

The Kingdoms the Dragons Loved

A novel set in the Twilight Kingdoms

Issue 1

Based on and Inspired by the songs of the band Twilight Force.



By David Foxfire

This work is set in the fictional setting created by the Adventure Metal band Twilight Force and, while the characters of the bands are present, the story is not necessary about the band itself. Twilight Force or Nuclear Blast has not (yet) endorsed or authorized this work. If they wish to discuss this matter, they can contact the author at this address: davidfoxfire (at) foxfirestudios [dot] net. (Other people who wish to converse with the author is encouraged to do so likewise.) He is also (currently) available at the Twilight Force discord server.

Because of this derivative nature of this work, this novel is available free of charge. Those who wish to contribute to this and future projects by David Foxfire, you are invited to go to the Foxfire Studios web site at foxfirestudios [dot] net. There are also other ways to reach and support him, listed at the end of this document.

Synopsis

A recent realm-shaking cataclysm on a cosmic scale has thrown the universe of the Twilight Kingdoms into chaos, and while most denizens are unaware of the turmoil in the skies above them, the Twilight Force felt the worst of it in their loss of one of their prime members. The Queen of Eternity and her associates are working round the clock in restoring order and preparing for another such event, and that involved resetting the life of the lost hero, Chrileon. While this is being done, the Queen has discovered another kindred spirit drawn from another world, a young woman with a crystal of her own. Though not a part of any prophecies, this Amber Merichello will have an important role to play in the upcoming events in the Twilight Kingdoms

Issue 1 Synopsis

The crone from the forest near Oak's End discovered a strange little girl who didn't quite look like she came from around here. She took her in and, after some language barrier bridging, she learns more about Amber Merichello and the world she came from. While most of the backstory is strange to the elderly elven witch, she knew that she had to take Amber in, especially when she learns that Amber has the makings of being a mage like herself. And then there's that crystal...

Content Warning

While steps have been made to avoid triggering content, I cannot account to every possible reader, especially in the current year. It is a certainty that something in this story will offend somebody, the only question being who, when, and from what? Those who are easily offended or hyper-sensitive toward anything should refrain from progressing any further. Such content includes Mature language, possible violence, light political themes, original characters, use of an isekai theme, psilocybin use, Touhou and Disney references, the use of Fifth Edition Dungeons & Dragons rules, and the idea that what is Woke in Earth is not the same thing as what is Woke in the Twilight Kingdoms. Different world, different social issues, it's as simple as that.

The Kingdoms the Dragons Loved is copyrighted © 2020 by David "David Foxfire" Gonterman and is licensed under the Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International Creative Commons License (CC BY 4.0) which is presented online at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>. With this license, you are free to Share, copy, and redistribute the material in any medium or format; and to Adapt, remix, transform, and build upon this work; as long as these two terms are followed: You must give the proper Attribution, the appropriate credit, to David Foxfire (and Twilight Force) and to provide the link to this license. You must also not use this material for any commercial purposes.

All Twilight Force material by the band Twilight Force © Nuclear Blast. The referenced material is listed in the order of their presence:

- Queen of Eternity, from "Dawn of the Dragonstar"
- To the Stars, from "Heroes of Mighty Magic"
- Rise of a Hero, from "Heroes of Mighty Magic"
- Epilogue, from "Heroes of Mighty Magic"

Twilight Force is:

- Allyon – Lead Vocals
- Aerendir – Rhythm Guitar
- Blackwald – Keyboards, Piano, Violin, Cembalo
- Born – Bass Guitar

- De'Azsh¹ -- Drums
- Lynd – Lead Guitar, Acoustic Guitar, Lute

Former Members, which are involved in this story:

- Chrileon – Former Lead Vocals

The below material used therein are used within United States Fair Use Laws:

- All Disney references and remixes inspired by Walt Disney, not necessarily the Corporation.
- All Touhou references by Zun/Team Shanghai Alice.
 - English lyrics to “Bad Apple” by Pat McCarthy and Cristina Vee
- Some maps inspired by Dyson's Dodecahedron and remixed.
- ‘Verbal Component Rosetta’ by PDX_Mike, available from the Dungeon Masters Guild (dmsguild.com)

The author makes some of the artworks. Other illustrations used here are referenced below:

- “Queen of Eternity Cover” from Twilight Force
- “Magical Forest” from alinurendini (at) deviantart [dot] com. Link: <https://tinyurl.com/sb7qae6> .
- “Ferraro House Forest Hills Gardens” from Wikimedia Commons. Link: <https://tinyurl.com/tbf2ye6> .
- Illo from *American Homes and Gardens* #323 (August 1909). Link: <https://tinyurl.com/u5qaouh> .
- Photo of Tsunami/Texas Tornado/Thriller, Schwarzkopf roller coaster, currently dismantled. Link: <https://tinyurl.com/w22fblr> .
- “Old Draw Well in Forest” Photo by Yvonne Stepanow from FreeImages. Link: <https://tinyurl.com/ttzh5rh> .
- Log Cabin Bedroom Picture from M&J Blog. Link: <https://tinyurl.com/vvyxbhj> .
- “Library” from Serdarakman (at) deviantart [dot] com. Link: <https://tinyurl.com/rrv2mo9> .

The following fonts are used:

- Baskerville BT by John Baskerville
- Bookmania by Mark Simonson
- Calibri by Luc dr Groot
- Century Schoolbook by Morris Fuller Benton
- CombiNumberals by FontSite Inc.
- Modesto by Jim Parkinson

TinyURL [dot] com is used for links whenever it is possible.

¹ The drummer of Twilight Force has been recently replaced, but he will assume the character of De'Azsh

Version History

Version 0.90; Dated 23 Feb 20; First pre-release for group proofreading.

Version 0.91; Dated 7 Mar 20; Light Edits, altering a scene, converting Alignments in Stat Blocks to adjectives rather than the standard biaxis array.

(Some details of this book can still be altered in a future version, those who wish to correct a detail (or grammatical error) or to adjust some matters to a better alternative are encouraged to contact David Foxfire to do so. Means to contact him lie at the end of this document.)

Special thanks goes to:

Ceth, Pirate Captain @ Discord

To the Reader

Thank you very much for giving what I wrote a shot. It took me a good three months off and on to get this far and if you like what you see so far, it'll be a real thrill for me. Especially if you're a fan of Twilight Force; you're my target audience here and I hope I can supply just a bit to fill up the spaces in the lore of the Twilight Kingdoms. We just can't trust *only Blackwald* to pour over those ancient scrolls, can we? We're talking about two continents the size of North America and Australia each; we're going to need more than one wizard at work here. I'll gladly volunteer for this job.

Now then, I've run through this file through several spelling and grammar checkers. However, even with the fine-toothed comb I use, you can be assured that this story has a heroic amount of spelling and grammar errors that I have yet to catch. It's my eyes, folks, I wouldn't know that I'm looking at a typo at times even if it was so big illiterate people can see it. If you happen to come across one of these errors, please, do not be afraid to let me know about it. I'm on the Twilight Force Discord all the time, so you can reach me there and tell me where you found it. I'll gladly correct it with much appreciation.

Also, on a similar route, you might think that some parts of the story are okay, some parts not so okay, and some parts that would make you wonder what I was on when I wrote it. (Heart medication, anti-depressants, and caffeine. Honest.) If you have something about what I made that you'd like to talk about, over almost everything at all—within reason, of course—you can talk to me about it as well. Even if nothing comes up that can be worked into the story, I'd enjoy the conversation. If I can make a few new friends over this, more power to me.

Lastly, and I hope people would pardon me on this: This is a fanwork, so this whole novel is available for free. However, if anyone wishes to show my support with a good cup of joe, I'm not going to refuse you. Nothing will encourage me to go further in this like some coffee from an appreciating reader. If you are so inclined, head over to <https://ko-fi.com/A411MTN>.

I'll let you go so that you start reading my story, and once again, thank you very much for reading this first part of an epic tale. I hope you enjoy it as much as I have.

*Dedicated to all those who was among the
Knights of Twilights Might*

Part 0

The Queen of Eternity

“This song tells the story of a timeless and omnipotent celestial entity, an immortal and unfathomably powerful ethereal being, namely the Queen of Eternity. She is the spirit and warden of realities and time and the immortal protector of the cosmic winds.

She is awakened from her slumber when unknown and malicious rifts in the space-time continuum sent tremors through the fabric of Mana.

In the events which transpire in this particular song, she is facing the Galactic Ruler of the Dark Dimensions, who seeks to eradicate life, order, and time.”

--- Blackwald



Prologue

Celestials are not known for cursing. It's something that nobody expected them to do, and not too many of them would even consider saying anything remotely like an F-Bomb. It's just not in the nature of your common celestial.

It will take a lot for a Celestial to consider the thought that swearing would even be proper.

The Queen of Eternity found something that managed to get her to swear.

She stood there in the Astral Plane, high above the realm she protects, surrounded by the wreckage of a battle in the deepest darkness of space. A graveyard of recently defeated spaceships, cosmos sailing dreadnaughts rendered inert by her infinite abilities. Bodies and wreckage laid scattered about in the vacuum, some to fall down to the planet and burn up in the atmosphere, but most of them would just tumble in the Astral, be it in one piece or in giblets, never to be seen again.

They appeared all of the sudden through rifts in the fabric of space and time created by the several dozen craft with several thousands of fighters and soldiers. If they knew that their destination was protected by this entity, even if she was sleeping at the time, would they have turned back...or did they feared the whips of their masters more than someone who could disintegrate anyone to ashes with a stray thought and a finger snap?

She didn't get the name of her assailants until after she made sure that she managed to drive back the survivors. She didn't get much, what survived talked in no language she knew, and the ships didn't carry much outside of some imperial livery she didn't recognize. All she knew is that fanaticism that a mixture of fear and zealotry could bring. Everything else was a complete mystery.

A matter for another day. But now she has to clean up this mess.

It'll take some doing to repair the rifts in the fabric of space and time caused by these spacecrafts. It wasn't like the minuscule pinprick-like teleportation caused by magic. To the fabric of space and time, a normal magic spell to teleport or to open a portal is little more than a prick of a sterilized lance used to test blood sugar. These rifts, however, were made with the elegance of a psychotically crazed serial killer using a chain saw. The rips and tears remained like open sieves, a brutal and violent act that would take forever to heal, if at all.

Unless they do, these rifts could wreak havoc in the realms, throwing planets out of sync and mucking up the normal flow of time and mana. If that alone isn't enough of a full-time job for someone who's supposed to be infinite, she might have to do that with one hand, because The Queen has that thought in the back of her head that is convinced that this Galactic Empire from this Dark Dimension is going to return, and no doubt with a stronger force.

She fears that she might not be able to face this possible future invasion on her own. The realm below hasn't even developed motorized flight yet, let alone space travel. The only hope she could think of is that the realm below her has started that prophesy from the Dragon King, where the seven crystals would be discovered by the seven heroes, and form the fabled and destined heroes to reunite the...

What she saw next floating next to her made her gasp in horror. A young man with leather armor, golden-brown hair, and a sword on his back. Floating inert on space, frozen solid in the ether.

"Chrileon. No."

Chrileon was one of those seven heroes. The band of heroes destined to be known as the Twilight Force. The group that was destined to reunite the Seven Kingdoms, bring on a new era of peace and prosperity, which will spark the imagination and ingenuity of the people to develop and create what they'd need to combat a threat such as what she faced.

And now, one of the Twilight Force is lost to the Twilight Kingdoms!!

She sighed, remembering that sometimes being an infinite being is not all that is cracked up to be. You'd think that doing what she's about to do would be as simple as juggling planets in one hand.

On the contrary, making sure that reality is kept in any semblance of order is a full-time job even for Gods.

The Queen shook her head. Even if Chrileon had never gotten one of the seven crystals, he still has that destiny. She could sense the noble blood in his young body, the soul of the Dragon King of long ago. He is supposed to be the one true heir of the Emerald Throne, and would have a vital part of the reunification of the Twilight Kingdoms. He had a role nobody else in the Twilight Kingdoms

could fill. There were several vital roles that the prophesy required. Anyone of them falling will spell disaster for the whole plan.

She can't let him just drift forever in the nether space; he's needed too much!

She encased Chrileon in a protective sphere and sent him floating back down into the world below. So far, the aftereffects of the rifts of space-time have only limited effects to the world...for the moment. But she feared the worst.

It's why she gave all those visions and dreams to Blackwald, the most powerful, and most prodigious, wizard in the Seven Kingdoms. She knew that Blackwald would figure it out in time. If there is anyone in the Seven Kingdoms that is capable of that, it's this one wizard too powerful, too knowledgeable, and too much of an outside-the-box thinker to be in respectable magic-casting company.

Even if he hadn't dabbled in necromancy...he should've expected such when he managed to open that forbidden book...Blackwald would've been cast out eventually. Such is the case of most prophets. There's not a realm alive where prophecies aren't considered valid and sensible until they started to come true before their eyes, often too late to heed their warnings. Until that time, they're just the ramblings of madmen and mushroom trippers.

She let her mind reach over toward Blackwald, who was with the remainder of the Twilight Force. They're still smarting from the loss of their King, all the while scrambling to seek a replacement to their ranks, if not get Chrileon back. They were en route to the Planes of Haraan, in the kingdom of Vhardas. Their ultimate destination is a portal of mystical portent that she can implement to restore the party.

Her mind panned over to that mystic portal and then saw the old crone who was guarding it. A simple touch between spirits would be enough to get her to act. That portal can link to not just other worlds, but other universes, piercing through the veil that separates the various spaces in the Material Plane, beyond where even her influence could be...

But then The Queen noticed that someone or something is ahead of her, a welcomed accomplishment. A tube-like thread lead from one of those rifts toward that portal and a bright shining soul traveled along, strong and mighty, versed in sword and horse. She found a name to go with that bright star in the darkness: Allyon.

A noble and strong soul, with a heart that can easily be kindred to the others at the party.

Yes, this Allyon would be a perfect replacement for Chrileon. She made sure that the soul will become a noble Haraan prince when he arrives.

Now with that out of the way, she can focus more on Chrileon. As she knew, his role in the grand plan cannot be taken up with another being. Chrileon's the only one who can fill the role with the Emerald Throne.

She decided that Chrileon's story will reset. She thought about it for an eternity within a fraction of instants. Celestials can think that fast. She weighed the chance of it working with the dangers that time manipulation and retconning a person's entire history, and found it a necessary risk.

She took her time and practiced surgical precision to rewrite Chrileon in History. It was the space-time equivalent of grafting tissue from one part of a body to strengthen another.

She knew that Blackwald would eventually realize what she has done; he's that close to the Queen's mindset. But as far as everyone else is concerned, all knowledge of what Chrileon has done had

faded away from all knowledge, and that farmer family in Oak's End who prayed to the Dragons for a child will find Chrileon in a basket at their doorstep. It would be two to three years ahead in time from what it originally happened, but nobody needs to know that.

Chrileon will have a second chance in life. A rare blessing indeed.

The Queen then thought for a moment. Even though Chrileon will no longer be a member of Twilight Force, he would definitely need something to help him along the way, something to show his special destiny and give everyone something better than just the words of a young lad from some simple farmer's town.

He still needs to be a crystal bearer. But does it have to be the seven crystals of the Twilight Force?

Not necessarily. All it needed to do is to provide proof that he's the last heir of the Emerald Throne. It doesn't necessarily have to have any powers.

And the thought after that, she wondered, what if, one, the crystal would have a power, not as great as the ones the Twilight Force has, but still important to the game; and two, what if there was a whole assortment of them? She already realized that the dangers facing the Twilight Kingdoms would be greater than even she expected. What if the Twilight Force had a small army of crystal bearers aiding them? As powerful as they are, they can't be everywhere or do everything at once. They're going to need more allies than before.

And so they shall have them, the Queen decided.

It was a simple matter in gathering up a thousand stars from the outskirts of the cosmos, and gather them all in her hand, channeling her energy, she made each of these stars consolidate into a crystal. Crystals of various colors, abilities, strengths and powers. Some that can channel the energy of the mana through a person and amplify it to the zenith of humanity's promise, while others specialize in a single task, each of them was deemed important, and necessary.

With a casual flick of her wrist, she scattered the Lesser Crystals down to the world below, descending all over the Twilight Kingdoms, glowing like a meteorite shower in the atmosphere. Some will fall in the mountains, some in the woods, a couple plink into the oceans and streams, and more than a few actually find their way for someone to find them. A Dwarf that would fire up a mighty forge. A swordsmith to make a blade of immortal steel.

Will Tomorrow Ever Come...

A cleric that needed something to make up for being an elf cursed with two left feet.

...Will I make it through the Night?...

A maiden who heard enough tales of valor and bravery to wish to make her own legend...

...Will there ever be a place...

A wizard of blizzard, destined to reignite the stars that are fading out of...

...For the Broken in the Light?...

The Queen of Eternity was eventually drawn to this youthful, innocent, and melancholy voice as it kept singing.

...Can I take another step? I've done everything I can...

She found her in that very same tube-like string just as the portal in Haraan closed, causing the other end to drift off into the astral sea.

Someone youthful, and innocent, a lover of tales, and the heart of a princess. But a bit rebellious, and she's hiding from someone or something. Something terrible enough to force her into whatever this place is.

...All the people that I see, they will never understand...

The Queen reached over to the far end of the passage, where she came from. She could see fires, and voices raised in anger and a clash of violence. It was clear that she hid to get away from that.

And there was still a small little star, a simple crystal for a designated task, a crystal for inscribing and curating, to collect stories and lore, fluttering down to the child, shining in her face to get her to notice, and then coax her further along the corridor. The tunnel between dimension is bound to dissolve in time, leaving her to float helplessly in the Astral Sea. Some people might have the stomach to leave a little girl like her to such a fate, but not her.

She noticed the girl look up to see the sparkling mote of light, flitting around in front of her, playing next to her face, and then flicking to and fro away from her. The girl got up and gave chase.

The Queen smiled. Yes, this one is very inquisitive and curious. A very vivid imagination and a thirst for knowledge and magic. Maybe this child can be a part of the story of the Twilight Kingdoms.

A minor part, of course, but an important one. A vital one. A necessary one.

She drew the exit of the interdimensional tube to a magical forest in Aloria, and coaxed the child through to the other end.

Go, little one, your time has come, fly away over the fields of dreams, to a world far beyond. You must be on your way before the magic star is lost.

Part 1

Bad Apple!!

Fifth Edition D&D rules in play

From this point onward, the story will work alongside a customized version of Dungeons & Dragons Fifth Edition, derived from the role-playing game published by Wizards of the Coast. All references with spells, magic items, or other items are with the Fifth Edition rulebooks.

To show character progression, all main characters will be given their own Stat Blocks which will be adjusted as the story continues. There will be other items as well, including an Appendix at the end of the book contains material not found in the sourcebooks as well as alterations to existing material. All of this is published under the Wizards of the Coast Open Game License found in <https://tinyurl.com/sttwp43>. All material herein should be considered playtest only and not legal for Adventurer's League play.

Some main alterations and home rules apply herein:

The variant rules of Hero Points (Page 264 of the *Dungeon Master's Guide*) and Spell Points (Page 288 of the *Dungeon Master's Guide*) will be applied. The Hero Points will be kept during the writing of the story and not shown on the text.

Character Sheets will include all of the material in all of the published documents up to and including *Mythic Odysseys of Theros*. This includes all *Unearthed Arcana* and some additional Third-Party material. Reference links will be given as they are invoked.

Dramatis Personae

In alphabetical order:

Amber Merichello: (Am-Ber Merry-chello) Female Human Commoner. Age 11 by Chapter 1. Soon to become Lore Wizard. Just now entered an isekai² situation. One of the main protagonists in the story.

Blackwald: (Black-wald) 14th Level Human Male Evoker/Necromancer Wizard. Crystal Bearer and member of the Twilight Force team. Friend of Nelladrie while he was still in good standing in Winterreach. Exiled from nearly all mage's guilds due to dabbling in Necromancy.

Chirleon: (Cril-le-on) Human Male Thief (Rogue). The sole remaining fully 'Dragonblooded' human in the Twilight Kingdoms. Age 13 by Chapter 8. The other main protagonist in the story. Former member of Twilight Force but had his life resettled and all of his former history retconned away.

Grandmother Nalladrie: (Nal-a-drie) 15th Level High Elf Female Enchantress Wizard. Known as the Witch of the Woods near Oak's End. She is the crone mentioned in the song *Rise of a Hero*, and

² Isekai is a Japanese term that translates into "Different World," and is used to define any story where a normal person from Earth ends up transported to another world, either through any means of transportation, being kidnapped or trapped there, or even being reborn with all the memories of the former life intact. It is by no means a recent trend. Classic films like *The Wizard of Oz* and *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, as well as the classic Saturday Morning D&D cartoon, are textbook Isekai stories.

in Chrileon's backstory. Often referred to as a "Benevolent Hag" due to her equal parts of Good Witch and Wicked Witch.

Stat Blocks:

Amber Merichello <i>Medium Humanoid Commoner</i> Alignment: Creative, Mischievous, Loyal ³					
Armor Class 12 (No Armor) Hit Points 3 (1d4) Speed 30'					
STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
8(-1)	12 (+1)	10(+0)	16 (+3)	14 (+2)	14 (+2)
Senses Passive Perception 12 Languages Earth English, Earth Japanese Experience Points –					
Standard Actions					
Unarmed Strike: <i>Melee Weapon Attack:</i> -1 to hit; 1d3 Bludgeoning.					
Inventory					
Mundane Items: Crystal of unknown origin.					

³ Instead of the more traditional nine-part alignment system that focus on two axes (Good-Evil and Lawful-Chaotic) alignments in the given Stat Blocks are a set of three adjectives that describe a person's unique personality. This proved to be a better gauge of a person's moral and ethical compasses.

Grandmother Nalladrie

Level 18 Female High Elf

Enchantress Wizard 15, Awakened Mystic 3

Alignment: Manipulative, Maternal, Knowledgeable

Armor Class 15 (Robe of the Archmagi)

Hit Points 87 (17d6+17)

Speed 30'

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
8(-1)	10 (+0)	12(+1)	19 (+4)	14 (+2)	15 (+2)

Saves INT +10; WIS +7

Skills Animal Handling (WIS) +7; Arcana (INT) +9; Deception (CHA) +7; Insight (WIS) +7; Intimidation (CHA) +7; Medicine (WIS) +7; Perception (WIS) +7; Persuasion (CHA) +7

Resistances Magic cannot put Nalladrie to Sleep; she has Advantage on saves vs Charmed, Magical Effects, and Spells.

Senses Darkvision 60; Passive Perception 17

Languages Common; Dwarven, Elvish, Halfling, Sylvan; Telepathy 120 ft.

Other Proficiencies Herbalism Kit

Experience Points 265,000

Diplomat. When Nalladrie talks with someone for more than 1 Minute, she can make a contested check: *Her Persuasion (CHA) vs Their Insight (WIS)*. If she wins, they're Charmed as long as she remains within 60 feet of them.

Reverie. Nalladrie can enter a meditative state which grants her a Full Rest with just four hours.

Spellcasting

15th Level Wizard. Spellcasting Modifier is INT; Spell Attack is +9; Spell Save DC is +17; Nalladrie has **94 Spell Points** and in an average day, she has the following spells prepared:

Cantrips: Blade Ward, Dancing Lights Friends, Prestidigitation, Ray of Frost, Shocking Grasp

1st Level: Cause Fear, Charm Person‡, Command‡, Comprehend Languages‡ Disguise Self, Puppet, Sense Emotion, Sleep

2nd Level: Crown of Madness, Detect Thoughts, Hold Person, Misty Step†

3rd Level: Counterspell, Hypnotic Pattern, Sending

4th Level: Confusion, Polymorph

5th Level: Dominate Person, Modify Memory, Scrying

6th Level: Flesh to Stone

7th Level: Teleport

8th Level: Telepathy

† She can also cast this spell without a spell slot once between rests.

‡ She can also cast this spell without a spell slot through 1 charge of her Staff of Charming.

3rd Level Mystic. Psionic Modifier is INT; Psionic Attack is +9; Psionic Save is +17; Nalladrie is 14 Psi Points and a limit use of 3 Points Max.

Disciplines: Mantle of Awe (Psychic Focus, Charming Presence, Center of Attention), Telepathic Contract (Psychic Focus, Exacting Query, Occulted Mind) Third Eye (Psychic Focus, Termorsense, Unwavering Eye, Piercing Sight)

Talents: Mystic Charm, Mystic Hand

Alter Memories: People charmed by Nalladrie are unaware of being charmed. They also could be forced to *INT Spell Save vs losing up to 3 Hours of their recent memories.*

Arcane Recovery: Once per day, with a Short Rest, Nalladrie can recover 11 Spell Points, she still can only cast 1 spell each of 6th through 9th Level.

Psionic Investigation: Nalladrie can read a psionic imprint of an object. Refer to the Unearthed Arcana on Mystic⁴ for more information.

Split Enchantment: When casting an Enchantment Spell (1st Level or Higher) that targets only 1, Nalladrie can target a second.

Standard Actions

Staff of Charming: *Melee Weapon Attack; +4 to Hit; 1d6-1 (Min 1) Bludgeoning*, 1d8-1 (Min 1) two-handed

Hypnotic Gaze (1/Day): Target 1 within 5'; target must *WIS Spell Save vs being Charmed until end of Nalladrie's next turn.*

Minor Actions

Mystical Recovery: When Nalladrie uses a Psionic Discipline, she gains the number of Psi Points used in HP.

Reactions

Instinctive Charm: *If someone Nalladrie sees within 30ft attacks her, then attacker must WIS Spell Save vs attacking closest creature other than her.*

Staff of Charming Reverse Charm: *If Nalladrie saves vs Enchantment spell, she can spend 1 charge to return the spell on the caster.*

Staff of Charming Auto-Save (1/Day): *If Nalladrie fails a save vs Enchantment spell, then she can use this feature and make it a success.*

Inventory

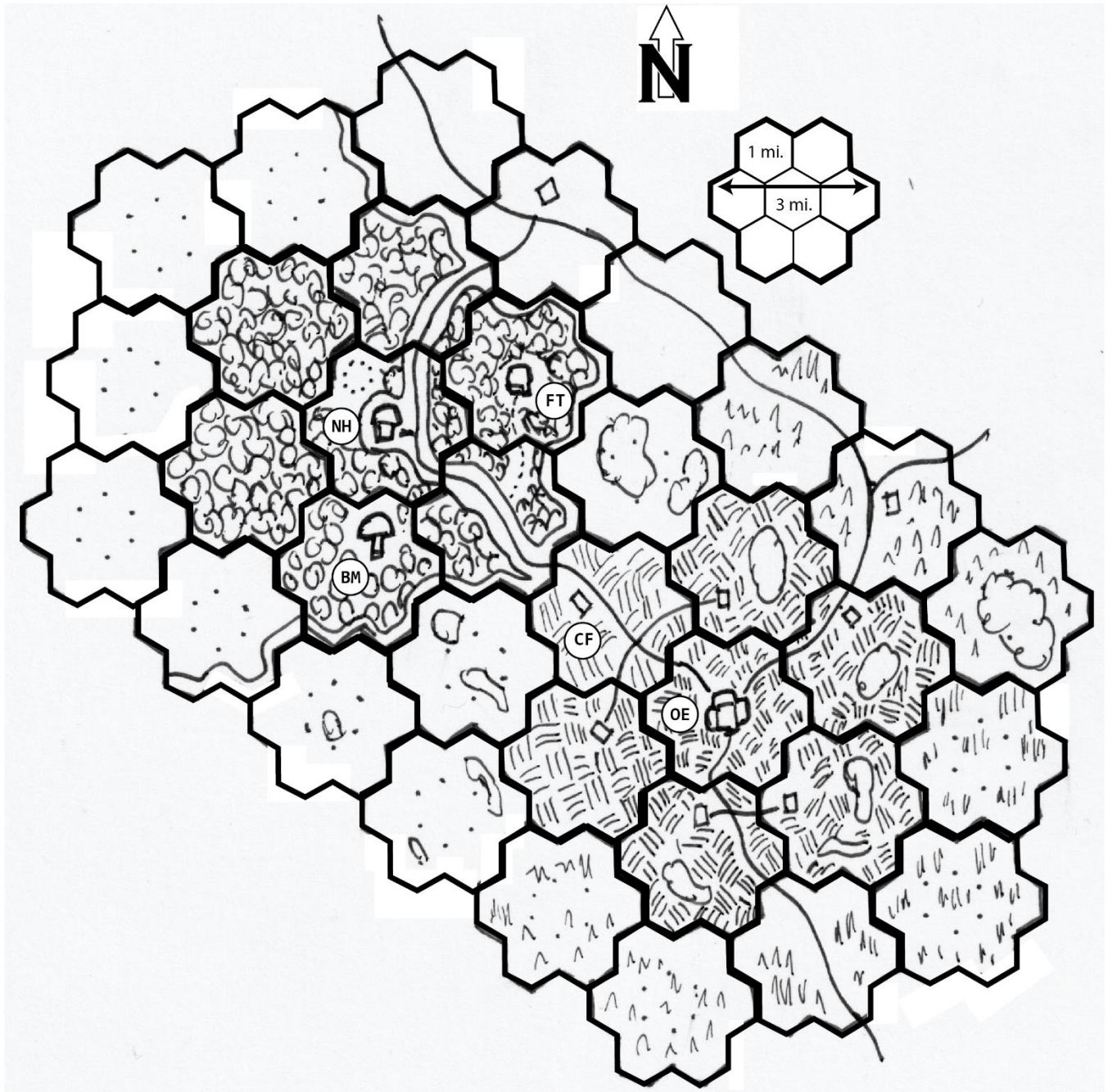
Robe of the Archmagi: Advantage on Saves vs spells and magic effects, +2 to Spell Attacks and Saves, AC becomes 15 + DEX

Staff of Charming (10 Charges): Regains 1d8+2 charges at Dawn; On last charge, a d20 roll of 1 removes all abilities.

Mundane Items: Spellbook, Component Pouch, Explorer's Pack, Herbalism Kit, Forest-based homestead, Wagon with two pulling donkeys, a multitude of magic scrolls, potions, and wands.

⁴ URL for Mystic Class: <https://tinyurl.com/sxc5c7e>

The Enchanted Forest of Oak's End



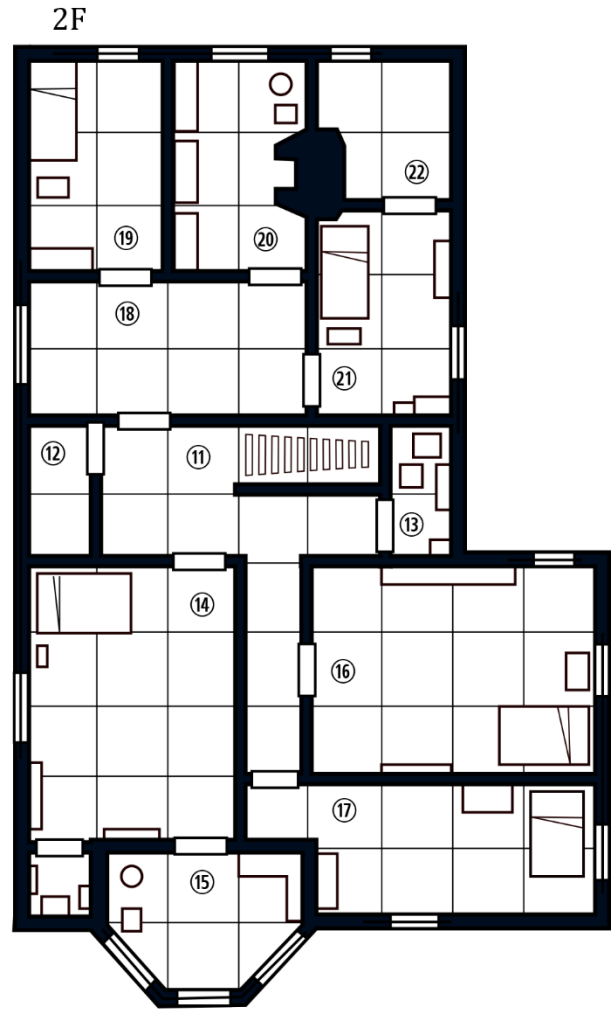
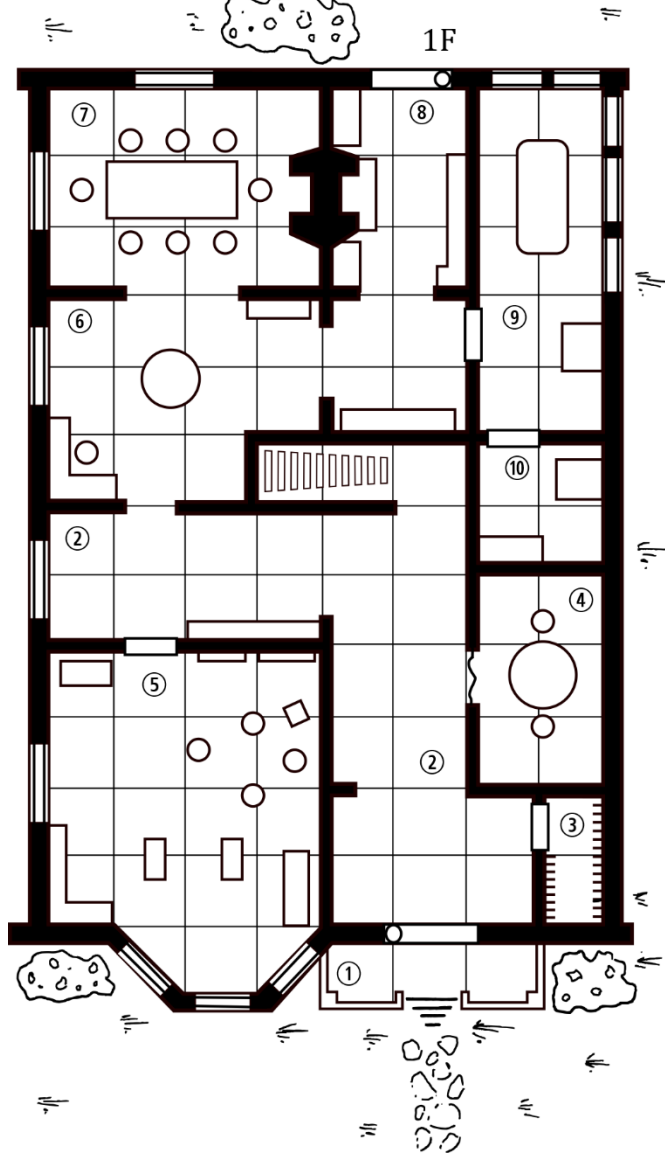
- BM Old Willow Tree
- CF Chrileon's Farm
- FT Forest Temple
- NH Nalladrie's House
- OE Oak's End

Nalladrie's Homestead



BS	Barn and Stable
CC	Chicken Coup
EH	Experiment House
FR	Fairy Ring
GD	Garden Bed
(Typical)	
GH	Green House
HP	House Proper
MC	Mushroom Cave
PA	Patio w/ Caldron
WE	Well

Grandmother Nalladrie's House



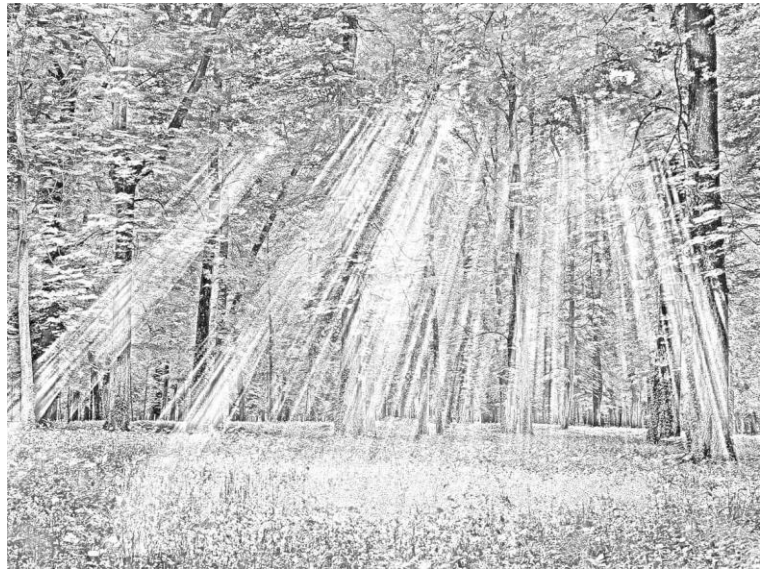
1. Front Porch
2. Entrance Hall
3. Cloak Room
4. Fortune Telling Room
5. Drawing Room
6. Caldron Room
7. Dining Hall
8. Kitchen
9. Bathroom
10. Toilet

11. Upper Corridors
12. Linen Closet
13. Storage Closet
14. Nalladrie's Bedroom (w/ Walk-in Closet)
15. Private Study
16. Amber's Bedroom
17. Guestroom
18. Upper Hall
19. Guestroom
20. Study
21. Guestroom
22. Storage Room

Chapter 1

A star floats and flits around the forest, drifting with ever the slightest bit of air current as the wind passes through the trees and branches. It was easy to track as it left a trail of sparkling starlight making its momentary twinkle until it faded away.

Making it easy for the young girl with shoulder-length dark brown hair, an oversized shirt under baggy jeans to follow it. Well, easier for her to follow than actually catch, because of the way it twitches. She would think that it was teasing in its pursuit as if daring her to catch it.



She finally had enough of the little spark's games. The next time she saw that twinkling little thing got close enough to the ground, she took a running start, bounded off a tree trunk and caught it with both hands. The resulting clap of her hands echoes throughout the forest.

"Caught you!" She said in a mixture of triumph and fatigue as she held the squirming thing in her hands. It tried to jerk out of her hands for a couple of moments until it calmed down. When it did, the child felt something solidify around it, forming in her clasped hands as she panted.

When she dared open her hands, risking giving that spark a chance to flee again, she found it encased in a slender crystal, roughly the length and size of her index finger, chiseled into eight sides with a point at each end.

She held it up before her, giving a smile at her accomplishment as she made the crystal reflect the moonlight falling down from the trees.

She noticed that it still produced a sparkling trail, but this time, the trail wound around the crystal, wrapping around it. The trail began to shimmer and solidify until it produced a metallic chain with a wiry encasement for the pendant.

She let it go, allowing the chain to go around her head and let it fall, hanging off her neck.

"Looks like I can keep you now," she said. "Now then, do you have any idea where you took me?"

She looked around, seeing only trees in every direction, her footsteps snapping twigs and disturbing leaves. Her ears twitched as she heard movement. She turned to one side to see an unidentified animal bolt away from her and toward a series of glowing eyes.

She blinked for a moment, but then gave a smile. "I know my mind wants to see some monster who wants to gobble me up, but you're really just a bunch of rabbits just as scared as I am, right?"

A red-furred cat-like critter with a fluffy bushy tail with a white tip darted across.

"Ha! A fox. That was my next guess."

The fox paused at the edge of the extent of her vision, turned back to see the girl, shake its head like a dog shaking itself off after a bath, then it scampered away.

The girl just snorted at that, then she looked up.

At first, she saw what looked like a pair of yellow eyes gazing down menacingly, but as a tree branch swayed to one side shedding moonlight, it revealed itself as a scraggly owl, perched on a branch on a tree with a series of knots on the trunk, giving it a face which could look friendlier if it were in daytime...maybe?

Hooooo.

“Hey there, Owl,” the child said. “How ya doing up there.”

It pivoted its head to look down at her, tilting it for one reason or another.

Hooooo.

“You don’t suppose you know where I am right?”

The owl just stood there, twisting his head upside down to make a face at her.

The girl sighed. “You probably don’t know how many licks it takes to get to a Tootsie Pop center, don’t cha?”

Hooooo.

“Amber, you idiot,” she chided herself, “I doubt that owl knows that.”

She sighed and looked around. There doesn’t seem to be anyone else in the whole forest except her. Well, anyone who’s capable of speech that is.

And then she heard the telltale rumbling of a thunderstorm. With no clear sign that there is any form of civilization wherever she found herself in.

“Not enough that I’m realizing that I’m about to quote *The Wizard of Oz*, now it’s going to rain. Getting cold too.”

The girl found a willow tree that she hoped would provide some cover, so she got under the weeping branches and huddled against the trunk.

“Welcome to Wonderland, Amber Merichello. Hope you survive the experience.”

Pulling her legs up against her for warmth, she looked around the darkening surroundings, thinking back to how she got here. Whatever *here* is.

“If I make another move, if I take another step, then it all would fall apart, there’d be nothing of me yet,” She sang like an angel, but her voice betrayed a nervous warble. *“If I’m crying in the wind, if I’m crying in the night, will there ever be a way? Will my heart return to white?”*

She didn’t know if anyone would notice her under that willow tree if she didn’t sing that song.



Can you tell me who you are? Can you tell me where I am? I've forgotten how to see, I've forgotten if I can.

Which made it a bit of a relief when she found the movement of a humanoid figure in a dark almost black gown approach, humming in a language that was clearly not any language the child knew.

If I make another move, there'll be no more turning back, because everything would change...and it all would...fade to...black.

It wasn't her being an elf that surprised her as she crept closer. The surprising part was that this elven woman looked like some grandmotherly witch. She wore a simple gown of dark purple, almost



black, and a cloak that had a hood which was down, revealing her gray, almost white hair, and a face that...well, it wasn't that she was *ugly*. Not as ugly as she was *old*. Her face was half wrinkles and her nose had a crooked beak to it. An old woman's face, older than some of the trees in this forest. She wondered if she was able to keep a hold on that wicker basket...

The crone gasped as she caught sight of the child, and moved closer, moving back the branches with a withered hand. The crone tried to say something to Amber, but to the girl's ears, what she said could've been Greek or Dutch or Mandarin, or even Hieroglyphics for all she knew.

"Er," Amber said, gulping, shaking her head. "H-hello?"

The crone blinked a bit, her eyes sparked a bit in recognition of what's happening. She muttered more of that Amber would recognize as a language, but not one she ever knew or even heard before.

"Oh, this is just great. I don't think you know what I'm saying, do ya?"

The crone appeared to use a walking staff in her hand, which had a gem on top in a heart-shaped mount. She muttered something under her breath and lowered the tip toward Amber. She then started waving her hand in a strange hand gesture and chanting something.

"I don't suppose that's sign language...of anything...I could..."

When the gem on the staff started glowing and a spiral of green, purple, orange and yellow reached Amber's face, she felt herself feeling tired, then very tired, as a wave of sleepiness just washed over her. Her head feels like it was swimming in syrup, and it was getting harder and harder to think.

"wha...g'in...haaaaawwwnnnn." Her voice trailed off as her head dips and her body slumps inert. Her eyes drooped as she was just barely at this side of awake.

The crone moved the glowing crystal up in front of her face, continued her chanting, until the ornate casing around the crystal was enveloping the child's head as well as the crystal that filled her vision, filled her whole head. In time, Amber's eyes slowly widened open, staring blankly straight ahead, her mouth slightly open.

The crone slowly lifted the staff and, like a puppet on strings, the child got up and walked up toward her.

The crone knelt down to the entranced child and got a good look at her. She's not from Oak's End, that's for sure. No little girl would dress like that, or at least no little girl she knew. Wearing only a flimsy nightshirt and pants, who dressed this child? And it was clear that she wasn't speaking in Common.

"{You don't look like you're around here, aren't ya, my pretty?}⁵" the elven witch said, in a voice that managed to be smooth and coarse at the same time, as her eyes stared deep into the child's placid face.

Amber felt like she was in a deepest of sleep and wide awake at the same time. It was impossible for Amber to think to move, or even blink, everything was just still, both in body and in mind, even her heart slowed to a relaxed beat. She didn't even have a voice in her head bringing up every red flag it could grab and telling him to GTFO. She just stood there, standing in front of her transfixed on those eyes, those lovely eyes. These eyes of this elderly crone kept changing color, from green to orange to purple, to orange, to purple, to green, and so on and so on. And when she felt her hand reach up and caress her face, hold it up to keep those eyes on hers, it just pulled her closer and lulled her deeper into this spell. Amber only stood there, blank eyes locked on the witch's as they stared down into her head and gazed into her soul.

The witch—Nalladrie, that is her name, Amber somehow knew that Nalladrie is her name—said something to her again. Only this time, she knew what she was saying. She was still talking in that strange language, but when it bounced around her now-still end, she understood it clearly.

{What is your name, my pretty?}

Her voice came out in the flat monotone of someone who was so deep into a trance that their personality has shut off. "Amber. Amber Merichello."

{Amber Merichello.} She heard the witch's bemused chuckle bouncing around her head, lingering on every syllable as she committed the name to memory. *{A pretty name for a pretty girl. I don't suppose you know how you got here, do you, Amber Merichello?}*

Even if she wasn't so deep into this hypnotic trance, she couldn't for the life of her know how she got here. She doesn't even know where 'here' is. "No," her voice said.

{Poor little girl lost in the woods. It looks like I found another stray to take home. Hmm.}

Her hand reached for the crystal around her neck.

{Where did you get this little sparkly?}

Nalladrie held the crystal pendant up a bit, the mote of starlight twinkling inside.

Again, with her brain so muddled by this witch's magic, Amber couldn't think of anything, she couldn't even muster a thought in her head. She just stood there, like a doll on display.

She pondered it for a while before letting it settle back where it hung.

{You look like you need a warm bath and a meal. And you're too pretty for me to deny you. If you'd be so kind as to help an old woman with her basket?}

⁵ For those who haven't figured it out yet, the crone is speaking in a multi-national language known in D&D circles as Common.

She held out the wicker basket to Amber's right hand, who floated over to grab it at the handle. She then took her left hands in her own cracked and old hands.

{Bless you, my pretty little one. Come with me.}

She then turned around and walked away toward somewhere, Amber couldn't think of where. All she was aware of is that she's following her, led by the hand. Hopefully somewhere warm, she was seeing her own breath.



Chapter 2



{You can trust Grandmother Nalladrie, Amber. You are safe with Grandmother Nalladrie. You are to feel home with Grandmother Nalladrie.}

Amber just kept walking straight ahead, led by Grandmother Nalladrie's hand, without a single thought or a complaint in her head, just a smile that the crone prompted her to wear. Even if she were aware that she's so deep under this witch's spell that she cannot break free even if she wanted to, she didn't even think of wanting to. The only thing rolling around in her emptied head were the words of *I can trust Grammie. I am safe with Grammie. I can feel at home with Grammie.*

{Keep that smile on you, Amber, you look so much cuter that way.}

She was led to what looked like a humble cottage, made of wood and thatch. It looked abandoned at first, but a snap of Nalladrie's fingers turned on the lights. Floating beads of light flit around like fireflies around walls of brick and wood. A fireplace sparked to life as she opened a round door that would've reminded Amber of a Halfling Shire and let her inside.

She found herself led through a hallway, down to a kitchen, where the witch told her to drop the basket on a stool, which she did without a complaint. She then led her through a door to a bathroom with a large tub. A bench lined with a towel with several others folded and waiting nearby.

The witch turned her guest around to face her and then stroked her smiling face again, looking straight into her eyes. Amber felt swallowed up by those ever swirling eyes; blue, then orange, then

purple, then green, then orange, then green, then purple...over and over the spiraling colors flowing over into her own head, pushing out any other thought in her head...*I can trust Grammie Nalladrie. I am safe with her. She'll take good care of me.*

{Take off those dirty rags you're wearing. Just toss them away. I'll have new clothes for you. And do not worry, I won't try anything.}

Not even a ping of panic registered in Amber's mind as her hands began to pull off her shirt. She moved on to pull off the rest of her sweaty and smelling clothes as Nalladrie drew water in the tub. She waved her hand around it and muttered something, prompting the water to heat up to proper bath temperature.

Nalladrie nodded in approval as the child stripped, sensing her mind doing what it's supposed to do in her state of mind. Each smelly, wet, and dirty piece just dropped into a nearby basket and forgotten. She was so deep under that spell that she didn't even twitch or felt any nervous over what she was doing. She just stripped to the buck and then stood in front of Grammie without a second thought over being naked. The only thing on her was her crystal hanging off her neck.

{You can't take that off?} Nalladrie picked up the crystal and tried to lift it above her head. The necklace didn't look like it dug into her skin, and she could string it back and forth, but it will not part where it touched Amber's shoulders and neck.

{Definitely need to look into that. But for now...when I snap my fingers, you will go limp...your body will be floppy, like a rag doll. You will fall and I will catch you. It'll be all right, child. You can trust your Grammie. You're safe with her.}

Nalladrie snapped her fingers, and Amber's body fell like a marionette with the strings just cut. She slumped halfway down, her arms and legs inert, but something kept her from collapsing to the ground. Amber's body started to lift up off the floor. The child just let herself go limp and let herself float, like a magician's assistant being levitated on stage. The child's body hovered in the air, floated toward the tub and lowered as gently as you please into perfectly warm water, her head resting on a basin to keep it above water. As she settled into a seat in the tub, Nalladrie tossed a ball that dissolved into fragrance and oils.

Nalladrie patted Amber on the head. *{I'll let you soak there for a while. Close your eyes, just float. Relaxed and calm...}* Amber's eyes fluttered closed and her smile faded as sleep claimed her. *{...feeling the warmth, smelling the nice scents, hearing the crickets...you'll be okay...just float there...in a dream...}*

When Nalladrie knew that the child would never be roused from her dream, and her head is cradled so that she won't slip under, she flicked out a piece of wood and voiced an incantation while waving it around. A shadow appeared that didn't have a source for an instant before it vanished. "{Get my old Witch's Outfit,}" she said to where she thought that invisible being that caused that shadow. She then moved back to Amber and stroked her head.

Amber just floated there, caressed by the tub so that her head is above water. Her eyelids flitted half-closed but her placid face stayed staring right ahead.

Nalladrie let her soak for a few minutes, letting her body take in all the sweet-smelling oils and letting the bath bomb do away with the grime and sweat on her. Nalladrie knew she'd stay that way, so she gathered the wet, stained, and smelly clothes she had on, and just pitched them into a waiting compost heap outside. They could just decompose and become garden food for all she cared. As she returned, she found a box and the witch's dress waiting for her. She ran her fingers along

with the blue vest and skirt and held up the wide-brimmed pointy hat. She nodded in approval as she returned to the child, her limp body soaking relaxed in the bath bomb. Good. Nalladrie went over to the head basin and scrubbed some scented oils into the child's hair, making sure that the dirt and grime were out of it. While she was there, she let her mind reach out to the still entranced child.

As Amber's eyelids flutter and twitch, she dreamt of words flooding into her head. At first, the words didn't make any sense, but then one word did, and then another, and then two dozen, and then a



thousand or so. A whole new language flooded into her head, a language she knew a bit at first, then she grew quite fluent, both to speak it and over time, to read it as well. After a few seconds, she just knew that she could write in this language...passably...she might need more practice in penmanship. Common. She knew the language is Common. She knew it to be Common even as the language she...used to speak...was was that language...Englisomethingish...She thought that language was put in a box and put away somewhere. Had she always spoke in Common? It doesn't matter. Grammie speaks Common, and now she can too. English can stay where it's stashed until she needs it.

Nalladrie kept rinsing out Amber's hair, making sure that her nose wasn't bleeding or that she was twitching too hard. That was the worst part, putting that language in the child's head. She didn't have any other choice to

bridge that gap and she didn't want to spend any more time teaching her Common than she wanted to. Dumping it into her head had its risks but it was the way that took the least time. But no, Amber didn't feel worse for wear and her brain, still deep in that trance, is still working. Nothing is twitching, her nose isn't bleeding, good. The crone sighed in relief as she let her soak for a few more minutes.

"Can you hear me now, Amber. Do you know what I'm saying?"⁶ Nalladrie asked as she gave Amber's hair one last rinse.

"...yes," Amber said in monotone, her voice the automation-like voice of someone so deep in a hypnotic trance that there was no personality or identity behind it, little more than an organic doll.

"And you know who you are, what your name is?"

"...my name is amber merichello."

"And who am I, dearie."

"...you're my grammie nalladrie."

Her grammie Nalladrie. The crone smiled at that. This was better than she expected. "And where are you now?"

"...i am in your house, taking a bath...you took me in..."

"That's right, Amber. I like the way you call me Grammie. That is what I am to you now. You are my child, Amber. As long as you're here, I am your beloved grandmother, and you are my beloved

⁶ From this point onward, unless noted otherwise, all spoken words are in Common.

little child. I took you into my house, so this house will be yours as well. You are to live here with your grandmother.”

“...i am your child...you took me in...this is my home...”

Nalladrie stroked her head. “That’s right. I know you might have family and a place you’ve been from. But as long as you’re here, you are *my* child, and *this place* is your home.”

“...i am your child...and this is my home...”

“Good. Always have that rolling around in your head. This home is full of hearth and home for you. You would never want to leave it. It would be perfectly fine if you were to stay here for as long as you want, forever if you wish.”

Amber gave a contented sigh. “...i am your child...this is my home...”

Nalladrie nodded in approval. Amber’s taking it all in. It was better than she hoped. “Shush now, my child.” And with that, Amber’s voice fell silent.

Nalladrie hovered her hand again. Amber floated up, out of the water. She made Amber hover above the tub for a bit, letting her body drip a bit, and then back to the bench. Amber’s body laid there limp as a rag doll as the towels dried her off. Nalladrie told Amber to ‘sit up now. Nice and straight,’ as she handed her a towel to dry the sensitive parts while Nalladrie hovered behind her, drying off her hair, coming it, and spritzing on some perfume.

Nalladrie saw the box she requested float into view. With a nod, she took the box and opened it. “Open your eyes, my child. Do you see this box?”

“...yes...”

“These are the clothes I have for you. You will put them on.”

Amber’s saw a set of underwear, a pair of white socks up to her knees, and a pair of white drawers. After she put on all of that without a second thought, on came a light blue blouse with puffy shoulders, a deep blue-purple skirt with a light blue apron, which Nalladrie tied back with a big bow behind her waist, and a dark blue matching vest. She made sure that the crystal hung from under the collar of the blouse. Her feet slipped into black leather strapped shoes. And for a finishing touch, added a bow tie under that collar as well.

“So not you now look like you’ve been here all your life, and now you’re talking like one too. Glad I got that part down right. Something’s missing though...oh. Here we are. Sit down and let me do your face. Let Grandmother Nalladrie do a little fussing over ya.”

Nalladrie found some makeup and gave Amber’s face a total makeover, lining her eyes, doing her lashes, putting some color to her lips and cheeks and powdering nose. She then made her hands hover before her so that she can paint her nails. She even sprayed perfume on her neck. And a pair of magnetic stud earrings over her lobes. And finally, she put on her the last piece of the dress, a wide brim pointed hat, dark blue with a light blue bow and golden stars and a moon on the cone. The inside was lined with white lace that caressed her head to the point that she’d get lost in there.

“Stand up and turned toward that camera there.”

The child did so, turning into a full-body mirror.

“You see what you’re wearing? You were always this pretty little girl, and now you look the part.”

Even as deep under that spell that she is, Amber's face practically beamed when she saw herself. All dressed up in that dress, her face done, she even brought her hand to her lips and noticed the painted nails. She even smelled nice. Like a proper little girl. "...i'm pretty..."

"Of course you are pretty, my dear. When were you not? You will wear this always, Amber. This is *your* dress, and you will always wear it."

The sense that this dress is so pretty, so wonderful, so much like her, so perfect with her, she couldn't think of wearing anything else. "...this is my dress now...i will wear this always..."

Nalladrie nodded, knowing that she's still rationalizing everything. "Perfect. Now come with me."

The witch then guided her into another room, which was full of curios and trinkets, crystals, pendants and the occasional dream catcher hung off the ceiling, which only made the eclectic choice in furniture even more random. She was guided down to a chair.

"Sit there."

She did do, knees together, skirt draping over her legs, and hands on her lap, as polite and ladylike as she could be. She just sat there straight and proper, staring straight ahead.

"Please don't be mad at Grandmother Nalladrie for what she did to you, Amber. I had to bridge the language gap somehow and putting you under a charm is the quickest for me. I also had to make you feel at home. Well at ease with your Grandmother. You were so scared and alone when I found you and I had to calm your nerves, making you comfortable. Would you bring it upon yourself to pardon me? Hmm?"

I can trust Grammie. I am safe with Grammie. Of course, she could excuse her. How else was she going to bridge that language gap? *Grammie took me in. She made me her child.* Sure, she had to put her under this spell to do it, but it felt so...nice...she was so gentle, and warm, and caring. *I trust her. I'm safe with her. I am her child. This is my home.* "it's okay...no harm done...i trust you...i'm safe with you..." Amber flat voice said as she nodded.

"Good," the witch said, "Now then, Amber. Wake up," and she snapped her fingers.

The haze and fog in Amber's head blew away in an instant, and she blinked her eyes awake. She gasped in utter surprise as her awareness returned to her. Her eyes dart around, startled. "Whaa...where...am I?" She then blinked straight ahead and straight into that witch's eyes.

Nalladrie's eyes. Grammie Nalladrie. *Her* grammie. For the briefest of instance, she felt startled at her presence, even scared, but as soon as she felt it...it left.



“Oh, come now,” Nalladrie said in a scolding tone. “If your Grandmother Nalladrie wanted to do something to you, she would’ve done it while you were under my spell, and you wouldn’t even be aware of it.” She then looked Amber up and down. “Then there is the obvious: Look at you Amber, all skin and bones! Who in blazes *fed* you, child, if someone ever *did*? Even if I was the kind of hag who would eat children, *you* wouldn’t be much of a meal. I’d just be hungry again after a half hour.”

That made Amber laugh, which made Nalladrie coax out a soft cackle and the brightest of smiles possible by a crone. “You smiled at me, Amber. I count that as a good sign. I like your smile. Keep doing that.”

Amber couldn’t help but feel that smile stay on her lips, as natural as it could be, as she looked around, seeing all the bric a brac and the pendulums hanging amongst the floating balls of light. And then down to her dress. She even found a hand mirror within reach so she can look at her face. It was the first time she ever wore makeup—and fingernail polish as well—and it was well done. Grammie had practice. “You didn’t have to dress me up, not that I’m complaining though. I kinda like this dress. I hope you have some spares.”

“I’m sure to pull them out of the mothballs.” Nalladrie smiled as she moved closer to Amber. It appears that the suggestions she put on her were better than she expected, or the child was filling in the spaces between her own thoughts and the thoughts she put in there on her own. Good, her brain is still working as it should.

When the hag reached for Amber’s hand, Amber just let her do it, her arm just submitted and relaxed as she the old elven woman placed her other hand over the top of the hand, stroking it. Amber just sat there, quiet and calm, as she watched it happen, feeling the elder’s touch. She wasn’t scared. She knew she should be, but she’s...just...not. Something about this...hag...is that what she’s called...she doesn’t look that bad...and she just makes her feel so...so much at ease, welcomed. Home. She just felt that she was home. *I am home. I am safe. I can trust her.*

This Grandmother Nalladrie was just so nice and welcoming. She just found her in the woods, and she didn’t have to do all this. She took her in, gave her a bath, found something nice to wear...what else is she’s planning to do to her? And why is she not caring?

Amber’s mind ran through most of the many scenarios as Nalladrie turned her hand over and started reading her palm. Amber’s arm was limp enough to let her do that. “Oooo, long lifeline...very intelligent, active imagination...suffered a setback or two...Did you lose any relatives when you were younger, if I can ask that?”

Amber answered without missing a beat. “I live with my Daddy. Mom died some time back. Breast Cancer. They didn’t get it all out in time.”

“I’m so sorry to hear that, child. Other than that, your palm tells me nothing out of the ordinary, just a normal pretty little girl...”

Amber suspected that she was under some sort of spell, Nalladrie *is* a witch, after all, but she wondered what the crone intended to do to her. Maybe Grammie wanted a minion, a servant of some kind? Or maybe she wanted to raise up witches and form a coven, and she thinks maybe Amber would fit the bill. Or maybe she collects lost kids for some reason or another. Maybe she wanted someone to put in dresses, do her face and hair, and plant her in this room with all the other pretty objects around her. Sit her down, pose her perhaps, freeze her in place, or maybe just let them flop on a couch, and keep her like a living doll. Or maybe she just needed someone to talk to. Maybe that’s it. Grammie just wants to talk. Might as well be a gracious guest, no, a gracious child, and strike up a conversation. It wasn’t like she felt that she could gather enough courage to pull away.

And pull away to where, that is? “Just so that I’ll know, so that I can tell my friends and family...Where am I? I mean, other than being in your home, that is.”

“Oh, just a humble little cottage, in a humble little forest, not too far from a humble little village called Oak’s End, in a not-so-humble kingdom of Aloria.” Nalladrie made a gesture with her other hand, causing a soft purplish-green-orange glowing stream to flow from her palm out through the door.

Amber exhaled. “Nope, I’m definitely not in Brighton, Indiana anymore.” She looked up. “That’s where I’m from. I don’t think you know of the place.”

Nalladrie just shook her head. “I’d have no idea.” She pointed to the pendant off Amber’s neck. “It all must be related to the sparkly off your neck.” There were some clinking and clacking in another room, a room Amber assumed was a kitchen.

Amber held the crystal and noticed the glowing mote of light. “I was hoping you’d know about it, Grammie. *You* know magic, I wouldn’t know Abra from Cadabra.” She just felt so comfortable talking to her that she was making her usual snippy commentary. She was testing Nalladrie’s reception. Some people turned to Amber as if she offended their god when she talked back, while others—such as her Dad—just roll with it.

Nalladrie let out an amused chuckle as she kept petting her hand. A good sign. “Ah, snappy repartee and spunk, I like that in my children. I have heard of crystals like yours. I’ll consult my notes on them later, and can call out a friend to brainstorm with, but for now,” she leaned forward and smiled. “I want to get to know my pretty little guest a little more. There’s no need to be shy, my pretty. Your Grandmother Nalladie won’t bite ya. That much.”

As she looked over down the hall, she saw a tray floated out of that room and toward the room she’s in. The tray had a full tea set and a basket of cookies. Amber watched in amazement as the tray floated down in front of her and saw the tea set spread out all nice and proper. Then the teapot and cups began to move on their own.

Nalladrie smiled as she saw the amazed expression on her guest’s face.

“Grammie, are you doing all this?”

“Not directly, what you’re...ahem...*not* seeing...is what we call an *Unseen Servant*⁷. They are magical butlers that do what you ask them and not talk back much. After all, talking back is *your* job.” A cup floated above a saucer as a teapot poured tea into it. A slice of lemon and a sugar cube jumped into it. A spoon stirred the tea a bit as it floated over to Amber’s hands.

“I always wanted to see magic like this,” Amber said as she picked up the cup and saucer. “You must be a great wizard, Grammie.”

Nalladrie smiled with a nod. “I could think of many wizards more powerful than me. I prefer to call myself a simple elderly witch in these humble woods. A benevolent Hag, some call me. Someone who keeps to herself, mostly. Willing to tell a fortune or whip up a charm or search for an item. While I go get some pretty coin for it, I usually do this for favors. You scratch Grammie’s back, Grammie scratches yours.” She allowed the invisible servant to pour her a cup. “Now then, you might be wondering whatever Grammie Nalladrie a good witch or a bad witch.”

⁷ Spell listed in Page 284 in the *Player’s Handbook*.

Amber had to snicker at that. “The thought *had* crossed my mind. You have to excuse my references here...”

“I’ll be sure to get them in due time, my dear.”

“You look like the Wicked Witch of the West, but act like the Good Witch of the North.”

“Do I?” Nalladrie said as she smiled. Her eyes flaring with an inner fire that Amber found too familiar. It was the similar spark she sees in her own reflection. “I take that as a compliment. Grandmother Nalladrie’s has a lot of rumors and stories about her, and they go all over the place. Some say that I prey upon naughty children, and I know a lot of parents tell their little boys and girls...”

With a wave over her face, her face and hands turned green and warty, her teeth yellowed, her eyes orange, and her voice like nails on a chalkboard. She made sparks fly out of her hands which sported nails like claws, as she croaked out a “Ye better be good or the Witch of the Woods’ll put cast a spell on ya and drag you to her house and you’ll never be seen again!! Hahahahahahaaaaaa!”

Amber couldn’t help but laugh at that. It was way over the top for her to be anything scary. Nalladrie did another hand wave and brought her face back to normal.

“Others say that I come to children whom I find lost in the woods, take them in, tend to them, and if I can’t help them find their way home, raise them myself. Much like what I want to do with you, pretty one.” She nodded toward Amber. “I’m either a kind-hearted old lady you’d love to pay a visit or some domineering puppet master who has half of Oak’s End tied to my strings. Some say that I always bring trouble in my wake, but others say that I bring good luck if you’re honest toward me.”

“Well...you’ve been very nice to me so far, Grammie.”

“Thank you, my dear.”

“Something tells me that you could do wicked stuff...when you have to.”

Nalladrie nodded and sighed. “This is a dangerous world, Amber. Not only do we have the requisite monster roaming around doing whatever it is monsters do. We got a couple of owlbears not too far from here.”

Amber made a face. “Owlbears? As in part owl, part bear?”

Nalladrie chuckled. “Some wizard got good and drunk one day and decided that merging those two creatures was a good idea. The result of that union gobbled up that wizard. As he deserved to. There’s always the roving bands of goblins, kobolds, an occasional preyton.”

Nalladrie noticed the blank expression Amber gave.

“Imagine an evil flying deer that will pounce on you from a half-mile away and then eat your heart right from your chest. Only the heart, mind you. You get to see it chomp down on your ticker and swallow it in one gulp as you die. They leave the rest of your corpse for the vultures.”

“Ew!” Amber made a face. But then she blinked in recognition as if she’s connecting a couple dots about the kind of world she’s now in. “I gotta ask, do you have dragons here?”

“Ah, Dragons.” Nalladrie waxed wistful. “The Twilight Kingdoms are practically *run* by dragons. I need to tell you the story of the Dragonstar, one such dragon that overseen a unified Twilight Kingdoms until he, in his old age, ascended to the stars. Dragons call that time of old age Twilight,

which is where the Twilight Kingdoms' name came from. People actually pray to that dragon as if he were a god, if you'd believe in such things."

Amber's face lit up at the thought. Not only is she in a world where magic flows freely, but she might even see a bona fide dragon! And a Dragon *God* to boot? That's one snoot she must boop.

Nalladrie got back to her train of thought. "And then there's the humankind element..."

"...that's a relative term here," Amber interrupted. "You're an elf. And I can assume that you have dwarves and hobbits here."

Nalladrie narrowed her eyes. "Hobbits? What in blazes is a hobbit?"

"A little person stands up to your waist. They look like children at a distance. Known to be incredibly lucky, and some of them have too much fur on their feet to wear shoes..."

"Oh! You must mean Halflings."

"That's what I meant."

"Yes, yes, we call them Halflings here." Nalladrie shrugged. "We've also got roving bands of brigands, highwaymen lying in wait for a passing caravan, rival wizards with bad intentions, monarchs going about playing their little games over their thrones, and that's not to mention spoony bards." Nalladrie rolled her eyes. "We got a dozen too many spoony bards. One of them annoyed me a bit too much. By the time I was done with him, I rendered him totally mute, not able to speak, let alone sing or play any instrument. You might find him in the capital city of Everdale dressed all in black and white, playing around with imaginary things or, thinking that he's in a box that isn't there."

Amber blinked and whistled in surprise.

"A little example of what kind of naughtiness your Grammie is capable of doing. But only when she has to. That's the case of most people here. You just need a tough skin or you'll get burned by more than just dragonfire."

"Do no harm but take no guff," Amber said. "I tend to live the same way."



Nalladrie chuckled. "We're going to get along just fine, Amber. Now then, you know more about me, now it's your turn. Tell Grandmother Nalladrie a little bit about ya, since you're going to be in my house for the coming days, at least."

Amber's face flushed a bit. She knew she could trust this which, but how could she say it, and it was something she didn't want to remember. "Well, you might need to know this if you want to take me back home...I don't know if I have a home to go back to."

“Go on, my pretty,” Nalladrie said as she reached over to stroke Amber’s cheek. “It’ll be all right. I know it would be strange to me, but go on, tell it the best you can.”

When the crone touched her face, Amber’s eyes locked on to the crones, who were swirling in that strange ever-changing spiraling light that seemed to fill her vision. She thought she was swallowed up in those storms of colors and could feel herself slip into that spell again, sensing someone—her, she’s doing it—enter her head as if it were a house, and look around inside.

“Back in my hometown, Grammie, we have this saying: Any sufficiently advanced technology is, to the uninitiated, indistinguishable from magic. And I don’t think you’ve been initiated yet.”

“I’ll keep up as much as I can. Go on.”

Chapter 3

Amber can’t help but think of that famous quote from Sir Arthur C Clarke. Sure, Grammie Nalladrie would be awestruck at the inventions the average person of Brighton, Indiana in 2019 just takes for granted. But Amber would doubt that Grammie would believe that there is no such thing as magic in Amber’s world. She can go through the entire history of Planet Earth and not see a single spell cast. Not even a cantrip. There’s also no elves, no dwarves, no hobbs..ahem...no halflings...not even a dragon. Amber could just hear Nalladrie now:

No magic, no dragons, the most ridiculous name for a planet ever, and just one race? How do you live?

But at least Amber would be able to show Nalladrie her library, which would be worthy of mages.

Nalladrie would have seen an Amber as a curator, in the crone’s eyes, a collector of tales and stories not just written, but spoken, sung and even performed and recorded into a device that...well, it was beyond even her description, it would appear to be just magical to actually record something that can be both seen and heard into some tape or disk and play them back later.

How else would someone in the Twilight Kingdoms describe videotape, compact disks, and DVDs?

And Amber had a small collection in her home at such a young age. Well, small would be a deceptively relative term. When a small stack of these disks can fit the size of the thickness of a single spellbook and just one of them could store every book in her house, Nalladrie would guess that Amber had a collection that could rival libraries in Winterreach that covered whole buildings...all in the size of her small bedroom.

The collection stretched several genres. Fantasy, Science Fiction, Western, Historical, Suspense, Romance, and even a few musicals. There were even some that consisted of drawing figures that were quite expertly made.

Most of Amber’s collection consisted of tales that were much older than she is, or even older than her father or even anyone she knows. And from her viewpoint of seeing through Amber’s memories, each of these ‘movies’ was a wonder to behold in Nalladrie’s eyes.

And it also was a source of inspiration for the child’s creativity, because Amber wrote a couple the scripts with her own stories with the dream of making them into these movies. One example is her tale of “Prince Doc and Princess Snow, a retelling of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* that focuses on the Dwarves, your typical proud and stout race that would be just as home digging in mountains as Doc was accompanying “His Snow,” around their castle. Amber got an award for that story. And a A++.

Or a remix of *Alice in Wonderland* where Alice remained in the real world, but through some mutant gene in her head and her insanity, she brought Wonderland into the real world around her! Or a *Wizard of Oz* where the witches are flipped. The ‘Good’ witch of the North was the villain, the ‘Wicked’ Witch of the West, the good guy. She made her own cartoon short series, with a mouse that was equal parts Mickey Mouse and Fievel Mouskewitz.

She had a saying, “Why be a Disney Princess? I want to be more like Uncle Walt.”

But her dreams of making her own movies got worn and faded, as everything around her mired in cheap tricks, overused technology, and pandering messages that made her feel that she’s being talked down on.

Nothing rubs a person the wrong way like being talked down to. Nalladrie didn’t need to be told that.

Not even the studios Amber loved that focused on animation do any animation anymore, or if they did, the quality was piss poor (and artificially made in Nalladrie’s eyes...which isn’t far from what Amber thinks of Computer Generated Animation) and just focused on fluffery what was easily marketable, following trends to just sell tickets and not doing anything unique or rememberable. It got to the point in Amber’s mind where every movie just looked like the same movie with just different settings and actors.

Amber realized what was happening she saw the trailer for *Captain America: Civil War* and then wrote down the script for the story. Then she compared it to the movie’s script and found out that it almost matched word for word. Amber never seen, much less read, the comic book it was based on. She only saw the trailer and knew the whole movie. That’s not a good sign.

It wasn’t just the movies that all started to look and sound the same to her. It was in music, where all the radios just play the same twelve songs over and over, and the television shows where she could just describe what they’re about with just the title. Even Reality Television. Everything around her was just fading into a boring, monotonous, soul-sucking sameness.

She had to go to Norway and Sweden to hear some good music—she found a love for Power Metal that way—Japan and even China for a cartoon that didn’t suck, and if it weren’t for El Rey Network, she would have to learn Spanish just to see some decent wrestling.

And when they started to focus less on making quality works and more on sending a pandering societal message that didn’t belong there, it was the proverbial nail in the coffin. The recent years had everything become politically divisive and combative everywhere Amber could see. She could see the rising caterwauling and melodramas she saw on the news, where society were taking sides, and things are just getting worse and worse until people feared Civil War II would come, and she just wants to find an outlet and tune the world out, just for her sanity.

She found such a place when, while searching anime on Youtube, she ran into the *Memories of Phantasm* series. Thirty minutes later, she was telling her dad about this cartoon she thought was done by Studio Ghibli but found out it was made *by a fan of a series of Bullet Hell games!*

Within five hours, she was downloading and playing those Touhou games herself.

Three days later, she asked her dad for a Japanese Shrine Maiden costume right out of the blue.

The following month, she entered her first anime convention cosplaying as Reimu Harukei (and Marisa Kirisame the next day) and was welcomed into the Midwestern Touhou Community, Gensokyo on the Wabash, with open arms.

Donnovan Merichello, a Democratic Indiana State Senator, could think of worse things she could get into. While he keeps seeing America surge head-on into further division and extremism, he could see Amber getting into worse things than escaping to Gensokyo in her imagination.

Donnovan didn't blame her. Amber's too young to have political views. She leaves all that to her father and just live-and-let-live like a normal kid that's about to hit puberty. She avoids social media as much as she could and thank goodness for that as far as Daddy's concerned. He learned that whoever

programmed social media intentionally made them as addicting as crack, and told Amber about it. That got her removing half the apps from her smartphone. So, Amber didn't get the full-on right-in-front-of-her-face exposure to the extremist parts of American Society, both on the Right and, to Donovan's ever growing dread, on the Left as well. Donovan hoped that he could help steer the country back to a much saner society without all the divisive social justice politics and identity politics that is souring into open racism.

Until one fateful Tuesday...

The following would take place over Amber's most recent memories, which take up roughly ninety minutes of measurable time, counting from the moment Donovan opened the front door.

"Daddy, I did it," Amber cried out. "I beat *Hidden Star* on Lunatic!"

"That's great, sweetie, great," Daddy said. He tried to smile at her, but he was clearly distraught. He was looking around frantically for something. He went in a closet and pulled out a red backpack.

That red backpack.

It was a backpack that always rested in the corner of the closet. Daddy told Amber not to mess with that backpack. It's there for emergencies. A Bug Out Bag, he called it. It had survival equipment, a way to bottle and purify water, something called Meals Ready to Eat that at best tastes...questionable, and a book on what to do when the proverbial shit hits the fan.



She's chewing on a pencil. Honest

Amber's smile dropped from her face so soundly she thought her face fell off her head. "Daddy...what's wrong. Did something happen?"

Daddy looked over at Amber with a combination of a Father's love for his daughters and a coming dread for the future. "Yes, dear. It finally happened. The shit just hit the fan."

"It wasn't storming that bad, there's no flood. And I didn't feel any earthquake," Amber's mind just went down the list of possible emergency circumstances she could think of. Was there a terrorist attack? Someone shooting up something?"

Dad nodded on that last part. "Worse. We gotta get out of town. Now."

Amber wasted no time in powering down her computer, making sure she had her wallet, her cell phone, fully charged, and her keys. She headed out the door, but doubled back to one more thing, she thought she needed it. Her skateboard. It was her normal mode of transportation. Just as fast as a bike and she can carry it inside. She learned to skateboard when she was seven and could do some simple tricks, such as jumps and tricks and some grinds, but nothing more dangerous than that.

She then bounded out the door toward Daddy's car, doubling back again only to ensure that the door is locked.

She then did the mistake of looking down the street.

And saw the pillars of smoke rising from the downtown Brighton area.

"Daddy? What's happening?"

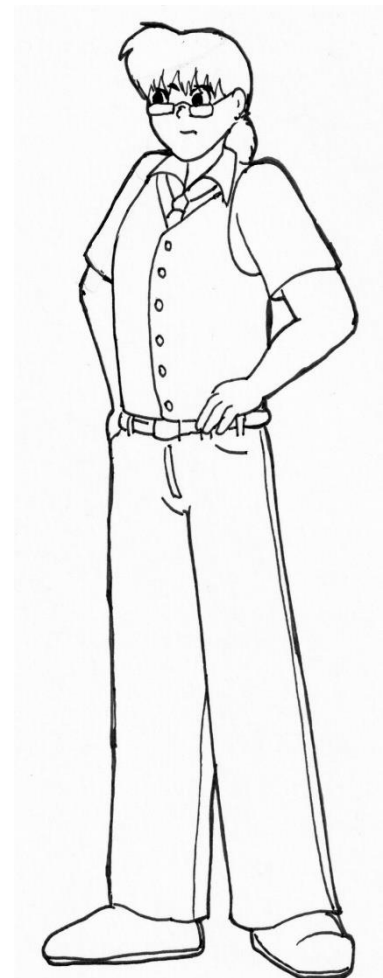
"I'm trying to figure that part out," He said as he got into the driver's seat. "There is a rash of riots and protests that popped up in several major cities, and they're spreading all across this country like wildfires. But there wasn't any warning or anything that might've triggered it. I would've heard someone talking about it. Some online chatter about a plan or something. But it all started at once with absolutely zero warning. Everyone's caught off guard."

As the car pulled into the streets, Dad turned on the radio. The news reports were a shocker. It wasn't just Brighton; it was all across the country. "...demonstrations have sprung up all over America at the same time, about 5 PM Eastern. Every major city in the country just erupted into violence. All at once. All at the same time. And it's beginning to spread to other countries in the world, with more flaring up by the..."

"Amber, here, take this." Dad handed her an envelope. Amber peeked inside it and her eyes went wide. "If we're separated, you might need this, just get somewhere where there's no..."

"...Daddy, that's about a hundred bucks in here!"

"I thought about a smaller amount, but I fear you might need it. You have your cell phone, text me where you're are, you don't have to call me. I'll call you when I can so I can get..."



Donnovan Merichello, Amber's Dad

The radio news reporter kept blurting out the bad news. "...stormed the White House, the Congress, and the Supreme Court. I repeat, three mobs of five thousand plus each stormed their way into all three branches of the United States Government. And we are receiving reports that this is a coordinated attack. This is not a drill, America, we are under a coup! WFNG 98.6 FM advises you to use whatever disaster preparedness plans you have; *this* is a proper time to..."

Amber's brain was too busy getting her brain to register what she just heard notice Dad's cell phone ringing.

Daddy still had on his earpiece so that he can keep both hands on the wheel. "Donnovan. What? How did they get my...they're tracking me over..." Confusion turned to fear and turned to outrage. "Why would they want to get at *me*? I'm a Democrat!" What he heard next over the phone made him blink in disbelief. "Keep me posted on where I should go, I need to get my daughter to a hiding spot, then I'll look for you. Be careful, Jim." He hung up. "I can't believe it either, pumpkin. I should've seen this coming. Too many people on the lunatic fringes—on *both* sides, Amber, not just the Alt-Right. I really should've seen it coming, where even people on my side of the aisle were getting more and more radical until..."

There were some screeching several city blocks behind it, and bright headlights reaching the rear-view mirrors with their harsh light.

"Oh no," Dad said as he sped away, at first he thought about stopping for those red lights, and he did for the first couple of them, but when he made that left turn to a side road and heard squealing tires following behind him. He punched the gas pedal with his leg, causing the car to progress up the gears.

"Daddy..." Ambers eyes went wide as the next intersection rushed up to greet them. "The stoplight." The light switched yellow.

"No choice, Amber. Hang on and hope the traffic's light."

Donnovan powerslid around the next turn and bolted down a thoroughfare. The pursuers rounded the corner ten seconds later. But they were in twenty-year-old clunkers that are owned by college graduates who realized that they only have a mountain of debt and a career in fast food to show for their degrees. Donnovan drove a two-year-old Ford Fusion, a hybrid car fine-tuned to drift—In fact, He was known for his drift racing when he was younger and showed videos of him drifting in his political ads—so father and daughter was more than able to keep distance between him and the clunkers.

"Amber, the fairgrounds are up ahead, isn't it?"

Brighton has a well-maintained fairground used for various events, including fairs, concerts, sports events, and the like. It even had fairground rides permanently built. Also located in the fairgrounds is a shelter for runaways, abused women, people escaping human trafficking, and anyone else who had to flee in an emergency. It had vending machines, a telephone, a first aid kit and defibrillator, working toilets, cots that can be pulled out, and closed-circuit monitors. Anyone who makes it there can call up help won't be charged with trespassing. It's not something Brighton shows on the web pages or anything, but it's something the police and EMTs know to tell anyone who needs a place to flee to about.

Whenever Amber needed to get away from everyone and find a place where she can be with her thoughts, she often goes there. The police found her a few times. Just wandering around on her skateboard singing something about paralyzing agony and a place for the broken in the light. At

least the cops in Brighton, Indiana were nice enough to offer her a ride back home without arresting her; they know her Dad. But of course, Daddy knew she was there every other weekend.

“For once I won’t be upset at all over you sneaking in there.” Daddy said as he circled a roundabout toward the fairgrounds parking lot. “Like I said. Find a place to hide. Keep away from trouble. Keep yourself safe. I’ll call you when I’m able to get back to you, I promise.”

Amber looked over at her father, still not knowing everything about what’s happening, but she finally felt the sense of dread catch up to her. Shit’s getting real. The world around her is falling apart. America might not be the same tomorrow morning. It might not even *be* tomorrow morning.

Would she ever see her father again?

Daddy rounded the entrance of the parking lot. There was no front gate over the parking lot, and only some movable barriers across the ticket booths, only there to tell anyone that the place is closed, but really won’t keep anyone out if they’re intent on getting in.

Amber got out with her skateboard. She turned around to take one more look at her father.

“I love you Amber,” he said.

She gulped.

“I’ll always love you,” he said.

She was about to get teary-eyed when she heard the squealing tires in the distance.

“Go,” he said. “Be safe.”

“You too,” she said as she bolted down the pavement and around a parking ticket booth. Parking was free, but there was a system to manage the cars there. She peeked around the corner and watched Dad’s red car roll away.

Only to have an unintelligible vehicle with a bad muffler and a paint job consisting of two shades of primer near miss it. Dad had to floor it to get away. A second car that had seen leaped up, only to get rubbed NASCAR-style by Dad as he sped for the exit. A third car just missed T-Boning him.

Amber didn’t stick around to find out who within those clunkers. She kicked up speed, rolling across the parking lot. The sun was about to duck under the horizon and the lot was in shadows, but the area ahead still had enough light.

The front gate was a series of ticket booths with a chain hanging chest-high across. The turn styles had barriers covering them, although a gate meant for wheelchairs can be pulled open. But the countertops of the ticket booths were still in the open air, if you ollie and duck good enough, you’ll just slide right through.

She looked back, there was still some light beams back at the top. The cars were still there. If one of them managed to look this way and see her...

She looked ahead. The chain was rushing up to greet her.

She ducked under it.

She timed this part too many times to mess it up now.

Her legs knocked the board upward.

The ollie was perfect, and she found herself zipping across the ticket booth as graceful as a bird in flight.

Which was more than what she could say about the landing. Or that's what she thought when the world stopped spinning and she found herself slumped in a heap.

She went down a bit too far forward and dug the front end into grass that usually is not intended for human traffic. There was even the appropriate "Keep Off The Grass" sign nearby. The force of the impact snapped the board in two. The momentum kept her going forward into grass usually not intended to be on.

She had to shake her wits back in place, and there was plenty of green and dirt stains and a bruise, but she was still breathing.

She picked up the two pieces and ducked around a food booth. She looked at the broken skateboard as if it were a lost friend, before pitching the pieces into a nearby trash can.

She looked back toward the parking lot. There were some more squeals, and a fading drone of traffic, but no more headlights. Everything was quiet.

Too quiet for some. Amusement Parks and Fairgrounds can be a bit spooky when they're empty. Even haunted. It's as if you could see the attractions come to life, the animatronics getting up and walking around and the character costumes roaming around looking for 'friends.' You'd almost expect someone to just pop up somewhere with a Mark Hamill voice with bad intentions toward you. You'll be found dead with a grotesque smile so locked on your face that the funeral would have to be a closed coffin. But hey. Voiced by *Mark Hamill*. Can't be that bad.

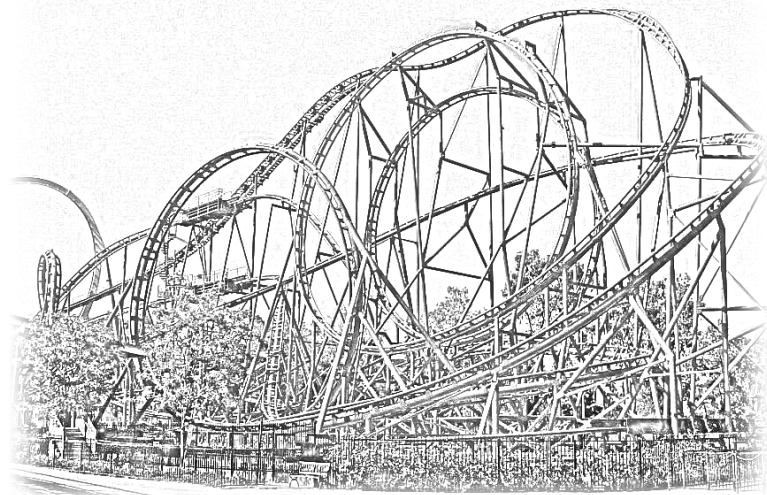
Nightmare Fuel to many people. But not Amber. Whenever she was wandering in here, she imagined herself a princess castmember from Disneyland, wandering the fairgrounds, spinning around in an imaginary princess gown, pretending to greet imaginary guests, imagining everything switched on, with all the lights and sounds flooding the place. Her mind's eye saw other fellow costumed characters greeting her like old friends, planning to have a ball together.

It was her very own Magic Kingdom, and she was the Princess.

She climbed onto a roller coaster. From the top of the lift hill, she could see smoke trails where something big was burning. She imagined this happening all across the nation, all across the world, and sighed.

"What kind of thing would've caused this," she wondered out loud as she climbed down.

She wondered how long she would have to stay here, hiding from whatever is...out there. Even if she knew she'll be safe in that shelter, she might be holed up there for weeks, waiting for the smoke to clear.



And what would happen then? Would the smoke ever clear? What sort of world would she wander back to? Will she ever see her dad again?

“He dropped off someone, I know it! Find that shelter, she might be there!”

That came from the front gate, and when she looked over there, she saw a flashlight flick this way and that to announce someone’s presence in the fairgrounds with her. At first, she thought it was one of the night guards that know her enough to let her....

“That...is the senator’s daughter, if we can kidnap her, we...”

That was all Amber needed to know. She ducked into the first building she could get to: The Dungeons & Dragons ride. It wasn’t what it’s named, it was something something wizards something, but the green dragon face with huge teeth making the entrance where the tracks led from the loading station looked too much like that 70s era Saturday Morning cartoon show. It was the only reference to that game Amber cared about. She wasn’t much into tabletop RPGs.

The ride, just like everything else, was shut down, but it was as much a great place to hide as any. She scrambled over the banisters and hopped down on the tracks, hoping she can duck into that dragon’s head before...

“I hear someone run up ahead. Look around, she’s gotta be hiding somewhere.”

...she heard them coming along the queue area of the ride, their flashlights stabbing into the darkness in the wood and paper mache dragon’s throat. She had already ducked into the first room in the ride, in total darkness but away from line of sight. Covering her mouth to avoid making a sound and please, dear God, in the name of all that is good and right, don’t sneeze...she waited until she saw the light beams flick away and the sound of footsteps and voices faded away.

She stayed there in pitch darkness for a few more minutes until she could no longer hear a single sound. There as some moments when she thought that someone would just clamp on her shoulder at any time, but she eventually gathered enough courage to turn on the flashlight on her phone. She walked among the still animatronic goblins and ghouls meant to frighten those on the train, under a devilish wizard about to cast a spell as they went into a tunnel.

*“Ever on and on, I continue circling,
with nothing but my hate, in the carousel of agony.”*

Ever since she heard the English version of Bad apple, she picked up the habit of singing it whenever she’s feeling tense, worried, sad, or scared. She wondered why she got this tic at times. It sounded like such a happy tune that just seems to mesh well with the dark lyrics.

*“Till slowly I forget, and my hearts starts vanishing,
and suddenly I see, and I can't break free.”*

She found herself going through a life-size diorama of a halfling home—looking straight out of Tolkien—which still had some faint lights on. Nothing on the display, just the light bulbs on the corner and showing the EXIT signs. Just the required by law light for whatever maintenance crew can look around in there without tripping over something. She got off the tracks, crept over to the model tree, and sat against it.

*“I’m slipping through the cracks of a dark eternity,
with nothing but my pain and the paralyzing agony.”*

She pulled her knees up against her and wrapped her arms around herself.

*“To tell me who I am, who I was, uncertainty
enveloping my mind till I can't break free.”*

She felt herself stifle a sob. She wanted to keep quiet, but she felt safe enough to let her emotions out a bit. The fear, the sorrow, the uncertainty. What is going on in the world around her? What little event, what random encounter, which butterfly flapped its wings, that set everything to this collision course?

*“And maybe it's a dream; maybe nothing else is real,
but it wouldn't mean a thing if I told you how I feel.
So I'm tired of all the pain, all the misery inside,
and I wish that I could live feeling nothing but the night.”*

Would she ever see her father again?

That was the question that worried her the most, as she kept singing...to anyone who would care that would be listening.

*“You can tell me what to say; you can tell me where to go,
but I doubt that I would care, and my heart would never know.
If I make another move there'll be no more turning back
because everything will change and it all will fade to black.”*

Even though she was not religious, her singing was a prayer, in a way. A cry out into the night. Yes, yes, she knew that she might be asking for it. She's seen too many stories where someone would do this and then some devil comes around offering everything you'd ever need if you sign your soul away. But Amber knows what would bring someone to that point now.

*“Will tomorrow ever come? Will I
make it through the night?
Will there ever be a place for the
broken in the light?
Am I hurting? Am I sad? Should I
stay, or should I go?
I've forgotten how to tell. Did I ever
even know?”*

She didn't quite know where that glowing mote of light came from. At first, she thought it was a firefly that made its way here, so it can stay in a dark and comfortable place. But as it floated over to her she found that the soft white glow was much too steady.



*“Can I take another step? I've done everything I can.
All the people that I see I will never understand.”*

And she didn't know why, but she felt like singing the rest of the song to it.

*“If I find a way to change, if I step into the light,
then I'll never be the same and it all will fade to white.”*

By the time she finished that verse when she said *'white,'* it turned itself up, bathing her in its soft white glow.

Amber looked at the little will of the wisp and wondered if it were looking back at her.

“Looks like someone *was* listening to me, whoever *you* are, that is?”

The mote hovered closer to her, bussing around like a firefly. It circled around her a couple of times as if it was curious about this visitor.

After wiping dry her eyes, she tried to reach out for it. It jerked back, out of her reach, but then moved closer, like a cat who was unsure of what crossed its path and was in an internal struggle between curiosity and fear. Amber couldn't help but giggle at the sight. It then started to hover a bit away, darting further into a prop forest and then doubling back. It was as if it wanted Amber to follow it.

“Where're ya going? You want me to follow?”

Curiosity got the better of Amber as well, because before she knew what she was doing, the events of the worst ninety minutes in her life still fresh in her mind, she was following it into the woods. Woods that looked like it was larger than the building the ride is in would allow. Woods that had trees that looked a bit too real to be props. Woods enveloped with a thick mist obscuring any vision to about thirty yards as she followed that fluttering light...

By the time she finally caught that will o' the wisp, she was in another place entirely.

Chapter 4

Amber was right about one thing: Nalladrie wouldn't (yet) understand half of what she said about her homeworld, even with the magic the crone used so that she would pick up what the child was thinking. It was as easy as opening a book and reading her memories. The hard part was in the translation. A good chunk of it was lost in the translation. These things about movies, television, compact disks and DVDs, that was alien to the crone, expectedly so. She would just shake her hand over what little politics the child was aware of—she wasn't that much interested—and wondered how these two parties would be so hostile against each other, but she found the riots that drove her into that gaudy pretend dungeon all too familiar. She wondered if she heard of the little sprite that lured her across the two worlds before. She filed that bit for later.

Nalladrie kept Amber's close. Amber's cheeks were wet with tears and her lower lip quivered a bit, but everything else about her was lulled to calm. Her arms limped and relaxed, her body slouched a bit ahead, and her eyes staring placid and blank. Nalladrie put her under that trance again.

And she just kept drilling it into her head: "You're home here, Amber. You're safe. You're with your Grammie now. You can trust your Grammie. You are safe with your Grammie."

The words just echoed through the child's head, soothing over all the pain and loss she felt as they looped around in there until they slipped out of her mouth as Amber kept repeating what she was told. "I'm home...I'm safe...I'm with my grammie...I'm safe with my grammie...I can trust my grammie."

"That's right, my child. You're home here. You've traveled so long and far to get here, I know. You had to flee a place that went bad. Your father wanted you to flee to here. You're in a safe place now, child. You're home now. You're safe."

Amber's voice, deep in that trance, parroted the thoughts rolling in her head. "...I'm home...I'm safe...I've travelled so long...had to flee to get here...I'm with you now..."

"Yes, you're here, in my home. This is your home now. And your home is a source of warmth and love and caring for you, Amber. You're with me now, your loving Grammie. You're where your Father wanted you to go. You're here now. You're with me, your dear Grandmother Nalladrie. You're home."

Nalladrie had no intention of replacing her father. She might have a stomach for it if this Donovan was one of the bad parents. The abusive, the manipulative, the drunk and violent kind of father. But Amber's father seemed all right. Sure, he might have been single, having lost his wife (Amber's mother) and his job must be a total pain, but he did love and cared for poor Amber, and Amber really did love him. Nalladrie didn't want to change that. Nobody has the right to take that connection from Amber. Sweet, innocent, creative, and lost little Amber. More than she needed a physical home, she needed an emotional home as well. A place that would spark and ignite her imagination and allow her heart and soul to grow. A warm and happy place where she can grow up in. With a motherly figure that would guide her toward where she should be.

It wasn't a replacement. It was a copy.

“Let this old elven crone fill that missing hole in your heart, my child. Fill up that hole that was left by your mother. Let my house be the home you always had in your heart, your forever home. Your home, and your Grammie, an everflowing source of love and care for you, eager to teach you my ways, share you my wisdom, and guide you to becoming a true woman yourself. A being of beauty and smarts and strength. A being everyone would want to be with. Someone a man would want to marry. Someone full of light and love. You know I love you, child, and I know you can love me. Just as you love your father. I’m sure that you’ll find your father again, and you will wish that you’ll return to them. But until that happy time comes, you are here, home, with me, your beloved magical Grammie. You will always be my child, this this home will always be yours. You’re at a safe place now, my child. You’re home.”



In Amber’s mind’s eye, deep in the spell, she felt herself replay the event, where she floated down from the heavens, a star that fell from the sky. The star landed on the soft ground where it formed a body. Her body. And in the confusion over what happened to her, this kindly old woman took her into her arms, carried her home, made the child to be her own daughter. She wasn’t alone anymore.

She could see the child smile again, her blank eyes giving a bit of a sparkle. Even her hands were floating up, wishing to reach over to her. To embrace her Grammie, to hug her tight, to snuggle up to her, and nuzzle her face to her chest and tell her that she loves her.

“It was no mere chance that you came to me, little star who came from the sky. You were sent to me, it was destiny, and we are meant to be together, a Grandmother and her child. You will think of me like a long lost grandmother you never thought you had, someone who slid into the place of your lost mother, you will find that I took you in like my own daughter, and when you wake up, you’re going to give me such a big hug and kiss.”

When Grammie snapped her fingers to bring her out of that trance, Amber blinked herself back to life. And then her eyes focused on Grammie. And her heart skipped several beats. Something connected in her head that wasn’t there before and wasn’t there for years.

“Grammie...”

Why did she doubt it for a second when she found her? She knows she’ll be all right. She just knows. She made it to Grammie’s place. A place that’s full of hearth and home. She’ll be staying here. It might not be with Daddy, but it’s good enough. She never had a grandmother before. And her own mother died when she was young. Advanced stage breast cancer. Even with both tits removed it wasn’t enough, the doctors didn’t get it all in time. It left her with a big gaping hole in her life. And now she has this wonderful and magical Grandmother Nalladrie filling in that role, loving her to death. And she’s loving her back. It’s not just this place is her home now. Grammie Nalladrie is her home now. Amber could feel the same connection she felt toward her father branch

off and connect to this Elven crone. She didn't know it before, but now, Grammie's everything she ever needed.

"G...Grammie!" She just leaned forward and reached out for her arms.

Nalladrie just smiled and opened up her arms.

Amber just threw herself into her, hugging her tight, overflowing with that warmth she never thought she had again. She felt the elderly hands stroke her head and her back as a pair of winkled lips pressed up against her forehead.

The two stayed in that embrace for what seemed like a lifetime. Everything dimmed away into a warm shadow with the sweet smell of flowers. Nalladrie even took the shawl from earlier and draped it over Amber so that she could feel the embrace all around her.

Nalladrie just leaned back and let Amber snuggle up to her. Even elves appreciate a good hug, and it's been too long since she was in one. And she knew that her little one didn't think she'd feel this way again.

Amber squirmed her way up and her nose touched Grammie's own. Looking up into those ever colorful eyes, contrasting the grayness of an old woman, she couldn't keep herself from moving her embrace to her shoulder and kissing her on the lips. "Love ya, Grammie."

"Of course you do, my dear. And I love you too, you know."

"Of course I do." She just...did...even though she knew by now it was put there by a spell, some sort of hypnosis or something...she wondered if that was what she was put through...she should've minded, but she just couldn't...it was just so...nice. If Nalladrie would want to just put her under her charm forever, she wouldn't care. Just to feel that warmth and love and happiness forever.

"You almost make me wish not to go back home, Grammie," Amber said.

Nalladrie nodded. "I was wondering if you wanted that."

Amber sighed. "If it weren't for the riot, I would. Daddy wanted me to get away and find someplace safe. Neither of us expected that safe place to be in another world, that's all." She murred as Nalladrie brought her back close and patted her head. "I don't think you know how to get me back anyway if I even wanted to."

Nalladrie sighed in return. "I'm afraid I'm in the dark as much as you are on that. I for one would be glad to help you find a way back home, but for now...Guess we're stuck together for now."

Amber nodded in Nalladrie's robe after a few seconds. "Yeah, and where am I going to return to? Brighton would be in rubble by now, Daddy might..."

Nalladrie pulled her closer, squeezing her tight. "Don't think that, child. Shush shush shush...don't you lose hope now. We'll find a way to get you back to your father one way or another. I don't know how yet, and I don't know if it'll be you going back or him coming here...We'll get you and your father back together. Or at least die trying. That I'll promise you."

She lifted Amber back a bit so she can see her face.

"Elves don't make promises that often. We're honor-bound to keep them even if we couldn't. But we also believe that families are important, and you don't have that much of a family left. So I'll promise that I...check that, we...will do what we can. I don't know if we'll be successful, but no one

will blame us for trying. But like I said, for now, you'll stay here. It's that safe place daddy wanted you to go, even if he didn't know it then."

Amber dried the rest of her tears. "Thanks, Grammie. I gotta tell you, you're quite good with that...whatever...whatever you did to me. Was that Hypnosis or something?"

"Oh," Nalladrie waved her hand. "A little charming magic, some light telepathy, nothing that I haven't done for over twelve decades."

"You should take it on stage or something. You'll have people wrapped around your finger and eating out of your hand. Probably got a lot of guys."

"I have. You should see me when I was younger, Amber. When I was Lady Nalladrie, the Enchantress of Cloudspire. A beautiful, elegant, irresistible, and very mischievous and sometimes naughty lady witch, wearing the very dress you're wearing, and you fill it up better than I ever did." She poked her in a good-natured tease. "You make your Grammie jealous, little girl."

Amber giggled at that.

"I could easily put anyone under my power, and in a deeper state than what I put you in. I could count on the fingers of both my hands...and maybe a toe or two...of the number of people who can resist me. Almost anyone else?" Nalladrie snapped her fingers.

Amber blinked a bit...but then her mind just dropped into a deep trance. Her eyes glazed over, her arms dropped limp, her body slumped.

"Nice to see I haven't lost my touch." She crooked Amber's chin and snapped her fingers. "Wake up."

Amber blinked herself back awake. "Whoooh, that was...whoa..."

"Sleep now." Snap.

"make up yer..." Slump.

Nalladrie placed Amber's hands together. "I just glued your hands together. When you wake up, you will find your hands stuck together, unable to part them, until I tell you that I removed the glue."

The child's hands pressed up together as if they were glued.

"Wake up." Snap.

Stir. "mmmm....mind."

"I can put you under a trance at any time now. I just snap my fingers and you drop. I'm the only one who can do this, of course."

Amber blinked for a second but then she looked at her hands, she tried pulling them apart but they just stayed together. "Where'd you get the...Let me guess...hypnotic suggestion."

Nalladrie just smiled and tapped her apprentice's hands with a finger. "The glue is gone now."

Amber's hands flew apart.

"What I just did to you, I can do to almost anyone with little to no problem. In some cases, they didn't have to be aware I'm there."

Amber whistled.

“I must confess that I could get a bit naughty with my magic. There’s a lot of pitfalls with enchanting magic. I’ve lost count of how many guys I made to fall into a passionate love for me. Even now I have a few in every town that didn’t know whom their hearts belong to until I stride into town. Even now, Grammie only needs to arrive and they’ll come and cater to her, letting me stay in their places and getting my meal and at times even tending to an old lady’s needs, just for a kiss and such a lovely kiss I would give.”

Amber had to giggle at that, even if it were a nervous one. Who hadn’t thought of being able to make any guy go gaga? At least until recent years when guys have become too scared or jaded to even care about anything outside of their video games. But who is a Touhou weeb to talk shit about gamers?

“I do have better uses for my talent. I once took an overly proud monarch and made him make a complete fool of himself. Every now and then I have to bring someone down a few pegs. Hubris can destroy a kingdom as surely as a plague or a necromancer. I often make brigands and thieves drop everything they stole by my feet and then kneel before me, leaving me everything they stole and report to the closest patrol in just their skivvies. I even made a noble’s spoiled child into a proper woman who nobody was aware was a spy to a rival that noble was threatening to plow over their land. And then there’s that spoony bard I turned into a mime. You know. Wicked things.”

Amber pondered what Grammie talked about. She might have been wicked with her magic, she’ll admit that...nice to know she’s honest...but if she had that ability, what would *Amber* do with the ability to just charm people and bend their minds? Make some bully or cop to get off her back? Charm teachers to get her straight A’s on her report card? She already wished that she could go to Washington with Nalladrie’s charming staff or Loki’s glowstick of destiny, wave it over everyone during the State of the Union address and tell everyone to knock it the frick off. Who is a ten-year-old girl to judge an old elf? “Well, you had your reasons.”

“True. But that’s not I’m doing to you, am I? I mean, you’re still you, right? Nothing’s missing in your head? Nothing put into any box and sealed away? You can easily resist me if you need to. I won’t make you do things you wouldn’t want me to do to you.”

Amber thought about it, running through her memories. They seemed all there, her childhood at Brighton, her relationship with Dad, her dreams of making her own Movie Magic and the disillusionment she got, the insanity that overrun her society and the desire to play Touhou games to keep herself from going mad herself. The riots that erupted over the country. Having to separate from Daddy to hide in the Fairgrounds. Having that orb find her and led her here. She said her name. “Name’s Amber Merichello.” She ran through some numbers. “one two three four five six seven eight nine ten.” It was all there. Nothing’s changed. Nothing removed. Amber nodded. “Yeah, I’m still me. Nothing in here’s changed.” She tapped her head. “Although if you want to turn me into a Witch, we can talk about it.”

Nalladrie nodded. “That’s good. But all I want now is to make you feel all safe and welcomed in my house. You were a lost and scared little girl. Who knows what would’ve happened to you if I haven’t found you. But that’s all in the past now; you know now that you’ll always have a home here, and always have me as your grandmother.” she then gave Amber a smirk, “aaand I *did* have to make you fluent in Common.”

Amber had to rub her head when she said that. “Yeah, right. Had to bridge that language gap.” She was right, after all. All of it. She might have done some bad things in her youth, but what she’s doing to her, this isn’t bad. It certainly didn’t feel bad. Would it feel bad if she brainwashed her into becoming a wicked witch under her will? Would she actually do that? Maybe she had a change of heart sometime.

“Later on, I’ll teach you Elvish, it’s my native tongue. You need to be fluent with that if you’re going to be living with me.”

Amber nodded she returned her gaze into Nalladrie’s wonderful ever-changing colored eyes. She could just lose herself in those eyes forever. “I’ll appreciate that very much, Grammie. You probably need someone to help out about around the house, being how old you are, no offense.”

“None taken.”

“It’s the least I can do if I’m to stay here.”

“I for one would appreciate that my dear,” Nalladrie cooed as she stroked her face. “I could use a little helper, and you’ll fit the bill nicely.”

Amber couldn’t help but smile. “By the way, I like your eyes. They’re always changing color.”

“How so, dearie?”

“They keep changing, first they’re purple, then they’re pink, then they’re green, then they’re orange, they’re all over.”

Nalladrie gasped. “Child. Are you really seeing it?”

Amber nodded. “I don’t think I can lie to *you*. It just looks so cool, seeing them change color all the time.”

“That’s because it’s not just any color, dearie. You’re seeing Octarine!”

Amber blinked at this. “Octarine?! I think I heard about it somewhere...from one of my stories...” Her mind would’ve found what she remembered from the Diskworld series, where she first heard of the Color of Magic, but Nalladrie beat her to it.

“There is only two kinds of people would be able to see Octarine, Amber: Wizards and Cats. And you don’t have fur and a tail, so that pretty much narrows it down.”

Amber’s eyes lit up. “Does that mean I can do magic? Like you?”

“Let’s find out. I might need to make up a brew.”

“Really. I’ve never had a witch’s brew before. I wonder what’s it like.”

“I’ll show ya...but first, a few ground rules.”

Nalladrie reached over to Amber and stroked her face, staring right into her eyes.

“Sleep now, Amber.” Snap.

By now Amber just let that swirling multi-color Octarine swallow her whole. Her face fell placid once again.

“That’s right, my little child, let yourself slip back under my spell. Back to that soft place, safe, warm, loved.”

Amber’s arms fell limp as her mind once again fell still, allowing everything her Grammie would say flow around her head and become her own thoughts.

“You trust your Grammie very much, and you even let me put you under my spell at any time. It feels good, doesn’t it? All safe, warm, loved ...”

Amber could barely nod. "...safe...warm...loved..."

"And now, you will say what I tell you out loud," Nalladrie said, her voice carried over to Amber's ears as she was lost in her eyes. "This is very important. It is to be first and foremost in your mind. This is your calling, your vow, your oath."

"my calling...my vow...my oath." Amber replied.

"You are my apprentice, Amber, and you are to become a witch like your Grammie."

"I am your apprentice, and I am to become a witch like you, grammie..."

"A little good witch...a little bad witch...a little bit of both."

"...a little good witch...a little bad witch...a little bit of both..."

"That's right. An apprentice always obeys and trusts her Grammie."

"...An apprentice always obeys and trusts her grammie..."

"An apprentice always does what her Grammie tells her, with not too much backtalk," Nalladrie had to shrug a bit, "any more than necessary, but she always does what she's told."

"...An apprentice always does what grammie tells her..."

"Good, Good. An apprentice never leaves her Grammie's side or her Grammie's house."

"...An apprentice never leaves her grammie's side or her grammie's house..."

"That's right. An apprentice always wears her uniform and always looks her best."

"...An apprentice always wears her uniform and always looks her best..."

"Now say all those things again for your grammie."

"...I'm my Grammie's apprentice, and I am to be a witch like her...I must always obey and trust my grammie...I will never leave my grammie's side or my grammie's house...and must always wear my uniform and always looks my best..."

"Say it again."

"I'm my Grammie's apprentice, and I am to be a witch like her. I must always obey and trust my grammie. I will never leave my grammie's side or my grammie's house. I must always wear my uniform and always looks my best."

She made her say it a couple more times. Again. Again. Again. Nalladrie wanted it drilled into her head, locked into her memory so that it'll stay foremost in her mind.

"Oh, and do keep smiling, my pretty. I love your smile, always smile for your Grammie, you're face isn't completely made up without it." She tapped Amber's nose. "You are never fully dressed without your smile, remember that. Looking at your best includes smiling."

Even this deep in her trance, the smile stayed on.

Nalladrie snapped her fingers. "Now wake up so you can help me make this brew."

Amber blinked back to life to see Nalladrie's trying to frown but was too bemused over something. "I have to say you might be liking being under my spell a bit too much," she snorted, betraying a

chuckle. "You're one of those people, the kind who can't get turned on unless under hypnosis? Come now, Amber. You're not even in your teens yet! You're too young to have a kink."

It was all Amber could do to just think of pulling away from those wonderful eyes. "What can I say, Grammie...the way you look at me when you do that...just makes me feel so safe and warm. Nothing can go wrong being with ya."

Nalladrie snorted in her mischievous smirk. "And to think that you didn't get the idea of being my apprentice on your own."

"What do you mean by that," Amber said with a raised eyebrow. "I always wanted to be a witch, a witch like you. A little good a little bad...a little of both." She then blinked. Where did those thoughts come from? She then shrugged. "I'd be too happy to be your apprentice."

"And what does my apprentice do, Amber?"

Amber didn't miss a beat as she started to beam. "I'm to always obey and trust you and do what you tell me to do, never leaving your side...or this house if you're on an errand." She then took Grammie's arm. "Are you having problems getting up, Grammie? Let me go on an errand for you if you need to rest."

"I'm sure you will in time. Anything else you can think of that an Apprentice of mine is supposed to do?"

Amber thought for a moment, and then the brain cells connected. "I'm always to wear this uniform, keep my makeup on, make sure my nails are done. An apprentice needs to look her best for her Grammie." She smiled. "Guess I'm not fully dressed without a smile eh? You want me to be the pretty witch."

"Someone's gotta be the pretty one, and it sure ain't me," Nalladrie's said as she tried to get up. "Ugh." She pretended that a side muscle was grumbling to her, and mocked a wince as her bones popped, again. "Oh, fiddlesticks, this old body of mine." She reached over to Amber. "Help an old woman up, will ya, dear?"

"I might need some help learning how to put makeup on, though," Amber said as she got up from Nalladrie's lap. "I never had to wear make-up before." She then held onto Nalladrie's arm.

"Come now, child," Nalladrie said with a grunt as she got up. "All pretty girls need to have their best-looking face at all times. The only ones who should get away without makeup would be someone old like me. My walking stick, please."

When Nalladrie pointed to the staff with the heart-shaped top, Amber quickly picked it up and put it in Nalladrie's hand. "There you go."

"Good girl," Nalladrie said as she plopped the hat back on her apprentice's head and scratched the child behind the ear. Amber all but purred. "Now come with me to the kitchen. There are some things I want to hand to you."

"Yes'm," Amber said with a nod as she went over to Nalladrie's side, just as she was told she should do. She felt warmed by Grammie's approval as she guided her out of the room and down the hall. "I hope I'm not too much of a problem for you, Grammie. Dad told me that I can be difficult at times."

"Do you have any reason to be difficult right now?"

Amber shook her head as she followed Nalladrie through the hall like a puppy toward the kitchen. “Not really, just a snippy remark or two.”

“I can handle snippy.” Nalladrie then reached over and tapped Amber on her nose. “Wait til you hear *my* back talking. You might learn a couple things.” The crone then looked around. “Now then, there’s something I need you to always carry around for me.” Nalladrie pulled at a couple of drawers until she found a sheathed dagger. “You’re going to be a spare pair of hands and arms for Grammie Nalladrie, after all. Oh, here we are. Clip this somewhere on you. You’ll be needing it once we get in the back. Don’t lose it, it’s silvered. And pick up that basket on our way.”

Amber did so without a passing thought, sliding the dagger into its new home behind her hip, and snatched the basket with one hand. She even returned to Grammie’s side. “I hope this brew works. I always wanted to find out if I can do magic.”

“You know, Amber, I was praying to the Dragons for a little helper, someone to aid me in my old age, maybe even rise as my apprentice. And while I was wandering checking my herbs, there you were, under that willow tree.”

“Remind me to thank that fire-breathing friend of yours,” Amber said. “I’d love to boop his snoot.” She illustrated it by tapping her own nose.

Nalladrie couldn’t help but laugh. “You want to tap a dragon on their snout? Right where they puke out their fire?”

Amber shrugged. “Grammie, I don’t know what you think of dragons, but I think they’re cute. Very majestic and beautiful creatures. They might breathe fire on me and swallow me in one gulp, I hope to see one soon, at least...” She paused. “...before I get back to Daddy.”

Nalladrie sighed. “If I knew how to get you back to this Brighton, bring you back to your father, and take you both out of that hellhole, I would be focusing all of my efforts in doing so.”

“You just don’t know if you can do that.”

“Consider this your first lesson in Magic, Amber: Magic can’t do everything. But what it can do, it does very very well. And while we can’t do everything we want, what little we can do, we do.”

“What little we can do, we do,” Amber said with a nod. “I just hope I can be strong enough to chop wood.”

Nalladrie scoffed. “I have a woodsman drop off some chopped logs every other day and before you ask, yes, I have him wrapped around my finger. Treats me like a queen, and I’ll make sure that you are the fairest of princesses as far as he’s concerned. There’ll always be a good supply of chopped up wood for you to put in places.”



Amber hummed at that. “Or carry buckets of water.”

“I have my *Unseen Servant* for that, but you can easily pump the water out of the well.”

Amber was surprised. “Plumbing, in *this* world.”

“We’re *Witches*, Amber, not *Heathens!*” The tone in Nalladrie’s voice gave off as ‘Is that a stupid question or what?’ in Amber’s ears. “Even the smallest of shacks should have *some* sort of plumbing. Rainwater is used for the toilet and bath and it’s taken to a buried swamp a kilo away and thank the Dragons for that. Water to cook, drink, and brew, however, that comes from that well.”

Chapter 5

A well set in the backyard, in front of a patio with a fire pit with a cast-iron cauldron in the middle. And surrounding both the patio and well is a wide assortment of vegetable, flower, herb gardens, with a wide assortment of mushrooms of every shape and color as far as she could see. There were even some more of the humongous mushrooms in some places.

Amber whistled when she saw what Nalladrie call ‘Big Bertha,’ a humongous red and white-polka-dotted toadstool the size of a truck! “Man, Marisa would think she could feed the world with that!”

“Who’s Marisa, Amber? A friend of yours?”

Amber gulped. “Remind me to tell you more about Touhou.”

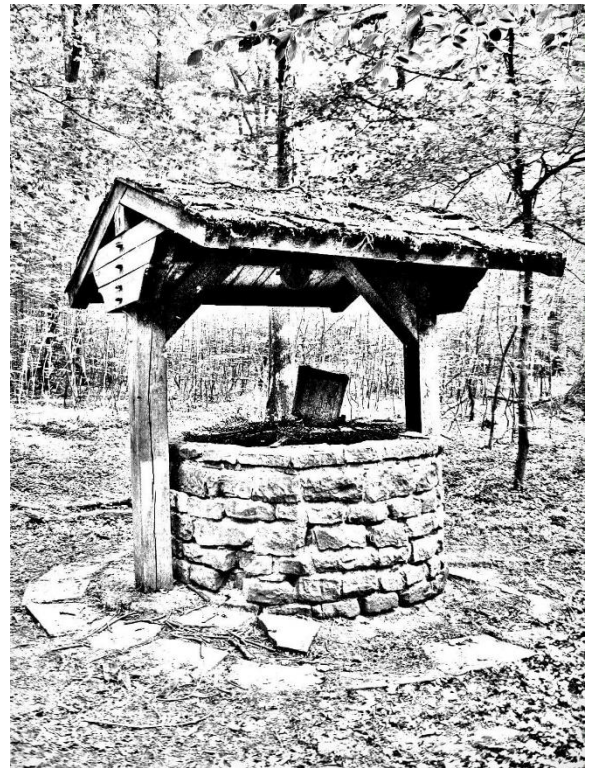
“I’m sure you will in time, now come along.”

Amber just looked around and took in all the bright colors and fragrances by all the plants as they vied for the attention of the occasional bee. Wind chimes play their soft tubular tone as the wind pushed the knocker just enough to tap them. And the orbs of light swayed in the air around the pair, making sure that everything around them was well lit.

“Most of what I’m growing are reagents for spells and potions, while others are for food, and others are for more...ritualistic purposes. And then there’s what’s in that shack at the back over there,” Nalladrie pointed to the barn-like building at the far side of the backyard. “I’ve even set up a cave nearby. There are a couple of plants that grow better in darkness, and some require some additional environmental conditions. There’re so many kinds of plants, herbs, and mushrooms around there for many purposes. Some can be used like wood, some can be turned into clothes, some even can be used to heat up the cauldron without setting a fire in the house. And then there are the kind that will help you along the way to attuning yourself to the mana of this world if it’s possible.”

Amber had to blink when she heard that last bit. “You have Magic Mushrooms here?”

“Do they have them where you’re from?”



“Well, they told me about mushrooms and plants that would make you trip? There’s this name for it that’s hard to pronounce: Sil-o, Psilo-byn, Psilociben, Psilocybin, got it. I keep hearing mixed messages about them. Some call it dangerous, but others say that they can be used for religious or therapy purposes. One person says that what they will change your mind for the better, another person claims that they’ll just fry your brain. And then there are the ones who say that they’ll make you run around buck naked and going crazy.”

Nalladrie chuckled. “Well, this brew will have those mushrooms in them. I hope you wouldn’t mind trying it out.”

Amber shook her head. “I have to admit being curious, but I never had the courage to try it. Sometimes, I wonder if I could just pluck a little cap and nom it, just to see if it’ll agree with me.”

“Well, in that case,” Nalladrie said, showing a milky white stalk with a bulb-like cap of white with red dots. It looked like something found in a video game to Amber. “You’re going to get your chance to try ‘im out. Now then, help me pluck out some of these toadstools.”

Nalladrie saw Amber kneeling down by the bed with dagger in hand, slicing off mushrooms, herbs, sages, and mint plants as she pointed them out to her. She was even careful as she carried them to the basket. She nodded in approval. Her apprentice is better at apprenticing than she thought. Before she knew it, Amber was dumping an apron full of toadstools into the basket. Then she followed her to a shed completely covered so that it’s in total darkness.

She handed Amber a lantern. “There’s a button there, keep pressing it until it lights up.” She did so, getting a closer look at the flint mechanism in the kerosene lantern. Nalladrie handed her a stick to tie the lantern on and made her hold it out while the crone plucked out a ripe fruit and some glowing mosses and flowers.

“Blow the lantern out and clip that to your belt,” Nalladrie told Amber when they left. “The pole can collapse, and you can put it in a pocket in your skirt.” It took Amber a few seconds to do it, but she did it without a second word. She nodded at how good she can follow directions, even at her age.”

Nalladrie walked back to the patio and the waiting caldron, Amber following behind with the basket, and passed the well as they found the pump moving on its own, pouring water into a couple of pails.

“How’re you doing, Jeeves?”

Nalladrie had to laugh. “Jeeves?”

“That’s what I’m calling him,” Amber said as she fanned the flames. “That *Unseen Servant* that is, or whatever *Unseen Servants* are, I just wanted to give ‘im a name.”

“I doubt any of them would care, oh, it looks like Jeeves has already placed that folding table alongside it. He’s being better today. Put the basket down beside it and get some logs up under that cauldron.”

“Sure thing, Grammie,” Amber almost sang as she picked up some wood wedges over to the fire pit.

“Now then, Magic lesson Number Two: It might surprise you that you can be able to cast spells right now, with the proper tool, such as this.” Nalladrie pulled out a wand. “This is a spell wand that creates a small flame. It’s good for lighting logs. Poke the far end to the logs and say ‘Incendio.’ You don’t have to be loud, but say it as if you’re speaking in public.”

Amber had to try it a couple of times before...*Incendio!*...the flame appeared on the tip.

“There! You got it,” Nalladrie said as Amber blew at the fire to get it going. “Spell wands, Spell Scrolls, and their smaller sibling, Spell Cards, can be used by anyone with a cursory knowledge of how magic works. And it seems you’re not that different, even if you did come from another world.”

“A magical lighter,”

“I’ll let you keep that,” Nalladrie said. “There’s a pocket in your vest just for wands. Even if you can’t do magic, you can always carry a wand around.”

Nalladrie brought out some other things for the brew. A couple extra herbs in a bag, some vials of some things, a couple football-shaped fruits, and a tray to cut some things on. The pair started cutting up everything, tossed it all in there.

“Don’t say it, Amber,” the child said as she stirred the brew as it boiled. “Don’t you say it, Amber.”

That piqued Nalladrie’s curiosity: “Don’t say what?”

“Something I read about in a book somewhere about what some witches say as they’re brewing:” Amber switched to her own take of the classic witch’s cackle: “Double, Double toil and trouble; fire burn and cal...”

Nalladrie just busted up laughing. “What self-respecting witch would ever chant *that!*?”

Amber just nodded. “I know, right? Blame it on a spoony bard from *my* world.”

“Why am I not surprised?” Nalladrie mused as she took turns mixing the bubbling brew.

“Those spells you showed me doesn’t seem too difficult,” Amber said while she’s with the spoon. “I’m not even drinking this brew and I’ve already casted a spell. Well, from a wand, but.”

“You’re picking things up fast, and that’s a good thing, Amber,” Nalladrie said. “Especially with the spells in the first and second circle. It’s the ones that are higher up that I’m more concerned for you over.”

“Circles?” Amber asked.

“That’s how we wizards measure the strength and complexity of the spells we cast, from the easiest on up. There are Twelve in all, but only the rare wizards could make it past the Fifth Circle. I can only get to Eight myself. Even the most powerful wizards I know of can only get to Nine. For good reason, the spells from Tenth Circle on up are much too powerful. Remind me to tell you about Karsus’s Folly. That’s the first last and only time anyone cast a Twelfth Circle spell, and that almost destroyed a whole universe.”

Amber whistled.

“Fortunately, you won’t be learning any of *those* spells at first. Just a selection of spells so easy anyone can learn them, that isn’t even in the First Circle. We call them cantrips. And then on to some spells that you can cast with a ritual like Jeeves, here. These spells take some time, but I’m sure you’ll be able to cast them no problem, and it’ll help you get used to drawing in mana. Once you get those two under your belt, we’ll move on to First Circle spells. They’ll have a bigger kick and you won’t be able to cast that many of them during the day. But you’ll get better.” Nalladrie sighed. “So here comes Magic Lesion Number Three here. My, I’m already teaching you the important stuff and you haven’t drunk that brew yet.”

Amber chuckled.

“Most of the spells I’ll be teaching you won’t do much harm if you do it right. Well, there would be some spells you can use to defend yourself from anything that would do you harm. Most of them are First Circle, and maybe a couple of Second Circle which you’ll pick up once you gain in strength. At most you’ll feel that you’ve been running a marathon at full clip. But it’s when you get to the higher Circles when they ask more and more about you. All Magic carries a price that will be paid from you, Amber, and when you are about to cast a spell you must consider what it might do to you as well as everyone around you. Most of the lower-level spells you cast won’t have that much of a price. Time and effort and maybe even making you feel fatigued after you cast them. It’s why you can only cast so many of the bigger spells during a day.”

“I take it you know this through personal experience.”

Nalladrie nodded as she looked at her wrinkly hands. “You’re probably wondering how Grandmother Nalladrie got this old. No Elf naturally ages with this lack of grace. We usually keep our good and youthful looks even as we go into Transcendence, which happens at the end of our lives.”

Amber blinked. “I didn’t want to offend you by asking, Grammie. But now that you mentioned it...how did that happen?”

“Way to the north, near the upper tip of this continent, lies the city of Winterreach. It’s the city where Magic is practiced and studied, with the most academies and guilds of all kinds. I lived there for quite a while and remind me to take you there to visit sometime. There are plenty of libraries where you can take in knowledge and lore of any spell you might find, and I’m sure that there’s something there that could provide some answers over how you got here. However, there is a hidden place under the towers, an underground vault where the oldest and most dangerous books lie. We’re talking magic that can level an entire city in one blast. Or bring an entire empire down upon its collective knees by just reading it. I’ve seen plenty a wizard go mad, their minds snapping,” she made a sign of someone’s head exploding, “just by looking at a random cover.” She raised a finger. “A *cover*, mind you. They didn’t even have to crack that book.

“In other words,” Amber mused, “The Adult Section.”

Nalladrie chuckled. “You could say that. Seven years ago, one young mage who just made the rank of Warlock found himself drawn by one of those books. Some of those books tend to do that, just draw someone in like a siren’s call. He cracked open that book, after picking several locks, both physical and magical...”

“...something tells me someone put those locks there for a reason.”

“...and the poor fool found out why when a spell that would blow all seven of the Twilight Kingdoms off the map jumped out of the pages and into the shmuck’s head. It immediately tried to take over him and try to force him to cast it.”

Amber winced. “A spell can do that?”

Nalladrie nodded. “And keeping them in check is part of the Arcane Tribunal’s purpose there. I was there when it happened, and even though I was quick to summon someone from the Tribunal to help, I knew they wouldn’t get here in time.”

“When seconds count, the police are only minutes away,” Amber said.

“Exactly. I had to work fast to save the world from disaster. I recently learned how to magically transfer a spell into a spellbook, something to make my research easier. It’s called *Arcana Amanuensis*. It is normally cast as a Third Circle ritual, but if you have to cast it normally, there can be some nasty repercussions if you do it wrong.”

Amber nodded.

“I knew that casting this too quickly would be too dangerous, but as you said, seconds were counting. There was no time to do it right. It was a risk I had to take when I grabbed a blank spellbook and hovered over the wizard trying to hold the spell back and was just about to lose it. It would be the most terrifying ten minutes of my life, drawing that spell out of that fool’s mouth and onto the pages. One slip of concentration, one utterance missed, and the spell would’ve triggered...”

“With you at Ground Zero.”

“I...think I know that term...But much to the relief of the Arcane Tribunal and the Academy, I was successful in trapping that spell back into a spellbook. I quickly handed it to a friend of mine, a former Warlock known as Blackwald—you’ll like him; I’m sure he’ll pay us a visit one day—and then I collapsed into unconsciousness.”

Amber winced.

“While I was out, the book was placed under its own set of padlocks and placed into its own vault. Melted the key afterward. The feeb I pulled that spell from fled Winterreach not too long afterward. I haven’t seen him since. I doubt he ever been anywhere near magic ever again.”

Nalladrie sighed when she got to this part, and Amber noticed the pain in her eyes. “They said I was out for weeks, and I take their word for it. I thought I was fading back to Arvandor multiple times. But eventually, I woke up, feeling every bone in my body aching and popping, and feeling slumped over and weary. I felt that I blacked out a beautiful raven-haired elven enchantress and woke up in a body that was worn with age, with silver hair, sagging face, and failing teeth.” Nalladrie sighed as if still mourning the loss. “When I saw myself in the mirror, I realized that was exactly what happened. Casting the spell saved Winterreach, but it cost me my youth.”

Amber just had to hug her Grammie in consolation. “I’m sorry that happened, Grammie.”



Nalladrie the Enchantress, before she lost her youth.

Nalladrie just gave her shoulder a squeeze “It’s all right, my dear. I was heralded as a hero for my actions. And my story is told as a warning to others. Magic must be taken with care, especially the ones in the higher circles. They can be dangerous, but you need not fear Magic.” She then tapped Amber on the nose. “You have me. I’ll teach you how to do it right. I’ll mold you into a fine witch, my dear. Even if the only way you can do it is by allowing me to channel my magic through you, like a poppet. I won’t steer you wrong, Amber.”

Amber looked up to the elderly and kind Octarine eyes of her Grammie and nodded. “I’ll be an apt pupil for you, Grammie.”

“I know you will, Amber. Now then, I think the brew is ready.”

Amber was set down on a chair in the patio and Grammie found a mug to pour some of the brew into it and then handed it to her. “Start off with just a little bit, Amber. No need to just jump into the deep end right away.”

Amber nodded as she drank it. It tasted like Chicken Stars soup, which matched what it looked like. After quaffing down the whole mug, she sat there and took in more of the garden and waited for something to happen.

It didn’t take the brew long to get her to feel dizzy and light-headed. A little giddy as well, because she giggled.

“Feeling it, Amber?” Nalladrie said as she refilled the mug with more brew.

Amber nodded. “Hehehehehe...I’m already feeling funky.”

“We’ll take your time with this; you can take it as far as you want to. You needn’t worry about something going wrong, not that I’m here. I’ll keep track of you, you won’t get into a bad trip when I’m here.”

“Thanks, Grammie,” Amber said as she brought the refill up to her lips. “I trust you enough.”

She drunk the whole mug and handed it back to Nalladrie to refill it. By now all the colors in Amber’s vision brightened to the point that it resembled a classic animated movie, and the chirping of birds and rustling of leaves echoed in her ears. She couldn’t help but feel that the house, the garden, the forest...it was as if the world around her has wrapped her into its collective arms and welcomed her as one of its own.

She was aware of drinking another mug and that’s when her head started to float away. It was hard to think of anything outside of the immediate area. Any thoughts about other worlds or coup or missing fathers proved hard to have, it was just herself, her Grammie, and the brew. She just sat there, with a sheepish smile, spitting out a chuckle on occasion, as she found her mug filled again. “Feeling a little woozy...but it’s good...”

By now she lost count of how many fills she had so far, she just kept drinking it after it was filled. Drink, fill, drink, fill. She sensed her senses fading away into a colorful kaleidoscope. Everything around her, the world she was in, the world of her memories, After the fifth mug, she felt the rest of the world, and almost everything of what she could remember, dissolve into a fanciful realm of color she can taste and sounds she can feel. There was on Brighton Indiana, or civic unrest, or rioting, or threats of goblins or kobolds or owlbears or preytons or highwayman or even dragons. There wasn’t even a set of seven kingdoms. It was just her, with her Grammie, and the woods, these wonderful magical woods, it was just them, sharing the moment. A moment of acceptance, and of everlasting

goodwill. And that tasty mushroom brew that she just couldn't get enough of, and with each mug, it just keeps getting better and better.

She felt that she was drifting into a dream even though completely wide awake. A dream where all she sees is a mass of streams and orbs and clouds and ribbons of that every changing Octarine.

"check it out, i'm seeing it. it's changing like your eyes, green then purple then orange and so on. it's octarine, right? it's everywhere."

"Hah!" Nalladrie said as she filled that mug again. "You're seeing the mana now. That's the energy that powers magic." She drank it. "It's the primal energy of this whole world, it's part of every living thing in the world." Another fill. "Mana connects everything together, and....I can guess...it wants to connect with you...if you let it." And another.

Even Nalladrie lost count on the number of mugs she made Amber drink. Things were going along great. She'll get to that point where the mana will attune to her in no time. She just has to be there and make sure that this trip doesn't go bad.

Amber just sat there with her eyes wide open, but her eyes didn't see anything around her. She had the goofiest of smiles, and sputtered an occasional a giggle, as she reached out with her hand as if stroking something or letting her fingers touch a ribbon of cloud. She gasped as she felt a surge of energy as the Mana started to stroke her face, slip through her nose and mouth. She was drinking it in, breathing it.

Eventually, Amber's arm fell limp, the cup slipping from her hands, and she just stayed there, inert as a doll. She wasn't aware of anything around her, or that she had a body, or that she was...she wasn't anything...all that was her...it all flowed away from her...as gentle as ocean waves...leaving nothing but the mana. All that is...all she is..was the Mana. "...i don't think...i know who i am...is this normal?"

"It's normal, my dear," Nalladrie said as she set the cup aside. "You're becoming one with the Mana, you might have lost all sense of who you are, but that's okay. It'll return to you after a while. But for now, just relax, just be. Close your eyes, dearie. Let the world fade away. Let it all be Octarine. Drink it in. Let it fill you. Just let it flow through you. Let it bind with you. Let it become you. Let yourself become it. You are the magic. The magic is you."

Amber slowly closed her eyes, and she felt what was left herself slip away, only the Octarine remained. There was no Magical Forest, no cottage, no witch. There was no other world, with a city...was there something important she would worry about...did she had a name...was there even a she?...there was nothing but mere existence. Of being. Of floating as mere stardust in a swirling space, drifting away into that wondrous flow. There was no physical body, no mind or heart. It never existed. All that is being, is merely a single point of white in the multicolored kaleidoscope. "...it feels too good...it's floating away...it don't wanna go way...just wants to stay here..."

Nalladrie knew she was at that point when she started to talk as if she wasn't there. The mana was attuning itself to her, permeating itself into every cell of her being. She saw Amber get up off her seat, almost floating up to standing, and started to glow as her arms floated up.

Whoever she was...she didn't have a name...she wasn't even a being...all she was is that little white dot, suspended in a golden beam of light in an Octarine starscape. A single dot brightening up into a star, a star glowing brighter and brighter, blinding her from everything else, as she felt a power surge inside her. Greater and greater. She gasped out a bit as she felt it grow even more intense.

So intense that it couldn't be held back...can't be contained...she felt like she was about to go nova...or maybe even more like a...

"...it feels like...an egg...about to hatch."

"Then hatch," she heard Nalladrie said. "Let it happen. Let the mana become a part of you, let yourself become a part of it. Let that spark shine, my little star, shine so bright that no darkness can withstand it. Let it ignite and blow into your new life...you're ready to leave that little egg of your former life. Now hatch, my child. Hatch into the life you're meant to live."

What started with a slow-rolling surge soon became an explosive burst as the little point of light went into a nova. A Big Bang. The spark that ignited all creation.

Amber's body flashed white as she let out a cry, not out of pain, but out of utter ecstasy. Like everything in her just switched on all at once and she felt like she never thought she had surge throughout her. It was almost as if she was being born.

She felt like a seedling erupting out of the ground, drawn out of a cold and wet womb and into a world of light and warmth. She felt herself start to sprout, and grow, like a tree, her branches reaching up to the sky in joyous rapture, leaves taking in light, her roots securing her to the earth, drawing in moisture and nutrients. It all felt so perfect, so right. Holy even.

And then she sensed the world around her felt its warm embrace. Sight, Hearing, Smell, Touch, Taste, every sense just sang with the sound of the world, her new home. She was aware of every tree, every flower, every mushroom. Every bird in the air and critter on the ground. She felt it take her in as one of their own, welcoming them into their exitance, and transforming her into a part of it. Her eyes opened but she was seeing everything around her and nothing at the same time. She could sense the whole forest, the surge of life, the energy of magic, the pure joy of being alive. She could feel herself laugh, laugh with abandon, laugh in utter joy, a joy she knew will never leave her.

It just felt so right. So good. So proper. She was destined for this. All of what she went through, all the good times and bad, had led to this moment. Oh, if only she could stay this way forever.

It certainly felt like an eternity before she felt herself returning back to reality. Back to having a body, back to having a mind with a familiar personality, with all the lovable traits, quirks, and wild memories of her trying to find a place in her life. Back to having a heart with her own surge of emotions, swirling around her as if she were a center of a hurricane. She remembered what happened today, felt the sadness and loss of being separated from Daddy. She remembered that she was a little girl just shy of her adolescence. She remembered her name. Amber. Her name is Amber Merichello. She came from Brighton, Indiana, where she lived with a Senator for a father. She remembered her love for movies. Her heartbreak when she found everything devolve into that game grayness. Her need for those silly bullet hell shooters to keep herself sane. Sane in a world that just went more and more nuts with each passing day.

She remembered the society finally snapping and collapsing under its own weight. She remembered having to flee with her father from a violent coup. Remembered Daddy having to drop her off to the fairgrounds to hide. Remember breaking her board when she ollie and grinded her way in. Dammit. Remembered having to hide in the D&D ride. Remembered huddling in a corner alone and afraid. Remembered the little star that found her. Remembered chasing it to these Magical Woods. Remember being found by Grammie. Who took her in. Gave her a bath and a warm meal. Made her feel safe and warm and loved. She's her apprentice. She is to become a Witch. Just like Grammie. And now she's connected to the Mana.

Oh, this energy, this wonderful magical energy. It was almost like the Force in Star Wars, with the way it binds and holds the world together, the way it flows through every living being, the energy that she can bend to her will. Only...it was better...it was real...it filled her up to overflowing until she could feel the warm ever color-changing light flow through her body like her blood.

She wasn't aware that her eyes were opened until she felt them blink. And she saw Grammie's smiling face. "Yes! You've done it. You have the Octarine now. Look."

She had a hand mirror in her hand, and let Amber see her own eyes with it. They were once brown, and if she squints, she could see that color, but now her eyes had that ever-changing color. From blue to orange to green to pink...the color of magic. That was her eyes now.

And it wasn't just her eyes that have changed. Her whole face was different. Her nose was a bit longer and both nose and ears had a pronounced tip. Her eyes narrowed, and her usual spark in her eyes now shone behind eyes that could pierce into a person's soul. And the make-up that was still on her, it only accentuated the face of someone who grew up.

Amber had a witch's face, not an ugly face, but definitely a witchy witch's face. The face of someone who can hex and curse if provoked. But she could sense a bit of goodness behind those mischievous eyes. Amber found the face staring back at her to be quite attractive. Pretty. Elegant. Sexy, even. Amber couldn't help but make a sly semi-wicked smile appear. A smile that stretched over an angled chin, joining with narrowed eyes and fierce gaze, giving her an air of mischief. "I look like Glinda and Elphaba's love child. My voice!!"

It was then where she sensed that even her voice was changed. It had a bit of an accent to it, Eastern European in her ears. Not only is her face that of a Witchy Witch, but her voice as well.



As she brought her hand to her face, she found that her nails were longer. That was when she realized that it wasn't just her face that changed by becoming one with the Mana. She looked down to find that she grew half a foot in height, more than a foot in hair and a cup in size. Her arms and legs were long and slender, and she noticed her chest filling out the blouse. A decent C cup. "They're not that big. Oh, thank the dragons." She then gasped to notice that even her voice was older, more mature as if it skipped through all the cracking phases.

She almost didn't recognize herself. She looked older, mature, pretty, magical. It was as if she were in some Magical Girl Anime series and she just transformed for the first time. "This...is just...*awesome*." She turned to Nalladrie. "I was hoping that my psychedelic experience would be a good once, but I didn't think it would involve a *physical* transformation."

She then gave a wicked grin in the mirror and waved her free hand. "I'll Get *you*, my preeeeety, and your little—WHOA!!"

She felt the warmth flow of power go down her arm and into her fingertips creating sparks!"

"It was the kind of experience I wanted you to have, Amber. But now that the mana is now flowing through you..."

Amber looked down to her hands, balled them into fists for a few seconds, then stretched her fingers out. She could feel a warm flow inside them as if her heart was pumping more than just blood through her body.

“Yeah...I can feel it. It feels nice. I can't wait to try it out.”

“Let's start with something simple, then. You see that rosebush over there?”

Amber looked around to find a rose bush that had all the bulbs closed for the night.

“Even though you don't know a spell, Amber, you can still move Mana around you with your will. It'll be like a little drop for now, but you'll get better at it in time. Try touching one of the bulbs. Let the mana flow out of your fingers and into that flower.”

Amber headed over to the bush and poked at one of the bulbs. When she imagined her new power jump from her finger to the bulb, it blossomed before her.

“Yeah!” Amber couldn't believe her eyes. “I did it! I can do Magic!” She spun around giggling as she produced more of the sparks in her hands.

Nalladrie let out a laugh as well. “You're a natural in the attitude. I think you'll make a fine and proper witch. Auntie Amber, I think I should call you.”

Amber went to Nalladrie and embrace her. “And I want to learn everything you can teach me. I want to be with you in your craft. I want to learn magic and become a great witch like you. A little good, a little wicked...” She looked up to those sparkling eyes, which now sparkled in Octarine. “...a little of both.”

Nalladrie couldn't keep from smiling proudly of her as she patted her head. A tear of joy fell off Nalladrie's cheeks as she caressed Amber's face. “I wouldn't have it any other way, my little star.”

Chapter 6

Amber still felt the aftereffects of all that psilocybin still in her head as she lied there in her bed. The corners of her vision had brightened colors and a kaleidoscope border, but her vision was clear enough on where her eyes focused. Or she could just close her eyes and enjoy the fading last moments of her trip before everything in her head returned to some resemblance of normal.

Well normal for someone who just became a magical girl. If the Amber Merichello of just yesterday would see who she'll become, she'd see a complete stranger. Even Amber right now would look at the little girl she was and wouldn't even recognize her as Amber. She'd just kneel down in front of her, ask her if she's



lost or something, and hand her some candy. Maybe the two would be friends. She might keep her if she could. Take her to her tower. Care for her. Teach her some spells, perhaps.

Nalladrie gave Amber a bedroom next to her own. It even had her name on the door:

Auntie Amber Merichello.
Apprentice Witch of the Woods.

It's a low-lit and comfy room, even if it were a bit sparse for the moment. But then again, apprentices didn't need anything extravagant for now; just a soft enough bed, a dresser, one of those secretary desks with that hinged top that folded over an assortment of drawers and a mirror—it doubled as a vanity with her makeup and nail polish—and a nightstand with a lamp with one of the magical lights. Send a little mana to it as she did with that rose to turn it on.

"I'll let you rest tomorrow, Amber," Grammie said as she gave in to the temptation to tuck her apprentice in. Fussy old crone. "I want to make sure that your brain's not falling out of your ears after what you've been through. I also want to show you around these parts, get you acquainted with some of my friends. There are some fairies and nymphs I'd like to get you to know. We'll start the day after that."

"Sounds like a plan, Grammie."

Nalladrie nodded. "Besides, there are some things I want to set up with you as well. There's a ritual that would turn you into my familiar. I'll be using that connection to teach you how to cast spells, as well as letting me keep an eye on you."

Of course, she will, Amber thought. After all, she's her parent now, and she needs to act the role. She'll be—figuratively, mind you—whipping her into shape in the coming months. Plenty of chores for her to do, things she needs to learn, books to read, spells and rituals and recipes to pick up. She'll need to be able to tell fortunes, make poppets, and charm people and everything else Grammie has to drill into her head. All in this nice and welcoming place, her new home. All warm and cozy.

She had on a soft nightgown and her hair wrangled into a bonnet. Her witch's dress hung in an open wardrobe, with a spare set, thankfully. A couple of extra blouses with varying sleeve length and thickness, a few skirts of various lengths, a couple of aprons, an organizer for all the smaller stuff, and at least five sets of underwear and drawers, and a pair of boots to accompany her Mary Janes. Even now, she wondered how she can accessorize what has become her uniform. Buttons, some wrist cuffs, striped stockings, different blouses and aprons, a shorter skirt perhaps, does she need to slap a big honking bow somewhere, a coin that will sparkle in someone's eyes as she charms them. Maybe a gohei like Reimu Hakurei has, for a magic wand. Or maybe some device to channel the Mana into a massive Master Spark like Marisa.

She's already wondering if she could make her own Danmaku.

Pulling off that uniform and getting into her nightgown wasn't that difficult, but the crystal couldn't be pulled off from her neck. Any attempt of pulling it over her head often ends with it getting stuck in one way or another. "Looks like that crystal of yours is a bit...clingy," Nalladrie said.

"Yeah. It's almost as if it chose me for some reason," Amber replied as she held the crystal up. "Do you think it has any powers or something?"

"I wouldn't be surprised if it does. We'll look into that."

Amber nodded. "But for now, I'm just gonna crash here."

“Crash, Amber? I don’t think you’re moving that...”

“That’s a slang term from my home. It means I’m gonna sleep.”

“Looks like I’m learning some things as well,” Nalladrie said with a smirk. “Good night, my little star,” Nalladrie said as she left the room.

“Good Night, Grammie,” Amber said as she watched her leave, “and thanks for everything.”

Amber lied spread eagle on the bed. She felt a bit stiff, unable to move. She felt like she ran a marathon and now the adrenaline has worn off. Her limbs were warm and heavy, and it’s all she could do to just breathe. What she been through must’ve worn her out more than she thought. Between that, the traveling, whatever charms Grammie did to her, being made to be this Apprentice who follows her Grandmother around like an obedient puppy, her very first psychedelic experience, the merging with this wonderful world’s magic, the mother of all growth spurts....What a day, what a day, and it really didn’t begin until that fateful moment when her father grabbed *that* backpack.

“Daddy,” she was wondering when that word returned to her head. She just knew that she’ll get him back. It’ll be her goal as a Witch. A powerful witch like her Grammie. A little Good. A little Bad. A little of both. She’ll find a way to get back to her old world, rocketing through space on a broom, and tear into Brighton, Indiana like a house on fire. She’ll charge into whatever brought her old world down, danmaku blazing, Fantasy Seal flying, Master Spark blasting, putting to waste anything that moves and some that don’t, turning anyone who opposes her into little barnyard animals, stone statues, swarms of butterflies, and every other thing she could think of. Just because they *dare* to stand between her and her father. If it means that she’ll become a bit wicked along the way, so be it. Screw being popular. She’ll rather defy gravity.

She’ll do and be all that. All that she has to. Maybe then some.

Just to save Daddy.

She’ll find him. She’ll tear Earth apart to find him. Break him out of whatever camp he ends up in. If she had to go back in time and save him from getting killed, no matter. She *will* rescue Daddy from the bad guys, and then ferry him to *this* world. Back *home*. With *her*. They’ll be together again, away from that crazy world. She’ll bring him here, to live with her and Grammie. Would it be too much to believe that they’ll become a family? Perhaps. But a girl can dream. And even if Nalladrie’s not Daddy’s type, at least he’ll be in a world who would appreciate his talent in bringing people together and solving problems without having to deal with extremists, be they on the internet or from his own party.

“I’ll get you back, Daddy. I promise.”

Sure, it sounded too much like a pipe dream, but it was a dream she’ll enjoy having. Even if she couldn’t make it come true, it’s something sweet and nice to hold on to; a goal she can set for herself.

Amber laid on her bed, looking up with a sigh, and let her hand move to a pocket in her drawers. She didn’t know when she did it, but she somehow still had her cell phone, her keys, and her wallet. When did she transfer them from the old clothes that were now ashes in a compost heap is beyond her.

“You know, I just want to know. Just how long has it been since...”

She pulled the cell phone out and turned it on.

She remembered the time Dad arrived was at 5:30 PM. The clock on the cell phone read 10:00 PM.

Amber whistled. "Only been four and a half hours? A lot really can happen in such a short time. Hmm. No bars. No wifi." She then snorted. "Of *course*, I wouldn't get a connection in this world, why did you think you could, Amber? Even if the Twilight Kingdoms *did* have cell phone service, how can I reach Earth?" She powered the cell phone down, opened a drawer in that lampstand, and slid the cell phone in. "Won't be needing *you* anymore."

She then pulled out her keys, let it jingle for a bit, and then...

"Grammie probably has a key to the house," Amber said before pulling out keys one by one, tossing each of them into the drawer, and was about to set it by the lamp where she saw a key she didn't have. "That would be it," she said as she slid that key through the ring before setting it in place.

And Lastly, her wallet. It still had everything in there. State ID, School ID, Bus Pass, a couple of Gift Cards, several other miscellaneous plastic things, and the envelope.

She peeked at it again. It was all there. Eight tenspots, three fivers, and five ones.

"Something tells me nobody's going to take this."

That got tossed into the drawer, along with everything except for her Indiana State ID card. She then closed the drawer and excised the memory of what's in there from her mind.

"Daddy, wherever you are," she said as she flopped back into the pillow, "...I hope you're safe."

It was easier for her to fall asleep than she thought. Especially when she dreamed of floating up to a mountain top to be among the stars, making them twinkle with a point and move with a wave, flinging comets around like baseballs, and causing earth, fire, air, and water to swirl around her as she spun around laughing. All of Creation's elements at the tips of her fingers obeying her every whim. She was one with the magic, and the magic was her, and oh, did it feel oh so good.

Amber slept sound and sure in her bed, oblivious to the world, which included Grandmother Nalladrie standing over her, seeing her eyes twitch in sleep and her chest rise and fall as she breathed. Just like any other mother overlooking their child. Only most mothers don't know *Invisibility* so that their child won't know that their Grammie's being a bit noisy. "Naughty old elf, Nalladrie, naughty naughty naughty."

Nalladrie traced her apprentice's sleeping face with her finger. She certainly didn't look like that little girl under that willow tree anymore. She felt a little ping of regret over what she did to her. She never charmed someone this much since she lost her youth. She feared that she might have gone too far with this girl. But then again, what was she supposed to do with her? The poor child was scared, alone, possibly hungry and definitely cold. She wasn't even from this world. She didn't even know Common! She was in little more than filthy rags. Nalladrie would never have it in her heart to turn her away. The poor girl wouldn't last an hour on her own. Sure, she got in her head and mucked around there, and would do a little bit more in the morning, but what other options did she have?"

And it wasn't like she erased her mind and put in a new personality in her. She only went as far as she thought was necessary. Make her feel connected with Grandmother Nalladrie. Making her see the crone like her own mother. Make her feel safe with Grammie, loved even. It wasn't anything more difficult than filling in some mother-shaped hole in her soul...

And Nalladrie did had a need for an apprentice, no lie there. Someone to work her magic through, someone to teach her ways. Mold her into taking up the role of The Witch of the Woods when Transcendence finally comes for the crone. Ever since she lost her youth, she often wondered when

she's going to get those crescent moons in her eyes. It's been two decades and that hadn't happened yet, thank the Dragons, but she somehow knew, one day, sooner or later, she'll see them and know that fate is dealing that final card.

Even though she feared that it won't be a happy ending, rescuing her father from that coup will provide a path that Amber won't stray far much. All she needed is someone to guide her along that path. And maybe, just maybe, she doesn't have to become *that* wicked of a witch. Just wicked enough.

She watched over to the sleeping Amber some more, seeing her chest rise and fall. She reached over and stroked her face. Auntie Amber would have her moments. Not only does she have a strong personality and still has that fiery rebellious streak; she's still a human to boot. Humans are always a handful when she's riled enough. But Grammie made sure already that Amber wouldn't be too much of a problem. She'll educate her Auntie Amber in the ways of magic, and make sure that her fiery spirit stays within some respectable boundaries.

And then there is the obvious. The most aggravating part of the relationship would be getting the child to slow down some and appreciate the moment like elves are known to do. It comes with that short lifespan humans got. Amber's gotta get an extended lifespan somehow. Fortunately, there's a brew for that. Unfortunately, it takes a while to get all the ingredients.

Nalladrie smiled as she allowed herself to hover back toward the door, and gave one last look at Amber in her deep sleep.

"Sleep well, my little star."

And with that, she left the room for real this time, leaving Auntie Amber to her dreams, which now included her growing older, a wizened Grandmotherly crone of her own right. Kind-hearted when she wants to, fierce when she has to. She sees herself collecting children, the lost, the homeless, those who wouldn't make it through the night, the broken without a place in the light. She'll take them into her little personal kingdom. This magical forest. She'll take them in, care for them, giving them the love they need; being their beloved Grammie. She might even train some of them up into Witches themselves, making her own coven, teaching them the way as she was taught, so that she can move on to the witchy heavens beyond and leave the Woods in good hands, looking down on them with pride as their guiding star...

Four Months Later

Stat Block

Amber Merichello <i>Level 0 Medium Female Human Wizard</i> Alignment: Creative, Mischievous, Loyal					
Armor Class 14 (<i>Mage Armor</i>) Hit Points 6 (1d6) Speed 30'					
STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
8(-1)	12 (+1)	10(+0)	16 (+3)	14 (+2)	14 (+2)
Senses Passive Perception 12 Languages Common, Earth English, Earth Japanese, Elvish Experience Points –					
Familiar to Nalladrie: Amber has a psychic rapport with Grandmother Nalladrie which makes Amber her familiar, as if through the <i>Find Familiar</i> spell.					
Spellcasting Wizard Magic Initiate ⁸ : Spellcasting Ability is INT; Spell Attack Bonus is +3, Spell Save DC is 11; Amber has 2 <i>Spell Points</i> and the following memorized: <i>Cantrip:</i> Mage Hand, Prestidigitation <i>Level 1:</i> Mage Armor <i>Cast as Rituals:</i> Amanuensis, Tenser's Floating Disk, Unseen Servant					
Standard Actions Silvered Dagger: <i>Melee or Ranged Weapon Attack:</i> Thrown 20/60; +1 to hit; 1d4+1 Piercing.					
Inventory Spell Wands: <i>Produce Flame (50 Charges), Magic Missile (25 Charges)</i> White Crystal: Always rests around her neck, cannot be removed, counts as a free attunement, properties currently unknown. Other Items: Travelling Clothes (her Witch's Uniform), Spellbook, Component Pouch. Lantern, and varying other objects Grandmother Nalladrie makes her carry.					

⁸ The Magic Initiate Feat (from Page 168 of the *Player's Handbook*) will differ from the Wizards of the Coast version in one area: Instead of being able to cast the 1st Level spell once per day, Amber is given 2 Spell Points to go with the memorized spell. If someone with this variant of the feat takes a level in the class they took this feat with, then the 2 Spell Points stack with the Spell Points listed in the Class. That is why, later on in this book, Amber will have 2 extra Spell Points in her Stat Block.

New Spell

Amanuensis

1st Circle Conjuraton (Ritual)

Available for Bards, Clerics, Druids, and Wizards.

Casting Time: 10 Minutes

Range: Touch

Components: V, S, M (a 10 GP gem, which it consumes)

Duration: Permanent

You capture the writing from one source (a book, scroll, or tablet) and cause it to appear onto a specially prepared paper, parchment, book, or some other similar item. This ritual copies a single page up to Tabloid size, both illustration and texts.

This spell cannot be used to copy magical texts—which will appear as blank areas in the copy sheet—nor can it be used to transfer spells between books or to inscribe spell scrolls or cards. (That requires a different process with added costs.)

(Note, 'Circle' is used in place of 'Level' to denote the level of the spell.)

Chapter 7

The following months were a whirlwind to Amber Merichello, and it was a happy time for her. With the exception of her wish to be reunited with her father, the world she came from wouldn't be any further away.

She had settled into her new life in these sacred woods with her Grandmother Nalladrie, and she was always hovering by Grammie's side from the moment she woke up in the morning to the moment she falls asleep in her bed. She gets up, gets dressed, puts on her makeup, makes sure that her nails are right, and then she finds herself beside the old crone's side wherever she is. (Or standing by Grammie's bedroom if she was there, waiting for her to come out because she didn't want to disturb her private quarters.)

After a quick breakfast, and a morning brew, they go into the chores and the lessons of the day.

After a day of showing Amber around in her new forest home, Nalladrie started the day afterward by setting up the link. She was already halfway there with the way she can put Amber into and out of her spell on command. Now she took it to the next level using a variant of the *Find Familiar*⁹ ritual that can be used on a living being. In this case, Amber.

Nalladrie warned her that this would be a bit weird until she gets used to it. Amber could sense her Grammie's mental link with her, which allowed her to see through her eyes and hear through her ears, and if Amber would mentally relax and let her do it, control her body. Grammie eased her into getting comfortable, making her speak in Elvish until she became fluent in it enough¹⁰ until she got to the reason why she set this link up:

To teach Amber a spell, Nalladrie takes control over Amber and make her do some arm stretches and voice warming up. This surprised Amber to find out how close spellcasting is to singing; a sore throat or a frog in her voice can actually throw off a spell. With catastrophic results. Once Nalladrie limbers up her apprentice she takes her to a safe out-of-the-way location where she won't accidentally blow up anything, (there's a side barn by the cottage for just such an occasion.) Once there, she tells her about the spell and puts her through the motions of said spell. First a few dozen dry runs without any mana so that she'll get the hand gestures and verbal incantations down pat, and then after that, the mana is drawn, and the spell is cast for real. Nalladrie will supply the mana so that Amber can cast it more than once for practice. Nalladrie makes her do it a couple of times, and then steps back and gives Amber the wheel so that she can pick it up herself. Once Amber managed to do that, Nalladrie then makes her practice that spell over and over again until the spell becomes second nature.

Amber thought of it as your proverbial riding a bike: It gets easier and eventually almost automatic once you know how to do it.

Her first spell was *Mage Hand*¹¹, and it didn't take Amber long to find more uses for that third arm with each day. Especially when she was encouraged to use it all the time, keeping herself in constant practice. She then learned a series of smaller illusions grouped up into a single cantrip that reminded Amber of street magicians. In fact, it's why the cantrip is called *Prestidigitation*¹². Amber

⁹ Listed on Page 240 in the *Player's Handbook*

¹⁰ Lines spoken in Elvish are in square brackets “[]”

¹¹ Listed on Page 256 of the *Player's Handbook*

¹² Listed on Page 267 of the *Player's Handbook*

thought back to her memories of David Blaine and Criss Angel to show a little extra flair when using this cantrip, making her wrist flicks and waves more elaborate and animated.

Amber also learned a defensive spell as she learned how to draw just enough mana to create a protective shield around herself. *Mage Armor*¹³, Grammie calls it. She felt that would be a good First Circle spell to have. She was only able to cast this spell once per day at the start, but Nalladrie assured her that, “[you’ll get better at it. Drawing in mana is like a muscle, it gets stronger with use, which is why I want you to always toy and play with your spells, little star. Experiment with them, show your creativity, bliss yourself out. I’m looking forward to seeing you take that *Magic Missile* spell I’ll teach you later and show me more about this Dan Mak Que.]”

“[Dan-mak-u, Grammie, It roughly translated into ‘Bullet Hell.’ It’s where you get Missiles by the hundreds and scatter them all over the field.]”

Nalladrie gave a curious smile. “[That’s something I’d like to see.]”

Afterward, the crone got her into ritual casting, the ability to cast some spells at a slower pace in time but can still cast them with her current magical strength. It was at this time when Amber found her spellbook. A loose-leaf binder created by a Gnome company in Rivendale. Amber suggested it so that she can easily organize its contents. Move some spells around, sort them by Circle and use, adding tabs and dividers, things not normally possible with a normally bound spellbook.

After a month, Nalladrie started teaching Amber with some of the many roles she has as the Witch of the Woods: Fortune telling. She’ll set Amber in front of the bones or crystal ball or palm or even tea leaves, take the wheel, and then guide her through interpreting what she sees. This would happen almost every time a visitor comes to their door. After some introductions and idle chat over tea and cakes, Nalladrie introduces Amber to the guest and then guides Amber through the fortune-telling.

It surprised Nalladrie that Amber was able to actually use the ball on her own so quickly though. She was dusting the séance room Nalladrie keeps for such purposes and she was checking it out.

She sat on the table, reached over to hold the ball, and stared at it intently.

“[I don’t know if you can get that to work right now, Amber,]” Nalladrie said as she passed by the room. “[You’re going to have to know someone or someplace intimately for scrying to work, it’s not like you could just reach out and find anything important...]”

Amber’s thoughts turned to her father.

And to the gasps of both of them, something appeared in the crystal.

That Fusion has seen better days. It was almost as if Daddy lost to a tofu delivery car in a duct tape death race. But



¹³ Listed on Page 256 of the *Player’s Handbook*

judging by the engine still running, he put up one hell of a race.

Amber sighed in relief when she saw that car in an Army Depot and Donovan walking out. He got away from the people chasing him, and now he's somewhere safe. The soldiers will keep him safe.

"We are currently reduced to merely containing the violence, Mr. Merichello,¹⁴" the Sargent that met him said. "It's all we can do to keep it from spreading right now. It's our hopes that things will die down enough for us to move in and re-establish control."

"That would be just for Brighton," Donovan replied. "What about Washington? Did you get the president..."

The sigh and dip of his head told the politician volumes. "The Secret Service did what they could to protect them, sir, but they were overrun. I believe you've seen the news reports."

"Damn it." Donovan sighed. Amber never wondered what her father thought of the Republican president, especially this one, but he made it his goal not to get all deranged over it. "Look, I might not like the guy, but I did not want this! I still believed that we can be civilized people."

"Not too many people believe that in the current year. Especially the ones behind this coup." The soldier paused. "If I can ask you something, Senator..."

"Sure."

"During the Impeachment hearing, you declared your candidacy for President in 2024, the next Campaign after this one. The one after Trump's second term."

Donnovan nodded. "I've just launched a web site and everything."

"From what I heard of other Democrats, you could've jumped into the campaign now and go far. Several pundits theorized that you would beat Trump. In fact, you had a debate against President Trump last year and you annihilated him on stage. You could be very eloquent and sell people on issues, and by not attacking him personally you were able to put the Donald on the back foot. Everyone did a scenario where there was a race between you and him, and you beat him every time. Even Fox News claimed that you could actually win. Why are you waiting until an election that I don't think we'll even have?"

Donnovan thought about it for a few seconds. "I would want to run against Donald...but I want to do it by being the better man. Not just on policies, but also by character. I want to win an election for an America that is still civil and level-headed and focus on issues that people care about. I can't do that in a world stuck on Trump Derangement Syndrome." He sighed. "You've by now seen the crazy people on the left, the ones that are increasingly becoming more extremist, the ones I wanted my fellow Democrats about. If I run this year, those nutcases will claim to be my supporters. They'd latch on to me like barnacles on a ship, leeching away all the oxygen. All of what they'll do, all the rioting, looting, protesting, beating up their fellow man just for wearing a hat—it doesn't have to be a MAGA hat; it just has to be *red*.—breaking up relationships, chasing down people with bike locks, and all that autistic screeching in mid-meltdown. All of that would be done *in my name*." Donovan shook his head. "Words cannot express, how disgusted I'd be. I'd concede the election before a single vote was cast, no doubt. I refuse to be a part of that." He did a pace or two across the front of his car. "Did you get anything about these rioting assholes?"

¹⁴ The following conversation is spoken in Earth English. Amber had to relay it to Nalladrie.

“We just got some intel,” the Sargent tapped on a tablet. “From what we learned from various contacts, armature journalists and various blogs, they were calling themselves ‘The True Order,’ a multinational anarchistic group bent on bringing down every country in this world and establishing a one-world government. But if such a group existed, Mr. Merichello, we would’ve known about it. We would’ve heard of some group meetings or web presence or manifesto, anything. The CIA would’ve at least heard of this group. But it appeared just a little over twenty-four hours ago and just covered the globe! They just appeared everywhere, and all at once. It caught every world superpower off guard, even the EU, even Russia, hell, even China. They’re shooting it out in Beijing right now and both sides have tanks. How they managed to keep everything under everyone’s radar is beyond anyone’s guess.”

While the Sargent was saying that, Donovan reached for his cell phone. His face grew grim and concerned.

“Something the matter, sir?”

“I’m trying to contact Amber. I dropped her off at the fairgrounds. I wanted her to wait for me to call, but her cell phone’s off. I can’t reach her.” He sighed. “I know she has a rebellious streak, but she never turns off her phone.”

The Sargent asked for Amber’s number and scanned for it. The soldier had a similar expression.

“Sir. Even with the phone off, the tech we have would’ve located that cell phone by now, but even with a global search...”

“You can do that.”

“Affirmative. We did...now, and nothing came...if she uses a secured phone with a VPN, we could at least be able...her location through phone towers. But noth...she’s completely off the grid.”

Amber’s big cry of “NO!” could be heard throughout the forest as the crystal ball began showing static

“You said she’s...the Fairgrounds in the...irts of town? I’ll summon...go there on...rescue mission for”

“Thank yo...” Donovan said to the soldier. And that’s when everything faded into white noise.

“[Is that your father?]” Nalladrie said as she hugged her sobbing apprentice.

Amber could only nod.

“[Come here, my child,]” Nalladrie said as lifted Amber face up to look into her eyes.

“[If only there was anything I could do, to bring him to you, even if it just to get him to hear your voice one more time, I would pull out all the stops to do it.]” She sighed. “[But even if I could do it, it will be extremely risky. I can only think of casting the most powerful spell I know of to get you two back together.]”

Amber managed to find her voice. “[And that is?]”

“[*Wish*¹⁵,]” Nalladrie said. “[You need to be able to cast *Wish*. You can literally ask for anything to happen with a *Wish*. There are only a few things that the spell can’t do, but I’m sure it would be able to pull your father over here.]”

“[You can’t cast it now?]”

Nalladrie shook her head. “[I can only cast up to Eighth Circle spells, and only then I can only cast one of those at a time. *Wish* is a *Ninth* Circle spell. It takes an immensely powerful wizard in order to cast it outright, very few wizards could do it. There are other ways to cast the spell, a ring or a blade or finding a lamp with a genie inside, but nobody has ever found that in centuries. If you are able to find one of those I’d be surprised.]” Nalladrie closed her eyes for a few seconds. “[And then there’s something I need to warn you about.]”

Amber gave a heavy sigh. “[Let me guess, Wishes don’t often come out the way you’d like?]”

“[Well there’s that, but then there’s something else you need to know. I told you about some magic comes with a heavy price that must be paid. *Wish* has a price tag all its own: a magical infirmity known as *Wishburn*.]”

“[*Wishburn*?]”

“[It’s the aftereffects of casting *Wish*. You can’t escape the effects, especially if you cast it straight. When you cast a *Wish*, you are literally taking the very nature of reality and twisting it in ways that it isn’t supposed to go. You just can’t do that without it having a dire effect on you. That’s what *Wishburn* is. *Wishburn* severely weakens you as a spellcaster. Even to the point of losing your ability to cast the larger spells, if you’re lucky, only temporary. In some cases, you will lose the ability to cast magic forever; not even a cantrip or even a ritual. To a wizard, that would be like being dead but with the indignation of a living body. I know of three people suffering *Wishburn* and just decided to just,]” she made a hand gesture as if she’s shooting herself in the head, “[thinking that they’re no longer of any use of anyone without their magic.]”

Amber likened it to being rendered deaf and blind, having all four limbs ripped out, and being reduced to a simpleton, all at once, and all over a simple desire to get their parents back. She shuddered. “[You can’t get away from that?]”

“[There are...some ways...to cast *Wish* without the nastier effects, I know of wishing rings...genies stuck in lamps or jewels, and of course, something I only heard of, a relic called the Blade of Fortune. A deceptively simple dagger with a sleeping power, that ultimately unlocks the ability to cast *Wish* once, if you could awaken it. But like I said, it’s been too long since anyone has ever seen it last.]”

Nalladrie started waving her hand above Amber’s face again, and the child felt herself coaxed back under that nice safe warm place in her mind.

“[I know you want to have your Father back, Amber,]” Nalladrie said as she gave her another squeeze, “[and I can tell that you would want to gain the ability to use that spell. You have a reason to cast that *Wish*. That one righteous and pure *Wish* nobody would blame you for wishing. It’ll require a lot of learning, years of experience, months after months of pouring over notes and research, and the ever-constant practice, practice, practice.]” With each ‘practice,’ she snapped her fingers, “[Sleep now, Amber...sleep...sleep...]”

¹⁵ Listed in Page 288 in the *Player’s Handbook*. *Wishburn* is a homebrew consequence for casting it.

Amber all but slumped over, the remainder of her tears falling on a placid face. Her eyes closed and her back limp.

Nalladrie set her back against the chair and found a wet cloth to wipe the tears away and began to redo her apprentice's face. The need to do something objectionable rose again. "[Do not lose hope, Amber. You will *never* lose hope. Your heart will *never* give in to despair. I know you'll be a great and powerful witch in time, more powerful than your grandmother, and you would do whatever it takes to be reunited with your father. But for now, you are to set it aside. All that worry and pain, it goes into a box, wrapped it up with a bow, set into a closet, and close and lock the door. There's nothing you can do about it and it's useless to worry about it, so you should not worry. Set it aside. Let it go for now. It'll come back to you when the time is ready. But until then, let it go.]"

As Amber drifted in that trance, feeling her Grammie doing her face, as she often does, she could feel something just slip out of her mental hands, and away from her grasp. It wasn't the memory that was taken from her, but the emotions. All the cares and worries about her father, the need for her to get daddy out of there and get him back with her. She had to rescue him. But she can't do it now...she'll do it when she's able to do it. But for now, she can do nothing about it. No sense worrying about it. She saw all her worries about Daddy go into a box, closed tight, wrapped in shiny paper, tied in a bow, plopped a 'Do Not Open Until You're Good and Ready' sign on it, and slid in a room that didn't have anything else in there and closed the door.

Click.

She can still remember her father and know that she must rescue him, but the urgency, the sadness, the fear over what is happening to him...it was taken from her, set aside in that box that need not be opened. She'll go back to that box and open it back up when the time is right. Only when the time is right. But for now. Lock that door. Let the stress fade away. It'll be there when she needs it. Daddy will be okay. She's with Grammie now. He sent her to Grammie. Wherever Daddy went, she knows she's safe. She'll learn Magic, grow in power, get the ability to cast *Wish* and, even with the risks, she will get back to her Daddy, they'll be together again, she swears it. But for now, she only needs to be with Grammie, needs only to be her apprentice. That's all that's important.

Nalladrie made sure that her apprentice's face is back to decent. Eyes lined and shadowed, lips colored, and blush powdered. "[Wake up, Amber.]" Snap.

Amber blinked awake feeling her face freshened up. And a bit of guilt over the outburst. "[Sorry about that, Grammie. I just...]"

"[You're concerned about your father, that's all.]"

Amber gave her grandmother a sheepish nod.

"[You'll get him back one day, Amber. I know it. It's why I'm teaching you magic.]"

"[Yes, that's right.]" Amber nodded again. By now most of what she thought couldn't be further from her mind, like a bang in her hair that Nalladrie just had to comb out.

By now Amber just lets her do it. It's part of her filling the Parental role, after all, with her own way of doing it. Even now Amber would agree, hell, even Nalladrie would agree, that having it so that Nalladrie could put Amber into and out of a trance at will and put little suggestions, rote behaviors, and compelling in the child's head while under would be...questionable, at best. However, the way Nalladrie was able to put thoughts in Amber's head was a quite gentle approach in keeping the child anywhere near the straight and narrow. And it sure beats more accepted forms of childrearing in

the Twilight Kingdoms: The same people who would shame Nalladrie of using enchantment magic to raise her apprentice are the same ones who believe in “Spare the Rod, Spoil the Child.”

Amber gasped when Nalladrie heard that from the crone’s lips. “Someone actually said that here? That line was in a religious text back home.”

Nalladrie was just as aghast. “And it surprises me that anyone would have any faith in any deity with *that* in your holy scriptures.”

Also to be mentioned is how easy Amber is to be around. Nalladrie didn’t have to use her control over Amber to get her to behave that much. And she likes her snappy repartees. With some moderation, of course.

As morning turned to afternoon, spell learning turned to book learning. By now with Amber being fluent in Common and now speaking Elvish as if she’s been with elves all her life, she could get to that library on the second floor of the cottage and start on books by the stack.

Amber betrayed a groan on occasion when it comes to books. She hated having to read in school, even the fiction ones that she would’ve otherwise be interested in. She definitely loved reading scripts and novels in her spare time. She’d haunt a library on summer days when there’s no school. It wasn’t reading that was the problem, as Nalladrie found out; it was the way the abhorrent public school teaches children how to read. Amber was the kind of girl whose permanent record is best summed up to “Does Not Suffer Fools Gladly.” Amber should know. She snuck into the principal’s office in the dead of night, picked the lock to that closet, and pulled out a folder on her as thick as her arm, and wrote that on the cover in red Sharpie.

Too many fools run the schools in Brighton Indiana.

Nalladrie could sympathize with Amber. Not only did she understand how much school sucks, but also that reading was a necessary thing that just didn’t have a work around, and some people just



gained an avoidance to reading. But this part of learning magic just didn't have a short cut; Amber just has to sludge through all those books. So Nalladrie put a suggestion in her apprentice's head. A reading compulsion. A nagging itch to read and read and read and read and read and read and read. Just *read*, no matter what it is. And not just skim or scan through the words quick, *Read!* Nice and slow, taking in every word, every sentence, every page. Just seeing a book lying around would trigger a need to pick it up and at least flip a couple of pages to find out what's in it. It could be easily resisted, but if she didn't, she'd just find herself sitting down with her face in it, soaking in the words into her head like a sponge. It was a reading itch that she...Must...Scratch. Be it books, pamphlets, chapbooks, newspapers, poetry, illustrations, anything in movable type, Nalladrie's spell made her read it intently, shoveling every word into her brain. If it has words, Amber must read it. Her mind wouldn't let her be unless she gave in.

This suggestion proved useful every afternoon she's marched to the library on the second floor where her Grammie plopped a couple of books in front of her, with a pad of paper for notes and a mug of another form of brew that was full of enough nutrients her brain needed to stay sharp and receptive enough to all this knowledge. Once the book hit the table, the spell took over, and she became preoccupied with what was in front of her.

She kept at that small stack and even pulled out another book on some occasions, getting into a flow of voracious reading, until she felt a summons in her head, [*Come to Grammie, my dear.*] She stops reading, gets up, goes downstairs, and finds Grammie lounging somewhere. Sometimes in the curios room, sometimes outside by the caldron. Sometimes wandering the garden and waiting to take Amber deeper into the night-darkened forest. Sometimes she even had a visitor and she had to introduce herself with a curtsy and a smile. But most of the time, Grammie was just resting her weary bones after a long day's work and study and wanted her little star to join her. She would sit down on a chair facing her Grammie and told her what she read, and Amber was surprised that she remembered more from those books than she thought. Once it was satisfactory enough for Nalladrie, the two had the tea set brought to her and Nalladrie started telling Amber what else she knew. Sometimes she patted a cochin next to her for her to sit closer, or even lets her sit on her lap.

They do often snuggle together, just enjoying each other's company, more like Grandmother and Child than Master and Apprentice.

Nalladrie told Amber all about her new world, and she made sure that the child remembers every word. She taught Amber of the Dragon King who once ruled a united Twilight Kingdoms, who entreated his descendants; Humans, Dwarves, Elves, and Halflings (and a Gnome or two) with noble dragon blood; to tend to the kingdom and keep it united after the Dragon King ascended to the stars and become the always bright in the sky Dragonstar. They did manage to keep it united for about a century or two. But no land with a diverse assortment of people and cultures couldn't keep the union forever. In time the schisms grew too much and the Twilight Kingdom broke into seven, with the requisite civil war to accompany it. There was a prophesy that the Seven Kingdoms would once again reunite into one kingdom again when the time is right.

She also told her the story of Karsus' Folly, the first last and only time anyone dared to cast the most powerful spell ever cast: Karsus' Avatar, the only Twelfth Circle spell ever to be cast. It was of a far-off land in another world where this took place. Nethril to be exact. The reasoning behind this prodigy of a wizard to even consider casting a spell that could turn him into a God, but his own hubris proved too great.

Oh, the spell did work, and he became a deity. For about half a second. Then the spell ripped the world asunder, destroying every shred of mana in the world for just enough time to devastate the planet. Karsus was reduced to something Amber thought would only be found in Cthulhu's toilet,

and the gods of that world ensure that the cautionary tale spread throughout all the other realms, including The Twilight Kingdoms.

Amber heard of the Forests of Destiny and Gates of Glory, of dragons that are noble protectors and guardians of those they watch over. (“[Some dragons consider a village or a people part of their hoard, Amber, and most of the time they treat them quite well. A dragon protects his treasure, no matter what it is.]”) She was told of ancient relics, powerful swords, noble wizards and winds of wisdom.

And then there are the nights when Nalladrie takes Amber by the hand and leads her deep into the forest, just the crone, the apprentice, and nature. Not only did Nalladrie taught her about all the flora and fauna of the forest, but she also gave her a few moments from a critter’s eye level. Nalladrie turned Amber into a bird so that she can fly. Into a fish so that she can swim. A bee so she can snuggle into a flower and nearly drown in sweet-smelling nectar. She hunted like a fox and climbed trees like a squirrel. She found out about Fairy Rings and how they are portals to a literal Wonderland known as the Realms of Fairies. Every other day she finds one of the tricky little sprites hiding under her hat or tucked into a pocket. “[If they get too annoying, Amber, here’s a good tip in dealing with them. Always keep sweets with you and if a fey creature gets too annoying, offer it a piece of candy. Or, in the case of more than one, a piece of cake or a doughnut, preferably with sprinkles. Lays them out like downing a whole keg of Dwarven Stout in one go.]”

She learned all this and more. Every day had a lesson to learn and something new to discover, as Nalladrie began molding her apprentice into a proper younger version of the Witch of the Woods. Nalladrie gave Amber plenty in leeway in remixing the persona, and Amber liked what she was becoming. Her laugh could shift from a wicked cackle to a melodious tweet, and blends with her Grammie’s just too well. She even started to join into with Grammy’s sly remarks and lewd comments. With a whole lot of scenery-chewing ham. Grammie took Amber’s normal perchance for being mischievous and prankish and non-conformist and channeled it into an impish part of her. A practical joker, so to say, and Amber knows a lot of practical jokes.

While Amber did learn how to charm people, Amber preferred to do forest animals instead. She also showed interest in animating dolls. She didn’t judge her Grammie, she just prefers not to charm people until she had to.

She really shouldn’t judge Grammie. Not when she’s designing her own Wicked Witch Mode, as she calls it. It’s an act, of course, something to shield herself from the dangers this world is full of, especially when you have occasional bag guys walking through your forest waiting for unsuspecting travelers and getting into Nalladrie and Amber’s business. Nalladrie didn’t want her to abandon what was pure and good in her, just protect it under the armor of her Witch Persona.

She managed to perfect her “Wicked Witch Mode” when she walked up to a couple of brigands—a guy and a gal—who thought invading their home was a good idea. At first, she stood there as their weapons were drawn, looking afraid. Then she started to laugh, softly first but then grew into a maniacal cacophony Mark Hamill could admire. When it reached its loudest, she made her eyes turn red, her teeth yellow and form fangs, and her voice cackled into something she’d hear from someone’s who’s demon possessed. While she could only hold this image for a few moments on her own, when Grammie is channeling through her, she could hold it for a much longer time. (There was one time when she told Nalladrie “[I’m calling it now: You can take control over me as much as you want, and even possess me when you die if you must, but spinning my head and making me projectile vomit is *out!*]”) When she first let this dark part of her come out, she scared herself with her own reflection, but At first, she wanted to completely turn into a hag, but then she found out that she could make



herself look like the hag using her real face as the mask and have a better effect. In fact, she scared herself when she did that in front of a mirror, she could imagine what anyone else would think.

Bruce Wayne was right: Criminals *are* a cowardly and superstitious lot.

The woman shrieked in horror over the transformation from sweet little girl to child-roasting fiend and booked it. Right into Nalladrie's and a face full of her *Staff of Charming*. While she struggled futilely not to be reduced to a quivering and sobbing mess, the guy decided that his last action as a living being would be to charge the little Hag.

But the little hag was ready for him. Or rather her Grandmother, who was able to jump her mind into her familiar. Grammie let her apprentice bloviate a bit.

"Now, you wretched excuse of a base villain, you think that you can trifle with the Witch of the Woods. You shall now deal with *me*, you fool! *And all the fires of Hell!!*"

The transformed hag then let herself be her master's puppet, being guided along a spell much too powerful for her to cast all her own. Her gestures and incantations were those of Nalladrie, her will and arcane power channeling through the young girl's body.

But then Amber Merichello decided to throw an wrinkle all her own into the mix. Just this last week, she was already working on modifying spells to suit her own taste. She was trying to divide the bolts in *Magic Missile* to the point where each bolt dealt as small a punch as possible, but in exchange, the number of bolts increased exponentially.

At Amber's current level, instead of just three bolts dealing a considerable amount of damage, she was able to produce a good dozen bolts, one of them were about as damaging as a bug bite, but once Amber sent the whole dozen down upon the victim in all directions...

Imagine Nalladrie's shock when she channeled that same spell at her much higher strength through Amber.

She could only imagine what the brigand felt when *over one hundred* bolts erupted from a rapturously laughing Hag Amber which swirled in a hypnotic spiral that left the brigand wide eyes like a deer in proverbial headlights.

"Hells Bells! How many of those can sh" was all he could say before it all rained down on him.

She didn't really intend to kill him. Pelt him five ways til Sunday and leave him scurrying in utter fear over what he just experienced and after some more threats that would leave him pissing in his pants, let him go leaving a skid mark to warn anyone else not to go around robbing in her forest ever again. At the worse, she thought she'd just go for the knockout. That way she can hogtie him for a little frightful fun.

A rock on the ground that greeted the feeb's skull when he collapsed had other ideas. If the cracked skull didn't kill him, 50 something bolts connecting with an unconscious body finished the job, with shattered limbs, ribs poking out, and a skull cracked open and spilling its contents on the dirt road.

Amber didn't know if she should be scared, shocked, horrified, guilty, or anything else then just continue to cackle and go "Whoops!" She was just too awestruck at the amount of projectiles she made. It was just what she wanted to see! She brought bullet hell to the Twilight Kingdoms! "The Touhou Arts is possible!" she exclaimed. "Soon I will bring this to the seven kingdoms and all of their foes shall tremble!"

A few seconds later, the adrenaline started to fade away, and Amber's conscious was getting back on line. *What in blazes did I just do! I just killed a...*

"[Intellectualize it, little star,]" Nalladrie said while she made Amber investigate the broken and burnt shell. Amber betrayed an expression of horror over what happened to the brigand. "[This fool chose his ethics. Whatever caused him to grow up bitter and angry at this world, but he decided to deal with the hand he's dealt by swinging a blade at it. Or a crossbow bolt. Or a spell. They wanted to rage at the world, Auntie Amber, to swing at anyone they think wronged them. We're part of that cruel world that swings back.]"

It was one thing to see a *Mortal Kombat Fatality*, and gods, Netherrealm Studios are making them more visceral by each successive game of the series. They were even anatomically correct in *Mortal Kombat X*, you could see the organs in their right place just like in those art exhibits where they showed dead bodies preserved in plastic.

But Ed Boon can't hold a candle to the real thing happening before your very eyes. At least Amber didn't faint at the sight of blood; she had more than a few skinned knees and gashes in her life. She was grateful that Grammie was still channeling her will through her as she bent over to close the bastard's dead eyes. Even if she knew it was a fluke—she didn't know about the rock—this was her first actual confirmed kill. She was afraid that she's end up in a fetal position on the ground crying out in anguish over what she've just done.

"[You could be tapped by Aloria's noble class. You could end up on the battlefield. You could be casting your curses and hexes at some poor slob who was just born in the wrong kingdom. Some king, warlord or some other rat bastard I'd often bring him down a few pegs wouldn't give the poor bastards a choice.]"

Amber was made to stand up, turn around to face the woman Nalladrie charmed, and slowly walked toward her. The woman stood there, arms down at the side, eyes blank and placid, seeing this hag incinerate her confederate right before her eyes but couldn't have a thought in her head as her face was forced to look toward the approaching hag. "[But *this* little morsel, this one had options. She made her choice, Amber. She *chose* to cross blades with everything that was good, righteous, and light.]"

Amber snorted and she felt her wicked smile return as she walked up toward the other offender, who just stared at her like a deer in headlights. "Whatever we do to *you*, nugget," she said, resuming her Wicked Witch act, "you fricking *deserve* it. So, what's the plan, Grandmother?" She snickered and tilted her head, as if in thought. "She's probably too high in cholesterol. I don't want to clog my arteries on second-rate thots."

"[What in the Seven Kingdoms is a...nevermind, I've got plans for her,]" Nalladrie said as she cracked her knuckles. "[This is a perfect time for you to learn how to charm a person, Amber. I've already made her susceptible, so I'll just guide you through putting her deeper into a trance, and after that, we'll have some fun with her.]"

"[Of course, Grammie,]" Amber said as she crooked her finger over the victim's chin and went nose to nose with her, those glowing yellow eyes turning into an Octarine spiral which filled the former

brigandette's vision. "Look into my eyes, my pet. You'll can only see my eyes, hear my voice. You can't look away, it's far too late for that...you can't get away from Auntie...and you don't want to..."

Amber wasn't like her Grammie in one concept, she wasn't quite as bullish on charming people, putting them deep into an hypnotic spell, and then bending their minds into doing her bidding like Nalladrie. Not that she's judging and all, it just wasn't her thing. She'd rather make a doll Sakuya Izayoi, and use a variant of *Unseen Servant* to bring her to life. But Nalladrie told her that she wanted to reduce the brigadette into that of a humble and lowly maid, so that's what the pair did. Amber might not want to do it to everyone who caught her ire, but she did decide that that charming people *might* be a necessary so it would be a good idea to have it in her spell book. And besides, the bitch would've had worse fates. In fact, Amber told her so, claiming that she'll let her hag side to her come out and play if Maid were to ever displeasure her.

Several days after that encounter, Shandra would stumble into Oak's End in and knock on the door to the Oaken Root Tavern and Inn, all dolled up in her short skirted black aproned dress. She stood there as meek as a churchmouse to Percival, the owner of the Oaken Root and a friend of Nalladrie's, as she handed him a letter introducing her as Maid Shandra. She is to fill in the missing Houskeeping position immediately. She would be eager and happy to obey any command without a passing word or thought. No matter what that order would be. The only exception would be when Amber Merichello is in the building, where she is to wait on her personally, hand and foot.

When Percival asked her about herself, Maid Shandra wouldn't have any memory of who she was or what she was before being trained by the Witch of the Woods. And she doesn't have any desire outside of being a humble and obedient maid, willing and content to be a lowly housekeeper who folds clothes and cleans toilets and whatever else she was told to do, without a single question about it. She wouldn't even know that Maid Shandra wasn't even her real name.

Nalladrie was that thorough with Maid Shandra. Every now and then she had to prove to herself that she still has it.

Before then, Maid Shandra offered Amber everything her forgotten former self ill-gottenly acquired and was told to give what she didn't want to the Temple of the Dragonstar. Shandra was only to keep a feather duster and the dress on her back. Nothing more.

Amber didn't want much. Mostly small regents, a collapsible bow and arrows—useful for a spell she picked up later—a leather wristband she can use to cast *Mage Armor* with, a bottle of rum tasty enough for her to use for *False Life*¹⁶, a bamboo stick she thinks would make a great Gohei like wand, an decent adventuring kit with a *Bag of Holding*¹⁷, and a good pile of assorted coin to save for when the time to quest comes. She even got a nice couple dresses, one that looked like a kimono and another that appeared Chinese to Amber's eyes, that she just had to keep.

The burnt brigand's body was left for the crows to eat, with a sign that warned people saying. "This idiot was being 'That Guy' around the Witch of the Woods. Don't be 'That Guy'." Whoever the woman was...her name wasn't important, and she would never remember it anymore...would never be seen again.

Amber only had to bring out her dark side a couple times since then. She usually presents herself as a kind-hearted and sweet young woman, all nice and friendly once you get to know her, of course. Granted, the general reception most wizards get, and Nalladrie and Amber are no exception, is everyone keeping them at arm's length, but the reception was friendly enough. Oak's End is by its

¹⁶ Listed on Page 239 of the *Player's Handbook*

¹⁷ Am extended description is listed in Page 153 in the *Dungeon Master's Guide*

nature a friendly, welcoming sort. Salt of the Earth folk, so to say. But they didn't want to get into any trouble with a spellcaster, so they keep their distance, looking at the pair like they'd look at a majestic beast in the wilderness.

That's where Amber remembered how princess cast members in Disney parks present themselves and decided to emulate that. Smiling and waving to anyone who'd see her, and even giving an occasional curtsy or twirl in her dress. Whenever some younger villagers show a little curiosity, she kneels to eye level to coax them closer if she could. Sometimes she's successful and the brave kid walks up to her, and the child's rewarded with a hug and a small bag of candy from her stash she always keeps on herself.

In time even the young guys catch a liking for her, as she'd break into a strut and a flirty wink to anyone who'd call her as she walked the street. Amber never did find it that offensive, in fact, she liked the attention. And she doesn't have to worry about someone getting fresh, that's what *Shocking Grasp*¹⁸ is for. Besides, compared to what she wears back in Brighton, the witch dress she wore was almost Victorian in comparison.

And then there's Amber's backstory, something she and Grammie worked on. Instead of telling them that she came from another planet, they said Brighton was a village in the Otherlands. You can reach the Otherlands by ship northwest from Winterreach. Truly little of the Otherlands is known, even learned mages know only bits and pieces, and it might as well be another planet to everyone. She was the sole daughter of Lord Donnovan, a statesman in Brighton. The village got overrun by an evil force. She doesn't know much about them, only that she was fleeing the village with her father. They tried to get into a boat together, but they got separated. She shuttled between ship hulls and undercarriages of caravans until she found herself in the Magic Forest near Oak's End. Grammie Nalladrie found her and took her in. Amber doesn't know where her daddy is and it's her goal as a wizard to find him. But until then, she'll be here, as Grammie's Apprentice.

It wasn't like Amber was universally liked by the people of Oak's End; she still had her detractors, but the people there were just the normal everyday friendly lot who would wave at anyone they'd walk past. So, it didn't take the people wrong to think she's an all right girl...for a witch. Even likable. Attractive even. A couple of boys even wondered if they could ask her out.

And then there's Chrileon.

¹⁸ Page 275 in the *Player's Handbook*

Amber Merichello

Level 1 Medium Female Human Wizard

Alignment: Creative, Mischievous, Loyal

Armor Class 14 (*Mage Armor*)

Hit Points 6 (1d6)

Speed 30' (50' with her *Broom of Flying*)

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
8(-1)	12 (+1)	10(+0)	16 (+3)	14 (+2)	14 (+2)

Saving Throws INT +5; WIS +4

Skills Arcana, (INT) +5; History (INT) +5; Insight (INT) +5; Nature (INT) +5 Performance (CHA) +4

Senses Passive Perception 12

Languages Common, Earth English, Earth Japanese, Elvish

Experience Points 100

Familiar to Nalladrie: Amber has a psychic rapport with Grandmother Nalladrie which makes Amber her familiar, as if through the *Find Familiar* spell.

Spellcasting

Level 1 Wizard with Magic Initiate: Spellcasting Ability is INT; Spell Attack Bonus is +5, Spell Save DC is 13; Amber has 6 *Spell Points* and the following Prepared by default:

Cantrip: Dancing Lights, Mage Hand, Minor Illusion, Prestidigitation, Shocking Grasp

1st Level: Cause Fear, Charm Person, Mage Armor, Magic Missile, Silent Image

Arcane Recovery: (1/Long Rest) With a Short Rest, Amber can recover 2 Spell Points.

Standard Actions

Silvered Dagger: *Melee or Ranged Weapon Attack:* Thrown 20/60; +3 to hit; 1d4+1 Piercing.

Inventory

Spell Wands: *Produce Flame (50 Charges), Magic Missile (25 Charges)*

White Crystal: Always rests around her neck, cannot be removed, counts as a free attunement, properties currently unknown.

Broom of Flying: Amber can use this homemade (due to the process, only Amber can use this Broom; if it remains beyond 1 Mile from her for more than 24 hours, it will lose all enchantments.) broom to fly (50' speed). She can send it anywhere within a Mile and summon it to her hand. More information at page 156 in the *Dungeon Master's Guide*

Amber's Spellbook contains the following additional spells:
1st Level: Amaunensis, Catapult, Comprehend Languages, Detect Magic, Find Familiar, Identify, Sleep, Tasha's Hideous Laughter, Tenser's Floating Disk, Unseen Servant, Witch Bolt

Other Items: Travelling Clothes (her Witch's Uniform), Component Pouch. Lantern, and varying other objects Grandmother Nalladrie makes her carry.

Chapter 8

Chrileon <i>Level 0 Medium Male Human Rogue (Thief)</i> Alignment: Adventurous, Optimistic, Noble					
Armor Class 13 (<i>Leather Armor</i>)					
Hit Points 5 (1d8+1)					
Speed 30'					
STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
14(+2)	15(+2)	13(+1)	11 (+0)	11 (+0)	16 (+3)
Saves DEX +4; INT +2					
Skills Acrobatics (DEX) +4; Performance (CHA) +5; Sleight of Hand (DEX) +4; Stealth (DEX) +4; Thieves' Tools (DEX) +4					
Senses Passive Perception 10					
Languages Common, Draconic, Thieves' Cant					
Experience Points –					
Standard Actions					
Short Sword: <i>Melee Attack:</i> +4 to hit; 1d6+2 Piercing.					
Inventory					
Green Crystal: Appeared around Chrileon's neck since he was found as a babe. Properties currently unknown.					
Other Items: Explorer's Pack.					



“Don’t stray too far into the forest, Chrileon. Who knows what mood Grandmother Nalladrie is in.”

That was what his mom and dad told him every time he as much as look toward that nest of trees by the outskirts of the farm. Having just turned ten—although that is just a guess, his parents didn’t know how old he was when they found him on their doorstep—and starting to show a bit of an adventurous side, drawn to the forest with all the trees to climb, nooks to wander into, and critters to chase around. Nothing that didn’t interest a young man whose age can still be measured in half-years. His father kinda expected that and he hopes that this phase will pass through so that he could return to the farming business.

His mother was more worried about the witch that lives there, though. She told him all the stories about The Witch of the Woods. “The elf turned hag,” she called her. (Not to Nalladrie’s face, of course.) Every now and then she had to warn Chrileon that the witch would patrol the area for unwary and wayward children to put into her cauldron, even though by now whenever she tells it, she could see Chrileon’s “I’m not buying your bullshit,” expression. In fact, by now, it just made him more curious about what is going on in that forest.

And then there’s the girl Nalladrie has. Auntie Amber. She’s too young to be anyone’s ‘Aunt,’ but then ‘Auntie’ is more of a Rank than anything else. He looked up some articles on what makes hags tick. Even the ones who act like hags but aren’t the traditional evil ones.

But Amber *can’t* be a hag, Chrileon is convinced at that. She’s just too beautiful. So pretty and smart and witty and sharp as a tack. The gracefulness in her moves, her light-hearted voice, those eyes that just spark of life and curiosity. How she makes little sparkling puffs of colors and star

shapes appear wherever she goes. Every time he sees her, she's nearly skipping, almost gliding, as if gravity didn't have a hold on her. The way she looks over her shoulder at someone checking her out and go on a twirling dance that would enchant any man she wished into eating out of her hand, with just a wink and a smile.

At least Chrileon thinks so, or at least those who noticed just how twitterpated he gets when Amber's around. You'd think you'd have to actually meet a girl before you get her cooties.

There'd be other girls fairer than Amber, or so that's what his mom says, but they don't zip over his farm on brooms every other day. First, she shared her Grandmother's flying broom, and then, later on, she's flitting about with a broom of her own. Especially in early mornings when the mist is still on the field or in the evening and nightfalls when only the moonlight illuminates the area, they could see the pair. Or rather his parents would and then pull Chrileon close next to them. As if they fear that either one of them would snatch the child from their arms.

Chrileon often just waves to them, much to his mother's chagrin. Chrileon's reasoning is simple, as he tells it: "If I'm nice to them when they get close, they won't be so inclined to put me in a roast." It earned him another scolding from his mother, but that only mattered so much.

Until he reached ten and his occasional wanderlust drew him into exploring that forest. Granted, he promised that he'll keep clear from Nalladrie as he wanders around taking in nature.

But that went out the window when he looked up to see sparking explosions of colors and sparkles in the sky, accompanied by, various pops and bangs and burst of melodious laughter echoing through the trees.

He recognized the voice. It wasn't The Witch of the Woods. It was *her*.

Chrileon had to find a place to get a better view and found it when he climbed a tree, going up into the branches as high as he could dare. Once he got a good one hundred and fifty feet up and looked through the branches and leaves, he found the Witch Princess.

Most people with a *Broom of Flying* usually straddle it or sit side saddled to fly. Not Amber Merichello. When Chrileon saw her, she was *standing* on the broom and gliding across the trees as if skating on ice. Sliding into turns, spinning into pirouettes, leaping up to do flips, and many other things that Chrileon doubted even warlocks in Winterreach thought was possible. All the while surrounded by an assortment of colorful lights; orbs, stars, butterflies, little comets, and all sorts of other glowing magical objects spinning around her as if in a dance. It even had music, she was somehow producing a bouncy tune out of thin air that thumped like it had a heartbeat.

She was just too beautiful. Chrileon just stood there from her vantage point and marveled at the sight. She wasn't just beautiful on the outside, with the nicely kept dress, the makeup on her face, and the magical display of her arcane potency. She had an inner beauty, that smile to her lips, the brightness in her eyes, the carefree poise. She was less of a witch and more of an angel.

She didn't have to charm him or anything. Chrileon would just come to her if she waved her over, completely infatuated in her. She was...just so...everything. She could just snatch him up right then and there, take him away to some magical wonderland, where they would stay together. Oh so have her take him to her tower so that she can sit on a throne and see him kneel before her and pledge his heart to...

"Oh, hello there."

Amber stopped in mid twirl to look right into his eyes. Chrileon gulped. She saw him.

“I didn’t know I was performing for an audience.” Her voice had a playful giggle as she floated closer, spinning down to sit on the broom. He would’ve noticed the burlap pad for a seat, leather straps for a handhold, and a forked tip with metal loops to tie things, such as a lantern dangling right up on the front. But he was too busy making sure that his back was up against the trunk of the tree, the fears put in him by his mother returning.

Or rather it would be from realizing that he got up that tree, but one glance down made him realize that he can’t get back down. Another gulp.

“My oh my, are you stuck up there, pal,” Auntie Amber said in her cheerful tone as she hovered among the branches. “You’re almost like a cat, and you’re quite a cutie to boot, I doubt Grammie would let me keep ya.”

Chrileon wouldn’t know which is worse, not knowing what Amber would do to him, or not knowing what his parents would’ve done to him if he found out that oh by the dragons those eyes of hers...

“You’re that handsome guy in the farm near here aren’t cha. Oh come on, don’t be shy, I won’t bite ya. Let me help you down.”

By now the girl was just right next by him and she scooped a bit to give him space on her broom and held out her hand. It had on a fingerless glove, and a series of bands of various cloth, including a thick one of leather, around her wrists.

Chrileon didn’t know if he could take her up on her offer, but a synapse in the back of his head reminded him of the alternative, and that the fall itself is not as bad as the sudden stop at the end, but then saw her face, so bright and cheerful, with a smile that said “Join me for a flight among the trees,” and eyes that wondered if he heard, “let’s have a little fun together and be friends.”

He reached out with a trembling hand toward the young witch.

And then the witch grabbed his arm with a hand that felt firm but was soft as velvet to the touch.

When she did that, did all sense of fear left his being, and went in probably the same direction of gravity’s hold on him, because he found himself floating away from the tree and over to the broom.

He was all too quick to move over to the broom and feel something solid underneath him, his eyes open wide; too afraid to look down.

But then she just stroked his back with that magic hand of hers. “It’s all right, Handsome,” she said with a bright smiling face. “I got ya.”

“You got me?” Chrileon said as he settled to the burlap padding on the broom. “Who’s got you?”

The girl’s laugh was a combination of a lyrical songbird and a mischievous cackle. “Oh, if you only knew what I’m thinking when you said that. Let’s go somewhere where we can get to know each other.”

Instead of floating down, she made the broom float up. Before he knew it, they were above the canopy and kept rising up until they were floating among the stars. The only light around them came from that lantern which she lit with a snap of her fingers and the crystal that glowed off her neck, but it only gave her a soft radiant glow that only illuminated her, just adding to that celestial image in Chrileon's mind. The pair was surrounded in little more than darkness and twinkling stars and the strumming of a lute or what vaguely sounded like lutes but different from them. Some played high notes, others low, all in a pleasant harmony that she hummed along to. He assumed that, if the witch's following along is any indication, she was using her magic to create the strange music. She didn't need to cast a spell to entrance him, this was naturally too charming for him to resist.



“Aaah, you wouldn't guess how much I enjoy floating about with the stars,” Amber said. “Grammie always says that I was one of them who fell to her. Can't help but feel at home when I look up at the night sky. I just got this broom made and enchanted, so I was trying it out. Thought I'd show off some of my experiments. I've been messing around with *Magic Missile*, but I haven't gotten it perfected yet.”

“They sure look good so far.”

“Why thank ya, Handsome, she said as she managed to turn around to face him. “By the way, my name's Amber, what's your name?”

“Chrileon,” he said with a slight smile.

“Handsome name for a handsome fellow,” Amber said with a flick of her hair. “I keep seeing ya wandering around the forest, every now and then. Just started doing adventures, eh? I'm about to go on a few myself.”

“Well, I usually get there so that I can have some time from my parents. But they keep worrying about the Witch of the Woods getting me and...”

“Oh, I can deal with that,” Amber said as she showed she was still holding his hand. She began to wave her other hand over the many braids around her wrist, chanting a sing-song incantation that caused one of them to twinkle. She took that glowing band and dragged it across the joined hands,

from her wrist to his. A little charm glowed in place and tingled Chrileon's wrist for a few seconds before the glow faded away.

"This friendship bracelet will let Grammie know that you're one of my friends so that she won't bother you. She might even let me go over to you so we can play around. She wanted me to find some friends anyway."

"Well...I..." Chrileon looked up to her, those eyes, that smile. "I was hoping you could be my friend anyway."

"Well then!" Amber took her other hand and held Chrileon's hand together. "I'm happy to be your friend and have you for a friend, Chrileon. I can't wait til we...Ulp." She looked down, toward the farm. "Looks like your mom and dad are worried about ya. I'll take you to them."

The gentle drifting down turned into a forward thrust as she willed the broom ahead, swooping around thick trunks on the way over the border brush and through the grains and cabbages.

"If your parents would let ya, feel free to pay me a visit over at the cottage over there. I'd like to get to know a few..."

A woman in a long-aproned dress appeared from the back door of the farmhouse. "Chrileon?!" she said in an exasperated tone. "What are you doing on that..."

Chrileon hopped off the broom as his legs found the ground. "I was about to yell out for help when Amber showed up." He looked down, blushed and scratched one leg with his other. "Got stuck up a tree."

The woman's expression was a mixture of outward displeasure and inner humor with a good amount of relief. Of course, Chrileon got stuck up a tree. "I'm sorry that you had to..."

"Oh, that's all right," Amber replied, smiling with her whole face so bright that she allowed herself to give off a warm glow. "I just wanted to help out someone."

She held Chrileon close to her, in a typical motherly protective pose, but she didn't go into hysterics over Amber. In fact, she remained cordial. "Thank you for what you did, young lady."

"You're welcome," Amber said as she lifted up to return to the woods. "I hope that we'll be friends one day."

"Well, you did say that we're friends already," Chrileon proclaimed.

"Let us get to know her first," the woman said in part scold.

"Oh, I'm sure you will, Ma'am," Amber said as she sped off.

Amber couldn't keep herself from laughing in amusement as she glided back home, even as she saw Nalladrie look at her with a cross expression and crossed arms. "You've been having too much fun, young lady. *Again!*" Amber knew it was a part act; Nalladrie knew what she did."

"Gotta rescue a cute boy from a tree," Amber said with a sheepish expression. "It's almost as if boys are part cat."

Nalladrie snorted. But she betrayed a smirk that showed she really wasn't that mad at her.

Amber made a thoughtful pose. "Maybe I should have one for a familiar."

"Put that thought out of your head, Amber!"

And that's when Amber heard laughter from a deep, masculine, wizardry, and unfamiliar voice.

Amber looked over around her Grandmother to see who was with her: A wizard in a dark cloak that covered everything on his head that wasn't beard. He wore a purple-black robe that looked like armor in some places, with a thick spellbook hanging off the hip that Amber thought would hold practically every spell that was ever casted in the realm. But it was the staff he held that drew Amber's eyes the most, a specter like relic that sparked with Octarine power and a crystal on top that glowed to near blinding.

Amber found this figure to be foreboding, someone who could just reduce even dragons to cinders with just a glance.

Which made her a bit relieved to hear him laugh.

"Oh, Nalladrie, my friend, you should know by now. A wizard is never late, nor is he early..."

Amber finished the line. "He arrives precisely when he means to."

The wizard's eyes lit up from under the hood he heard that and turned to the child. "She taught you about the great Nicodemus already."

Amber rubbed her head under her bow. "Actually, I heard it from Gandalf."

The wizard gave her a confused look.

"Gandalf is a wizard from where she's from, Blackwald," Nalladrie said.

"I see," Blackwald said, then turned to the apprentice. "You must be Amber, the little star that fell from the sky."



"The one and only," Amber said as she did a well-practiced curtsy.

"By the dragons, Nalladrie!" Blackwald laughed. "She's already a charmer! She's probably already got that boy wrapped around her finger."

Amber had to laugh at that. "Oh come on, give me some time. I just met him."

"Besides, she only really knows two cantrips, *Mage Armor*, and a couple of rituals," Nalladrie said as she patted Amber's head. "She's still a novice."

"We were all novices once," Blackwald said. "Even I, though I don't usually admit it."

Nalladrie blinked for a moment, remembering something. "Amber, this is the wizard I told you about, Blackwald. You know by now that we've been friends in Winterreach," and then glared at Blackwald. "Until he decided that opening up a book on necromancy was a good idea."

Blackwald just shrugged. "It was bound to happen sooner or later." He then turned to Amber. "Sometimes the quest for knowledge takes you to places where angels fear to tread."

"Yeah," Amber rolled her eyes. "I'll probably end up dabbling in her specialty one day," she pointed to Grammie, referring to her enchantment magics. "I take it you're here to take a look at this?" She then pulled out the crystal as far as the chain would allow. "It's stuck around my neck. If only just inanimate objects were this clingy."

Blackwald knelt down to get a better look. "It hasn't been speaking to you, haven't heard any voices. Did you ever do anything that would cause it to glow?"

"As a matter of fact, it had...But I need to have a pen and paper for it..."

Blackwald

Level 17 Male Human Hybrid Wizard¹⁹

Alignment: Enigmatic, Knowledgeable, Boisterous

Armor Class 15 (Robe of the Archmagi)

Hit Points 87 (17d6+17)

Speed 30'

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
10 (+0)	11 (+0)	13 (+1)	20 (+5)	14 (+2)	16 (+3)

Saves INT +11; WIS +8

Skills Arcana (INT) +11; History (INT) +11; Insight (WIS) +8; Investigation (INT) +11

Resistances Advantage on Saves vs spells and magical effects.

Senses Passive Perception 12

Languages Common; Draconic, Dwarven, Elvish

Experience Points 172,000

Spellcasting

17th Level Wizard. Spellcasting Modifier is INT; Spell Attack is +15;

Spell Save DC is +21; Blackwald has **104 Spell Points** and in an average day, she has the following spells prepared:

Cantrips: Fire Bolt, Message, Minor Illusion, Prestidigitation, Shocking Grasp.

1st Level: Cause Fear, Disguise Self, Fog Cloud, Magic Missile, Witch Bolt

2nd Level: Enhance Ability, Knock, Misty Step, Ray of Enfeeblement

3rd Level: Animate Dead, Counterspell, Protection from Energy, Speak with Dead,

4th Level: Dimension Door, Evard's Black Tentacles,

5th Level: Cloudkill, Legend Lore

6th Level: Arcane Gate, Eyebite

7th Level: Teleport

8th Level: Incendiary Cloud

9th Level: Astral Projection

Staff of the Magi casting: Blackwald has 1d20+20 charges at the start, and can spend charges from the Staff and cast the following:

No Charges: Arcane Lock, Detect Magic, Enlarge/Reduce, Light, Mage Hand, Protection from Evil and Good

2 Charges: Flaming Sphere, Invisibility, Knock, Web

3 Charges: Dispel Magic

4 Charges: Ice Storm, Wall of Fire

5 Charged: Passwall, Telekinesis

7 Charges: Conjure Elemental, Fireball (7th Level), Lightning Bolt (7th Level), Plane Shift

Arcane Recovery: Once per day, with a Short Rest, Blackwald can recover *13 Spell Points*, she still can only cast 1 spell each of 6th through 9th Level.

Focused Spellcasting: While Blackwald is concentrating on a spell, it cannot be broken by taking damage.

Grim Harvest: (Feat) Once per turn, if Blackwald kills anyone with a spell cast with a spell slot, he gains twice the level in HP, three times if that spell is a Necromatic Spell.

Durable Summons: Any creature Blackwald summons or creates has 30 Temporary Hit Points.

Standard Actions

Staff of the Magi: *Melee Weapon Attack; +8 to Hit; 1d6+2*

Bludgeoning, 1d8+2 two-handed

Benign Transportation (1/Day). Blackwald can teleport up to 30 feet, or swap places with a willing Small or Medium sized creature within 30 feet. He can regain the use of this feature if he casts a Conjunction spell of 1st Level or higher.

Minor Conjunction. Blackwald can conjure a non-magical object up to a 3 ft cube and 10 lbs maximum within 10 feet. It disappears after 1 hour, if it takes damage, or when he uses this action again.

Reactions

Staff of the Magi Absorption: If Blackwald is targeted with spell that targets only him, he can use the staff to negate the spell. The staff absorbs charges equal to the spell's level. If this absorption brings the total charges to more than 50, the staff explodes (see page 208 in the Dungeon Master's Guide

Inventory

Robe of the Archmagi: Advantage on Saves vs spells and magic effects, +2 to Spell Attacks and Saves, AC becomes 15 + DEX

Staff of the Magi. Has a maximum of 50 Charges and recharges 4d6+2 charges at dawn. If the last charge is expended, roll a d20; on a 20, the staff regains 1d12+1 charges.

There are other features, listed on Page 203 of the Dungeon Master's Guide

Mundane Items: Spellbook, Component Pouch, various scrolls, wands, and potions, Explorer's Pack.

¹⁹ Blackwald started as a Conjurer Wizard, but later dabbled into Necromancy, which is shown by using a Feat to add a feature in the Necromancy School with his base class.

Chapter 9

“When Nalladrie told me about the crystal around your neck, I had to come here to see for myself. I’ve seen crystals much like the one you have before.”

“Much like what’s on your staff, Blackwald?”

“Aye, Amber. You claim that it’s related to how you got to this realm?”

Amber nodded as she carried a book into the fortune-telling room. “It found me while I was hiding from someone who was chasing down Daddy. It led me over to Oak’s End. I had to chase it like mad just to catch it. When I did it became this crystal, went around my neck, and made itself at home. I can’t take it off to save my life. But you know, as I was writing in a book, I noticed something.”

Amber pulled out a book and plopped it on the table next to the crystal ball... “I’ve been collecting all of the stories and tales I heard throughout my life in my old homework,” Amber said as she dipped a quill pen into ink. The three were in the crystal ballroom; the crystal ball was moved out of the way so a large coffee table-sized book can be opened there. Amber had been writing on it. “One of my homework’s putting them all on paper so that I can share them with people here.”

The first pages had a story of a princess who had to run from an evil queen who wanted to carve out her heart because she was chosen as “The Fairest One of All,” over the queen of course, and flee into an enchanted forest where she was taken in by a group of dwarves, including one Prince Doctlow Charmsword. (“Prince Charming and Doc in one, with plenty of Thorin thrown in.” That was a note in the margins.) She paged over another story of a wooden puppet court jester who came to life by a celestial and his subsequent adventures on the way to becoming a real human child. After that, a noble daughter who was reduced to a peasant girl by an evil stepmother who is striving to get her less attractive—in both looks and personality—stepsisters married into royalty, but a godfather dragon mystic helped the former noble reclaim her nobility and eventually marry the prince.

And finally, she reached a blank page. “I thought that I would have problems writing them because I’m not used to dip pens; the pens I’m used to having got the ink already inside the barrel.”

“I know of some gnomes who are designing something like that,” Blackwald said.

“I’d like to get to know them. Now then, once I put this pen to paper, watch the crystal and see what happens.”

By the time it took for Amber to tap the excess ink off the tip of her quill and brought it to the blank sheet, Amber’s crystal started to glow, and once she let that tip touch the paper, the ink started to flow out on its own. While she was writing through one line using a simplistic block writing style, the ink spread into elegant—and very readable—writing with ascetically appealing accents for headers and drop caps, and the occasional illustration showing a character or a backdrop or something else. In this case, it was a story of a deformed man who lives in a bell tower of a church, who befriends a nomadic maiden and protects her from a Knight Templar bent on wiping out her kind.

“I could never write this good back ho...I mean, back at my old home...or this fast as well. It’s almost as if everything jumping out my head and into the sheet of paper.” She held up the crystal which is now not just glowing but also hovering over the book, giving Amber plenty of writing light.

“Impressive,” Blackwald said. “A crystal of scribing. Fascinating.”

“Have you seen anything like this, Mister Blackwald?”

Blackwald just hummed. "I've seen a good number of such crystals as of late. A lot more in the recent year."

"A lot more?" Nalladrie asked. "You mean that there's more than just seven."

"What do you mean seven?"

"I think she's referring to my crystal." And with that, Blackwald lowered his staff so that Amber could get a better look at the crystal on the top. The Octarine was so bright she had to cover her eyes. "Man, that's an Uber Crystal. What did you do to get that?"

"I'll explain," Blackwald nodded. "I've been researching many kinds of crystals that were appearing as of late, and I can tell you two things about them: One, that crystal chose you, Amber." He turned to Nalladrie "All the crystals choose their owners, not the other way around. That star didn't just pick her out of the blue. There a reason she has it, and a reason why she's here. And that's the second part, each crystal represents a great purpose for the one bearing it. A destiny in the time to come. Some big, some small..." He gave Amber a nod. "...but nevertheless important, each and every one of them."

"You've been clamoring about some coming crises in the coming years, Blackwald," Nalladrie said. "Is it related to the weird weather we've been having around here?"

"Yeah, I've seen some strange weather patterns since I've arrived," Amber added. "Balmy one day, a snowstorm the next, followed by near hurricane winds, followed by sun, followed by rain, just over the course of ten days. I'd call it Climate Change, but the climate needs to make up its mind first."

By now Amber knows that this cannot be caused by greenhouse gases. She's yet to see a coal mine or a gas station in this world. People still burn wood for heating and cooking. Whatever's causing this, the peoplekind here didn't cause it. She just hopes that the Twilight Kingdoms' life span isn't measured in mere years.

"You have a very keen eye, Amber. There have been several chaotic events as of late, some celestial bodies were moved out of their places, and the weather is not as they're supposed to. A snowstorm in Vhardas, an unexpected eclipse in Aeonias, an icecap in the mountains in Khronon melting to the point where it snapped off and caused an avalanche, way before it should." He paused. "I think I can trust you two with what little I know." He sat down next to the table, facing Amber who was taking in everything he said. "I can tell that you want to help, my young friend, and there will come a time when we will stand together in our quest, but for now, you need to only listen." He pulled up a chair and sat down. "I have been looking into this for many years. This world is in peril, but there is still hope. There are an ever-growing group of heroes, those who can still bring order to the chaos, light to dark, turn despair into glory."

Blackwald leaned back. "The elder wizards once knew of the prophecies. They are inscribed in riddles and serpent tongue, in the ancient forgotten tomes in the deepest of the arcane libraries of Winterreach. I have seen them with my own eyes! I tried to decipher the ancient conundrums and incantations, I tried so hard! But for every secret that was unraveled before my eyes, two more stood at my doorstep."

Amber sighed. "I get the feeling that I'll run into the same problem myself."

"Aye, child. Such is the plight of anyone seeking knowledge, something I can already see in you. I worked relentlessly for what seemed like eons. I was at the brink of madness many a time, and almost succumbed to the arcane forces unleashed. One day, I finally found myself on the verge of unfolding monumental mysteries, when..."

Blackwald's lips turned into a snarl.

"...when they..."

Amber could see his eyes under his cloak, a mixture of anger, disappointment, and despondency.

"...they have..."

He shook his fist in the air.

"...*they have abolished me!!* The Arcane Tribunal deemed my studies...wretched and vile!"

He brought that fist down hard on the table. "***Curse them!*** Let the wrath of the Netherrealm be upon their creaking bones! I have not devoted my life to mundane sorcery to please cowards and weaklings, and neither of you two should either!"

She has seen something like this before, although nobody in this world would know what movies are, the plot was familiar. One person discovers a threat to the world, but those who are in authority, those who are hired and paid to protect us, completely discounted what that person found because of reasons. They then tried to address the problem their own way and get soundly thrashed in a catastrophe that would have been prevented *if they had only listened...*but they never do. Amber just sat there and nodded with a roll of her eyes that just said, "I know, right?" to the wizard.

"No, they would never listen to something that important, that much of a threat, to our existence. We must proceed with what has begun. The wheels of fate are already spinning, and we cannot bide any longer. We are on our own, and splendor shall follow in our wake."

His smile returned.

"So now, hearken. Ever since the order of the Seven Flames perished, and the Dragon Fathers forgathered in the Gharad Mountains; they are, albeit mighty beyond mortal comprehension, the only thing that now stands in the way of the brooding calamities, and the only solace to the people of the Twilight Kingdoms. The life force in the Glades of Lithôe is already dwindling, and the Octarine luster in the Forest of Destiny is waning. I have beheld it, and I have felt it. It will soon be upon us.

The prophecies, however, spoke of the crystal bearers. Chosen heroes of starlight born for the glory of the Kingdoms. The guardians of man, elf and dwarf, and the protectors of the realms. At first, I thought there were just seven of them, seven greater crystals..."

"Like the one you have, right?" Amber said pointing to the crystal on Blackwald's staff, glowing in Octarine like a captured star and humming with barely hold back arcane potency. If Amber's crystal was a mere little candleflame, Blackwald's was the blinding sun in full-on supernova.

"An excellent observation. My crystal, and the six others that accompany it, are the ones that deal with the prophecy: They shall rise when time is dire and come bearing arcane light and the wrath of dragons. One hero shall arise from every kingdom, and with him, a celestial crystal echoing his name. They will be known as the Twilight Force.

They remain nameless throughout the grimoires and tomes, and none speak of their whereabouts or origin. I have searched far and wide, over mountains and seas, through the voids of magicka and the voices of time, and finally, I now know. I have seen their visions, and I have felt their presence. Met a couple of them already."

Amber leaned forward, her eyes wide open.

“One is a wood elf. A swift and cunning woodland ranger with his heart in the trees and his spirit on the seas. Another is the prophesied ruler of the people of the Desert. Destined to unite the scattered nomads into an unstoppable force. The third is a venerable forest whisperer, a mystic herbalist with the gift of beast speech. The fourth is a half-elf of clandestine nature. With an obsidian will and a silent mind, he is the shadow death. The fifth is an enigma indeed. I had trouble discerning its life force through my visions. And I was transfixed by the power of its spirit. I felt surges of malicious contempt, as well as waves of cosmic insight and primordial wisdom. A truly intriguing being of eldritch descent.” He then motioned with his staff. “And Amber, my young friend, I think you noticed this by now. I wasn’t aware that I would be the last crystal bearer, until this very crystal came to me, under a full moon. The very night after I got excommunicated from Winterreach.”

Amber blinked. “Hold on for a second.” She then counted on her fingers. “The Ranger, the Knight, the Druid, the Rogue, whatever this fifth character is...and you. That’s *six* crystal bearers. You said there are *seven* crystals. One from each of the seven kingdoms. We’re one short.”

Nalladrie nodded. “What do you know of the seventh, Blackwald?”

It took Blackwald some time to process that. “That’s a good question. The seventh crystal bearer remains a mystery even to me. All I know is that this seventh bearer should come from Khron, a dark and somber place, filled with peril and pure evil. I was about to go there and do some searching when Nalladrie sent for me.” He then scratched his chin. “But come to think of it, seeing you with that...”

“Come on, Blackwald,” Nalladrie interjected. “I don’t think that Amber would be a Crystal Bearer. Not only does she have such a low powered crystal, as I said she’s still a novice yet. I’m not letting her go out into the wild yet.”

“I know, Nalladrie,” Blackwald said, and then turned to Amber. He reached out and held her hand. “If you were more experienced, of a higher level, I would’ve gladly invited you to become one of us. But alas, you still have a lot to learn. But don’t lose heart, young Amber. There will be others like you. There have been signs of lesser crystals around, I know of a dozen, and my research tells me of a lot more. None of these crystals would be as powerful as mine, but the role they play is by no means minor. You still have a significant part to play in this grand play, a role you must fill. Not only are you a collector of stories and lore, but you can also go to places where I can no longer enter. I beseech you, find everything you can learn, keep it in one place, protect it like a dragon guards his hoard. You will be keeping a valuable resource in the cause. In some instances, a little knowledge could be more powerful than the sharpest blade, or the most powerful of spells.”

Blackwald stood up

“I must seek out the bearers, and the crystals must be unearthed. And you must return to your training. You have the promise to be a great mage, Amber. I have faith that you’ll succeed.”

And with that, Blackwald went to the door, but not before turning around to give Amber one last smile.

“We will meet again, Amber Merichello. The Knights of Twilight's Might will gather and rise.”

New Magic Item

Amber's Crystal of Scribing

Wondrous Item, Necklace, Singular, Requires Attunement

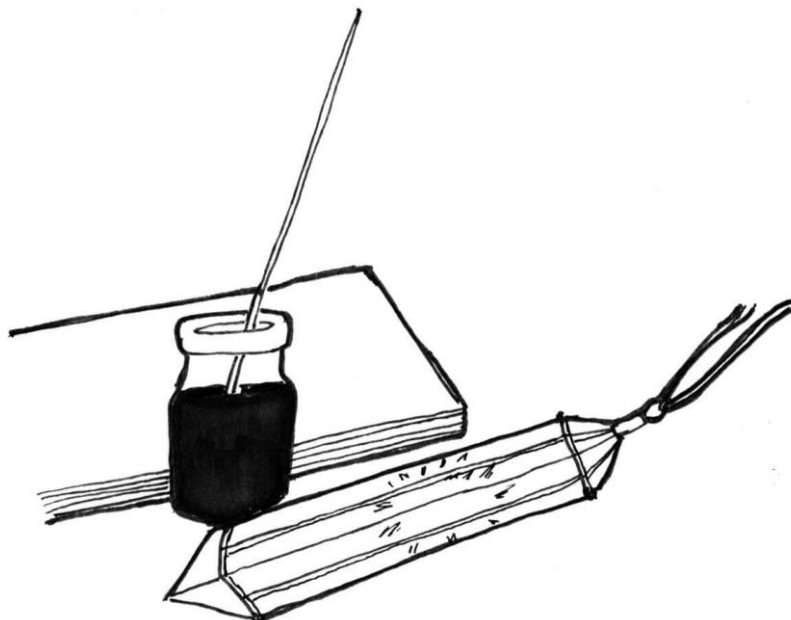
This crystal is always hanging off Amber Merichello's neck and cannot be removed as long as she's alive. This is a curse-like effect. You cannot attune to this crystal as long as Amber is alive. (Other features would be available later.)

When attuned, the wearer has the following. (Note that these are similar to the Dragonmark of Scribing, as listed in *Eberron: Rising from the Last War*, page 47. You don't have to be a gnome to attune to the Crystal)

- This does not count toward the maximum number of attunements.
- The wearer's Charisma Score increases by 1
- The wearer gains a d4 with any INT checks made with Calligrapher's Supplies.
 - The wearer gains proficiency in this tool if not already.
- The wearer knows the *Message* Cantrip and can cast *Comprehend Languages* and at third level *Magic Mouth*. Non-spellcasters can cast the two spells once between long rests, only as rituals, and the spellcasting ability used is INT. Spellcasters have these added to their prepared spells (these are bonus prepared spells, not counted toward their maximum prepared spells) and can cast them normally, either normally cast or as rituals.
- If the wearer is a spellcaster, they also have the following spells added to their class's spell list:
 - 1st Circle: Amanuensis, Illusory Script
 - 2nd Circle: Animal Messenger, Silence
 - 3rd Circle: Sending, Tongues
 - 4th Circle: Arcane Eye, Confusion
 - 5th Circle: Dream

(Note: While Legendary Rarity can have more than 1 item in a campaign setting, items with a Singular Rarity only has 1 item in the setting.)

Also note that for Wizards, the spells are only added to the Wizard Spell List; Amber would still have to find the spells to add to her spellbook.)



End of Part 1

Coming Next, Part 2: *Rise of a Hero*.

Amber and Chrileon began well on their way to becoming adventures in the passing seasons since the night they bonded their friendship among the stars, and once they heard that someone has set up a Live Action Role Play for budding adventurers to test their skill, the two were quick to take it on, taking in a rookie cleric to improve the party. But along the way, Amber discovers a bit about Chrileon that sets them both on the path to destiny: Not being a Crystal Bearer didn't change Chrileon's prophesy one iota:

“Child, you’ve probably heard of the Dragon King of long ago, and how he had lots of descendants. Noble people with pure hearts and strong spirits, charged with their father to maintain peace and harmony in the Twilight Kingdoms. I thought that no such being was alive anymore. Until right now. Chrileon, you are the last living descendant of the Dragon King and the true heir to the Emerald Throne.”

Reminder:

This series is provided free of charge, and you are free to make derivative works from it. The story is designed to further flesh out the Twilight Kingdoms to be put into a campaign guide for D&D 5th Edition. Those who wish to support this work are invited to go to foxfirestudios [dot] net and go to a Support page for various venues.

Contact David Foxfire at

Email: davidfoxfire (at) foxfirestudios [dot] net

Website: foxfirestudios [dot] net

MeWe: <https://mewe.com/i/davidfoxfire>

Minds: <https://www.minds.com/DavidFoxfire/>

Discord: David Foxfire#7694

Reddit: /u/DavidFoxfire

The easiest way to support my work is with coffee: <https://ko-fi.com/A411MTN>