staple in any dwarf sorcerer’s lab.

“I have some ideas,” he said, “but let’s see what you come up with first. I can’t think of anything dangerous in what you’re about to try. As long as you’re not planning on melting the sand,” he added. She shook her head.

A couple hours later, a bottle containing a little sand appeared in front of him.

“Pour it out,” she instructed. She handed him a little cup to pour the sand into. As he poured, he heard her voice saying, “There are three flowers in a vase. The middle one is green.” The voice was loud enough, it was only a bit crackly. Or sandy.

“I made several,” she said, point to a row of bottles stood on the counter. Some had sand, some were smoky. “I’ll open one of each every other day. The smoke messages usually are

noticeably deteriorated after a couple days. I mean, you can still hear them fine, just that they don't sound quite as good. I'm hoping the sand messages will still sound good."

"How did you get the message into the sand?"

She poured fine white sand into a little tray. With a pencil, she drew a message into the sand.

"Like you said, the medium is just a focus. Theoretically the written message doesn't even need to be legible."

Dain held out a hand as she moved to pour the sand into the bottle.

"Wait—I have an idea." He rummaged through a drawer on the other side of the lab and came back with several straws. He cut them evenly to almost the same height as the bottle.

"Put these in the bottle before you pour the sand in." She looked at him curiously but he did not explain. She finished the spell and corked the bottle.

"I don't think you actually need the cork," she explained, "but I'm not sure."

"I shouldn't think you would. The cork keeps the smoke from escaping. The sand won't escape unless you knock the bottle over."

He uncorked the bottle and pulled out one straw.

"There are three flowers," her voice said. He pulled out another straw. "There are three flowers," the voice repeated.

"It repeats!" Amber clapped her hands together. "I wonder how times it could work. How many straws do you think will fit in?"

Dain was completely distracted from Tomar's jungle adventures. They spent the rest of the break experimenting and improving. Headmaster, when he returned from his holiday travels, which were more political in nature than vacation, called them "the Matched Set". They were the

same height, with similar long brown hair. Dain was a bit stockier, but from the back they could be mistaken for each other. From the front, of course, Dain's beard and Amber's distinctive gray eyes made them unmistakable. Fierguld noted with satisfaction how confident, assertive, and even happy Amber seemed compared to how she had been the first few weeks at school. Dain, he thought, was as good for the girl, as she was for him.

The limit to the number of repeats turned out to be a factor of how many straws could contact the sand grains without disturbing too many of the sand grains. Too many straws, and some of the middle straws did not contact the sand grains. If the sand was disturbed too much, either because several straws had been removed, or because the bottle had been shaken, the message was no longer clear. Additional layers of sand on top of the message-layer helped protect the message-layer from being disturbed.

"We should write this up and send it to *Mage Notes*," Dain said excitedly.

"*Mage Notes*?" Amber asked.

"*Mage Notes* started out as a circular letter," he explained. "A group of sorcerers had spent some time together and realized that working together they were better able to refine spells and create new spells. They started keeping notes, and other sorcerers heard about it, and wanted to read the notes. Then they wanted to add to the notes themselves. For a while there were too many versions going around to keep track of. Then they agreed to all send their notes to a central location, where they hired scribes to collate the notes, copy them, and send them out to everyone on the list. As the new material coming in got to be too much, they paid a couple sorcerers to review the notes and weed out the redundant or bad information. That part of the business grew so that the sorcerers who review the submissions are now highly thought of. They don't just read it, they try out the spells. If you send them something bogus they reject it."

“Who pays the scribes?”

“Not just scribes now. Those esteemed reviewers get paid a pretty penny too. The sorcerers who submit material send money for the privilege. If we write this up and submit it to *Mage Notes*, the school will pay our fee.”

“Why does the school pay?”

“The school paid for the research. They provided the lab, a lot of the material, and they pay me a living wage so that I can get on with research, when I’m not teaching. The school gets credit for supporting my research, and the Headmaster wants everyone to know it. He’ll pay, or the school will pay, the fee so we can submit our research.”

They spent the rest of the break experimenting, writing, and experimenting. They tried it out with gases, liquids, solids. They borrowed jelly from the cook. (That didn’t work. It smelled awful when they opened the bottle a few days later. Dain said the germs had eaten up the jelly and the words.) They didn’t limit themselves to matter but experimented with energy too, which was difficult to bottle.

After the holidays, their progress continued but at a slower pace. Even less frequently did Dain spend an evening at home now. More frequently than he used to, he stayed in the lab all night and slept in his most comfortable chair. No one was supposed to know that it converted into a bed. The headmaster knew, because it was hard to keep secrets from him. Amber knew, because she had found the button that triggered it to morph. Dain was embarrassed when she discovered it, and hid his embarrassment with gruff anger.

“Do you push every button just because it’s there?” he demanded.

“Yes,” she replied simply. “If I have my own lab someday, I will take naps in it, too.” He didn’t reply, because he took naps in the chair form of the chair, not the bed form. He only used

the bed form when he stayed overnight, and he didn't want anyone to know that he practically lived in the lab.

By spring, they had conducted sufficient experiments that Dain thought they could submit the paper. During the spring holiday break, they wrote the manuscript. To celebrate, they left the lab, left the school, and went for a long walk outside of town. Dain didn't spend much time outdoors (or outside of his lab), so the woods were as new to him as to Amber. It had been decades since he had taken any interest in the outdoors. In fact, he hadn't taken a walk in the woods since Aurel had died and he had come to here to teach, when he could still be called young.

In Amber's company he felt a child's delight in every new thing he saw: the water running over the rocks in the creek, as it had been doing for hundreds of years, yet the rocks had not worn away yet. The tiny fish darting away from their shadows falling onto the creek. The yellow goldfinches and metallic eastern bluebirds and scarlet cardinals that darted across the trail in front of them. The baby copperhead curled up on the warm trail in the cooling dusk, which they gave wide berth. The scattering of new green leaves throughout the woods, like a child's scribble on a coloring page, with a few stray pink and yellow lines of little flowers just starting to bloom.

Amber found a tree with low branches and climbed it, laughing. He helped her up to the first branch and then she took off up the tree. The thought suddenly came to him that he was happier right now than he had ever been in his life. With this realization came a wave of guilt. He loved Crusher dearly, and the happiest moment of his life ought to have been a moment with his son, not his student. And then another wave of guilt, as he thought that this was likely the happiest moment of her life too. And then yet another wave of guilt as he realized the two of

them were sharing the happiest moment in their lives. He suddenly had doubts about the propriety of their walk.

“The walk,” he thought. “The walk may be ill advised, but our entire project, spending hours in the lab together, if the walk is improper, our project is beyond improper.” He shied away from the notion that there was anything wrong with the project. “If there were anything wrong, I would have realized it months ago,” he reasoned. “I would not jeopardize the dear girl for anything.” With this rationalization he turned his attention back to enjoying the day in the woods. But if he were completely honest with himself, which he was not, he would have to admit that he was not quite comfortable that they should be experiencing the best times of their lives together.

Amber came back down the tree, flushed and breathless. There was a place in the stream where the water level was low and a path of dry rocks led across the stream. They sat in the sun on the largest dry rock in the middle and rested.

“This place is beautiful,” Amber said. “It’s perfect. I could stay here forever.” The rock was large enough she laid down and even fell asleep briefly. The moment was perfect, and Dain thought his heart might break from the beauty of it all.

Chapter 5: The long month

Crusher came home a year after he left. He stayed for a month this time. Dain explained to Amber that with his son at home, he would not be spending the evenings in the lab. He set the lock so that it would open for her only, so that she could continue her experiments and studies, at a limited level. “Don’t forget, anything new that you want to try, check with me first. Leave me a bottle message so I’ll know to stay a few minutes after classes are over.”

He did not arrange for her to meet his son. He wasn’t quite sure what his rationalization was. Somehow he felt that if he kept his personal life separate from work, then Amber wasn’t really part of his personal life. On another level that he did not admit, he was both testing and punishing himself by keeping away from her. He felt a pang of remorse at the thought that she would be unhappy without him. “She’s young and resilient,” he reassured himself. “She has to move on with her life sometime, and leave me behind, and it’s for the best if her attachment to me is not so strong. I should make an effort to distance myself, even after Crusher leaves again.”

He hoped that Crusher would not leave too soon, and at the same time he hoped that Crusher would leave sooner, because he secretly yearned for the happy hours in the lab with Amber.

Crusher noticed changes in Dain since a year ago. “You look stronger,” he declared. “What have you been doing? Have you been more active?”

Dain thought he had been eating better, with Amber to remind him to have supper, and he himself was conscious of Amber’s health and would make sure she, and therefore he, had something to eat. The experiments had been more active than his studies usually were. Left to his own devices, he would have spent those hours reading and writing about Tomar, occasionally repeating one of Tomar’s early experiments, but mostly being sedentary. The Message Bottle

project had him moving, fetching one supply after another. Sometimes Amber fetched the supplies, if she knew where they were, but more often they both went together.

“Maybe so,” he answered. “I walked in the woods the other day.”

Crusher pretended astonishment. “When have you ever walked in the woods?”

“Well, never, not in the woods around here. It was high time.”

“Indeed it was,” Crusher agreed, and immediately decided they would go out in the woods the next day. Dain protested weakly, and the next day found them in the woods. Dain was careful to steer them away from the creek he and Amber had found. He was quiet on the walk, but that was not unusual, and Crusher chattered away, unaware of any mental discomfort Dain might have had.

However, Crusher did not miss the unusual restlessness that kept Dain awake late at night. “Dad, you don’t have to stay away from the lab just because I’m here. I know you’re glad I’m home. We have plenty of time, and I’ll be back often in the years to come. Don’t let me monopolize every minute of your time just because this is a visit.”

“No, no,” Dain protested, “I’m happy to be at home with you. I don’t really want to go to the lab tonight,” he lied. “I just finished a big project right before you got home, and to tell the truth I kind of burned myself out on that.” He felt guilty again about using the phrase “to tell the truth”. Well, it was partly true. He had just finished a big project.

Crusher was quiet for a moment. “You seem restless,” he said. “I thought you weren’t sure what to do with yourself, because you’re used to spending more time in the lab.”

Dain didn’t have a good answer. “I’ve just had a lot on my mind,” he said.

“What’s been on your mind?”

Dain cursed himself for not coming up with a better answer. “It’s just this project I’ve been working on. But it’s finished now, now I can rest, and your visit is perfect timing. How about a game of checkers?”

“And what do I have to feel guilty about?” he scolded himself mentally. “All I did was take a student under my wing and teach her a bit of Transduction magic. She’s got great skill and she needs a mentor. She’ll go on to do great things and all I did was help her along a bit. There’s no shame in that. It’s something to be proud of.” All month he went back and forth, swamped in guilt one moment, and then convincing himself nothing was wrong the next.

“She’s just a colleague,” he told himself. “If any other student were half as intelligent as she is, no matter his age, gender, or race, I’d have done the same. She’s just the first somewhat intelligent student we’ve had in this school in the last hundred years. If I’d gone to Mage Academy, I’d have colleagues my own age. Or the human or elf equivalent.” He told himself often that Amber was just a colleague. It made sense. Yet the argument didn’t sway his misery and guilt.

“It’s entirely innocent,” he reminded himself. “Before it occurred to me it might be otherwise, nothing seemed wrong. I am a good person at heart.” It had taken him years to learn *that*. “I know I would not do anything wrong on purpose. Until that moment in the woods, it was innocent, and the thought that it might not be was the only thing that made it any different. If I had not had that thought, I would not be agonizing over it now. That was just a thought, not an action. Nothing has changed. Nothing is wrong.”

Crusher was not satisfied with Dain’s diversion into a game of checkers. Dain was distracted during the game and Crusher won too easily. Crusher was persistent, and bit by bit extracted information, with the same patience he and his team had used to find the geryon out

near Middle Tree, the same patience with which he had pursued the beautiful Helen, the mayor he had a fling with after defeating the geryon. Crusher learned that Dain had put aside the Tomar biography and started the Message Bottle project. Although Dain strictly forbid himself from mentioning Amber at all, partly in an attempt to punish himself but mostly out of fear that Crusher, the only person he was close to, might detect his secret, Amber was such an integral part of the project, and he hated not to give her the credit of coming up with the initial idea, that he couldn't help but mention her now and again. Crusher realized that this student was special, for Dain to have let her into his life. Never, as far as Crusher could recall, had Dain ever spoken of a student with anything but disdain. His highest praise for a student had been, "Well, this one might not make too much of a mess of things." And now he was allowing a student to work with him on a project, and he never said anything disparaging about the girl!

"I'd like to meet her," Crusher said. Dain was horrified. His first thought was that he had been found out, and he started to protest. But maybe Crusher knew nothing, and his protests would reveal everything. The result was that he stammered unintelligibly. Crusher looked at him curiously.

"I just want you all to myself while you're here," Dain finally said. "I've missed you." That much was true, but the visit was getting to be positively tortuous to Dain's guilty conscience. He was miserably glad when Crusher left.

About a week before Crusher's team would be passing through and collecting Crusher, Dain got a message from the *Mage Notes*. The manuscript had been accepted and would be sent to sorcerers and wizards all over the country, and beyond, with the next collection! He couldn't wait to tell Amber. He got the message in the middle of his last class. He sent a student to her

classroom with a message for her (written on paper, not a bottle-message) asking her to come to the lab as soon as possible.

She came in just as the last student was leaving.

“Our paper was accepted!” he told her. She shrieked, threw her hands in the air, and embraced him. Caught up in the moment, he lifted her off the ground and twirled her around in the air. Then catching himself, he set her down and stepped away. But she grabbed hold of both his hands.

“That’s so wonderful! I can’t believe it!” she said breathlessly. “I’m so excited. When will we get our copy?” She had poured over every issue of *Mage Notes* that had arrived since they had submitted their manuscript. She believed that their paper was much higher quality than most of what she read. Dain thought so too.

“In a few weeks,” Dain answered. They chatted for a while longer. He really missed talking to her. He was sorely tempted to stay at the school for supper, to have her fetch their suppers like she used to. But he tore himself away. “I have to get home soon,” he told her.

To Amber, the month was simply confusing. She didn’t get depressed, unlike the last time Dain’s son visited and took him away from her. She knew the cause of his absence. But his behavior was confusing. During class he seemed cold, distant, unapproachable and unwelcoming. Although he had told her to leave messages for him as usual, since he would not be in the lab most evenings, she didn’t. And he lied about not being in the lab *most* evenings. He wasn’t in the lab *any* evening during the entire month of Crusher’s visit. She talked a new student into going for walks in the woods with her, because students weren’t allowed out of the building alone, and she haunted the creek where they had spent the Perfect Day. That’s what she

called it, in her head. She thought Dain and his son might go for a walk in this area. But if they did, she never saw them.

She was confident that he would have an explanation of his odd behavior. He had explained last time, when they hardly knew each other. And now, he was her best friend.

It was a long, lonely month. She and her walking companion finished their walks as the sun was setting, and she would spend the rest of the evening sitting in Dain's comfortable chair, Rat the Kitten (who was no longer a kitten) on her lap, reading. She didn't feel like doing experiments without Dain. The thought of it was depressing.

The highlight of the month was getting their paper accepted. Dain was his old self, for just a few minutes. But the next day, Dain acted as if nothing unusual had happened.

At last the month was over and Crusher had left. She went to the lab that evening, full of hope and uncertainty. Dain was in his usual chair, studying Tomar's notes. He did not look up as she entered. She stood tentatively, not sure whether to disturb him. He still did not look up. She took a chair near the door and read for a while. Eventually she fetched supper plates for them both, like she used to do.

"Thanks," he grunted when she set the plate on his little table in front of him.

She took advantage of the momentary interruption to speak, even though he was already going back to his reading. "Did you have a good visit with your son?"

"Yes," he answered, picking up the book again. She hurried to think of something else to say before he was lost in the book.

"Where is he off to this time?"

"East. Someplace called Reader, I think." He had the book open and his eyes were reading. She continued anyway.

“What will he be doing there?”

“Investigating disappearances,” he replied. She couldn’t think of anything else to ask.

She left soon after.

Dain had been acutely, and painfully, aware of her presence the moment she entered the room that evening. For all that he seemed engrossed in his research, he read very little and understood almost nothing of what he read. It was a long evening of acting on his part, and he was exhausted long before it was over. When she finally left for the night, he cried. Rat the Kitten, he felt, ought to have comforted him, but Rat, with Amber’s help, had recently discovered the kitchens, and was nowhere to be seen.

She didn’t come by the next evening, and he was both heartbroken and relieved. Fierguld stopped by.

“Where’s the other half of the Matched Set?” the headmaster asked.

“What?”

“Where’s Amber?” he clarified.

“I guess she’s busy,” Dain answered carefully.

“Maybe she’s out with that new friend of hers,” Fierguld suggested.

Dain felt a painful stab of jealousy. He covered it, and asked, “Who is her new friend?”

“Our next to last acquisition. Oakley. The elf from Deerfield.”

Dain nodded. He hadn’t any notion who Oakley was. He vaguely recalled the staff meeting when Oakley was discussed.

“It’s good to see her branching out, making new friends,” Fierguld commented. Dain nodded again. He was suddenly tired.

The next week was Amber's birthday. He thought he would like to acknowledge the event. But that would be inconsistent with his determination to behave distant and cold. He wrestled with the question all week, obsessing over it. Finally he hit on a plan that seemed perfect. He would invite Amber's new friend along! Remembering their perfect day in the woods, he thought another walk would be the thing. And cake, that was how you celebrated birthdays, wasn't it? He asked Mrs. Wainright to bake a small cake. He quietly spoke to Oakley, inviting her to the little excursion.

"But don't tell Amber," he cautioned. "It's to be a surprise."

Amber saw him talking to Oakley and immediately peppered the elf with questions. Oakley just said, "I didn't do very well on the last assignment. He wants me to come in for extra work tomorrow."

Amber was surprised. Dain usually let poor students sink or swim on their own. They either sought his help, which he grudgingly gave, or more often, another instructor's help, or didn't pass and found another subject to study. "Will you come with me? You're so good at Transduction, and you know him better than anyone else."

Amber agreed, and had no suspicion of any sort of surprise.

They arrived in his room the next afternoon immediately after their last class.

"Oakley! Amber!" Dain greeted them with uncharacteristic enthusiasm. "Let's go!"

"Go? Where are we going?"

"This way! Follow me!"

Dain did not take them to the Stream of the Perfect Day, as he called it in his mind. He didn't want to share that with Oakley. He took them to another trail that Crusher had shown him.

The trail had several interesting features, including the remnants of an old stone farmhouse, and it went along a bluff, higher and higher, past a tree that jutted out over the side. A rope hung from a limb over the river.

They ate cake at the farmhouse, then went took turns swinging on the rope. Dain took a turn swinging, then Amber. While Oakley was taking her turn, Dain said impulsively, “Come by the lab once in a while, Rat misses you.” Amber gave him an odd look, but said nothing.

Dain thought, “I shouldn’t have said that.” It went entirely against his decision to remain cold and aloof.

Amber put an arm around him. He froze. “I missed you,” she said simply. He didn’t move, didn’t breathe, didn’t say a word. Oakley swung back to the bluff and Amber took her turn. Dain’s hands shook, and he didn’t swing on the rope again.

“I invited her in, which was a mistake, and I have to push her away again,” Dain told himself. “If she comes by tomorrow, I must be distant again, not speak to her.”

That was his intention, but the latest issue of *Mage Notes* arrived. He couldn’t bring himself to act aloof in the excitement of seeing their own paper. It was just like old times, only even better because he knew now how precious the moment was. He let himself enjoy the evening, then chastised and scolded himself in the night.

After that she came more often. Oakley sometimes came with her, because Oakley was lonely and had not made other friends. Dain resented her intrusion and at the same time welcomed the sense of propriety her presence stamped on the evenings. But he most enjoyed the moments after Oakley had gotten tired and left, or the moments before Oakley wandered in, when it was just the two of them.

“You’re a fool,” he told himself, “you’re not helping her any.” Then he immediately changed his mind. “It’s only reasonable that it is a joy to work with a talented and skilled colleague. That I have the opportunity to be her mentor is a gift.”

To Amber, Dain seemed to blow hot and cold, one moment delighted with her company and the next moment repulsed by it. The inconsistency didn’t upset her. It seemed like a challenge. Her goal was to impress him so that he would be delighted with her. She worked harder than ever, not just in his lab but in all her classes, so that he would hear nothing but good reports of her. She was rewarded often enough that she continued her efforts. His attempts to rebuff her grew feebler and eventually discontinued.

He stopped worrying about it entirely—during the day. In the middle of the night he was plagued with insomnia and guilt. As soon as he saw her in the hall, all of that vanished and he just looked forward to the fun they would have later that day.

The summer session was optional, and more laid back. It included outings, which Dain formerly avoided and despised. Now he volunteered to lead expeditions into the woods nearby. He even helped with an overnight excursion. Fierguld was impressed. Dain’s attitude toward the students had changed entirely. He had indulged Dain’s disdain for students for decades, because he knew it stemmed from fear, and because he had seen more than one student thrive under Dain’s adversity where they had failed under Charity’s kindness. He steered those students toward Dain and the more sensitive students toward other instructors like Charity. But now, Dain was becoming much more reasonable. He was still a demanding instructor, but not as harsh, even to the less skilled students.

Chapter 6: A memory in a bottle

Both Amber and Dain had lost interest in the message bottles, their interest burned out by their long project. When the fall semester started, and the level 4's were ready for message bottles, their interest revived.

“Did we ever try wax?” Amber asked.

“How would you get the wax out of the bottle to hear the message?” Dain asked.

“Maybe you don't need the bottle.”

Amber set to work on putting the message in wax. She stenciled “Three flowers in a vase” onto the candle around the wick. She started the spell and melted the wax. As she was working, Rat jumped up on her lap and meowed. Startled, she jumped, then giggled. She finished the spell and left the wax to harden.

Before she could come back to see if the spell worked, Dain absently picked up the candle and took it into the storage rooms to light his way while he was looking for some supplies. Down in the basement, he lit the candle and sat on the floor to rummage through a drawer. Suddenly he heard Amber's voice, “Three flowers,” then felt a cat jump onto his lap, and jumped as if startled. Yet he was not startled. He was not, by nature, easily startled. He heard her giggle, then finish, “in a vase.”

He had felt a cat, but there was no cat. He had jumped but he had not felt startled. What was going on?

He found what he had come down for, and went back to the lab, where he saw Amber.

“Oh, there's the candle. Did you use it? Did my spell work? Did you hear the message?”

“I heard more than the message,” he answered. “Amber, I felt a cat land on my thighs. I jumped, even though I was not startled. Right in the middle of your message.”

“Really? How strange! But Rat did jump on me, and I was startled and I did jump, when I was making the message.”

“This is amazing.” Dain was solemn. “Give me quiet now, so I can think.”

She obediently cleaned up her area and prepared to leave.

“Amber,” Dain called her back. He was starting out a window. She went over to him. He turned to her and put his hand on her shoulder. “We have discovered something astounding today. This is going to change our world.”

She nodded, confident in his approval and sure of herself. “And tomorrow, we’ll just do it all again. This is what I want to do the rest of my life. We’re the perfect team. Like they call us, the Matched Set.”

“Yes,” he said. “Thank you.” His hand was still on her shoulder. He reluctantly let go, and she left him to his thoughts.

He resolutely put her out of his mind and focused on the implications of her accidental discovery. Late into the night he scribbled notes, planning out a long set of experiments and philosophizing on the applications. This would take more than just the two of them, he regretfully concluded. They would have to take on other students as apprentices.

He met with Headmaster Fierguld. The headmaster gave him permission to take on more student research assistants. The headmaster also gave permission for Amber to drop some of her classes so she could spend more time on the project, and he arranged for another instructor to cover both Dain’s classes and the few other students he mentored.

Amber trained the new researchers so that Dain could direct the project. It was an exciting time. They worked more closely together than ever before. In his intense focus on the project, Dain was finally able to put out of his mind any worries about being too attached to

Amber. They *had* to work closely together, he reasoned, to pull this off. He didn't have time to worry about it now. There would be time to worry later. And why worry, anyway?

There was plenty else to worry about. Even with the extra help and extra time, they needed more supplies, which cost money. They needed more help, and not just students, they needed an actual staff. That cost money. Dain talked it over with the headmaster.

"I know the school doesn't have that kind of resources," Dain explained. "I just wondered if you had any thoughts, with your connections, you know people."

Headmaster Fierguld did know people. "I'm making a trip to Potato City in two weeks," he said. "I'll set up a meeting with the Mage Academy while I'm there. Write something up that I can show them, that describes what it is you found."

He allowed Amber to take the two weeks off of all her classes so that she and Dain could focus on this. Even so, night after night found them in lab later and later. Dain looked up from his work late one night and Amber had fallen asleep, curled up in his chair, an open book on her lap that she had been reading. Rat the Kitten purred next to her. He stopped reading, and just watched them for a long time. Rat opened one eye to look at him, then closed it and purred. He just sat there, watching her sleep, for nearly ten minutes. Finally he stood up.

"Amber," he nudged her shoulder gently. She didn't move. He hated to waken her. "Amber, dear," he repeated, and touched her shoulder again. She yawned and stretched. "You fell asleep reading," he told her. "Let me walk you to the dorm." She sleepily stood up, and stumbled toward the door. "Whoa, there," he held out a hand to steady her. She leaned against him and he guided her down the long hallway, up the stairs, down another hall, around a corner, and to her dorm, his arm around her shoulders. He reluctantly removed his arm as they approached the dorm. "She fell asleep in the lab, we were working late," he explained to the

attendant on duty. The attendant nodded and opened the door. Amber disappeared into the dark room and Dain turned back to his lab to morph the chair into a bed and fall asleep himself with a warm, happy feeling.

“Whatever else happens,” he thought as he fell asleep, “this has been the best year of my life, and I can die peacefully, knowing I’ve tasted happiness at last.”

Chapter 7: A crisis, and an explosion

The report was finished, “Fireforge’s Memory Device”. With the report submitted and the headmaster gone for the next week presenting their report to the Academy, the matter was out of their hands, and their workload lightened a bit. Dain found time to make a surprise for Amber. The new technology was blossoming into an entire field of research, and one of the things the research team had invented was a way to store a memory. Another thing they were working on was more permanent Fireforge Devices. Dain planned to make one using electrical energy instead of matter like wax, sand, or smoke as the storage medium. He was going to store his memory of the Perfect Day in the Woods in the device. So long as it was recharged periodically, Amber would be able to experience his memory as many times as she wished. Only Amber would be able to call it up. He would tune the device to her, so that it would work only for her.

Amber had no idea he was building this device. She was making a birthday present for him: a wax kitten that repeated Rat’s purrs and meows. With the incorporation of electrical energy as storage, the team had devised a way to *copy* a message. She copied Rat’s noises to store hundreds of times in the wax figure. So long as the candle burned, for about 3 hours, Rat’s purrs and meows would sound. When the candle had burned out, the wax figure around it would remain.

Dain was aware she was working on something. He carefully did not look too closely, so as not to spoil her surprise. Sometimes he had to go to some effort to not see.

When Headmaster Fierguld returned from Potato City, he summoned Dain to his office. “I have good news,” he began. “The Academy is very interested in the Fireforge Device. They would very much like for you to continue your research in their facilities. However, they are

willing to fund it here if you can't leave. I think you ought to consider their offer carefully. We would lose a valuable member of our staff if you left. But you are an old friend, and I want what is best for you. The school will get by without you. The Academy has resources that we don't. You would have a bigger lab, and access to highly trained staff. Although I personally would miss you, I truly believe the Academy would be the best place for you.

"I know you declined their offer, was it 50 years ago? I think I know why you turned it down, and you've changed since then. You have certainly changed during the past year. I think you are ready to make this move.

"Regardless of your decision, they did request that you go to the Mage Conference and present some of your new technology. I know it's only two weeks away, and short notice."

Dain was overwhelmed. He was pale and trembling. He started to speak, but could only stammer.

"You needn't make a decision right now. You should probably have a decision made in two weeks though. Go get some sleep. You look dreadful, young friend."

This last was a reminder that Fierguld had been, if not old, at least not young, when he had hired Dain as a young instructor at the School of Sorcery.

He told Amber that the Academy was interested in the research and wanted him to visit and demonstrate the Fireforge device. She was ecstatic. He did not tell her the decision he had to make.

If he had been sleepless at times, and working late too often recently, it seemed to catch up to him now. Every time he turned around it seemed like he was falling asleep again. Over and over he woke up in his chair, a book on his lap, students busy around him. He couldn't seem to

stay awake at night and he had a terrible time rousing in the morning. With all the sleeping, and demonstrations to prepare, and a project to run, he had no time to contemplate his decision.

The night before he was to leave, he sent all the students away from the lab. He let Amber stay, because she insisted.

“I’m going for a walk around the school,” he told her. “I’ll be back in a bit.”

The night air was chilly. The moon and the stars were bright. He gazed at them as he walked along the smooth path, hoping for inspiration.

Fierguld was right. He had changed during the past year. He was no longer afraid of people. He was not afraid of children anymore, even girl children. He didn’t need the gruff armor he had worn for a hundred years, before he had met Amber. In the city, it would be easier for Crusher to visit him. He might see Crusher more often.

Fierguld was right. The Academy was the best place for this research. It was the best place for him. He was ready for it.

Fierguld was right. But he couldn’t bear the thought of leaving Amber.

Amber would be all right, he was sure. She had quickly grown into such a mature young woman, from the child she had been. She was taller than him, now. They still bore the nickname, “Matched Set”, but they weren’t such a matched set anymore. She would be angry at him for leaving, he thought, but she would prosper. She was such a skilled sorcerer already. She could finish her studies at the School of Sorcery, get some years of experience in the field, and then maybe the Academy would hire her, too. Then they could work together again.

He shook his head. He wasn’t planning her life. She might go out and become a famous sorceress, and meet someone and have a family.

The stars blurred as tears filled his eyes. It wasn't for her sake he couldn't bear the thought of leaving her. It was for his own sake.

He loved her. He had never been in love in his life, and here he was in love with a 16 year old human girl. In an instant he knew that he had to accept the job and leave her. He had been right on that Perfect Day in the Woods, he should have ended the relationship that day. He wasn't quite sure how he could have done that, no, he did know exactly how he could have done it. He could have gone straight to the headmaster and explained. That would have been the honorable thing to do, and that had never once crossed his mind.

It was what he should do right now, he thought. Amber was deeply attached to him too, he thought, although he did not believe that she was in love with him, not in that way. That would be ridiculous.

He should go straight to Fierguld, explain everything, thank him for his friendship over the past century, and leave without ever seeing Amber again.

He couldn't do that. He had to see her one last time. He had to give her his present, something to remember him by. He turned toward the lab.

No, he didn't want her to remember him. He wanted her to forget all about him. He would remember enough for both of them. He turned around to go to Fierguld's home.

He should tell her that. He should tell to forget him, he should tell her that he would do the remembering for both of them, that she was going to have such a wonderful life. He turned around again, to go back to the lab.

Amber was still in the lab. She hastily put the wax kitten inside a cabinet and pushed some other pieces with similar looking equipment on another side of the counter, as he came inside. He didn't notice.

"Amber, there is something I need to tell you." Amber waited. "I'm not sure how to begin. Sit down, dear girl."

"You sit," Amber said. He looked pale, and his eyes were red. She had never seen him like that. "Sit in your chair, and I'll pull up a chair."

He settled himself while she got another chair, and tried to think what to say.

"I don't know how to say this," he started again. "The Academy gave me a choice. I have to have a decision when I meet with them. They will fund our research here. Or they will let me use their facilities and give me staff."

"You can't leave!" Amber exclaimed vehemently. "No, no, I didn't mean that. But I don't want you to leave. Not yet! Not ever!" She grabbed his hand as she spoke. He leaned toward her and put his other hand on top of hers.

"There is something else," he said hesitantly. "We have been good friends. You know that I don't have many friends, and I was lonely when my son left. You filled a gap in my life..."

"You have been everything I needed, too," she interrupted. "I owe you so much." He shook his head.

"No, you owe me nothing. You have given me more than you realize. But there is a problem now. I blame myself, I shouldn't have let this happen." He let go of her hands, pulled away as she tried to hang on, stood up and began pacing. "Amber, I'm afraid I have let my feelings of friendship toward you develop in an unfortunate direction."

Amber was completely confused by this. "What are you saying?"

He turned to face her. "I have to leave. I can't work with you anymore. I'm far too fond of you."

"Nonsense," she said, refusing to understand his meaning. "You should be fond of people you work with. It makes it much more enjoyable to work with them. I'm a lot more than fond of you. You mean the world to me!"

He sighed. "Amber, I've fallen in love with you. I can't stay here anymore. I came to say goodbye."

"No! You mustn't!" she shouted. "It's not a problem! Don't you know I've had a crush on you almost as long as I've known you?"

That stopped him. "I had no idea," he mumbled.

"Of course I have. I know it would be scandalous for us here. But let's both go to the Academy. I know they usually don't take students until after they've finished at the School of Sorcery, but we can talk them into accepting me as your student."

"I don't think..." he began.

"Please," she begged, catching hold of his hands again. This time he did not pull away. "I couldn't bear it without you. That long month your son was here, I wanted you to be free to enjoy him, but, oh, how I resented him. I can't stand anything that takes you away. Take the job, and take me with you. Please!"

She flung her arms around him and impulsively kissed him. He closed his eyes and returned the kiss, shushing the inner voice that told him to break off the kiss and go straight to Fierguld's home. He held her head in his hands and continued the kiss. But the inner voice insisted.

"Amber," he finally broke off. "We can't. This is wrong."

“It isn’t wrong at all. It’s lovely,” she insisted. “The only reason you think it’s wrong is because you listen to social conventions. I’m disappointed in you.” Her censure was like a knife. “There’s absolutely nothing wrong when two people love each other, it doesn’t matter if there’s a difference in age or race. Don’t listen to the old gossips. You never have before. We can tell the Academy I’m a bit older than I am, and they don’t have to know that I’m your student. I can be on your research staff.”

“Fierguld won’t allow...”

“Fierguld won’t know until it’s too late. I’ll go with you tomorrow. We don’t ever have to come back here.”

Within minutes she had their escape planned out. She would smuggle Rat to the dorm tonight, and in the morning she would sneak out and meet him at the coach that was to take him to Potato City.

She kissed him again and he did not object this time. He wholeheartedly returned the kiss. He seemed incapable of defying her.

“Now, you go home and pack. I will see you in the morning.” She scooped up the sleeping Rat and headed to the dorm.

She was too excited to sleep. She quickly and quietly packed her things into a bag. She lay awake, imagining their new life in the city. She thought of her mother, and her nightmare childhood. That ordeal didn’t seem so brutal and unfair now, since she was being rewarded with such happiness.

Dain didn’t sleep either. He didn’t do any further packing, since he was already prepared for the trip that was planned. The Fireforge Device he was making for Amber was almost done.

By some accounts he could call it finished. But he hadn't tested it completely, and hadn't tried recharging it yet. He got it out and watched the Perfect Day in the Woods, smiling. They would have many more perfect days.

The thought of Fierguld troubled him. Fierguld was an old friend, and he could not imagine anything but disapproval from the headmaster. He should go to him tonight and explain, he thought, not with any intention of changing his mind, but so that his friend would understand. Or maybe he should write a letter.

He watched the memory again. He should make a copy of this memory for Fierguld. If Fierguld saw this, he would understand.

He reached for the electrical energy device to recharge the memory device. He didn't notice that Amber's equipment was mixed in with his equipment at the end of that bench. He picked up the electricity jar she was using for her wax kitten project. It was entirely the wrong one for what he was about to do.

The explosion rocked the building and rattled the windows. Amber was still lying awake, fully dressed for their flight, imagining their life to come. In one fluid movement she was out of bed and down the hall before even the attendant was awake. She ran down the stairs through the smoke that was quickly filling the long hall. The heat was unbearable.

"Dain!" she screamed. She screamed his name over and over until she coughed. She couldn't see and her eyes burned. She kept moving forward, ran into a wall, and coughed. She made it to the door of the lab and collapsed.

A few minutes later, the firefighter wizards arrived, called by the magical alarms set in every lab and every room of the school. They pulled her from the edge of the fire, badly burned.

Part 2: Dain

Chapter 8: The investigation

Amber woke up in pain.

“She’s awake,” a male elf voice said. “Call the headmaster.”

“Sorry, dear,” said another voice, possibly a human woman, “I know you are in a lot of pain, but just talk to the headmaster first and then we can give you something for it.”

“You’ll go right back to sleep when we give you this, and the headmaster really needs to talk to you first,” the other voice explained.

“Water,” Amber croaked. Hands hurried to hold a glass straw to her lips. She sucked a mouthful of the liquid and held it in her mouth. Seeing that was all she wanted, the nurse put the glass on the table. The liquid was not exactly water, and it soothed her throat.

“Dain,” Amber said, and her voice was not as hoarse. Neither nurse spoke. Amber hadn’t opened her eyes, so she didn’t see the glance they exchanged.

“Amber,” Headmaster Fierguld spoke. “Amber, I know you are in a lot of pain, so I won’t waste time. What were you doing in the lab?”

“I wasn’t in the lab,” she answered. “I heard the explosion. Dain...is he...” she couldn’t bring herself to ask. Fierguld did not answer her unasked question right away.

“How did you get to the lab? Where were you?”

“I was awake. I was going to go with him.”

“Why? Did he need you to help with the presentation?”

“No...we love...we loved each other. We were going to run away. Where is he?” she wailed.

Fierguld signaled to the nurses to give her a draught for the pain. As she drank it, he finally answered.

“I’m sorry, Amber. Dain did not survive the explosion.”

The healers from the temple tended to her burns. With the pain draughts, she did not suffer much physical pain. Her mental anguish they could not help. She wished she had died in the fire too. She didn’t see how she could live without Dain.

Fierguld’s mental anguish was also great. He had lost a dear friend, and he had failed to see what was going on. He had thought Dain and Amber were good for each other, helping each other over their troubled pasts. He had never suspected the truth. Now that he knew, there were a hundred little clues he should have noticed, should have interpreted differently. The investigation of the explosion was still underway, but until the cause was known, Fierguld had a hunch that the explosion had something to do with Dain’s and Amber’s plan to run away. Because of Fierguld’s inattention, his lack of imagination, his inability to believe this of his old friend, because of his failure, this girl was suffering, and his friend was dead.

He had several unpleasant messages to send. He summoned Amber’s father. He wished Aurel were alive. She would be able to help. But if Aurel were alive, Dain wouldn’t have come to the school. He sent for Kendall, Aurel’s daughter. Then he stared at the blank notepaper in front of him, hating to write the last letter, the letter that would be the first news Crusher had of his father’s death. Finally he wrote it, and tears splashed onto the words, smearing them. He blotted the tears away and re-wrote the letters.

In three days, the healers declared Amber physically out of danger, provided she continue to rest for a few days. Fierguld arrived at the hospital to claim her until her father arrived. Amber was sleeping.

“I’ll wait until she wakes,” he told the nurse. The nurse shook his head.

“She won’t wake up unless we make her. Or she isn’t asleep. She just lies there.”

“Maybe she should stay here?”

“Physically, her wounds healed two days ago. This...lethargy...isn't from her physical wounds. She has suffered a grave emotional trauma.”

“I know,” Fierguld said heavily.

The nurse roused Amber, who obediently followed Fierguld to the carriage.

“Amber,” Fierguld said, “do you want to know what caused the explosion?” She looked up. He took this for a sign of interest. “So do I. The investigators aren't quite sure yet. They have some questions for you. They need you to look at some things they found in the lab.”

Amber looked down again, nodded, and shuddered. He put his coat over her shoulders. The carriage arrived at the school. As they walked down the long halls, her shivering increased.

An old dwarf wizard greeted them in the hallway. The remains of the transduction lab down the hall were blackened and smoky.

“Headmaster, good day. You must be Amber. Thank you for coming. I am so sorry for your loss.” Amber tried to nod, but she was shivering too violently.

“We have determined the focus of the explosion. It is a device, but we don't know what the purpose of the device is. Headmaster Fierguld thought you might know.”

“It's all right if you don't,” Fierguld hastened to add. “We asked all the other students who had been working with you and Dain, and they didn't recognize it.”

“I'll know,” Amber whispered.

“Maybe you should sit down,” the wizard suggested. Fierguld fetched a chair from the classroom and Amber sat.

The dwarf showed her the device. It was badly charred on one side. She reached out a hand to it, and then stopped.

“I think it’s a Fireforge Device,” she said. “It might be tuned to me, so that only I can experience it.”

“Is there any way we can experience it with you?”

“Hold my hand.” The wizard took her hand, but she did not activate the device. She looked at Fierguld. After a moment, he put his hand on top of their hands.

She reached out her other hand to the device.

Water softly burbled in the creek. A girl splashed and laughed out of sight. “Amber,” Dain’s voice said over the memory, “this is my memory of our Perfect Day in the Woods. That creek belongs to us, and I’ve never been back to it. I didn’t want to go without you. Someday, years from now, when it no longer matters that we ran away together, we’ll go back. Until then, you can see the creek in this memory device as often as you like.” Amber herself appeared in the memory, and lay down in the sun on the rock in the middle of the creek, water spreading around her feet and arms. Dain continued to explain how to use the Fireforge Device, instructions that were useless from a practical standpoint since the device was broken, but valuable for the knowledge of what was possible with the new technology. “I feel like I am the youngest of you and me. I love you!” he finished, and broke into a wide grin.

Fierguld and Amber both had tears streaming down their faces. The inspector said in a low voice to Fierguld, “This confirms her story.” Fierguld nodded.

A tall, dark woman arrived in a week. Fierguld marveled at how much Kendall looked like her mother, Aurel. Aurel had been very pale, while Kendall was dark, but they shared the family resemblance to dragons. Rumor was that they had a dragon lineage, and that Aurel could

actually turn into a dragon. Fierguld knew that was false. Aurel could only sprout wings and claws. As far as he knew, Kendall did not do that. Yet.

“Thank you for coming,” Fierguld said, rising from his desk to greet her. “I don’t know if you can help her.”

“Dain was my mother’s last protégé before she died,” Kendall said. “I will help his last protégé if I can.”

“I have sent for Amber’s father. He won’t know what to do with her, and he will be grateful for your help. I have not told him you are Aurel’s daughter. That would scare him.” Kendall smiled that slightly frightening smile that reminded him of dragons.

“I’ll handle the father.”

Kendall spent the days discretely interviewing everyone Amber knew. She claimed to be making a memorial to Dain, her mother’s last protégé, but she was actually studying up on Amber, learning what she ate and when, who she talked to and what she said to them. More importantly, she learned what Amber didn’t eat, what she didn’t say, and what she didn’t do.

Amber’s father arrived two days later. Fierguld did not tell him that Amber and Dain had been planning to run away. He simply said, “They were very close. Dain helped her get over her mother. I think Kendall will be good for Amber. She will teach her to get past this death, and move on with her life. Let me introduce you to her, and then you can go see Amber.”

Amber’s father agreed to everything Kendall proposed with relief. He had no idea what to do with his adolescent daughter, much less a grief stricken one.

Crusher arrived last, after Amber's father had left, and after Kendall had taken Amber away to her mother's mountain hermitage. The message had been delivered with all speed, and Crusher had left his team immediately upon hearing the news. But he had been far away. Crusher was devastated.

"What happened?" he demanded. "How could this happen? My father was a skilled sorcerer."

"I'm so sorry," Fierguld said sympathetically. "He was the most skillful sorcerer at this school. We were lucky to get him, and only his own insecurities held him back from leaving us for a better situation."

He got up from his desk, and poured a cloudy gray liquid into two glasses. He set one in front of Crusher.

"That said," Fierguld continued, "it was not entirely out of character for him to make mistakes. Shortly after you left, he used a wolverine pelt that was contaminated with cat fur, in a potion intended to help Mrs. Wainright's nephew travel more safely. Fortunately, no harm came of that mistake, other than a lost bag." Fierguld suddenly and vividly remembered his own words at the time. *Dain Fireforge is growing up at last, and he'll be better for it, if he survives.* He had not intended to be prophetic. "Mistakes like that were a rare event for your father, and only happened when he was experiencing an emotional distraction."

"The wolverine pelt...that was right after I left the first time?"

"Yes. I believe he was distracted at the time because he was missing you."

"And he made another mistake because he was still missing me?"

"Ah, no. I mean, I believe he did continue to miss you, but that is not what was distracting him."

“But something was distracting him.”

Fierguld nodded. “He had...bonded...with a student, a human girl.”

“I knew it! He pretended he didn’t want to talk about her, but I could tell he wanted to talk about nothing else. Amy, I think?”

“Amber. She was shy and lonely...”

“How did *they* ever strike up a friendship then?” Crusher made a noise that might have been a laugh. “Both of them shy. Conversations between them must have involved a *lot* of silence.”

“I believe that was not the case. I saw them sometimes. Apart, they were shy and taciturn. Together, they both came alive. It was remarkable.” He shook his head. “I wish I had seen...Well, they worked together well. She was...is...very talented. They even published a paper.”

“I know, he wrote to me about it. And we met a wizard who had a copy, I saw the paper. Of course I didn’t understand it. I remember her name was on it.”

“Well, they were very close. He was quite attached to her. They made a new discovery, they called it the Fireforge Device. I met with the staff at the Mage Academy in Potato City about getting funding it. They agreed to fund it, but they also offered him a lab and research staff onsite, at the Academy.” He stopped for a moment. “The rest of the story is mainly what she told me. But we have evidence that supports it.”

“Go on.”

“To my knowledge, he had not made a decision yet, and they were expecting him to answer when he arrived the next day. According to Amber, he went for a walk, and when he

came back to the lab, he told her he was accepting the job offer. He said he couldn't stay because he loved her."

"That's ridiculous," Crusher said angrily.

Fierguld's voice was a little unsteady as he repeated the painful conversation he had had with Amber. "Amber claims responsibility for persuading him to run away with her. She said they made plans that he would take the job, but she would go with him as a research assistant." He paused. "I don't think their plan was very well thought out. I would surely have not rested until I had located a missing student!"

Crusher only nodded. His expression was stormy.

"He had been making a present for Amber," Fierguld continued. "Using their new technology, he created a Fireforge Device and stored a memory. He called it the Perfect Day in the Woods." Crusher remembered walking in the woods with his father during his last visit home. "The device could be recharged to play the memory over and over. The inspectors believe he used the wrong electrical energy converter to recharge the device. To put it simply, one jar had green electricity, and the other one blue electricity. He had the green jar at hand, and we don't know why he picked the blue one."

"Where is she?" Crusher growled.

"Who, Amber? She is safe...I think. Like many of our students, she did not have an easy life before coming here, and I am not certain she will recover from this."

"Maybe it's best that she doesn't," Crusher said. Fierguld did not respond. Grief made people say cruel things.

As he left Fierguld's office, Crusher paused. "Two years ago, I gave my father a kitten. Do you know..."

“I sent it with Amber,” Fierguld answered. “The cat knew her better than anyone besides Dain.”

“She took my father,” Crusher said, “I guess she can have the cat too.”

Chapter 9: The mountain

The journey to the mountains took over two weeks. They reached a little town at the base of a mountain, with the ambitious name of Silver Dragon.

“The town is named for my mother,” Kendall explained as they followed the little donkeys up the base of the mountain. This didn’t make any sense to Amber. She knew that Kendall’s mother was Aurel, and she knew that Aurel was famous. But she hadn’t heard the rumors about her dragon nature. She didn’t care enough to ask.

There was a statue of Aurel in the town square of Silver Dragon, complete with dragon claws and wings. The mayor and her family greeted them warmly. “Your rooms are ready,” she told them, “and I’ve instructed the cooks to prepare a light meal tonight. I know you’re too tired to eat, after all that traveling. We’ll have a feast tomorrow to celebrate.”

Kendall demurred. “Please delay the feast for one week.” She knew there had to be a feast. She owed it to the town, for her mother. But Amber would be offended by a celebration. She would get Amber settled in the hermitage, then make a day trip to town for the celebration.

The trees were bare as they ascended the mountain the next day. The hermitage was near the tree line. The barrenness suited Amber. It felt right, a reflection of the death of her whole world. They left the carriage in Silver Dragon and walked. The wind was chilly but the climb kept them warm. They passed by a farm, and stopped for a rest. The family fed them lunch, goat cheese and bread and fizzy juice. Kendall spoke with the farmer for a while. The farmer disappeared for a while, and Kendall made no move to leave. Finally the farmer and one of her daughters reappeared, driving a few goats.

“This is from the flock they took in after my mother died,” she explained. “My mother used to keep them when she lived up here. We’ll need them this winter.”

But they did not have to drive the little herd. The farmer's daughter did that, so they could go on ahead and arrive at the cottage before dark. The daughter would stay with them overnight, then return to the farm the next morning.

Kendall had Amber check the fence of the goat's corral for holes, while she built a fire. Two weeks ago, when Fierguld had contacted her, she had sent word to Silver Dragon to prepare the cottage for inhabitants. They had cleaned out the century's accumulation of dust, brought in fresh mattresses and blankets, and stacked firewood. Yesterday, they had stocked the pantry. Kendall had made these arrangements before arriving, and when they passed through town, she paid them handsomely. She sent payment with the farmer's daughter also.

Away from all reminders of her past life at school, except for the cat, Amber began to show some interest in the little farm. Every morning after breakfast, she and Kendall walked around the farm.

"My mother did very little actual farming," Kendall explained. "That was mainly just for show. She did things for people, and in return she could demand just about anything she wanted."

"What did she do?"

"Hm?"

"You said she did things for people."

"Oh. She was a sorcerer, you know. And a painter. And she knew a lot about very important people. They consulted her on just about anything. Kings and queens, penniless wanderers, anyone brave enough to ask her."

"Brave?"

“They had to be quite brave to approach her, because of all the rumors about her. She encouraged the rumors and spread a lot of them herself. Most of them had some basis in reality. She wasn’t really as terrifying as the rumors made her sound. It was the way she presented the stories, even though the facts were true, the way she told them made her sound cold and cruel.”

Kendall never mentioned Dain or asked Amber about her life, until Amber showed interest. She was patient. Eventually Amber asked, “Why did you bring me here?”

She didn’t answer immediately. She appeared to be finishing a tricky line of knitting. She was collecting her thoughts and thinking how to phrase her answer, and which of the many truths to give.

“Headmaster Fierguld and I chose the farm,” she said. “We had several reasons. It is very peaceful and quiet here.”

“It is,” Amber agreed. “I like it.”

“That’s good.”

“What were the other reasons?”

“Except for Rat the Kitten, there are no reminders here.”

“So you want me to forget?” Amber asked a little angrily. Kendall thought that was good. It took energy to be angry.

“No. We want you to remember when you are ready to.”

“I remember all the time,” Amber said in a low voice. Kendall didn’t answer. “Was that all?”

“All of what?”

“All the reasons?”

“No.”

“What are the other reasons?”

“While my mother lived here, from time to time she took on an apprentice. Her last apprentice was a young dwarf. He was just a child. A little younger than you, not in years of course but as dwarves go. He had a troubled past. Like you. She helped him get past that.”

“Was that...” Amber avoided speaking the name. But Kendall didn’t help her out, and at last she finished her sentence. “...Dain?”

“Yes.”

Amber paced angrily across the room and back again.

“How is that supposed to help me? Being in the same place where he was?”

“I’m not sure yet,” Kendall answered. “There are notes and things, from when he was here. It might help you understand him better.”

“I understood him *perfectly*.”

She grabbed her overcoat and went outside. The sky was clear and cold and the stars looked close enough to touch. She meant to walk, or maybe run, preferably off a cliff. But she just gazed at the stars. Maybe a young Dain had looked at these stars over a hundred years ago. She wished she could show him the stars.

Fierguld visited in the spring. They had roast goat for supper and Kendall sent Amber to do the washing up while Kendall and Fierguld inspected the farm.

“She’s doing well,” Fierguld said, petting a black goat.

“Ha. She wants you to think that. She puts on a good show. She always has. Careful, that one bites.” A speckled brown and gray goat was pushing the black goat out of the way, trying to get Fierguld’s attention, or perhaps just his buttons.

“What do you mean?” He straightened up and left the speckled goat alone. They moved on toward the orchard.

“As far as I could tell, she never talked about her mother. I doubt she even told Dain about her mother.”

“He knew. He was at the staff meeting.”

“I’m sure he knew. But she never talked about it, not even to him.”

“And you think her mother still bothers her? After all that happened with Dain?”

“Yes, but that’s not my point.”

“What was your point? Is this ripe?” Fierguld tugged at a golden apple.

“Yes, pick one for me too. Up there, see? My point is, she puts on a good show. She puts away anything she doesn’t want to think about, and pretends it never happened. She’s hardly 17, and she’s pretending that most of her life never happened.”

“Will you be able to help her? How long will it take?”

“I can help her if she lets me. She’ll help herself more than I can, if she chooses. It takes as long as it takes. She has 17 years of trauma to deal with. I hope it won’t take 17 years to recover, but it will take time.”

Fierguld nodded and sighed unhappily.

“The dean of Transduction at the Academy wants to talk to Amber.”

“Whatever for?” Kendall bit into the apple. It was tart and juicy.

“What she and Dain were working on. The Fireforge Device. His notes didn’t survive the explosion. The other students didn’t have enough of a grasp of what they were doing to recreate much of it. Only Amber has a chance of being able to carry on their research.”

“It will be a long time, if ever, before she is ready to try sorcery again.”

“Sorcery isn’t something that can be suppressed, usually. Attempts by a sorcerer to suppress it tend to end badly.”

“We’ll see,” Kendall answered. “Now isn’t the time to ask her. Tell them we’ll let them know when, if ever, she is interested in passing that knowledge along.”

The night before Fierguld left, Amber told him, “It’s not your fault.”

He glanced across the heavy wooden table at Kendall before answering. “What isn’t?”

“Any of it. You couldn’t have known, and there’s nothing you could have done to save him.”

“Thank you, Amber.” He started to say more, but his eyes had filled with tears.

“There is only one person to blame,” she added.

“Dain...”

“Only one person *alive*,” she corrected herself.

Fierguld shook his head. “No, no, you cannot blame yourself either,” he said. She smiled sadly, unconvinced. He looked at Kendall, who was watching them intently. She shrugged.

After Fierguld left, Kendall asked Amber to help her sort some of her mother’s notes and papers. In cataloguing the collection, they would necessarily come across information about Dain. Kendall didn’t exactly have a plan to help Amber. She was guided by her instinct, hoping that her mother’s successes helping troubled young sorcerers had rubbed off on her. She had an idea that it would help Amber to learn that Dain was a whole person, with insecurities and faults, beyond the idolized perception she had of him based on the year and a few months she had known him.

Some of Aurel's collection had extremely sensitive information about very powerful and influential people. Many of them were long dead, but elves live hundreds of years. Certain people of other races, like Aurel herself, sometimes found themselves with inordinately long lives too. Immortality was a relative term. Amber probably shouldn't see some of this information. But, Kendall rationalized, Aurel had surely magically protected the truly sensitive material.

Kendall ignored the niggling thought that her mother had an odd sense of humor at times.

Amber and Kendall learned from Aurel's notes that Dain was about average of all her apprentices. Of course, the notes explained, all but four of her apprentices were excellent, so being average still meant he had talent. However, his talent was impeded by emotional blocks. Aurel had Dain start a journal to deal with these blocks. She kept a journal too, of his progress. She interviewed his family, his peers, and community members from his home to learn more about what the emotional blocks were. Between the two journals, Amber pieced together a fairly detailed story of Dain's life.

Chapter 10: The new baby

“Dain!” his mother called, her voice tinged with worry. She was always worried these days. Dain thought it was because he was so clumsy. He hadn’t always been clumsy. His father said he would grow out of it. In the past five years, Dain had broken six plates, the clock that used to have little constructs come out and announce the time, the china dolls that had belonged to great-great-grandfather, and a cow. It hadn’t been a large cow, and it got better, but nonetheless Dain had managed to injure it. He had been milking the calf’s mother, and the calf got in the way. Dain had meant to nudge it out of the way, but spilt the milk, annoyed the cow, and injured the calf.

Dain hurried in, tripping over his own feet as he neared the house. He didn’t fall, but he dropped the daisies he had picked for the supper table. He gathered them back up and came inside. His mother took the daisies from him. He washed up for supper and sat down at the cheery table covered with a red and white tablecloth, his slightly battered daisies in the center. He was very hungry.

“Slow down,” his father chided as Dain noisily ate.

“Sorry,” he mumbled, his mouth full. His mother tightened her lips at the rudeness.

“Sorry,” he mumbled again, but his mouth was still full, so it didn’t do much good.

“We have something to tell you,” his mother said. She paused until Dain realized that he was expected to stop eating for the announcement.

“You’re going to have a little brother or sister,” his father said.

“Oh.” Dain wasn’t sure what to say. He looked at his mother. “When?”

“In the spring.”

That was a long time away. Dain looked at his plate. There might still be some meat on that bone. His parents looked at each other.

“Did you have any questions?”

Dain shook his head. His father picked up his fork, and Dain took that as a sign that he could recommence eating.

Sometimes his son’s clumsiness yielded falls and spills that were somehow more spectacular than they ought to be. Gover puzzled over it for a long time, and watched Dain carefully. He suspected that the results exceeded what would be expected if only natural laws were at work. His suspicion was confirmed one day when Dain reached for a bucket that was hanging just out of reach. Dain tripped, and the bucket fell on him. But—*Dain hadn’t touched the bucket.*

“My son is a sorcerer,” he said proudly...and sadly.

Natala didn’t look proud or sad when Gover told his wife. She looked worried. She seemed to be worried all the time about everything, but he knew the only thing she was really thinking about at all was the baby. It had been a difficult pregnancy. He hoped the last six months would go better than the first year of her pregnancy. Dain took her worrying so personally.

They hadn’t mentioned the pregnancy to him until now, and hadn’t told him about the troubles. They were trying to protect him, not worry him, and didn’t realize that he picked up on their worry and attributed it to himself. He wasn’t sure what he was doing to make them worry. He just assumed it was his fault and never questioned the premise. He wished he could figure out what it was so that he could fix it.

Amber thought that Dain's discovery of his own sorcery wasn't so bad, as far as those experiences went. She had her own experience, and had heard stories from the other children at the School of Sorcery. While none of them had an easy time, hers was worse than any she had heard yet. Dain's story didn't seem so bad.

Dain's little sister Mishko was born as winter was giving way to spring. She was born early. The difficult pregnancy had gotten better toward the end, but the birth was too soon and did not go well. The midwife² thought the baby had died before she was born. But with perseverance she coaxed the baby to breathe, and her color finally brightened up. The other midwife, tending to Natala, thought she was going to lose a mother, for the first time.

Gover had his hands full for a few months, caring for his invalid wife and a new baby that needed even more care than new babies usually did, if such a thing was possible. They were not *poor* farmers, but they did not have much to spare for healers and nurses. The neglected farm fared poorly that year, and Dain was left largely on his own just as he was discovering his sorcery. Gover couldn't cope with the budding sorcerer, and tried to minimize the damage by repeatedly cautioning Dain to "be careful" and keeping him at a distance from his mother and sister.

That left Dain with the impression that the baby was incredibly fragile, and that he was far too rough and clumsy to be trusted anywhere near her. The baby, it seemed, cost him his mother, whom he rarely saw for several months after the birth, as she recuperated. The healer had saved her life after the birth, but healers in this area were expensive. They did not have money for any but the most essential services, so she had to spend a long time recovering.

² The dwarf word for this person roughly translates to our word "midwife". However, the midwife that delivered Dain's sister was a male dwarf.

A violent wind in the area had knocked over several trees and damaged houses, barns, and fences in Dorgen. The family's farm was spared, luckily. The entire community rallied to help the less fortunate repair their structures. The older children, including Dain, were set to repairing a neighbor's fence. The fence was made of rocks and the children thought the work was back-breaking. They had to carry in more rocks from the creek.

It started off as a contest.

"I'll get that rock," Brind boasted. "It's too heavy for either of you."

Kara immediately picked out a larger rock. Dain looked around for an even larger rock. But the only larger rocks were boulders. He went further up the hill and found one half buried. By the time he had it excavated, Brind and Kara had each gotten their rocks in place and returned for the next rocks.

"Even if you ever get that thing out," Brind jeered, "you can't carry it!" Kara laughed.

Dain was embarrassed. He had misjudged the size of this rock. The part that stuck out, for all that it was large, was actually deceptively small. He was afraid Brind was right. The excavation was going far too slowly, and already the rock was too large for anyone to carry.

He was embarrassed, frustrated, and angry. Brind and Kara each got their next rock and headed off toward the fence. Dain angrily yanked on the rock, throwing all his weight into it.

The rock was actually part of a limestone outcropping. The hill itself was a limestone structure covered with a bit of topsoil. Dain accidentally pulled the entire hill down in a landslide that wiped out the partly repaired fence and buried two children (not Brind or Kara), and himself. He and the two buried children were rescued. They all survived.

“You have to send him away, Gover,” Elder Stasha said emphatically. Her silver braids fell almost to her waist, indicating her revered age and her status in the village. “We haven’t had a sorcerer around here in two centuries. There’s no one to train him.”

Dain’s father looked sad. He took another cookie from the plate she had brought. “I knew he had some sorcery in him. But I’ve been so preoccupied with Natala and Mishko, I haven’t even had time to tell him.”

“He didn’t know?” Stasha said, shocked. Gover shook his head guiltily.

“I know I should have talked to him. There has just been too much. Where can he go?”

“The sorcerer on the mountain takes apprentices sometimes.”

“Aurel? But...she’s a dragon.”

“So I’ve heard. It might not be true. And even if it is, that doesn’t mean she’ll eat him. By all accounts she is...” Stasha was going to say “good” but remembered several accounts that did not cast her in a strictly “good” light. “...not entirely evil,” she finished weakly.

Gover winced. But he didn’t see that he had a choice.

Chapter 11: Aurel's apprentice

Dain felt awful. He didn't want to leave. But he was afraid to stay. He had caused awful damage and hurt two people not counting himself. He hadn't wanted the healer, because he didn't want his father to pay for it. He tried to tell his father that he didn't mind getting better without the gods' intervention. He thought surely he could do no damage from a sickbed. But his father didn't listen and paid the healer anyway. Then he told Dain he was to be apprenticed to a sorcerer.

Brind and Kara made sure that Dain knew hundreds of unsettling rumors about Aurel before he left. Dain thought they might have made some up themselves. All the same he was nervous.

He made the journey to the hermitage. Aurel was an old, old woman. The little farm near the tree line on the mountain looked terribly poor. But she had these amazing paintings on all her walls. Dain thought that if she needed money she could easily sell those paintings for quite a lot.

Amber looked at the paintings still hanging on the walls of the little house and realized they were probably the same paintings Dain had seen, over a hundred years ago.

"Was she really part dragon?" Amber asked Kendall, who laughed.

"Let's just say that one of my ancestors was a dragon."

"The first thing I'm going to teach you is to control your magic," Aurel told Dain after he introduced himself. He had thought there would be more to it than that, maybe a test or a challenge. He had thought Aurel would look more intimidating. She didn't look like a dragon in the least. "Then I'll work out the bugs in your head. After that, if I have any time, I'll teach you some spells. But that's not important."

“Bugs? In my head?”

“In your mind. There are all these problems inside, anyone can see that. We’ll straighten them out.”

Dain did not understand in the least what she meant and was more than a little worried. But in general, nothing much she said made sense, so eventually, he stopped worrying.

Aurel was a crotchety old woman. She always had an old ferret nearby that did nothing but sleep and stink. She called the creature Mrs. Nesmith. For all he could tell it was dead, except whenever he got too close it bit his fingers. The nearest neighbor was a quarter-day’s walk down the mountain, and a half-day’s walk back up. He didn’t feel lonely exactly, but it was not the most exciting life. And he had thought the little village he grew up in was dull.

She insisted Dain have daily lessons, and then he was to do his chores and keep out of her way. This wasn’t difficult. His chores seemed to consist of only running the entire farm. That didn’t leave him a lot of time to do much else.

It wasn’t his nature to grumble, so he took care of the stupid goats and milked them, made goat cheese, and tended the sparse crops without enjoyment but without resentment. He tended to think he deserved hard work now for being foolish and clumsy in the village.

He quickly learned how to control the magic. Aurel gave him impossible tasks to force him into frustration so that he could feel the magic welling up and stop it, or as she preferred to say, redirect it. During these daily lessons, she regaled him with tales of how other students of hers had overcome difficulties similar to his. She gave him reading assignments, and he was astonished when he realized that the authors of the important looking tomes shared the same name as her students.

“Are all your students named after famous sorcerers?” he asked. She burst into laughter.

“My students became these famous sorcerers,” she answered. He felt very foolish. But he had another question.

“If you’ve had such good students that they become famous,” he asked, “why did you take me on?”

“I like a challenge.”

It took him a while to puzzle that one out, and when he realized he’d been insulted he felt more foolish than ever.

After a year she sent him to visit his family and he thought he might not come back. His mother was much healthier. His baby sister was fat and gurgly. His father looked older than he remembered.

“Gover ought to spend this year just sleeping,” his mother said when he remarked on it, “to make up for being so overworked. But he just keeps at it, trying to do too much on the farm.” Dain wished he had been more help and less trouble for his father. He tried to help while he was home. But he was so nervous milking the cow that his old clumsiness returned. The milk spilt and his father was suddenly right there, cleaning up the mess and tactfully suggesting he go find his old friends and play with them.

He didn’t really have old friends. He knew other children but he wasn’t at all fond of them. He was still scared of his baby sister. Every time he even looked at her, he thought his mother or his father got nervous. They did not ask him to babysit.

A week of that was enough. With relief he was on his way back to Aurel’s.

“Haven’t you gotten clumsy,” she remarked when he arrived. She made him go back to the basic drills.

Until he left and got clumsy again, he hadn't realized that he had gotten so much better.

Aurel sent him home to visit once a year. Every year he returned clumsy, and she put him through the basic drills again.

"It's time to see to the bugs in your head," she announced after a couple years of this. He had forgotten about the bugs.

"I still don't understand, what do you mean by bugs?" The littlest goat butted at his legs.

"The things in your head that keep you from being who you are. The ones that make you clumsy when you visit your family. First you're going to keep a journal. Write in it every day." A bigger goat got a little too close to her, and Mrs. Nesmith bit it. The goats quickly learned to keep their distance from Aurel.

"What do I write?"

"Doesn't matter. Anything at all. Just write something."

In a slight fit of rebellion he wrote, "This is stupid." An hour later he felt foolish, crossed it out, and wrote, "I saw a mountain bluebird today." After another five minutes he added, "It was blue." And finally, "It had a red breast, like a robin." Then he felt rebellious again and muttered, "I wrote something, anyway."

Aurel didn't comment on what he wrote. He wasn't sure she ever read it. Somehow she seemed to know with unerring accuracy whether or not he'd written in it. If he missed a single day the journal would be on his pillow when he went to bed. And if he didn't write in it even then, she would actually wake him up and make him write in it right then, still half asleep.

Sometimes she suggested topics he could write about.

"Write about your baby sister," she said. He wrote about how fragile and delicate she was. She wasn't really fragile or delicate at all, but that is how he saw her.

“Write about the landslide,” she said once. He rebelled again and did not comply. She didn’t comment. He really thought she did *not* read his journal, but he just couldn’t tell. Several days later she made the same suggestion. “Write about the landslide.” Again he didn’t do it. Again and again, every few days, she made the same suggestion. Finally he wrote, “There was a landslide,” and her next suggestion had nothing to do with the landslide.

She had to be reading it, he thought. He started keeping the journal with him all the time, so she couldn’t possibly be reading it.

“Write about apples,” she told him next. This seemed completely random. She couldn’t know whether or not he wrote about apples. So he didn’t.

But a few days later, “Write about apples.”

“How do you know?” he asked. She just smiled.

In truth, she didn’t read his journal. She was very good at reading people.

Over time he wrote all about the landslide. He wrote about his baby sister. He wrote about being clumsy and foolish, and feeling like everything he touched would break. He wrote about his mother being worried. And, except when he went home to visit his family, his clumsiness and foolishness disappeared entirely.

Kendall had Amber writing in a journal too. Amber wondered if Kendall read her journal, or just magically knew what she was writing in it. Kendall didn’t seem like a sorcerer, but maybe she was so good that she could disguise that.

While the hermitage could get lonely at times, at other times it had a steady stream of visitors. When visitors arrived Dain was sent out to do chores. If there were no chores he could

practice some spell or other. But there were always chores. The visitors looked poor, regal, and everywhere in between. Sometimes Aurel talked about them after they left. This one wanted a husband for his daughter, that one wanted a daughter for her husband, the next wanted state secrets.

“State secrets?”

“I can’t tell you, or they wouldn’t be secrets now, would they?”

Dain had long since learned that when she made these silly, cryptic remarks that the conversation was over.

Some visitors were regulars. Others came once and never again. They all left something. If they had nothing to leave, they helped with the chores.

“I don’t think we actually need all these goats,” Dain said. The goats didn’t like him, and the feeling was mutual. “We get so much from all your clients, that we would be fine without the goat cheese.”

“You are wrong, little cat,” Aurel said. Dain groaned inwardly, thinking that she was going to be cryptic again. “We need the goats so that you will have something to do.”

Most of the cheese that Dain made, they gave to the villagers in Silver Dragon.

“Good cheese,” Aurel told him. “If you hadn’t done well, I would not give it away. You’d be eating a lot of goat cheese this winter, if you hadn’t done well.”

Amber liked the goats. She wasn’t too fond of goat cheese. She wondered if Kendall would be performing services for clients and they would get paid in better food. It didn’t seem like Kendall was getting a steady stream of visitors. But they did have other food. Kendall seemed to have ample money at least.

Dain's visits home continued to make him clumsy. His baby sister was a young lady, who thought her older brother insufferably arrogant and foolish. He still thought of her as fragile and was just as scared as ever.

In his opinion, Dain did spend too much time on chores, the "bugs in his head", and learning to simply control his magic. But he did also learn spells. Aurel taught him to read magical writing and he discovered a world of information all over the farm. There was magical writing on the barn, the gate, the path, and everywhere in and on the house. She gave him his own prism, which he used to read magic through, and just to look at the colorful lights in normal sunlight and candlelight.

Aurel taught him to see magic and he discovered that every part of the farm was magical. (This is why the farm was in such good repair one hundred years after anyone had lived in it, when Kendall and Amber came.)

Aurel taught him how to create light shows and he entertained the mountain side with his displays. She taught him how to make ghostly sounds and he terrorized the goats. For weeks the milk was not fit for cheese, and she strictly forbid him from teasing the goats. He kept a lump of wax in his pocket anyway, for any occasion to make the ghostly noises.

"Mending" was his favorite spell. Although he wasn't nearly as clumsy as when he had first come, at least not usually, he had his moments. And even graceful people have accidents and break things. Knowing how to magically mend broken things took the pressure off. Without the pressure to be careful, he didn't make as many mistakes. Knowing how to mend freed him from needing to know how to mend.

He hated the “Message” spell. When he first learned it, he hated it, because Aurel began using it on him. No more calling out “Dain!” across the fields and he could pretend not to hear. Now she just whispered his name and what she wanted, and there was no escaping or pretending not to hear, and she required him to answer her immediately. Except that the spell required a short bit of copper wire. He often lost his.

She started having him help her prepare potions, artifacts, and spells for her clients. At first he mostly just fetched supplies. This familiarized him with her extensive stock, and with the sorts of ingredients required by spells. Later, she let him perform some of the spells required. In twenty years, he was doing most of the work for her clients. There were a few she kept to herself, such as the advisor who needed information of a delicate nature about her king. It was a simple spell to get the information, but due to the sensitivity of the issue, she kept this one to herself.

These exceptions grew fewer and fewer.

Over a century later, he would use that most basic spell as a basis for the “Message in a Bottle” spells that led to the Fireforge Device. Amber shook her head at this notion.

A respectable, elegant elf named Fierguld was one of Aurel’s regular clients. Gradually Dain realized that Fierguld was one of the few whose visits did not always, or even often, include a job. Fierguld visited socially. Aurel always fed him the best of their pantry, when he came. She always seemed happy when he came. But inevitably as the evening wore on, she would send Dain out to the barn to practice one spell or another.

One evening in the 19th year of Dain’s apprenticeship, after she had sent Dain out for the evening, Fierguld announced, “The school needs teachers.”

“I’m too old,” Aurel said. “I already told you I won’t teach at a school. Does the school need more money? I’ll give you money.”

“I need more teachers. I wasn’t thinking of you.”

“Who?”

“Dain.”

“He’s not ready.”

“He will be. I’ll wait.”

Aurel rocked in her rocking chair. Her ancient ferret, Mrs. Nesmith, was draped around her neck. Mrs. Nesmith snored slightly. Aurel stroked her fur. Fierguld wrinkled his nose as Mrs. Nesmith emitted an odd smell.

“Yes, he will be. I’ll make sure of it. It’s not long now, you know.”

Fierguld sighed. “You don’t know that. There is no such spell as predicting your own death.”

“It’s not a spell.” Fierguld didn’t argue. Aurel continued to rock. “I’ve been wondering what to do with him.”

“Kendall?”

“She’s no sorcerer. He’s got more talent already than most masters anyway.”

“Then why is he still an apprentice?”

“The bugs in his head.”

Fierguld was used to her turns of phrase, and simply nodded.

“Being around children will be good for him,” she continued. “That’s his main hang-up now. He’s still terrified of children. When he starts teaching, give him boys to teach at first. He’s most scared of girl children.”

“How do you know? Get a lot of children up here, do you?”

Aurel chuckled. “You’re getting sassy in my old age. Think I don’t have it anymore?”

Fierguld held up his hands in pretend horror. “Perish the thought. Even at your feeblest, I’m sure you could hold off an army.”

“Ha. No, I can just tell. Little things. And centuries of learning about people.” Fierguld knew better than to ask how many centuries. Rumors put her age at a millennia, but he suspected she was even older than that.

“If he’s terrified of children, will he be able to teach?”

“He’ll learn.”

“Kendall?” Amber asked. “How could Dain have been scared of girl children? That just doesn’t make sense. He wasn’t scared of us. He wasn’t scared of me. He was just kind of impatient and gruff.”

“He’d had a century to get used to the school,” Kendall explained. “He used his gruffness as armor. He mostly lost his fear, but he still wore his gruffness out of habit. But until he met you, he was still always uneasy around girls.”

Amber’s routine was not unlike Dain’s. Kendall was warmer and friendlier than Aurel, and didn’t own a disgusting smelly ancient pet. Only Rat the Kitten roamed the farm. He quickly declared the entire farm as his own territory and kept out any other pests. Amber did her chores, wrote in her journal, and had lessons from Kendall. She learned that Kendall was not a sorcerer. She had plenty of theoretical knowledge of sorcery, but without innate talent she could not cast

even the simplest of spells. She was a bit of a wizard, which didn't require innate talent.

Kendall's main skill seemed to be in finding out secrets and breaking in.

Kendall suggested once or twice that Amber practice a bit of magic. Amber declined, and she didn't press the issue. Other times she asked Amber to help her with a task that could very easily be completed with magic. Amber completed those patiently and thoroughly, but without magic. Finally Kendall just asked her.

"Will you ever do magic again?"

"No," Amber answered forcefully.

"What about a different type of magic? Would you like to be a wizard? Or a cleric?"

"No," again no hesitation.

After reading Dain's accounts of growing up, and how his fear of his little sister transpired, Amber began writing about her mother. She even talked about it to Kendall, and told her of the beatings and the mind-games, of being locked up for magical accidents. She learned from Dain's story that she had her mother to thank for her excellent control over her own sorcery. That was one trait all her instructors had agreed was highly developed.

Since Amber didn't want to continue studying sorcery, Kendall taught her other skills, like setting traps, disarming traps, setting locks, picking locks, keeping secrets, and finding out secrets. The latter they practiced on the Silver Dragon villagers when they visited the little town. Kendall taught her to fight, which seemed to involve a lot of dancing. They tried out the dancing in Silver Dragon, too, but not the fighting. Amber enjoyed dances in Silver Dragon. The music whirled, the dancers twirled, the room spun. It was beautiful and dangerous.

Dain had been studying with Aurel for three decades. One evening he came inside as usual. Aurel was in her rocking chair. She looked asleep. He went to the kitchen to start supper. She didn't move as he passed her. He went back. He looked at her, then reached out and touched her hand. It was cold. Mrs. Nesmith hung around her neck and didn't bite him. He lifted Aurel's hand. It was stiff. She was dead. Mrs. Nesmith was stiff too.

He sat up with the body all night, because that was what you did. In the morning he dug a grave. He placed her in it, and all the herbs and potions that go with a body. He said all the things you say around a grave. He filled in the grave. He heated water and did the ritual cleansing. He did his chores, because they needed done, and he needed them to do. He slept the rest of the day. The next morning he did his chores again.

The day after that he had a visitor. As he watched the figure climb the mountain toward him, he knew he would have to tell the news. His eyes filled with tears. It was an old woman from the village, who visited for the pain-removing potions, although Aurel always said she'd fare better seeing a healer. Sandal had broken off relations with one god after another until no temples remained that she would grace with her presence, and the healers wouldn't come see her. So she used Aurel's potions instead. Aurel had told him that the potions were devoid of anything magical. They just worked because Sandal thought they did, and because Aurel knew a thing or two, not much, about healing. Not magical healing, just ordinary healing. Dain knew the recipe. He wondered wildly if Sandal would still believe the potions worked, if she knew Aurel hadn't made them.

"Aurel died two days ago," he told Sandal. "But she made up a lot of extra potion for you first. I just have to do a couple things to it first." With this lie he made the potion like he always

had. Sandal sat in Aurel's chair, rocking, and talked of all her memories of Aural while he made her potion.

As soon as Sandal got back to the village and spread the news, he had a steady stream of visitors come to pay their respects. Fierguld was among the first, and he stayed with Dain through the weeks as people who looked as rich as kings and queens or as poor as paupers arrived. The ones that looked poor, Dain knew, were wealthier and far more powerful than the best dressed kings and queens, who merely looked the part.

"Aurel had plans for you after her death," Fierguld told Dain when the number of visitors tapered off. They were washing up in the kitchen. There were not many dishes, and with all the visitors it seemed that every dish was in use at all times. Every visitor brought something to eat, and hospitality dictated that they share the food right away.

"She didn't tell me of any plans," Dain said.

"She told me. I founded a School of Sorcery not long ago." To an elf, "not long ago" might mean anything from a few months to a few decades.

"She wanted me to go to school to finish my training?" The glasses clinked as Dain set them in the cabinet.

"No. She wanted you to teach." Even wearing an apron and with his arms elbow deep in suds, Fierguld looked distinguished and authoritative.

"Teach who?"

"Whom," Fierguld corrected. "Teach *whom*. The children, of course."

"Oh, no, I couldn't possibly. I'm not good with children."

"Aurel thought you would be. Are you telling me she was wrong?"

Aurel couldn't be wrong. But she had to be wrong about this. "Maybe you misunderstood her," he suggested.

"Oh no, she was quite clear on the matter. She wanted you to teach at my School of Sorcery."

"What could I teach?"

Fierguld glanced at Dain to see if he was being sarcastic. That would be unlike him. He seemed earnest. "Well, not grammar, obviously. You would teach sorcery."

"I'm not a trained sorcerer myself yet! How could I teach sorcery?"

"Aurel believed you were ready." He finished scouring the last pot, rinsed it once more, and handed it to Dain to dry and put away.

Fierguld was persistent and eventually wore Dain down by repeating the argument that Aurel thought it was best. Together they closed up the farm and went down the mountain.

Chapter 11 ½

As Fierguld and Dain traveled down the mountainside, a rift in the sky opened in front of them. A hairy beast with tentacles gently floated out of the rift to the ground. Fierguld and Dain stared with astonishment and fear.

“What is it?” Dain asked, trembling.

“I’ve never seen anything like it before,” Fierguld admitted.

“Snarf gurgle grimbo,” the beast said.

Fierguld pushed Dain behind him and raised his hands, beginning an incantation.

“Me duce tuo,” it said.

“What in the world...” Fierguld breathed, interrupting his own spell. “Can you understand me?” he said loudly and slowly.

“Yes, I can understand you,” the beast replied in the same loud, slow tones.

“Fascinating!” Fierguld exclaimed. “Dain, we may have discovered a new magical monster! Find me some paper, I must take some notes. We can call it Fierguld’s Tentacled...”

“Take me to your leader,” the beast interrupted. “I am from the future. I came through time and space on a ship that is the marvel of my people. Take me to your leader.”

Fierguld launched into an explanation of the governmental structure of the current era. The beast rolled all twenty of its eyes and lumbered away. Fierguld followed, still lecturing. Dain had to skip ahead to guide him away from ravines and cliffs, because Fierguld was paying no attention to where he was putting his feet. The beast seemed to float over such obstacles.

Finally, tired of the lecture, the beast opened another rift in the sky and disappeared from their world.

It opened the rift somewhere else. The orcs stared at it in wonder and amazement. They gibbered. Eventually the beast's machines decoded their language. They were arguing whether it was a god to worship or a god to destroy.

"Take me to your leader," it said, sighing. The orcs fell silent. "Take me to your leader," it repeated. A murmuring started up. They were arguing who was the leader. In moments, orcs were fighting orcs. "Ow!" the beast yelped as a tentacle was accidentally severed. The orcs stopped fighting and stared at the twitching tentacle. Then as one, they turned and roared. The beast opened another rift hurriedly and escaped as they attacked.

Chapter 12: A new life, and another baby

Aurel's notes stopped, of course, with her death, and Dain's last journal ended with his departure from the farm. To learn the rest of Dain's story we must ask Fierguld.

Dain's first few years at the school were very difficult. He was very harsh with the children and they were just as terrified of him as he was of them. Gradually he found a comfortable level of off-putting gruffness. He even enjoyed teaching at times.

One spring morning he arrived at school early and found a baby on the steps. No one was awake or around, so he brought it into his lab while he worked. He vaguely knew that babies drank milk, so he warmed some milk in the kitchen. He tried to feed it to the baby in sips from a cup, but it mostly spilled. The baby sucked it off his finger so he dipped his finger in the milk and let the baby suck on his finger over and over. The baby didn't eat much that way, but it did fall asleep.

Several hours later Fierguld heard a preposterous rumor that Dain had a baby in his lab and hurried down to see what was happening. It was true. Sitting in the comfortable chair, Dain was holding a sleeping baby, and reading a book.

"What is going on, Instructor?" Fierguld demanded.

"Shh," Dain said. "It's sleeping."

"Where on earth did you get a baby?" Fierguld whispered.

"It was in a basket just outside." He nodded toward the basket. "I touched it as little as possible. You might be able to find some clues as to its origin."

Fierguld looked more closely at the baby. It was human, maybe three months old, he guessed. It had a light dusting of red hair. It stirred in Dain's arms. Fierguld reached for the baby and Dain reluctantly let him take it.

It was wrapped in a cloth and otherwise naked, and it was a boy. The cloth was a little damp on one side and Fierguld wrinkled his nose. He handed the damp baby back to Dain.

“Come with me,” he instructed. They went to the kitchen. Fierguld handed him several rags. “This rag to clean him up, this one for a diaper, this one to wrap him in. Soak this one in milk so he can suck on it. I’ll see if we can find some bottles.”

“What are the other rags for?” Dain asked, as he cleaned up the baby.

“You’ll find out,” Fierguld said grimly.

Dain didn’t seem at all concerned about handling the baby. Later, Fierguld asked him about that.

“You’ve always been terrified of babies and children. Your fear made you extremely severe with them, when you first started teaching here. But you seem to have taken a shine to this baby.”

“I don’t know,” Dain admitted. “It is unusual. I guess, there was no one else around, and I did what needed to be done, and my mind was on other things, so I didn’t think about how breakable these things are.”

“They aren’t *that* breakable,” Fierguld chuckled. In a moment of inspiration, Fierguld arranged it so that Dain was on paternity leave and taking care of the baby full time. “Take the baby home. Someone else will cover your classes. I’ll let you know what we find out about him.”

“I don’t know how...”

“I’ll send Mrs. Wainright along to help you out.” Fierguld was not entirely heartless. Mrs. Wainright had raised at least a dozen young ones. She would have all the necessary accessories.

“And Dain, give it a name until we find out if it has a name.”

Fierguld was unable to determine much about the child. There were magical traces, so the baby had probably been transported somehow, probably through another plane of existence. It was not possible to tell where the baby had originated from on this plane.

Dain bonded with the child and named him Crusher, after a legendary red-headed dwarf hero.

Fierguld never regretted his rash decision. Dain positively mellowed under Crusher's influence and became much more popular with the children, although he was still skittish around girls.

Chapter 13: A quest

Amber learned about Dain's life, and in learning his life learned about her own life. She recovered from the trauma of Dain's death and the deeper trauma of her childhood. Nonetheless, she had no interest in magic of any kind.

Her father had visited a couple times. Amber told him to stop feeling guilty about her past, stop feeling responsible for her future, and just be friends with her.

"Don't try to be fatherly," she suggested. "It's too late for that. Let's just be friends."

He agreed and the awkwardness melted away.

"I want to ask you something," he said, about two years after she and Kendall came to the hermitage. "A, um, friend of mine, a countess, has hired a group of professionals to investigate a kobold problem on her land." The way he described the countess suggested that their relationship was a *very* warm friendship. "They agreed to it, but one of the group was called away suddenly. That was the only one of them who had certain skills they need for their investigation and they have not made any progress since he left. Amber, I think you might be able to do the things they need."

Amber didn't answer. Kendall asked, "Like what?"

"Specifically, there's a barn they need access to, and they need to do it very, um, diplomatically so that no one knows they were in there. Discretely."

"How is it secured?"

"Locks and traps, that sort of thing. Nothing magical, but all their skill is magical, they don't really know how to deal with the non-magical."

"Amber could handle that."

Amber still hadn't spoken. They turned to her and waited.

"It's all right if you don't want to," her father started to say.

“Why wouldn’t you want to?” Kendall asked. “It’ll be a lot more interesting than hanging around here.”

“I can’t think of anything I’d rather do than hang around here,” Amber disagreed. “But I have to go out some day, and do something useful. This sounds as good as anything else. But Kendall? Can I come back here? Will you take care of Rat?”

Rat was a sleek, bossy cat who didn’t need taken care of. “Of course,” Kendall agreed. “I’ll be here. So will Rat.”

Brad the cleric, Yemin the wizard, and Crisha the fierce warrior greeted her enthusiastically. “At last,” Brad griped, “We could have been inside that stupid barn ages ago, but Countess Gretta made it clear we can’t leave any trace that we were there.”

The owner of the barn was Gretta’s brother’s lover. Brad, Yemin, and Crisha were sure that the kobolds were using the barn somehow, perhaps as a cover or hideout, or maybe it was a secret entrance to an underground lair. They also believed it was with the owner’s knowledge and permission, but until they could prove that, Gretta wouldn’t allow them to do anything that might antagonize her brother’s lover.

“I don’t want to have to face my brother’s ire unless there is something going on there,” Gretta insisted. She met them in a dark tavern, wearing a cloak with a hood that obscured her head. It was unlikely that anyone in the tavern didn’t know she was their countess. There were not many people who could own such a nice cloak, or who would wear a ridiculous hood that hid their face.

Under the cover of darkness, Amber looked the barn over. Brad the cleric created a low light and Yemin the wizard surrounded them in darkness. Crisha the warrior kept watch. The

lock was not tricky, but there was a trap that would catch anyone who opened the door. Amber carefully disarmed it and started to open the door. Brad's hand on her shoulder stopped her.

“Fighters first,” he whispered.

Crisha stepped in and nudged the door open.

Inside, a door in the floor was closed but not hidden. Amber disarmed the trap on it, and again Crisha opened it. Crisha went first down the stairs, then Yemin, then Amber, and Brad last. They followed a tunnel until it opened into a little room. There were traces of kobolds, and the stench of them, everywhere.

There were two doors off the room.

“Listen at each door,” Brad told Amber, “and tell us what you hear.”

She didn't hear anything behind the left door. She heard inarticulate voices behind the right door. She checked the right door for traps. There were none, but it was locked. She unlocked it, and Crisha entered. It was another tunnel and they quietly went down it. Light shone into the tunnel from a doorway, which was where the voices were coming from. They crept closer. Amber heard a woman's voice speaking a strange language, and harsh, alien voices replying. Brad motioned for them to stop, and, staying in the shadows, he peered into the room for a moment, then returned. He motioned to them to go back. He followed last.

Amber relocked each door that had been locked and reset each trap behind them. They met the Countess, wearing the cloak and hood again, at the tavern, and Brad described what he had seen.

“I saw Rath, your brother's lover, talking to several kobolds. They are planning to invade Raintown, a little village in the south part of the county. The kobolds get to raid and loot, and

Rath gets to pretend to kick them out and save the village, earning herself a sweet little reward from you.”

“Tomorrow morning,” Countess Gretta said grimly, “go back. While the kobolds sleep, kill them all.” Kobolds plagued the area and were constantly pushing the edges of their boundaries. It was a nearly constant state of war. The “civilized” races and the kobolds knew to stay in their own territories. Getting caught in another’s territory was sufficient grounds for immediate execution.

“Bring me Rath if she is with them,” she added. “I would speak to her, and so would my brother.” She sent guards to Rath’s home, in case Rath returned there.

In the morning they left. Amber was nervous. Kendall had taught her some clever tricks, but would that be enough against kobolds? Kendall’s tricks were just games, she had never used them in a real fight. But the kobolds were not much trouble. Brad, Yemin, and Crisha dispatched them quickly and Amber could have hung back entirely. One kobold did come after her, and she ducked and rolled out of its way as Kendall had trained her, and came up with her dagger in her hand and a fire in her eye. Then Crisha cut off the kobold’s head with her battleaxe, and it was over.

They hadn’t found Rath, and they had to search the kobold warren until they found her workshop and chamber. She was more of a challenge than the kobolds had been, but Yemin kept her busy exchanging spells and Amber further distracted her with quick little attacks and feints until Crisha overpowered her. They took her back to Countess Gretta.

They didn’t get to see the end of it, the conversation between Rath and Countess Gretta’s brother, because a messenger was waiting for them in the dark tavern. The messenger did not wear a hood and cloak. She was a pretty, bored young woman.

“Count Ingot sends me,” she introduced herself. “Rath’s land is the west border of Gretta’s county. Ingot’s county to the west has more hills which lead into the mountains, where the kobolds come from. He has had problems with the same tribe of kobolds Rath had been dealing with. You eradicated only a portion of the pests under Rath’s barn. Count Ingot invites you to take care of the rest.”

Brad looked at Yemin and Crisha. Crisha nodded.

“Negotiate our usual rates,” Yemin said.

“Will you come with us?” he invited Amber. “We are used to being four at least, and you can help.”

“Sure,” Amber shrugged. She turned to the messenger. “Can I send a message through you to my...to a friend?” The messenger nodded.

“I have your gold from Countess Gretta as well,” the messenger added.

Brad counted out the gold and distributed it equally.

Chapter 14: A new life

Brad, Yemin, Crisha, and now Amber were a mercenary peace-keeping force who worked mainly for the counts and barons in the southeast Duchy of Hayes, and sometimes for the Duchess of Hayes herself, investigating mysteries or eradicating minor infestations of creatures as directed by their current employer. Sometimes one count would hire them to investigate another, and then the other might hire them to investigate the first. They were in demand because they were mercenaries and had no allegiance or loyalties. Their impartiality ensured that the results of their investigations were at least much closer to the truth than if they had loyalties, so the employer of the moment could legitimately claim the veracity of their results. This was important because the duchess insisted that one count could not attack another without her express permission, and her express permission didn't come without proof of due cause.

Once a coalition of count and barons hired them to take down a wizard-baron who had dabbled a little too far in necromancy. It was an ugly time for Amber, encountering disgusting and horrifying creatures and beings she had never heard of before. The duchess invited them to her castle to thank them for their service to her subjects.

"I've not seen this one before," she greeted them. Brad quickly introduced Amber.

"She has trained at the School of Sorcery, but she practices magic no more. She trained with Kendall more recently," he explained.

"Kendall?" asked the duchess, intrigued. "I knew her mother well." Amber doubted that. From what Kendall said, and Fierguld, no one, not even they, knew her mother well. "Give her my regards. I have high expectations of you, with that lineage."

Later during supper, the duchess remembered Aurel's last student.

"He was a dwarf, I think. Didn't he teach at the School of Sorcery? You might have known him."

“Dain,” Amber said. “His name was Dain.”

“Oh, did you know him? Such a shame, that explosion. Did you know what happened? I heard so many rumors.”

The duchess paused but Amber didn't answer, and in a moment the duchess was talking again.

“You know, he adopted a human son, an adventurer like you all, although his group mostly works in the Duke of Forest's lands, for those counts and barons north of here.”

“His name is Crusher,” Amber said.

“Yes, that's right. A red headed boy.” Dessert arrived and the duchess was distracted. She didn't refer to it again.

Amber was anxious to visit home, and the team decided to join her. They spent Festival Week on the mountainside in Silver Dragon. The villagers loved the adventures, loved listening to their stories, and loved entertaining them. Silver Dragon, for all its remoteness, was actually a popular spot among adventurers, historically because of its proximity to Aurel's hermitage, but it continued to attract visitors in the decades since her death. The villagers were accustomed to all manner of interesting folk dropping by. Yemin, Brad, and Crisha had a ball.

Amber and Kendall stayed in the village a few days with them, and returned to their home for the rest of Festival Week. Amber was grateful for the quiet and did not talk much.

“Too much, too soon?” Kendall asked. “Or are you ready for more?”

“This is perfect,” Amber replied. “What we are doing is interesting, and it is good, it helps people. It's good to be home and have a rest, and next time I can go longer before coming back home.” She looked up at Kendall. “But you don't have to live here just because I might

come visit. You took two years of your life for me.” She hadn’t been aware of that before, but she had realized it when they were coming home.

“That’s sweet,” Kendall said, “but I didn’t really. I had other reasons for coming out here, and I’ve accomplished that. I was thinking of relocating, now that everything here is finished. But just send me word and I’ll have this place inhabitable in moments.”

Amber hugged her. “You’ll still take care of Rat? I can’t really take him with me.”

“Of course,” Kendall assured her.

Amber wondered what Kendall’s other reasons were besides her. If Kendall wanted to tell her, she would ask. For her part, Kendall thought that if Amber wanted to know, she would ask. But out of respect, neither did³.

³ Actually, the author doesn’t know. I suspect she’s courting Fierguld.

Part 3: Crusher

Chapter 15: Musicians

Amber spent the next three years with Brad, Yemin, and Crisha. They called her their thief, because she was so good at getting into places that were locked.

“I’ve never in my life stolen so much as a second glance,” she objected.

“So you’ve stolen a first glance?” Brad teased. “Anyway that’s what we called Gerard, and he’s not coming back so you’re our thief now.” Gerard was the one who had left them in the lurch investigating Rath and her kobolds. His leave was supposed to be temporary, but he had impulsively gotten married while he was gone. He couldn’t bear the thought of leaving his new bride.

Their quests included the Treasure of Nine Visions, and the long-lost father of the cousin of Count Duquesne. The Treasure of Nine Visions was nine gemstones, all fake, but which would magically show images of babies, the grandchildren of a former Baroness Winter. One of the images was of the current Baroness Winter when she was a baby.

The long lost father of the Ramon, the cousin of Count Duquesne, was a traveling musician with a band of bards. He played the lyre and sang. He did neither well, but the pieces he sang were all tawdry and therefore popular.

“I often wonder about Ramon,” the father said of the cousin, when they approached him.

“He does wonder,” the percussionist of the band of bards confirmed. “Typically after two pints of ale, he cries about Ramon and we all agree that Ramon is better off without him.”

They assured the musician that Ramon did not need his father’s money, which was good because the father had none. They told him that Ramon wanted to learn a little more about his parent. Ramon’s father suggested celebrating the reunion-to-be at a local tavern, and everyone quaffed a great deal of ale.

Amber had not quaffed much ale before. Afterwards, she was not quite sure how it happened, and at the same time remembered it all clearly enough she wished she had a less detailed memory. She quaffed ale, flirted outrageously with the percussionist, followed him to his room, and spent the night with him. He was handsome and charismatic, and she had secretly admired him from the first moment they met. However, she had hardly had time to envision that sort of relationship with him at all, and this was not how she would have envisioned that sort of relationship with anyone had she done any envisioning. Which she had not.

Crisha didn't understand why she was upset. "That's how this is supposed to go," she said in puzzlement. "We celebrate the success of a quest, we quaff, we have a little fun, we go on another quest. What's the problem? Is he being clingy? When they're clingy, or a little too moon-eyed, I just promise them that our paths will cross again one day. Say it really soulfully, like that. They cry, but they let you go. It sometimes makes me a little teary eyed myself."

Yemin understood a little better why it was a big deal to Amber. It was her first quaffing, and her first everything else. Yemin had a long, private talk with Amber, and Amber felt she could survive, but she had no intention of any further quaffing ever. Yemin asked Brad to help Amber with a sudden headache she was experiencing. She asked him with a stern expression, and without the slightest trace of a smile or raised eyebrow, he offered up a little cure potion immediately. Which Amber quaffed without hesitation.

The Duchess of Hayes rarely called them into service herself, preferring that they be seen as independent of her, loyal to the truth above all. Once in a while she sent them to investigate whether one noble or another was a shape changer. From time to time, these beings slipped into the world from another plane, and plagued the world by secretly assassinating someone and

assuming the victim's life. More often the accusations were unfounded, but the ones that were real were troubling. Particularly when a shape changer had been caught, they speculated whether there were shape changers out there that had never been caught.

Chapter 16: Nine children

“The Duke of Forest requests of the Duchess of Hayes an extra team of adventurers in his south woodlands,” the message read. His usual team was in the west, recovering long lost treasure for a poor baroness, and while he felt their current mission was not so vital that he couldn’t easily call them back, it would take a long time to get word to them, and a long time for them to arrive.

The trouble in the south woodlands was urgent. Nine adolescent children, sons and daughters of counts and barons, were missing. They were last seen near the south woodlands.

Brad, Yemin, Crisha, and Amber were to join the Duke’s representative in Lamar.

Brad met with the Duke’s man while Yemin, Crisha, and Amber settled into their lodgings. After the meeting, Brad told them what he knew.

“He believes there’s an elemental at work here,” Brad said. “Yemin, elemental magic isn’t your focus. But he gave me plenty of money to outfit ourselves, and Lamar is a big enough city to have some skilled wizards who can supply us with potions and reinforced cloaks. Go shopping. If it’s an elemental, we need protection from everything. Hot, cold, fire, water, wind, everything elemental.

“Crisha,” he added.

“Yes?”

“The Duke wants you to have this.” He pulled from a box a battleaxe inscribed with runes. Crisha’s eyes widened.

“Is it magical?” she asked.

“Yes,” Yemin and Brad said in unison.

“Careful with that,” Brad said. “It gets electrical or something. It’s not fire or frost. He wanted you to have something that can get through an elemental’s defenses.”

“Is he that sure it is an elemental?”

“No.”

“What are we looking for? What do we know?”

“Arboria, Sylvette, and Oaktown reported unusual storms in the past month. That’s really all we know for certain. There are rumors of a magician in the forest, unusual weather events, kidnappings and disappearances, and mangled bodies. But none of the rumors have been confirmed.”

The next few days were busy. Each of them had magical armor commissioned. Yemin and Brad added quite a lot to their stock of potions. Amber interviewed dozens of people, trying to track down the rumors and their sources. She turned up many more rumors, but no sources.

“It might be the case that the elemental has an army of wind warriors,” she reported doubtfully.

The Duke’s man was to go with them but only Brad had met him thus far. The night before they were to leave, the Duke’s man came to the inn to join them for supper.

“Sorry I haven’t made it over here any sooner,” he said, “I’ve been working dawn to dusk on this thing.” He had a loud voice, a jolly laugh, and red hair. “My name is Crusher.”

Amber wondered how many people were named Crusher. He had a large sword, and she knew that Dain’s son was a swordsman. Surely this was Dain’s son.

Brad was introducing the others to Crusher.

“And this is Amber,” he finished. “She is our thief. She studied with Kendall.”

“I’m so pleased to meet you,” she said a little breathlessly. “I think I’ve heard so much about you. Aren’t you Dain’s son?”

His smile had stiffened during Brad’s introduction and now it disappeared entirely.

“So you are Amber,” he said accusingly.

“I was a student...”

“I know,” he cut her off. He turned to Brad. “We’ll travel to Arboria tomorrow.” The rest of the evening he focused on their plans, speaking to Amber only when absolutely required.

“What did you do to him?” Yemin wondered. “Are you sure you’ve never met him?”

“I knew his father,” Amber replied, “Dain. But I never met Crusher.”

“Then why does he hate you?”

“I’m not sure.”

“But you have an idea?”

“Well, not exactly. It’s...hard to explain.” Yemin waited patiently. At last Amber said, “As a student, I was working on a project with Dain. He may believe I had something to do with the circumstances leading to his death.”

“Why would he think that?” Yemin persisted.

“The explosion was caused by a thing that Dain was making for me.”

“But you weren’t making it. Why would he blame you?”

Amber was getting frustrated. “I don’t know. I’ve never met him before, so I don’t know what he thinks. Why don’t you ask him?”

Yemin did just that, but Crusher wouldn’t talk about it. All he said was, “I’ve never met her before. How could I have formed any opinion of her yet?”

In Arboria, Amber again sought out rumors and their sources. She got slightly better results this time. She asked for stories about the forest, claiming that she was writing a book about unsolved forest mysteries. She suspected a great many of the stories were invented on the spot for the amusement of the storyteller. Patiently she listened to the old people who had nothing better to do than sit around spinning yarns. She got her hair cut and listened to the barber. She shopped on a sleepy afternoon and listened to one bored shopkeeper after another. She quaffed far more watered down spirits than she wanted to in Arboria's four taverns and listened to the young drunks try to impress her with their wild tales.

Crusher was impatient and openly critical of her efforts. He scowled as she reported her lack of success. He didn't speak directly to her. He turned to Brad and demanded, "Why couldn't you have hired a *competent* thief?"

Yemin gasped, and Crusher glared at her, then abruptly left the room. But the rest of the day his conversation was littered with little digs at her failure.

The next day she caught a break. The cold wind of the last two days abated, the sun came out and shone on the bright autumn leaves, and more people ventured outdoors on the first warm day all week. Walking down a street, she passed an old woman rocking on her front porch.

"Come sit with me," the old woman invited her. "Have some of my freshly baked snickerdoodles and lemonade," she enticed.

Amber climbed the steps. The woman stayed seated in her rocking chair, but motioned to the cup and jug balanced on the rail.

"Help yourself, dear."

Amber poured a cup of lemonade and sat on the bench swing the woman pointed at.

“I’m Amber,” she said.

“Of course I know that,” the woman replied. “Haven’t I heard you’re looking for ghost stories from the forest?”

Amber smiled. “You have the advantage of me.”

“It’s Emerald. For my eyes. When I was young they were green. Who knows what they look like now. I can’t see well enough to tell. The mirrors are all foggy these days.”

Amber looked closely. “They are a faded green,” she said honestly.

“Ah, well, I still have my mind,” Emerald sighed philosophically. “Is it really a story you’re writing? Or is that just a story?”

“Actually, we’re investigating. But it’s easier to explain that I’m writing a book. People are less nervous about telling me things.” She sighed. “Sometimes I think I might learn more if they said less.”

Emerald laughed. “I think I know something about what you’re investigating. It’s the weather, isn’t it?”

Amber nodded.

“Long ago, I was sweet on a wizard. He wooed me with thunderstorms. It was a whirlwind romance, heh heh.” Amber groaned at the pun. “His name was Korol. For all that it’s been sixty years, I recognized his work in that windstorm last year.”

“What happened with the romance?” Strictly speaking, this wasn’t the line of questioning Amber ought to take to get the information they needed. Amber wasn’t sure what prompted her to ask.

“Ah, well, he had better things to do. I tried to make him jealous by stepping out with Damond. But he didn’t seem to get jealous, didn’t really seem to care at all. And, well, Damond *did* care. And I liked that.”

“What happened to Korol?”

“I don’t know, dear. Maybe the wizards know. They surely do keep tabs on one another.” That was true enough. Wizards tended to be suspicious, particularly of each other. Yemin was an exception. Well, sort of. Yemin wasn’t suspicious exactly, but she was very inquisitive.

“Thank you for the cookies. They are very good.”

“Take a couple more, for your friends.”

Amber visited a couple shops she had passed by the previous days. While she knew they were probably looking for a wizard, a wizard who specialized in elemental magic, she had not bothered asking the local wizards, because in addition to being suspicious, wizards were close-mouthed. But now that she had a name, she might be able to get more information.

“Sixty years ago a wizard named Korol lived in this area,” Amber reported to the team. “He specialized in elemental magic. He built a fortress in the forest. No one has seen him in decades.” She hoped that Crusher’s attitude would improve with her success.

Instead, he raged, “Where is the evidence? How do you know this is our target? What good does it do to know he’s somewhere in the forest? We already knew that!”

Surprised, Amber answered the last question. “One of the local wizards knows the exact location. She saw the fortress when it was being built. Korol wanted to partner with her. But she knew her skills were not adequate, and she knew *he* knew that, so she suspected he just wanted money.” She was going to answer his other questions, but he interrupted.

“That’s ridiculous. A wizard would never admit to inadequacy.”

Yemin nodded in agreement.

“Well, she didn’t say it that way. I...interpreted...what she said.”

By the time she had answered all his questions, she was fuming, and still he wasn’t satisfied. Finally, she burst out, “What would Dain think, if he could see how you treat me?”

Crusher stared at her, stunned. She fled.

The next day she avoided him. It wasn’t difficult. Now that they knew the location of the fortress, there wasn’t much for her to do, while he had a great deal of planning and preparation. When they did happen to be in the same place, Crusher acted as if she weren’t there. That suited her. Brad did his best to smooth things over, but ineffectually.

The journey into the forest, however, was not easy. Crusher constantly sniped about her, to Brad and the rest of the team. She snarled right back to her companions. Brad, Yemin, Crisha, and particularly the wizard guide Lucinda were painfully uncomfortable at first. And then Crusher and Amber erupted directly at each other, and the rest of them were left out of it.

Brad hoped perhaps now that they had had a good fight, they’d make up and get along. Yemin knew better. For a few hours, there was peace as they ignored each other. But it took almost nothing to set them off again.

“This is going to be a long quest,” Crisha groaned. Lucinda rubbed her temples.

From the top of the ridge, Crusher could see the fortress rising out of the forest, only a few hundred yards away. They’d been in the forest for a few days, Lucinda doing her best to

remember a journey taken only once half a century before. Everyone else was eating near the tents.

“Crusher,” Brad said, approaching quietly.

“Yes?”

“I wondered if we might send Lucinda home, now that we have found the fortress. She won’t be too much help, and it is dangerous.”

“It’s more dangerous for her to go off in these woods alone.”

“I thought we might send someone with her.”

“Can’t spare anyone.”

“I thought Amber could go with her. We all know you dislike her, and we’ll still have four...”

“We need her.”

Brad was taken aback. “But...I thought that you thought she’s no good...”

“She’s good. She was trained by *Kendall*. Of course she’s good.”

“Then what is your issue with her?”

Crusher sighed. “It’s personal.”

“I don’t understand. You told Yemin you’d never met her before.”

“I hadn’t. It’s...she killed my father. She didn’t mean to, she was young, but she killed him, and I can’t forgive her.”

Brad didn’t know what to say.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Crusher added. “Don’t mention it to the others. Especially her. Look, I’ll try to go easier on her. This guy...this Korol...he’s going to be tough. We need everyone we have. Even Lucinda, and she really isn’t any good yet. Amber was right about that.”

The next day was more peaceful. Crusher stopped griping about Amber, for a while. It helped that she and Yemin were off snooping around the fortress while the rest stayed back by the tents. When they reported back, Crusher listened quietly instead of berating her.

They spent one more night at their camp, and broke into the fortress before dawn the next day. Amber successfully disarmed the physical traps, and Yemin the magical ones. They crept through the fortress undetected. The fortress above ground seemed to be just for show. For whom it was a show was a mystery, hidden away in the forest as it was. Wizards liked to show off, and maybe the wizard had built a showy fortress on the off chance that a rival wizard might see his fortress and be impressed or intimidated. Or maybe he had hoped to recruit other wizards, as he had tried to recruit Lucinda. Regardless, the business end of the fortress was underground, a labyrinth of tunnels and caves.

They stealthily opened every door, painstakingly checking for alarms and traps, closing behind them every door that had been closed, locking every door that had been locked, and wherever possible resetting the traps they had disarmed. They looked into countless closets, broom closets and coat closets. They found dusty empty dormitories, an armory with shoddy weaponry, and two kitchens. Then they spied a guard down a hall. This looked more promising.

Yemin silently dispatched the guard. He sighed and slid to the floor. “He’s asleep,” she whispered. The door he had guarded had both magical and physical locks. Yemin unlocked the magical locks and Amber unlocked the physical ones. Amber turned the doorknob and started to push it open—but Crusher grabbed her hand.

“What are you doing?” he whispered fiercely. “You let Crisha or me go in first.” She had forgotten. But he wasn’t through. “Damned novices,” he muttered. “Haven’t the sense of a rockbird.”

“I just forgot,” she protested.

“A competent adventurer doesn’t forget the basics,” he replied scornfully.

“We’ve been at this for hours!”

“And we have hours left!”

Crisha rolled her eyes and pushed past them to open the door. This dormitory was not empty and dusty. The occupants, poorly trained mercenaries, were already awakened by the argument, and the team had lost the element of surprise. They dispatched the mercenaries, but the fight was not quiet.

There was no point in trying to be stealthy after that. They had to move quickly. The fights came fast and furious after that. A bucket of water in a room turned into a whirlpool of water elementals. Air elementals chased them down the hall firing bolts of lightning. Fire crackled through the walls. Brad was getting worried. He had done about as much healing as he could, and if anyone took any serious damage he had only a couple potions to save them.

“We have to retreat,” he told Crusher.

“If we retreat now, he’ll hole up and we’ll have to do this all over again,” Amber protested.

“Who cares about him?” Crusher yelled at her. “It’s the children I’m worried about!”

Amber started to yell back, but Crisha interrupted.

“Cut it out, both of you, or he’ll escape *and* we’ll lose the children. Let’s go.”

Without waiting for permission or instructions, she charged ahead and took the full force of a fireball in her chest. She had found Korol.

While the rest kept Korol busy, Brad gave the last curing potion to Crisha, who was on the brink of death. As soon as she could totter to her feet, she charged in yelling and swinging

her battleaxe. Electricity crackled along its blade, and then Korol's head was lying on the floor. As if in slow motion his body fell over. Lucinda threw up.

Crisha cleaned her blade on Korol's robe.

"Let's find the children," she said grimly. But she was nearly fainting from exhaustion and her wounds. The potion had barely saved her; it had not healed her.

Although they had killed Korol, there could yet be other creatures or people in the fortress, so they proceeded cautiously. With their resources drained, they could not afford to take risks.

"If we find the children, and they are hurt," Yemin remarked quietly to Amber, "Brad can't heal them. He doesn't have any spells left today."

"I don't understand," Amber said. "Brad's power to heal comes from the gods, right?"

"Yes, that's right."

"And each day he asks the gods for more power to heal?"

"Yes."

"Why doesn't he just ask the gods for more power right now?"

"The gods have this thing about equity and justice. They set the rules and then anyone can play so long as everyone plays by the rules."

"Even if their enemies win?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Now you're getting theological."

They found a nest of earth elementals, but managed to creep by without alerting them.

The tunnel led up and out into the open air.

“We have to go back,” Yemin groaned. “We must have missed a secret passageway somewhere.”

“No, look,” Amber pointed. They had come out into a little courtyard, with a fountain in the middle. Nine statues lined the stone path. But the statues didn’t look artistic.

“The children,” Crisha gasped.

“I can’t do it today,” Yemin sank onto a stone bench. “I can prepare the spell but I can’t prepare it until I have rested. It takes too much concentration. As soon as it is ready I will take care of them.”

They made a makeshift camp right there in the courtyard and took turns standing guard, catching a couple hours’ sleep at a time. Crusher forbid Brad and Yemin to stand guard. Without rest, they would not be able to perform the spells needed to heal the injured and to rescue the children. Crusher also insisted that *two* people be on guard at all times. He and Amber would take first watch, Lucinda and Crisha second. That would be two long watches, and only Brad and Yemin would get enough sleep.

Their watch started silently. After an hour, everyone was sound asleep.

“Amber,” he said softly.

“Yes?”

“I’m afraid I’m going to fall asleep. Come talk to me.” They had been on opposite sides of the courtyard, but she moved to his side.

“You keep looking that direction,” she said, “I’ll look this way.”

He started to protest that she wasn’t the leader. Then he sighed. “That’s how Kendall taught you.”

“Yes.”

“I almost caused us to fail our quest today.”

“No,” Amber protested, “you were right, I shouldn’t have tried to open the door. That’s always Crisha’s job.”

“But your mistake wouldn’t have done any harm. I followed up your mistake with one that did a great deal of harm to our mission. After all the care we’d taken to be silent, I blew it all arguing about stupid stuff.”

Amber bit back the impulse to claim some share of the blame. He’d been nothing but rude to her since they met. He didn’t deserve leniency. But then he said, “I’m sorry.”

“It takes two to argue,” she relented. Sitting back to back as they were, she couldn’t see his face. Silence fell.

“Where is the cat?” he asked suddenly.

“What?” She was confused.

“Rat the Kitten.”

“Oh. He’s with Kendall.” The conversation faltered again.

“He’s a good mouser,” she said.

Crusher wanted to reply. He was desperately tired and only conversation would keep him alert. But the only thing he could think of to say was that his father had told him years ago in letters that Rat caught mice and rats, voles, squirrels, and bunny rabbits. And he refused to talk about his father with her. The thought of her in connection with his father brought mental images he hated. As young as she had been, she had seduced his father. It was impossible to imagine any other scenario, and that scenario was disgusting enough to imagine.

He frantically sought for something, anything else, to think about.

“The team I’ve been with for the last few years,” he said at last.

“What about it?”

“We have a ranger who can shoot an apple off a tree from two hundred yards away. We have a druid who can call up the spirits of the trees.” He was reciting now, more than talking.

“We have a lasher who can do amazing things with a whip. She is beautiful besides, long black hair and fiery eyes. When she laughs her whole face lights up.”

“What’s her name?”

“Simone. But,” he sighed, “she’s half-elf.”

“Why does that matter?” Amber asked.

“I’m human.”

“I noticed. But I don’t understand.”

“I can’t court her. She’s half-elf, and I’m human.”

“Why not?”

He was growing angry. How could she not understand this basic fundamental? He clamped down on the impulse to shout at her. He considered sending her back to the other side of the courtyard, but dismissed the idea. He really did need her to keep him awake. She was probably just as tired as he was, and needed him to keep her awake. He wouldn’t make that mistake twice today, letting his personal issues endanger the quest.

“Who does the healing?” she asked.

“What?”

“In your other team. Who heals the fighters when they get hurt?”

“Mostly the druid. It’s not really his specialty, but he has a lot of potions. I think he has a...special lady friend...who is a healer, and gives him a good deal. He hasn’t been with us so long. We had a cleric like Brad before him.”

They talked long into the night, until the moon had set. They shied away from any topic that strayed too close to his father. They talked of philosophy and the gods, of sciences, of politics, and of nature. They both loved to walk in the forest or under the stars. The stars shone brightly. They were a little bit giddy with fatigue and inclined to giggle.

Finally he woke up Crisha and Lucinda, who groggily took their posts. The autumn day had been unseasonably warm, but the night was cooler, and without blankets they were a little chilly. Crusher lay his coat over Amber, who was already asleep, or she would have protested vehemently. It seemed only a moment later that Yemin was waking him.

“I am ready to bring the children back.”

Crusher nodded. Brad was already awake, and Crisha and Lucinda sleeping again. Crisha looked much better; Brad must have already cast more healing spells on her.

One by one, Yemin woke the children from their stony sleep. The journey back through the forest was hurried and quiet. The adventurers were exhausted, the children scared. In Arboria they rested briefly, then returned to Lamar. Crusher was busy after that. He seemed to be spending all his spare time with Lucinda. Amber and her team didn't stay any longer than necessary to receive the Duke's thanks (and payment), and they were off.

Chapter 17: Whose undead army?

A year and a half later, the Queen summoned Brad to serve on her personal guard, the special unit that did for her exclusively what their group did for hire. That unit was autonomous and although in a sense they were loyal to her, their mission was always one of truth seeking, regardless of embarrassing or uncomfortable the truth might be to Her Majesty. They had special protections from being assassinated for knowing something she'd prefer they didn't, and their position within the guard was secured for life.

Amber, Yemin, and Crisha had to find another cleric to replace him. Or a druid or paladin, Amber pointed out.

“One with lots of potions.”

Yemin and Crisha raised their eyebrows.

“I mean healing potions!” Amber said defensively. There were many kinds of potions, and while the majority had honest, useful purposes, there were some with what could be described as pro-active purposes, but could also be described as nefarious or naughty, depending on whether you were administering or receiving the draught.

They talked to people they knew. Amber told Fierguld and Kendall that they were looking for a cleric who liked adventure. Fierguld and Kendall didn't know any clerics, but asked their friends and acquaintances. Fierguld sent a message to the Academy.

“We don't know anyone who could serve in that capacity,” came the answer, “but we will spread the word. We are happy to hear that Amber is doing well. We would like to talk to her.”

Fierguld relayed the request.

“I won't go to Potato City,” Amber said shortly.

So the Mage Academy came to her, sending the deputy headmistress, Nine Oaks. Nine Oaks was a silver haired elf. She didn't look old, despite her centuries. Elves never aged until the last five or ten years of their life.

Nine Oaks knew that the party was seeking a cleric. So she went to the temple to find them. They might have been there, and maybe the priests and priestesses would know where they were. As she entered the temple, she heard voices coming down the hall to the entrance. She stopped and waited. Amber and Yemin appeared, taking their leave of the priest-in-chief and thanking him for his assistance.

"You are seeking a cleric for your adventures?" she asked them. She recognized Amber, because she had the description and she had seen her images from Fierguld. Neither Amber nor Yemin recognized her.

"Yes, but we may have just found one," Yemin replied. "I'm afraid the position is probably filled."

"I am not seeking employment or adventure," Nine Oaks laughed. "I have come to speak to Amber. I spoke with Fierguld recently. I am Nine Oaks, deputy headmistress of Mage Academy."

The friendly smile disappeared from Amber's face.

"I am not a sorcerer," she said.

"Once, you were."

"We don't have time to talk to you."

Yemin, always curious about Amber's mysterious past, said, "We will have time this evening. Meet us at the Prophet's Inn."

Amber rolled her eyes. She didn't speak to Yemin the rest of the afternoon. Then she foiled Yemin's attempts to learn more about Amber by arranging a private room for herself and Nine Oaks.

Nine Oaks sipped daintily and incongruously of the flagon of ale in front of her.

"Amber, we have tried to build the Fireforge Device, without success. Dain's notes were destroyed, and none of his other students understood it well enough."

"They were idiots," Amber agreed. "None of them cared."

"We need your help. You were an equal partner in the project, were you not?" Amber nodded. "I think you could help us continue his work."

"I am not a sorcerer."

"So you said," Nine Oaks said placidly. "Yet you might remember enough. Just come talk to us. We would pay a great deal. But I think gold is not the incentive that will move you. Tell me, what is?"

"There is none. I am not a sorcerer."

The cleric of Kord, a dwarf named Dogo, joined the team in time for their next assignment for Baron Nelson. Baron Nelson wanted his neighbor, Baroness Wagner, investigated.

"I'm afraid Wagner is building an undead army."

"What is the evidence?" Amber asked.

"That's what you're here for, to find the evidence. If she's building an army I have to attack her now before she builds an unstoppable army and attacks me! But the Duchess won't let me attack without evidence."

“Yes,” Amber said patiently, “but what makes you think she is building an undead army?”

“Oh. There have been reports of skeletons and mummies in the marsh.”

“Who have the reports come from?”

“The folks who live out by the marsh. They come to the manor village once in a while, for news and trade. There’s not much out by the marsh. I guess you’d call them farmers, but they don’t really farm. They just eke out a living, between what they can raise, the livestock they keep, and what they can hunt, trap, and fish. The marsh has abundant life. Or it did until Wagner started turning it into an undead army!”

The last time they had been hired to investigate reports of undead, the rumors turned out to be false. The team hadn’t minded, and had lingered even after they were sure there were no undead armies around, because the weather in that region was balmy. They were near an ocean and a lovely beach. Crisha still had tan lines under her armor.

Dogo was enthusiastic but naïve. He had been trained well but had no practical experience. With Brad gone, Yemin had seniority and was the logical choice to take charge of Dogo. Leadership was not her strength. Crisha took it on herself, as a fellow dwarf.

“Your job is to keep us alive,” she told him. “For that, we need you to be alive. Always take care of yourself first. And always let us lead the way. Never go into a room ahead of us, no matter how safe we think we are.” Even when they visited shops and inns, she made him walk behind her, to get him into the habit of letting her go first.

But she was not interested in leading the team, so that fell to Amber, despite her own lack of experience. She wasn’t concerned. She knew Crisha and Yemin would advise her when she

needed guidance. And, after the last undead army that was made of nothing but rumors, she didn't take the assignment seriously.

They quickly discovered that the undead army in the marsh was real. Dogo was nervous but performed well during his first battle against six skeletons and a mummy. Dogo recited a prayer and the six skeletons fled. One skeleton fell to pieces as it attempted to run. The mummy flagged momentarily, then rallied and turned toward Dogo. Before it could do anything, Crisha's battleaxe cleaved it through.

"Follow the skeletons," Yemin suggested. Amber was off like a shot. She realized that the handful of undead was probably a small contingent of a larger force. She could follow the skeletons to the rest of the army and learn more.

The skeletons ran poorly in the marsh. Without the mummy to guide them, one by one they got stuck in the marsh. Three of the skeletons disappeared entirely into the muck. The fourth got stuck and was pitifully circling its stuck leg. Amber found a rock and knocked its skull off. The rest of it collapsed, only the tibia sticking up straight in the mud.

"We need to find the rest of the army," Amber said when she returned to the group, "and find out who is controlling it."

"Isn't that Baroness Wagner?" Dogo asked.

"We don't have evidence of that," Yemin replied.

"But we're on her land."

"The swamp is claimed by neither Wagner nor Nelson. It's uninhabitable and bordered by both their lands. The swamp itself is in between their lands."

"You mean this is Nelson's undead army?" Dogo asked. "Then why did he hire us to investigate?"

“Dogo!” Crisha said in exasperation. “It isn’t likely to be his army either. It could be someone else’s.”

“We always get evidence,” Amber told him. “We never assume, even when we’re quite sure we know the truth.”

“It’s happened that we were wrong,” Crisha explained, “when we were just as sure as we could be.”

Amber spotted a patch of dry ground. “We’ll camp here,” she said.

“It’s dry,” Yemin said, “but there is no cover.”

“What about that grove of trees?” Crisha suggested. Amber agreed and they set up camp.

The ground was soft and marshy, and they couldn’t get the tents up. Amber was reluctant to have anyone sleep on the damp ground. Dogo began to erect some ground cover using fallen limbs from the trees. He did a terrible job of it, but the idea was a good one, and Amber’s skill in creating and setting traps served her well in manufacturing some beds. She, Crisha, and Yemin took turns standing guard while Dogo slept. If Yemin had fully depleted her prepared spells, she would need the same quality of rest that Dogo needed, but she still had many spells prepared, and could get by with interrupted sleep. Dogo was young yet, for a dwarf, and couldn’t hold onto very many spells at once. He had used his repertoire up in the brief battle.

It had been an important battle for him, Amber thought, in that it was his first battle and he had made a noticeable impact in the outcome. They would have easily finished them off without him, but the way they fled as he prayed was a dramatic testament to his role. The confidence he gained tonight would probably be shattered soon. Then she would have to

persuade him that the right balance was somewhere between this first confidence and his second fright.

The search for the main army took several days. At last they caught a lucky break.

“There are undead nearby,” Dogo told Amber. “I can sense them.”

“Yemin, Crisha. Dogo thinks there are undead near. Be still and silent. If we can follow them undetected, they might lead us back to the army.”

“You and Dogo follow them,” Yemin suggested. “Two can be more silent than four. And this will be good experience for him.”

“Wouldn’t we be more likely to be successful with someone more experienced in being undetected?”

Yemin shook her head. “Don’t worry that you are leading your first mission. You’re doing fine. If we fail, no one will be surprised. It’s your second mission that can’t fail. Keep Dogo reigned in then. Take advantage of this first mission to take some risks.”

Amber wasn’t convinced, but followed Yemin’s advice. Dogo easily picked up the knack of moving stealthily.

“Have you done this before?” she whispered.

“Sort of.”

“Sort of?”

“I always won when we played hide-and-seek.”

The little band of skeletons followed the mummy leader to a barn near the edge of the swamp. Amber wasn’t sure if the farm was in Baron Nelson’s lands or in Baroness Wagner’s. They led three protesting horses out of the barn, paying no attention to the elf who came running

out of the house, yelling. When the elf tried to stop them, one skeleton knocked him away. He fell to the ground. He screamed at them but did not try to stop them again.

“Shouldn’t we stop them, and get his horses back?” Dogo whispered.

“We can’t,” Amber answered. “We need to find the army. The elf will have bigger problems than losing three horses if we don’t stop that army.”

Dogo reluctantly kept quiet.

Amber was worried that she and Dogo would not be able to follow the raiding party if they were on horses. But the skeletons did not try to ride the horses. The horses were already frightened and uncooperative. Animals, Yemin had told Amber, hated and feared the undead. The horses must be for someone else, someone who was not undead, perhaps Baroness Wagner and her henchmen.

The horses got more and more skittish. One broke free entirely. It ran straight toward Amber and Dogo. Amber didn’t think it saw them. It was just running away. She and Dogo held their breaths as the skeletons ran past them, pursuing the escaped horse. She thought they might be quite close to the army now. They left the skeletons to chase the horse and gave wide berth to the skeletons still holding the other two horses.

They were deep in the swamp now. Then they saw and smelled the army. The stench was nauseating. Dogo was pale and sweating. Amber motioned him to stay put, and moved to the other side of a little clump of trees so she could see better. She forced herself to concentrate, to identify each type of undead, or make note of the features if she wasn’t familiar with one or another type. She estimated how many of each type she could see.

There was a tent in the middle of the crowd of skeletons, zombies, ghosts, ghouls, wights, hellhounds, and other bizarre and horrible creatures. A few living people came out of the tent.

Amber gasped. She recognized one of them, a tall, pale woman with long, black hair. She had seen the woman in Baron Nelson's manor.

She hurried back to Dogo. Dogo wasn't there.

"Blast him," she cursed under her breath. Then she heard a soft voice.

"We have crossbows trained on you. Don't move." Someone bound her wrists behind her. They tied a blindfold around her eyes and gagged her. They led her not far away. Amber thought she heard someone stumbling next to her and hoped it was Dogo.

They stopped and removed her blindfold and the gag. Dogo was next to her. He looked better than when she had left him.

"Amber?" said a voice incredulously.

"Crusher!" Amber exclaimed.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

"Baron Nelson hired us to investigate..."

"Baron Nelson? But we're investigating him. Him and his undead army."

"It's not his army." But she remembered the tall pale woman. "At least, I don't think it's his army. Nelson thought Baroness Wagner was building an undead army."

"We're working for the Baroness."

"Untie me," Amber demanded. Crusher didn't move.

"Who is this?"

"It's Dogo," she said impatiently. "Come on, untie us."

"You just admitted you are working for the person we were hired to investigate," Crusher said infuriatingly. "Are you here with Brad? Dogo looks like a cleric, why would you need two clerics?"

“Brad joined the Queen’s Guard. We’re here with Yemin and Crisha. Now untie us!”

“Where are Yemin and Crisha?”

“Northeast, past a large grove of swamp trees. Don’t be ridiculous. Untie us!”

Crusher kept them both bound until his companions searched for and retrieved Yemin and Crisha. They had horses, so it didn’t take long. Amber and Crusher spent the better part of the wait yelling at each other.

Yemin and Crisha confirmed Amber’s story, and Crusher untied their hands. Amber slapped him as hard as she could.

Amber wouldn’t speak to Crusher. She took Crisha, Dogo, and Yemin aside to discuss what she’d seen. She listed all the creatures she had seen, the ones that she recognized. Then she described the others.

“There were some things that looked like the dark shadows of horrible people. They had arms and faces. But their bodies trailed off into nothing below that.”

“Allips,” Yemin said. “Those are called allips.”

“I saw five living people. They may have been in charge. I recognized one of them.”

“Who?”

“I don’t know. I saw her at the manor. She was tall, pale, black hair, and wore black silk robes.”

“I remember her,” Crisha said. “I saw her at the manor too.”

“Crusher thought the Baron was building the undead army. Do you think he knows she is here?”

“Why would he have hired us if this was his army?”

“I know, but why is she here?”

“You should ask Crusher if he recognized anyone,” Yemin said. “I don’t think either the baron or the baroness is raising this army. I think it’s someone else entirely.”

“I don’t want to speak to Crusher. Ever again.”

“You’re the leader,” Yemin reminded her. “Swallow your pride.”

Amber glared. But Yemin was right. Anyway, she could do better than Crusher had done last time. Feeling smug, she found Crusher.

Crusher had also recognized one of the living, a dwarf from the Baroness’ manor.

“We need to go back to the manors,” he said. “We need to find out who these people are.”

Amber resented him taking charge. “We’ll go back to the Baron and find out,” she said, just to get the last word in. But he disagreed.

“We should both go to the Baroness and then the Baron. We should stay together.”

“Why? We’ll have to cross the swamp to get from one to the other. It will be much faster if we go to both.”

In moments they were arguing, questioning each other’s judgment and leadership. Yemin heard them yelling and rolled her eyes. She walked over to them and put a hand on Amber’s arm.

“Remember,” she said quietly, “you can do better.”

Amber was embarrassed. Her smug superiority had disappeared. She immediately stopped yelling and acquiesced to Crusher’s plan.

When they arrived at the Baroness’ manor, it was in an uproar. The Baroness had been murdered.

“Show us,” Crusher said to the sheriff authoritatively. The sheriff was out of his league with this turn of events. She had conducted murder investigations, but nothing like this. With relief, she showed them to the body.

“She was found in this room,” the sheriff explained.

The room had a foul stench. Dogo pointed out piles of dust and fragments of bone.

“Where were her guards?” an elf member of Crusher’s team asked.

“Their bodies were found around the corner,” the sheriff said. She showed them to the bodies. There were more piles of dust and bone, and more of the stench.

“It looks like an assassination,” Crusher said.

They asked about the dwarf they had seen with the undead army, and just in case, they also asked about the woman in black. No one knew about the woman in black. They recognized the description of the dwarf.

“Lar Bloodfighter,” a dwarf guard told them. “He looked like a black mountain dwarf, and I tried to talk to him, because he might know my relatives, see? But he didn’t want to talk. They said I was to let him in, so I did.” The guard’s captain said the Baroness had given the order that Lar had clearance to visit. No one knew anything else about him.

The Baroness’ steward told them to continue the investigation. “If you find who is responsible for this assassination, your payment is doubled. If not, you will still receive what was agreed on. We will pay both of your groups.”

“We’re working for the Baron,” Amber protested.

“Our interests align,” the steward insisted.

They used special swamp horses to speed the journey to the Baron's manor. With sinking hearts they saw unusual activity as soon as they spotted the manor. It was the same story. He had been murdered. So had his guards. There was the same foul stench, the same piles of dirt and bone.

The lady in black was Honoria. She kept to herself, and the order to the guards to permit her entrance had come from the Baron. And the Baron's steward said the same thing the Baroness' steward had said.

"Find the assassin. We'll pay double what the Baron had promised you."

The team now consisted of Amber, Crisha, Yemin, and Dogo, plus Crusher, the elf thief Huchon, the human cleric Morell, who seemed to be very close to Crusher, and the human sorcerer Raven. It was not clear who was leading the combined team. Yemin confronted Crusher and Amber.

"Who is our leader?" she asked.

"I am," they both answered.

"You are inexperienced," Crusher objected.

"You let your personal feelings endanger the mission," Amber shot back.

Yemin left them yelling at each other and summoned the rest of the team. When Morell saw Crusher yelling at Amber, she started to go to him, but Yemin stopped her.

"In the absence of the other, either of them would be good leaders," she said, motioning to the arguing pair. "But neither of them can be a leader when the other one is around. Someone needs to be in charge."

"You are the most experienced," Raven said. "You should be our leader."

“I am experienced enough to know that I am not the best choice,” Yemin said.

“Experience does not necessarily make the best leader. Novice adventurers are often more willing to listen to advice. The group is smarter and has many times the experience and knowledge of the individual.”

“What is it that makes you a poor leader?” Raven pressed. “Are you unwilling to listen to advice?”

“I have my reasons,” Yemin said cryptically. “It’s not a secret. When this is over, and we know each other better, I might tell you.” Raven let it drop.

“What about you?” Crisha asked Raven. “Could you be a good leader?”

Raven shrugged. “I have done so in the past.”

“And how did those missions turn out?”

“She did fine,” Morell said. “None of us died, and we completed our quests. What more can you ask for?”

Everyone agreed that Raven would lead this mission.

“Will you tell them?” Yemin asked Raven, who nodded.

“Crusher! Amber!” Raven shouted. The two turned toward her and stopped yelling. “We have just agreed that I will lead this mission. For the rest of the evening, you will not speak to each other. If you do, you are both off the team.” Over their indignant objections, she raised her voice. “We need you both, but you will do more harm than good if you keep on this way.”

Yemin pulled Amber away, and Morell escorted Crusher, both of them protesting vehemently. Neither was happy with the outcome, but they grudgingly accepted it. Crusher directed some of his anger at Morell, when she told him she had spoken up in favor of Raven. Morell didn’t speak to him the rest of the day.

Raven found Yemin's advice to be the most valuable. Crusher and Amber both had good advice to offer, but typically offered it in rivalry with each other. Raven was forced to order them quiet before they had managed to deliver their good advice.

Amber used the strategy that had worked in Arboria, and sought old-timers for their knowledge. They might have historical information about the swamp that could be useful, she reasoned. Old-timers who weren't rocking on their front porch with lemonade, she discovered, could quaff an amazing amount of ale. But she was right about the usefulness of their knowledge. They told her of an abandoned stone tower out in the swamp. It had belonged to a recluse wizard, centuries ago.

Amber reported back to Raven, and suggested they go look for the tower. Crusher predictably and immediately objected. Raven lectured them, again, on getting along. Maybe she should leave one of them here. She sought Yemin's advice.

"They remind me of a married couple," Raven complained. Morell agreed, sourly. Yemin laughed.

"They do, don't they? But we need both of them. I mean, we're taking on an entire undead army! Just remember that they have a tendency to forget themselves, and keep them separated any time that discretion is required."

"All right," Raven agreed. "But we're not really taking on whole army. That would be madness. We just need to get past the army so we can get to the leaders. Once we get the leaders, the undead will disorganize. The Baron's and Baroness' forces will take care of them after that."

The Duke's forces had also been called in. Hopefully they would arrive before the undead army came pouring into the towns. Even if the army was disorganized, Yemin doubted the ability of the guards to handle it.

The rest of the adventure went smoothly. The undead army was stationed a mile away from the abandoned tower. That was probably so they could keep horses near the tower for the convenience of the living generals. The pale lady and the mysterious dwarf had wormed their ways into the Baron's and Baroness' confidence, promising them riches but insisting on utmost secrecy. They were the lieutenants of a necromancer who was none other than the wizard who had built the tower centuries ago and then abandoned it. She had been driven out of one land by the Baron's mother and the other land by the Baroness' father, and was taking her revenge by conquering both lands.

She and her lieutenants were not easy to dispatch, but they did succeed in bringing her down. The pale lady did not survive the fight. When she died, she disintegrated into a disgusting goo. They were shocked. She had been a shape changer.

They subdued the dwarf and his mistress. Crusher made them each bleed just enough to determine whether their blood turned into the disgusting goo of a shape changer. The dwarf's did; the necromancer's didn't. It was possible to imprison shape changers. The combination of silver and iron did the trick, as if they were part were and part fey. The prisoners were turned over to the Duke. The Duke's forces, including a squadron of clerics from the Temple of Kord, repelled the undead army.

Chapter 18: Back to the mountain

The rewards were distributed as promised, and both towns insisted on celebrating all the heroes in turn. Amber was shocked and dismayed to recognize Nine Oaks along the parade route in Wagnerville. She was not surprised when Nine Oaks greeted her at the manor that evening.

“There’s no escaping you, is there?” she said sourly.

Nine Oaks smiled civilly. “Please introduce me to your companions,” she asked. Amber reluctantly did so. Nine Oaks dutifully shook hands all round. When Amber started to introduce Crusher, Nine Oaks interrupted.

“I know that this is Crusher,” Nine Oaks said.

“You have the advantage of me,” Crusher said suspiciously.

“I am the deputy headmistress of Mage Academy,” Nine Oaks explained. “I was a great fan of your father’s.”

“What brings you here?” Crusher asked.

“Before you ask,” Amber interrupted, “the answer is still no. I am not a sorcerer.”

With that, she rudely walked away. She was seething.

Crusher continued the conversation. He sensed that Amber was threatened, and for some reason he wanted to protect her. He had to find out what the threat was.

“Your father had discovered an important area of research,” Nine Oaks explained. “This area is entirely closed to us because his notes were destroyed, and all of his students but one were unable to recreate his work. Amber is the only one who can help.”

“That line of research is dangerous. She is right to refuse.”

“It is not dangerous at all!” Nine Oaks said in surprise. “The explosion had nothing to do with the research. The explosion was part of a side project.”

When the festivities had died away that night, Crusher went to the courtyard of the manor to walk in the moonlight and think. A figure was sitting on one of the stone benches. It was Amber. She looked forlorn.

“Are you all right?”

“Yes,” she answered unconvincingly. He sat next to her. He didn’t ask permission, but she did object as he thought she would.

“Why don’t you want to help Nine Oaks?”

“What business is it of yours?” she flashed, a more normal reaction.

“None of mine,” he answered mildly. “I don’t care if you help her or not. I just wondered why. I thought maybe it was dangerous, but Nine Oaks says it’s not.”

“It’s not dangerous,” Amber said. “I mean, no more dangerous than any sorcery. It’s all dangerous if you’re not careful. The problem is, I’m not a sorcerer. I can’t help.”

“You were a sorcerer.”

“You sound like Nine Oaks.”

“Sorry.”

An apology was so uncharacteristic of Crusher that Amber was startled. “I’m not a sorcerer *now*. I will never practice magic again.”

The moon had risen a little higher, and moonlight streamed into the courtyard between two trees. A gentle breeze rustled the leaves. An owl hooted.

“Nine Oaks says without your help, my father’s work is lost.”

“Your father’s work cost him his life. Why would we save it?”

“She says the explosion had nothing to do with the project. That the research was safe.”

“Sorcery is never safe. Anyway, just because the project didn’t directly cause the explosion, it was part of the chain of events. Nothing we do is in isolation.”

A little gust of wind came through, and Amber shivered in the cooling evening.

“You’re cold,” Crusher observed, putting his arm around her. Amber sat perfectly still, even her shivering frozen. Even with the bright moon, the stars were clear. His arm was warm. “Relax,” he told her. “Look at the stars. Don’t they remind you of that night we held watch, with the statues of the nine children? Do you remember that?”

“Yes,” Amber whispered. “I remember.”

“I know I’ve been awful to you. I’m not saying I have an excuse, but you have to understand it was hard for me.”

“It was hard for me too,” Amber said in a low voice. His arm tightened around her shoulders.

“I know. You were so young. It is true I’ve blamed you for his death. I know you weren’t really responsible; you were too young to understand. And it’s not that I thought you were a bad sorcerer. My father was a very good judge of talent and ability, and you must have been a very skilled sorcerer. I blamed you for distracting him, so that he made a mistake.”

“He never made mistakes.”

“He did make mistakes. Fierguld told me. Three times he made a mistake. Each time it happened when he was distracted. I blamed you for distracting him.”

“How do you know it was his mistake?”

“The investigators determined that the memory device was supposed to be charged with green electricity, but for some reason he used blue electricity. It doesn’t make sense because the

jar of green electricity had been right there on the counter. We don't know why he used the blue."

"It *was* my fault," Amber whispered.

"What?"

"I had been using the blue electricity for the wax kitten."

"Wax kitten?"

"It was going to make the same sounds as Rat the Kitten. The blue electricity was to make it meow and purr. It was a surprise for him. When he came into the lab, I hid the wax kitten and pushed the jar to the edge of the counter with the other jars. He must have picked up my jar. It was my fault."

Crusher didn't know what to think. He had just forgiven her. But not for this. He took his arm away.

"I'm going..." she started to say, then ran to the tree and threw up.

He ought to take care of her, to comfort her. He felt like throwing up himself. He left her alone by the tree.

Nine Oaks did not return to Potato City right away. She went to the School of Sorcery first.

"Headmaster Fierguld," she greeted him.

"Nine Oaks!" His face broke into a smile. "You should have sent word you were coming. How good to see you!"

"And you, Fierguld," she replied.

“What brings you here? Retrieving the books I borrowed last year? I have kept them a shamefully long time.”

“Not at all. I don’t need them back for years yet. Keep them as long as they are useful to you. I know where to find you should I need them.”

“As indeed you have found me. But why then?”

“Actually, I’m looking for your wife.”

“But we just...how did you hear...”

“She wrote us a most amusing letter,” Nine Oaks explained. “From her own hand, we learned of your felicitous tidings.”

It was not the fashion of elves to celebrate weddings with large parties, or small ones. Many elves wouldn’t even recognize this as a legitimate marriage, between human and elf.

“I was just going home, let me finish just two things and we will surprise her for dinner.”

Kendall did not greet Nine Oaks as warmly as Fierguld had. She knew the Academy was deeply disappointed that Fierguld had made such an unwelcome match. They had no problem with her personally, but as a wife for a highly respected elf, they had a great problem with her. Kendall behaved politely.

“You had a charge not long ago, a human thief,” Nine Oaks began.

“Amber,” Kendall agreed.

“Is she all right?” Fierguld asked in alarm, pouring wine into slender goblets. Nine Oaks viewed the wine with relief. There would be no ale quaffing here.

“I just parted with her not two days ago. She was in good health when I left her. But we are concerned. She has sworn off sorcery.”

Kendall nodded. "I have known that for a long time. I was not surprised. It is a coping mechanism. She may never return to it."

"That is not acceptable."

"I don't see what you're going to do about it," Kendall replied heatedly.

"She is the only one who can continue Dain's work. None of his work survived. The other students didn't understand it well enough."

"Yes, yes, I know all that," Kendall said impatiently. "You might have to wait until the next genius comes along. The world has survived many millennia without the memory device, and will continue to get by for a long time to come."

Nine Oaks appeared unruffled. "We hope to find another solution. And I think it is in Amber's best interest to get past this. It's clearly very painful to her."

Kendall couldn't argue with that. "But she will get past it. Just be patient. Maybe in a couple decades she'll come around."

"She has been on more than one quest with Crusher," Nine Oaks informed her.

"Dain's son?" Fierguld asked, astonished.

"I thought their teams were in separate duchies," Kendall objected.

"They are, but they have been assigned to work together twice."

"Well, what of it?"

"There is friction. It interferes with their work. It jeopardized their first quest together, and the second time they were brought together, they went from each one being the leader of their team to neither being the leader, because they couldn't work together."

"You can't make people like each other," Kendall protested feebly.

“Their problem is not one of dislike. Crusher blames her for his father’s death. And now, she does too.”

“No, she doesn’t,” Kendall argued. “I was there. She got over that much of it.”

“She received new information.”

“How is that possible? I told her everything I knew!” Fierguld said.

“Not quite everything. You didn’t tell her that the mistake was one of using the jar of blue electricity instead of green.”

“What does that matter?”

“The blue jar was hers. It was for a little knick knack she had meant to surprise Dain with. He used it by accident because she left it on the counter next to the green jar.”

“You told her that? How do you know that?” Kendall was angry.

“Crusher told her. I overheard. They were having an... intimate... moment in the moonlight and it came out. They never did notice my presence.”

“I am going to have a talk with that boy that he will never forget to his dying day. And his dying day might be at the end of that talk,” Kendall said furiously, standing up.

“Please, sit,” Nine Oaks suggested.

“An intimate moment?” Fierguld repeated, looking horrified. “With Dain’s own son?”

Kendall sat back down and put her head in her hands.

“She can’t win for losing,” she said. “First the forbidden romance with her teacher, and now she finds someone her own age—and species—and it’s forbidden too because he is her dead lover’s son. For shame, Fierguld.”

“Me?” he protested. “What did I do?”

Kendall did not reply. “You win, Nine Oaks,” she said. “I suppose it is meaningless to say I’m doing this for Amber, not for you or your Academy.” Nine Oaks merely nodded pleasantly.

“I think you will both be more comfortable if I do not stay,” she said, and left them to their inevitable argument.

Kendall brought Amber back to the little mountain farm. After the latest revelation, Amber was far from fine. Kendall gave her no time to brood. She made Amber work on the farm, building a fence. She started by chopping trees for the fence posts. Amber was exhausted by the time Kendall let her turn in. The next day was more of the same. Kendall had some potion to heal the blisters, and, hands still smarting, Amber was back at it every day.

Then the journals started again, and the probing questions. Kendall moved faster this time. After only a month, Kendall declared that Amber was ready to try sorcery.

“I’m not a sorcerer,” came the familiar protest.

“You don’t have to be,” Kendall replied. “You just have to do one spell. Then you can leave. You know you miss your companions. You hate thinking that they’re on a quest without you.”

“Why one spell? Even if you convince me to do one, I’ll never do another.”

“That’s your choice. This one isn’t.”

“You can’t keep me here!” Amber yelled, like a rebellious teenager. Kendall smiled in satisfaction. Amber had never been a rebellious teenager. But Amber misinterpreted the smile.

“Actually, I can. The entire mountainside voluntarily is allegiant to me. They can make it very difficult for you to go anywhere.”

“Then we’ll be here forever.”

“You’re not that bad to be around,” Kendall replied.

“I can be,” Amber threatened.

But her protests were habitual more than real, and finally she did a little spell, one of the ghost-noises that Dain had delighted in.

Kendall had one more assignment for her before she went back. They went to the School of Sorcery and used the rebuilt Transduction lab, now staffed by a young human sorcerer who stuttered. Kendall instructed Amber to make a Fireforge Device to preserve her memories of Dain. With the help of the glass smith she made Fireforge Devices out of glass. She loved looking at the little glass balls, irrespective of the memories inside them. The air bubbles inside sparkled and the wisps of colored glass the glass smith had included made fascinating patterns. The balls distorted the light around, whether it was sunlight, firelight, lamp light, or candle light.

Her team had hired on another thief temporarily to replace her while she was gone. He was a wizened old gnome who had come out of retirement to help them out, and while he had had a great time these few weeks, he was happy to get back to his quiet life when Amber returned.

Countess Illacharia hired the team to investigate her lover. They argued whether to accept the quest. Dogo and Crisha thought it was beneath their dignity.

“I have no dignity,” Yemin said, “but I love gossip.”

Amber shrugged. “It sounds like an easy one, and we don’t have anything better to do right now.”

That is how she came to be breaking into a gentleman’s bedroom one night. The gentleman himself was out with the Countess. Yemin and Crisha were keeping a lookout, and

Dogo waited for Amber to unlock the door. She didn't expect any traps but checked anyway. There were none. She didn't expect anyone to be in the apartment, since the Countess' lover lived alone and he was out with the Countess. So she nonchalantly opened the door and walked in.

She was hit with a spell that knocked her over. "Run!" she yelled. "Get Yemin and Crisha!"

Dogo had been moving toward her to heal her, but fled at her command. The assailant turned to follow him, but Amber cast an illusion. There were now ten Dogo's running away, and no way to tell which was the real one. The figure ran the other way. By the time Amber got up, it was gone.

"How did you do that?" Dogo demanded later. "Suddenly I was surrounded by myself!"

Yemin looked interested.

"It's a spell," Amber admitted.

It turned out that Illacharia's lover was true, but an attempt was being made to frame him to discredit Illacharia's judgment. The team uncovered evidence exposing Illacharia's rival and all in all, considered it a good quest, not as demeaning as Dogo and Crisha had feared.

Illacharia's rival turned out to be a shape changer.

After that, Amber routinely used sorcery during their quests, when it was convenient. But her main role was still that of thief, not as a spell caster.

Chapter 19: The Queen is worried

The Duchess summoned the team to augment her personal bodyguard on a visit to the Queen. The Queen had summoned all the duchies to discuss what might be an influx of shape changers. Brad was there, in the Queen's guard, and so was Crusher, serving the Duke.

They were all very busy, but Crusher found time to seek out Amber when all the duchies were in a private meeting with the Queen.

"I wanted to let you know, I have forgiven you," he informed her. Amber was furious.

"*You* have forgiven *me*?" she asked scornfully.

"Yes," he said, confused, "and I heard you are a sorcerer again, so I wondered if you were going to help the Academy figure out Dain's work."

Yemin and Crisha, and many others, were drawn by the noise of their argument.

"They're at it again," Crisha observed.

Brad rushed in. "What in the Queen's name is going on?" he demanded. "Amber! Crusher! Break it up or the guards will arrest you both. This is not the time for a petty quarrel. Your bickering could distract the guards from the real dangers. If the Queen were to be harmed—that would be treason."

The situation with the shape changers was getting dire. The Queen drafted all the bands of mercenaries to investigate cities for signs of shape changers. They were to particularly investigate leaders of the community. The assignments were hampered by the charges not to antagonize influential and powerful people while at the same time investigating them.

Amber and her team were sent to Potato City. The influential people on their list included Hope, the headmistress of Mage Academy, and her administration.

“We will cooperate fully with your investigation,” the headmistress told Amber, “so long as you do confine yourself to investigating the possible presence of shape changers, and not other activities we may be engaged in. Some of our endeavors are of a sensitive nature and should not be made public at this time.”

Amber agreed, and wondered what the Academy was hiding. Headmistress Hope’s words piqued her curiosity.

“Our team,” Amber said, “will be paragons of discretion.”

The headmistress narrowed her eyes, but nodded. Amber had effectively told her that the team would investigate what they chose too, but of the information they uncovered, only that pertaining to shape changers would find its way to the Queen.

“Please, let us know what we can do to help,” Headmistress Hope added more warmly. “The shape changers are a great worry to us. And, Amber,” she added, “I do hope you’ll reconsider helping us out with the little problem Nine Oaks mentioned to you. After all of this is over.”

After interviewing several faculty, Amber began to understand the headmistress’ concerns. The Academy was pursuing a line of research into planar travel. It was in a fuzzy gray area as to whether it pertained to the shape changers, since the shape changers had traveled through planes to arrive in the world. But there had not been any new shape changer influx, as far as anyone could tell. Being able to travel to their world probably wouldn’t help with the current war. It might make the current war bigger, and doom their world, because the shape changers were so much more powerful.

The dwarf sorcerer Trigan was reluctantly researching planar travel. “I’m much more interested in the Fireforge Device,” he told her. “But it’s stalled until we can find the girl he worked with. She’s the only one who knows how to make it work. That is, if she does know. She was a young student, I guess she’d be about your age now.”

Amber almost admitted who she was. The little dwarf reminded her of Dain, just a little bit. “Did you ever meet him?” she asked.

“Yes, he came to a few Mages’ Conventions. And I read his latest paper. I mean his last. I sent him some letters about that.”

“Did he write back?”

“Once or twice. But don’t get me talking about old friends or we’ll be here for hours. What did you want to know about the shape changers? By the way, I’ve been working on a spell to detect the buggers. I fear that blood can be faked. Do you have a sorcerer in your group?”

“I am actually a sorcerer,” Amber admitted. That was the first time she’d laid claim to being a sorcerer since she had cast a spell for Kendall.

“Providential! Let me show you.”

Trigan taught her the spell to detect shape changers. She thanked him. She would ostensibly use it here, she decided, but discretely use the other tests as well. Relying on a spell to detect a shape changer in the midst of Mage Academy seemed like a bad idea.

“I’m scheduled to talk to Serena next,” she told Trigan.

“I’ll send her in,” he promised.

A few moments later the door opened. She looked up, expecting to see Serena.

“Amber, I have to talk to you.” Crusher looked unkempt and haggard. “I’ve been looking everywhere for you.”

“I’m in the middle of interrogations, Crusher,” she replied curtly. “Didn’t your team get sent to Vazala?”

“Yes...I should be there. I had to find you. Amber, I’m begging you to help with Dain’s work. You don’t understand how important this is to me. I can’t stand the thought that it might be lost in oblivion. Kendall thinks someone else will figure it out some day but that’s not necessarily true. The alphabet was only invented once. Please, Amber.”

He was actually down on one knee! Before she had a chance to say anything, the door opened again.

“Um...” said Serena.

“Oh, for goodness’ sake,” said Amber impatiently. “I already decided half an hour ago that I’d do it. Get off the floor. Serena, come in, thank you for coming. Crusher, go get some sleep. We can talk this evening.”

“I’m sorry you made this trip for nothing,” Amber said as they waited for their drinks at the tavern. “I hope you don’t get in too much trouble for abandoning your team.”

“I’m not returning to my team.”

“Why not? What happened?”

“I fell in love.”

Amber felt an inexplicable pang of disappointment. “Well, that’s exciting,” she said lightly. He didn’t respond. The tavern keeper’s perky son handed them their drinks. She quaffed her fizzy grape juice, coughed, and wiped her mouth. Finally, she reluctantly asked, “Is it the half-elf lasher from your old team?”

“Simone? Oh, no. I only thought she was attractive. I never entertained any serious feelings for her.” He sipped his ale and fell into silence again.

“Well, then, who is it? Is she human?”

“Yes, she’s human. She is extremely talented but she doesn’t seem to realize it.”

“Where does she live?”

“She travels a lot.”

“What does she do?”

“She’s always helping people out. I mean, they pay her, but she would help them out anyway. Sometimes she does, even when they can’t pay.”

“She sounds nice.”

“She’s amazing.”

Amber wondered if his mystery girl liked the stars. She was suddenly very tired. She excused herself and went to bed, where she lay wakeful far into the night. The moon inconveniently shone into her room, and stars twinkled all round it.

Crusher seemed to hang about purposelessly while Amber and her team investigated the mages.

“Are you pining with unrequited love?” Amber demanded when she passed him in the hallway.

“Yes,” he answered emphatically.

“Have you told her how you feel?”

“No.”

A bard student hurried by and she lowered her voice. When the little gnome was passed, she asked, “Are you going to?”

“I’m not sure. I guess I’ll have to, some day. But the time hasn’t been right.”

“I assume she’s in the city right now. That’s why you’re here, right? Maybe you can introduce her to us.”

He shook his head. “Not yet.”

“Well, you’re annoying me with your uselessness. If you don’t have anything better to do, you can help us out.”

He was pathetically eager. She rolled her eyes and moved on. Throughout the day she kept thinking of tasks for him, and in the tavern that evening she announced that she had a job for him: her personal aide.

The Mage Academy was clean. As far as the team could tell there were no shape changers among the faculty. Their next assignment was to visit counts and barons and ensure that neither they nor their staff nor courtiers were shape changers. There were 99 counts and barons in the duchy. Even with all the mercenary bands called into service, the task was still going to take months.

The Queen informed the Duchess that they didn’t have months. The Kalarian Duchy had just learned that their Duke’s primary advisor was a shape changer. The Peanut Duchy reported fending off a tribe of orcs and discovering that the leader of the tribe was a shape changer. More and more reports were coming in.

The Duchess sent instructions to Amber which counts and barons were the highest priority. Amber summoned her team to an empty classroom in the Academy to let them know they would be leaving.

Dogo came in with good news. “The gods decided that the situation was becoming unbalanced and provided a spell to detect shape changers.”

“With Trigan’s Shape Changer Detection spell, that will be very helpful in the campaign,” Amber applauded.

“To keep the balance,” Dogo went on, “the gods made the spell prone to error, and we have limited use of it.”

“Tomorrow the Queen sends us to Hayes Duchy to start the search for shape changers. She has assigned us to more than a dozen counties and baronies in Hayes. We leave at dawn.”

Despite her plan for an early departure, Dogo’s news about the new spell led to a late night debate in the tavern of the nature of gods. Amber and Crusher bickered as of old, but without the hostility. Amber actually enjoyed it.

“It’s just a game to the gods,” Crusher repeated, quaffing his ale. “To keep it fun, they have to create arbitrary rules.”

“It’s a serious matter,” Amber objected again, sipping her fizzy grape juice. “They have to create rules for fairness.”

Instead of rehashing the same argument for the third time that night, Crusher set his ale down and abruptly said, “Let me go with you tomorrow.”

“What?” Amber was astonished.

“It’s a big job. You can use the help.”

“So can your Duke.”

“There’s too much work for everyone. I’ll be just as effective with your team as with my old team.”

“But why?”

He didn’t answer immediately. “You know that girl I mentioned?”

“Oh,” she said as understanding dawned. “You haven’t gotten anywhere with her and you want to get away?”

He hesitated again. “Yeah, that’s it,” he agreed at last. He looked as though he wanted to say something else, and she waited. But he only broke off a crust of bread and dipped it in her juice before eating it.

“I know we’ve been getting along well here,” she said finally, “but will you be able to work with me? If I’m in charge?”

“If you have any problems with me, send me packing,” he promised.

“Well, if it’s a choice between letting you come with us, and you hanging around here uselessly mooning over some girl, you can come with us,” she agreed.

“I am forever grateful,” he said theatrically. “I am in your debt. Ask of me anything at all.”

“Get up, you silly goose,” she laughed at his pose. “It’s late, and we’re leaving early. Go to bed. That’s what I ask of you.”

“I obey your every command. But my debt to you is not satisfied.” He drained his ale and blew a kiss to her. She smiled.

Chapter 20: At war with the shape changers

He was amazingly compliant, and witty, and warm. The quest was one of the most fun she'd been on, despite the danger and urgency. They revealed quite a few shape changers in alarmingly powerful positions. Sadly, the steward of the late Baron Nelson was one of them. That meant that the real steward, the one they had met years ago, was dead, assassinated and his identity stolen.

The urgency of their mission created an intensity the team had not often experienced. The shared danger gave them solidarity. Crusher was good natured and reliable. He was docile to her every wish. But during the less stressful moments, he was also fun to be around, and relieved everyone's tension with stories and songs.

"I didn't know you could sing so well," Amber admired.

"You sing quite well yourself," he returned.

"No, I meant it." Sincerity was unlike him, and she thought he was being facetious at best.

"So did I."

"How would you know whether or not I sing well? You've never heard me sing."

"I've heard you sing to yourself. You just didn't know I was listening."

He began to sing a song she recognized. It was a song Dain sometimes hummed when he was working. She never talked about Dain around him, because in the past that had always upset him.

"You might know that song," he said when he finished. "My father often sang it. It was a favorite of his."

"Yes," she agreed carefully. "I have heard him sing it." This was the first time he'd mentioned his father to her.

“Sing it with me,” he suggested. They sang it together. After the first time through, he harmonized the chorus. By then the others had gathered round, listening, and they joined in the chorus with Amber.

After that he mentioned his father often. “This is a story my father told me when I was very young,” he would say. Or, “My father had a funny habit of pointing his shoes to the west when he took them off. He said it was because he was walking after the sun. It was a tradition in Dorgen where his family lived.”

Amber became quiet and attentive when he spoke of his father. She was afraid if she said the wrong thing, he would become angry and distrustful again. She only spoke to encourage more of the story or the memory that he was sharing.

“I wish my father had told me more about you,” Crusher remarked one day. They were traveling to another county for their investigations. They rode horses, as the quickest way to travel. There were magical ways that were quicker, but prohibitively expensive, even in, or especially in, this critical time of near-war.

“You’ve known me longer than he did,” Amber replied. She was a little uncomfortable.

“Yes, but I would like to know more about what he thought about you.”

She knew what Dain thought of her. But it was awkward to tell Crusher.

“I was jealous,” Crusher confessed. “And angry at him. Angry that he had kept this big secret from me. But I think he was afraid to tell me.”

“He didn’t really know about it himself,” Amber said, “not until the last night.”

“He knew,” Crusher disagreed. “He just didn’t admit it until then. Not even to himself.”

“The way it ended was awful,” Amber said, “but I don’t think it would have worked out between us, if we had run away.” The sun vanished behind a cloud, and a light rain began to fall. The cool rain was a nice contrast to the warm day.

“Well, Fierguld would never have let you just disappear!” Crusher chuckled.

“That’s part of it,” Amber agreed.

“He was terrified of children,” Crusher told her.

“I know. I learned a lot about his past, when I was with Kendall.”

“It’s amazing that he adopted me.”

“And that he let me into his lab.”

“Yeah, he was remarkable, taking us both in despite his phobia. I wonder why he was afraid of children.”

“You don’t know?”

“No. Do you?”

“Kendall had me read all these journals and notes that he’d kept when he was Aurel’s apprentice.” She noticed the unhappy expression on his face. “I only learned all this after he died.”

“He never talked about it to me.”

“Me neither. I may know more about his past, but you had 25 years with him. I only had one year with him. You know him so much better than I ever did.”

“And I took him away from you for an entire month of that year.”

“So you did, I hadn’t thought of it that way.”

They fished out their waterproof jackets from their saddlebags as the rain began to fall a little harder. Amber told him all the things she had learned about Dain's past during her time with Kendall.

Tired, cold, and wet, they were more than ready for a roaring fire and a hot meal when they arrived at the county manor. Warm and full and drowsy, Amber was reluctant to leave her spot by the fire as one by one everyone else left. Crusher stayed with her.

"I've never met his family," Crusher said.

"Maybe when this is over, if we still have a world of our own, we could visit them."

"Maybe," he agreed unenthusiastically. Amber laughed at his look of dismay.

It was getting late. "Look at the stars," Amber said, pointing to the window. "They remind me of...they remind me of so many things."

"Like what?"

"Remember that night we held watch over the nine children who had been turned to stone?"

"Yes. I think of that night too, sometimes. When it's clear like this."

"I know. You said so once."

"I did?"

"The night in the courtyard. The night we discovered it was my fault."

"Oh. Amber," he grabbed both her hands, "it wasn't your fault."

She didn't reply. But she didn't pull her hands away either. The silence stretched on. Crusher looked as if he wanted to say something. But finally he just repeated, "It wasn't your fault."

"I guess I know that now. Most of the time."

Again the silence. Again she waited. Then he said, “It’s late. We should go in.” But he continued to hold her hands for another long moment.

“Crusher? If you want to know more about your father...I have a little bit. Nothing much. Kendall had me make these memory balls. They only work once, but I can always make more, as long as I have the memory. I’d like you to use them.”

“They are your memories? Of my father?”

“Yes.”

“Including his last night?”

“Yes. But that one you might not want to see.”

“I’d like to see it. Thank you.”

He pulled her up from her chair, and just stood with her for a moment. Finally he dropped only one of her hands and continued to hold the other hand as they walked to their rooms, letting go only when they reached the stairs and he saw someone coming down.

Amber wasn’t sure what to think after that. He seemed to have forgiven her entirely, and wanted to be friends. If he had been anyone else, she would have thought he wanted to be more than just friends. But surely Crusher was not interested in her. How strange it would be for both of them, she thought, knowing that his father had loved her—that his father had kissed her—that his father had planned to run away with her. Surely when he experienced that memory in the little glass ball, it would kill any feelings he might otherwise develop for her. Besides, what about the girl in Potato City?

He was a little reserved for the next few days. He was distant and cool, and the other night seemed unreal. Amber thought his coolness must be a result of watching her memories, particularly the memory of Dain kissing her.

They traveled on to County Greenton. The countess' manor was two days' journey by horse. There were no inns midway, so they camped that night. The next morning, Dogo cooked breakfast. Crusher and Yemin, the tallest of the party, disassembled and packed the tents. A long reach made this job a little easier. Amber and Crisha prepared the horses.

No one was keeping guard. No one saw the two huge, hairy beasts carrying axes until they were upon them. Amber and Crisha were attacked first, because they were the closest. Amber had no time to cast a spell, but she ducked and rolled and deflected the blow with her arm, receiving a serious gash.

Crisha responded almost before the second one attacked. She yodeled a battle cry and stepped aside so the blow aimed at her missed.

Amber began to cast the illusion spell to create replicas of themselves to confuse the monsters. The first minotaur charged her and she had to interrupt the spell to avoid the attack. Crisha had the second creature's full attention, dealing and receiving damage. Crusher and Dogo were running toward the fight. Yemin could cast her spells from a distance, and didn't need to run to the fight. The monster attacking Amber roared as it received a jolt from behind. It turned around and saw Crusher and Dogo, and charged them.

Finally Amber was able to cast the illusion spell and created replicas of Crusher and Dogo. Confronted by many images, the minotaur halted, confused, and attacked the closest image, which merely disappeared in a puff.

Yemin finished it off in a fiery blast, and Crusher helped Crisha fend off the other one.

Amber fell to her knees, weak and dizzy from loss of blood. Dogo was tending to her. Crusher turned around, exultant in his and Crisha's victory over the minotaur, and saw her lying in blood.

"Amber!" he cried, and ran to her. He tripped over Dogo.

"Get out of the way," Dogo said testily. "You just interrupted the spell that will stop the bleeding."

"Crusher," Crisha pulled him away. "You'll just make it worse. She's fine. Dogo is a skilled healer."

And in a couple minutes, she *was* fine.

"Thank you," she said to Dogo.

"Thank Kord," he replied.

"Yes," she agreed. "Thank Kord." The gods supplied the spells to their followers, at least, when they felt like it. It didn't do to forget that.

"Thank Kord," Crusher echoed fervently.

"I'm sorry," she said to the group. "I've gotten careless about setting watches."

"We kept watch all night," Yemin reminded her.

"Yes, I know, but I didn't think to assign anyone to keep watch after we were awake. This was my fault."

They finished packing up. Crisha kept guard until they were on their way. They left the minotaurs' bodies where they lay below the trees. There wasn't anything they could do with them.

“Why were we attacked by minotaurs?” Amber wondered. “Minotaurs prefer underground. What were they doing out here?” There was something else wrong too, but she couldn’t quite put her finger on it.

They discovered the answer in County Greenton. The countess herself was a victim of the shape changers. The spell Trigan had taught Amber detected the shape changer immediately. She cast it even as the countess greeted them. It admitted to setting the minotaurs on them in an attempt to keep them from finding her out.

“Crusher,” Amber said, “can I talk to you?” He obediently followed her outside the Greenton fortress where the countess had resided. She led him to a little garden and sat down on a stone bench. A water fountain tinkled merrily nearby.

“I didn’t get a chance to talk to you this morning, after the fight.”

“I know what you’re going to say.”

She ignored him and continued. “You did something this morning that was extremely uncharacteristic.” She pulled out the bit of goo that was once part of a shape changer. This was a component of the Trigan’s spell she used to detect shape changers. In this case, it was a bit of the shape changer they had uncovered that day. Amber thought the spell was most effective with fresh goo.

“What are you doing?” he asked in astonishment. This was not where he had thought the conversation was going.

She finished the spell, then pulled out a small knife.

“Hold out your hand.”

“What did your spell tell you?”

“That you are not a shape changer. But the shape changers know about the spell. You might have found a way around it.”

He let her cut his hand. The blood dripped away, and stayed blood. It didn't turn into goo.

“Don't forget to ask the questions,” he told her.

“I know. But we had a long conversation recently. If you are a shape changer, you might have been there, and learned a lot about Crusher's past with me.” She thought for a minute.

“What was the name of Dain's pet?”

“Rat the Kitten,” he answered promptly.

“Who was the cleric on my team before Dogo?”

“Brad.”

She took a deep breath. “What was Dain planning the night he died?”

“Amber, this is ridiculous.”

“What was he planning?”

“I answered the other two, there's no way a random shape changer would have known both of those.”

“What was he planning?” she shouted.

“To run away with you,” he answered quietly.

Amber burst into tears.

“Whoa, what's wrong?”

“I was so afraid you'd been killed,” she sobbed, “that they'd gotten to you.”

“No, no, I'm here. They haven't gotten me.” He sat next to her on the bench and held her while she cried.

“But I don't understand,” she said finally.

“What don’t you understand?” He wiped the tears off her face.

“What you did this morning. You interrupted Dogo’s spell, when he was healing me. It didn’t make sense.”

“Ah. There was a reason.”

“Yes?”

“It wasn’t a good reason.”

“Just tell me.”

“I just wasn’t thinking. That’s all. I saw you lying there, and all that blood, and I just knew right then that the worst thing that could happen to me is if you died. All I could think was that you were dying, and I had to tell you something first. Luckily the others pulled me away so Dogo could finish healing you so that you weren’t dying anymore.”

“Tell me now.”

“Tell you what?”

“What it was you had to tell me before I died. Tell me now.”

“I don’t know if this is the right time.”

“The right time is when we are both alive. Tell me now.”

“You’re cute when you are insistent.”

“Crusher,” she said warningly.

“All right, all right. I’m just teasing. I’m going to tell you. I’m just procrastinating. Or prolonging the moment. I’m not sure which. I don’t know why it’s so hard to tell you. It’s just such a risk.”

Amber kept quiet, with difficulty, and held his hand. “I’ll wait until you can say it.”

“Sorry. It’s not easy. The truth is, I love you, Amber.”

Amber was silent. She had suspected something like that, hadn't she? But she had convinced herself it was entirely improbable.

"Say something," he said, worried.

"What about the girl in Potato City?"

He laughed. "That's *you*. You're the girl who travels a lot, who is amazingly talented, and beautiful. You're the girl I wasn't having any luck with." His tone grew worried again.

"What about now?" he asked, lifting her chin to look at her eyes. "Am I having any luck now?" His brown eyes looked earnestly into hers, searching.

"Yes," she answered at last. "But..."

She didn't get a chance to voice her objection. He kissed her, preventing any further speech for a long time.

She broke away at last.

"I don't understand. I thought you were angry again, because of the memories."

"The memories? Oh, the glass balls."

"Yes, I thought watching me kiss your father had made you angry."

"Amber, you were young..."

"I was old enough," she said angrily. "I knew what I was doing."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean it that way. I meant, it was so long ago. Amber, he was so happy. You made him so happy the last night of his life. I can't hate you for that. You gave him such a wonderful gift. Thank you."

"Oh. Uh, you're welcome. But then...you have been so distant since that last night that we talked. What was that about?"

“I kept convincing myself that I don’t have a chance with you. Every time we talked I wanted to tell you how I felt. And every time, I lost my courage. Amber, in my adventures I have faced the most terrifying monsters you can imagine, without quailing. But I couldn’t face you. I couldn’t bear the thought of your rejection. I have been the most cowardly person in the world, these past few months.

“The truth is, I didn’t leave my team to come see you. They kicked me out. I had gotten scared. I froze during a battle and the entire team nearly died. They were kind about it, but they were right. I was worse than useless; I was a liability.”

“Another man, driven to distraction by me,” Amber murmured sadly.

“No, that’s not your fault at all.”

“My fault or not, if it’s the effect I have on people, *I’m* the liability. Like the gnome with the golden touch.”

“The gnome... the what?”

“Oh, it’s a story Kendall told me. There was a little gnome and everything she touched turned to gold. So she couldn’t touch anyone. Her mother was a golden statue, her father was a golden statue, her grandmother figured it out and devised a way to care for the infant without touching her.”

“How awful.”

“Well, it’s not a true story. It was just a fairy tale. I’m not sure what the point of it was.”

“I guess the point you were using it to make is that, even if it is unintentional, you feel responsible for the effect you have on people.”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“I was ridiculous to let myself be so distracted. It’s absolutely not you. It was entirely me, and I will prove it to you by behaving maturely no matter what you say or where you are.”

At that, Amber laughed. She more than laughed. She guffawed. Crusher looked hurt.

“What? Do you have so little faith in me?”

“I have no faith in you at all. However, you’ve made your point. It’s your own immaturity that lets you be distracted by me. It’s not my fault at all. If it was any other girl, you’d be just as distracted.”

“I’m not sure that makes me feel any better.”

“I would wager that you *have* been just as distracted by other girls, at least once or twice.”

“No, never!” Crusher started to protest. Then he remembered an elf minister who had driven him to distraction with her almond shaped eyes. “Well, maybe,” he conceded.

“I’ll make you a deal,” Amber said seriously.

“What’s that?”

“Let’s just get through this shape changer stuff. For all we know, this might be the end of our world, and there will be no tomorrow to worry about. Let’s enjoy each other in the time we have left. And if it turns out there *is* a tomorrow, well, we’ll see then.”

“No commitments?”

“That’s right, we’ll just have fun.”

“I’m prepared to make a commitment.” His face got that mooning look.

“No. Not until this is over. Then we’ll see how we feel.”

She forestalled further protests by kissing him.

“I don’t believe it,” Dogo said as he came into the big hall where Crisha was relaxing by sharpening her battleaxe. Yemin was nearby, learning a new spell.

“Believe what?” Crisha asked.

“I was looking for Amber and I heard voices in the garden. Then the voices went quiet and when I looked into the garden...”

“Yes?” Yemin prompted.

“She was with Crusher.”

“They’ve been spending a lot of time together,” Crisha shrugged.

“They were kissing.”

“Really!” Crisha exclaimed. “This I’ve got to see!” She grabbed her battleaxe and ran out of the room. Yemin smiled indulgently.

“I thought it wouldn’t be much longer. They’ve been trying to hook up for years.”

“But they fight all the time!” Dogo protested.

“They used to fight like a married couple,” Yemin explained.

They ferreted out several more shape changers, but before they had investigated everyone they were assigned to, the shape changers launched the attack. The shape changers weren’t entirely prepared, but the teams assigned to investigate were doing such a good job that the shape changers were forced to act before they were ready.

Trigan’s spell to detect shape changers was crucial to the investigators’ success, even more so than the spell the gods provided. Years later, Amber campaigned tirelessly until he was awarded a medal, and Potato City erected a statue of him, with a plaque describing his

contribution to the war. The temples also put up a memorial recognizing the gods' contribution, because it didn't do to shortchange their efforts, even if their contribution was of minimal use.

The investigative teams were assembled and reassigned to help in the battles. Amber's team was broken up as each member was assigned to a different specialty unit: Dogo to the clerics, Yemin to the wizards, Crisha and Crusher to the fighters. Amber was assigned to a corp of investigators who were to maintain the integrity of the army. The Queen knew that the biggest threat the shape changers posed to her army was in assassinating and replacing the leaders, the generals and captains, the lieutenants and sergeants. Amber requested that Crusher be reassigned to her unit, and the request was granted.

"This may be the most fun I've ever had," Amber told Crusher.

They delighted in catching the shape changers *before* they struck, rather than discovering who the shape changers had assassinated and replaced. The shape changers typically took on a body before killing it, studying its moves and learning its history so they could better mimic it. For anywhere from a few hours to a few days, there might be two of a person. Amber and Crusher grew adept at hearing the hints of doppelgangers.

"Where is the Captain?" they overheard a soldier say.

"She's in the mess," another replied, but at the same time, a third was saying, "I saw her heading toward the Queen's tent."

Immediately Amber went to the mess and Crusher toward the Queen's tent until they had both apprehended a captain. With a handcuff made of silver and iron, they led the protesting and indignant—and identical—captains to the tent they had set up for interrogation. The tent was lined with silver and iron, and the chairs and furniture within laced with the same. Amber cast Trigan's spell to identify the false one.

The shape changers never managed to outwit her spell. But just in case, she never relied on it alone. She was always vigilant that the shape changers might find a way to deflect the spell, and she might apprehend the real person instead of the mimic. She always verified the identity of both the real person and the false, before turning the shape changer over to the team of sorcerers who would send the shape changer back to its home plane.

The shape changers were sent back with a message, instead of being executed, by the Queen's decree. She hoped in this way to negotiate peace and discourage the shape changers from attempting to conquer this world again.

The war did not suffer any serious setbacks. The shape changers formally surrendered. The commander, currently mimicking a 9 year old human child, confessed the entire plan. He also told them where the child's body was hidden, the child whom he had murdered and assumed the identity of. The Queen did not send him back to his plane of existence with the other captives. She personally attended his execution.

The commander's confession revealed that the shape changers had found a hole that allowed them to travel freely from their plane of existence to this one. The hole was unstable. More than one shape changer was caught inside the hole when it winked out of existence, and lost forever. After a few weeks, the hole closed entirely. But by then, a sizable force of shape changers had gotten through. They carried out their mission to conquer this world. When they had conquered the land, they would force the spell casters of this world to create a new hole.

Amber remembered that Trigan had been looking into that line of research, when he was interrupted to devise the spell to detect shape changers.

"If the shape changers had won," she asked him, "would you have been forced to create the path for them to move freely from one plane to another?"

“No,” he told her. “It’s not possible.” He launched into a technical discussion of why such a hole must necessarily be unstable and short lived. She was reassured until he finished his lecture with, “Unless the theory of Potential Existence is true. But that is highly unlikely, and even so, it would take decades of research, and more materials than this world has.”

Trigan had been drafted into the army with most of the rest of the faculty at Mage Academy. Spell casters were in high demand in the war against the shape changers.

Chapter 21: Happiness

After the war, Amber and Crusher took a vacation from all the investigating and fighting. They traveled spontaneously with no particular destination. They followed a traveling carnival through several little villages for a few days. They rescued the carnival's prized, caged Quetzalcoatl and slipped away in the night. They visited Kendall and Fierguld. The Quetzalcoatl and Rat the Kitten hit it off, so Kendall adopted the colorful flying snake.

They visited Dorgen to see Dain's family. Dorgen was a beautiful land of pastoral hills. Each time they crested a hill, another five or six peaks appeared ahead. Cattle grazed on green hills spotted with limestone outcroppings under the deep blue sky.

The road through Dorgen led to a little village of dwarves. A boy sitting on a cart full of apples near the road waved at them.

"Two apples for a copper," he called.

Crusher fished out a copper and gave one apple to Amber. He bit into the other one. "Do you know Gover and Natala?" he asked the boy.

"No," said the boy, "but my father might. Wait here. I'll bring him."

Before they could protest he was off, running across the pasture. They could see his father in the distance. In a few minutes he was back, his father trailing behind him.

"Sure, I know Gover," the older dwarf said.

Amber looked at Crusher. Crusher said, "We're writing about book about Gover's son, Dain. He's a famous sorcerer. Do you know where we could find the family?"

"Sad business, that was," the dwarf replied. "Yes, I can draw you a map. Tom, take them inside, give them some of last year's cider."

Last year's cider was spicy and delicious. Tom's father drew a detailed map and explained every landmark. After they left, Amber giggled, "I thought he was going to tell us to turn left at the spotted cow."

Dain's mother talked about him fondly.

"He was such an unhappy boy at home. He really blossomed when he went away. But I missed him."

His sister did not speak of him fondly.

"He was arrogant and stuck up. He thought he was better than me and he wouldn't speak to me when he came home to visit. But he wasn't any better than me. He was just a clumsy oaf."

His father only said, "I was proud of him."

At last, Crusher admitted that he was Dain's adopted son. Their reception grew cool, and he and Amber did not stay long after that.

"Racism," Amber said with disgust.

"It's just their culture," Crusher defended them.

"They should accept you for Dain's sake. *He* loved you."

Crusher brushed back her hair from her eyes. "You're beautiful when you are indignant. They have dwarf grandchildren, they don't need an adopted human grandchild."

"And *you're* beautiful when you're obedient. Fetch me my slippers."

After an adventurous and glorious turn in the mountains tracking down trolls who had been terrorizing a village of elves, they treated themselves to several nights in a luxurious inn near a sea. The inn looked out onto a beach. They spent hours in the water and on the beach,

looking for shells and sea dollars. Amber sighed contentedly. She thought about her troubled life, the rare and exquisite moments of happiness she had experienced, and how peaceful the sea was.

“I could die happily now,” she thought. “I can live happily now.”

A family of elves was also patronizing the inn at the same time. Their son was rebellious and sullen. His black hair hung over green eyes in a dark face. His name was Paton, and he was about 800 years old, roughly equivalent to the same age as Amber and Crusher. He spent a lot of time at the beach with Amber and Crusher. His wealthy parents had come here for their health and brought him with them, because they didn't approve of his companions.

The three swam all morning in the sea and rested in the shade on the beach listening to him complain that his parents had forbidden him from talking to his friends.

“You're old enough,” Amber pointed out, “why do you obey them?”

Crusher said warningly, “Amber,” but Payton laughed.

“You don't know much about our culture,” he answered. “That would be the same as killing myself. We take our duties to our parents very seriously.”

“Why do they disapprove of your friends?”

“They think my friends are not very intelligent.”

“Are they?”

“No.”

Crusher chuckled.

Paton told them all about black elf culture, and how different it was from red elf or silver elf culture. Amber was fascinated. His parents approved of Amber and Crusher as companions

for their son. Apparently they felt Amber and Crusher were sufficiently intelligent. Paton grew friendlier and was content to spend his time with them.

One day he confessed to them, "I always wanted to be a wizard."

"What's stopping you?" Amber asked.

"My parents don't think that's the best path for me, and I'm too old to start training."

"Too old?"

"Don't most wizards start training when they are children?"

"Some do. But it's not a requirement. Listen, if you want to be a wizard, I can help you."

"I won't go against my parents' wishes. That's not our way."

"You don't have to go against their wishes. Leave it to me."

"What are you going to do?"

"You'll see."

Amber used the skills Kendall had taught her. She probed his parents to find out why they objected, and learned that they didn't have any problems with wizardry in general. They just honestly believed that Paton would be no good at it, that he didn't have the right personality for it.

She turned her attention to Paton. Were they right? Did he have the traits of a good wizard? She wasn't familiar enough with wizardry to know.

"If you're not busy," she wrote to Yemin, "could you come to the Turkey Inn on the north side of the Gradient Sea? There's someone I want you to meet."

Yemin arrived quickly. Amber's letter had included a drawing of the beautiful beach, and a description of the mild, sunny weather. Yemin adored beautiful beaches and mild, sunny weather.

Yemin taught Paton a few easy spells. Then she taught him one that was a little more challenging.

“No problem,” she announced. “He’d do fine, if this is what he wants to do.”

“Teach him some showy, flashy things,” Amber asked. “That will convince his parents that he has the ability for it.”

In a couple weeks, Paton treated everyone to an amazing display of fireworks on the beach.

“Esteemed mother and revered father,” he announced formally, “I once again beseech you to bless my entry into the arts of wizardry, if it please your judgment of my abilities tonight.”

The elf parents agreed. They made plans to travel back to Potato City and enroll Paton in the Mage Academy.

Amber and Crusher walked along the beach. The moon was a sliver in the sky, and a dusting of clouds hid most of the stars.

“I guess our holiday is over,” Amber said. “When we get back to Potato City, I’ll start working with Trigan where Dain left off.”

“Don’t worry about me,” Crusher said hurriedly. “I’ll find something to do there. Maybe the Headmistress needs a bodyguard.”

“She does have bodyguards, and I’m sure we could find something for you. But, Crusher, I don’t want you to do that.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“You are a traveler. You like to meet new people and rescue them. Go save the world, kiss exotic women, and come visit me from time to time.”

“You’re sending me away?” he asked, anguished.

Amber stroked his hair. “Try it for a few days. You’ll see it’s for the best. You’ll be happier this way.”

“Amber, I love you.”

“I love you too, Crusher. But honestly, we’re not that perfect together. And you know it. You’re not going to be happy settling down with one person in one place. And I’m done traveling. I’m going to continue Dain’s work, and start my own.”

“Is it Paton?”

“What?”

“Are you leaving me for Paton?”

“No, I am not. I’m leaving you because I can see that it was just fun for a while. It’s not going to work out.”

“But you are fond of Paton?”

“I don’t know,” she answered honestly. “Right now we’re just friends. I guess I’m open to the possibility that it could be more than that some day.”

“You can’t do this,” he argued. “After all we’ve been through?”

“Don’t you miss how we used to argue?” she asked. “I almost think that is what I liked best about you, is the arguing.”

“This is not funny!”

She gave in and gave him the argument he was seeking, one last flaming row on the beach.

Amber and Paton's family left for Potato City. Yemin stayed with Crusher for a few days to console him. He sat in the sun and moped until she heard a rumor from another traveler of treasure on an island in the sea.

"I've hired a little sailing boat," she told him. "We're going treasure hunting."

"I don't care where we go," he said dully. But after a few days of hacking through manticores, hydras, and shambling mounds, his liveliness returned. He pushed on through fireballs, banshees, and gravity reversal traps with glee.

The treasure they found was cursed. The wizard who removed the curse claimed a full quarter of the treasure for her trouble. Crusher put half of his share into a time-release dragon horde, the safest place to store valuables, and the rest he spent on a half-elf dancer who turned out to be as dishonest as she was attractive. Yemin judged that he had gotten over Amber at that point and left him with the dancer, even though she knew the dancer wasn't going to work out for him. Yemin was retiring from adventuring. She had already bought a little castle not far from Potato City.

Chapter 22: A dénouement

Nine Oaks was relieved to see Amber installed at last in Mage Academy. Amber negotiated for Paton's probationary acceptance into the Wizardry College. Nine Oaks had promised her an entire lab of her own, but she bargained that away for Paton. She preferred to share Trigon's lab. She dreaded the idea of being in charge of her own entire lab. It was much more comfortable to share the responsibility with Trigon.

She married Paton when he graduated from Second Level of the College. He continued to study the advanced levels until their first child was born. Then he stayed home to tend to the babies, three in all. His parents weren't thrilled about having half-human grandchildren, but they were polite. The middle child, a boy with Amber's fair hair and Paton's green eyes, won their hearts by learning the famous traditional black elf Ballad of the Fat Elf by heart and reciting it. The small boy's accent was perfect.

As Amber predicted, Crusher kissed many exotic women but never settled down with any. He did visit her and Paton, and the children called him "Uncle Crusher". One day, he brought a companion, a tiny dwarf tot.

"Her name is Daina."

"She's so strong!" Amber marveled as the curly haired child pulled her finger almost out of its socket.

"Let go, Daina," Crusher chided, distracting her with a piece of flint, which she put in her mouth.

"Give her a real toy," Amber objected, handing her a doll. Daina took the flint out of her mouth and banged it on the doll's soft head.

"Where did she come from?" Paton asked.

“It’s a long story.”

“We’ve got time,” Amber said authoritatively.

“I was in Featherville, and a dwarf hired me to find her fiancé. Her name was Tina. She insisted on coming with us to find him. She and I...spent a lot of time together.”

Amber raised her eyebrows, and Paton chuckled.

“So is Daina yours?”

“Tina was already pregnant when her fiancé disappeared. So, no.”

“What happened?”

“We didn’t find him. Tina wanted to keep looking, but she couldn’t do that and look after a baby. Honestly, I was worried about her, the way she didn’t seem to care about the baby. She wanted me to pick out the name.”

“She was so devoted to the father that she sacrificed being a mother to her baby to keep looking for him, but not so devoted as to refrain from carrying on with you?” Paton asked.

“Exactly,” Crusher said. “But I think she wasn’t so keen on being a mother in the first place. She wasn’t ready to settle down.”

“Did she ever find the father?”

“Not yet.”

“You named her after your father,” Amber observed.

“Now that you have a baby, are *you* going to settle down?” Paton asked.

Crusher laughed. “I don’t plan to!”

“He wouldn’t be the first adventurer to take a baby with him,” Amber pointed out.

“Remember Verice?” she asked Crusher.

“Well, she was a ranger,” he pointed out. “She was usually pretty far to the back in a fight. She just had to design a baby harness that kept the baby out of the way of the crossbow.”

“Hire a nanny,” Amber advised. “We’ve had lots of experience traveling with vulnerable people we had to keep out of harm’s way. It’s not that hard.”

“It’ll be a strange childhood,” Paton observed.

“I know!” Amber said, her eyes shining. “She’ll learn so much!” Paton looked alarmed. “It’s not that much different than when you try out your spells on the children.”

“What’s that?” Crusher laughed.

“He’s always trying to figure out how to make spells simpler, so that less skilled wizards can learn them. Or he’s trying to figure out how to *teach* them more simply. And he tries it out on the kids first.”

“If a little child can learn a spell, so can a fumbling wizard,” Paton defended himself.

“That’s right. And the children are getting new experiences. Just like little Daina will.”

Little Daina did have an interesting childhood, and grew up to an interesting life. Before you ask, she did *not* grow up to marry one of Amber’s children. None of the minor characters in this story chose any of the other minor characters as life partners. Some found soulmates and some found companions. But they were only here to support our main characters, and they weren’t willing to conveniently tie off loose ends by arbitrarily hooking up. Because although their appearance in this narrative is to support the story, they are the main characters of their own stories.

The End