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15,500 words

## The Healer in the Ice

By Rick Stevens

Nirvrin lost her parents when she was six and was taken in by an older woman who lived alone. Nirvrin called her Aunt Maal. She followed along with her aunt during the day as she cleaned and ran errands for the village elders, including the sorcerer. It was important to stay very quiet as her aunt cleaned for important people. To fight the boredom, she would count things, like books, which only the sorcerer and the healer owned. From the shadows in the corners, she analyzed each wand, intricately carved from a deer's antler or some oddly shaped tree limb. She was fascinated by the amulets holding gems and crystals, as well as other strange objects scattered about the room. Her young mind was a sponge, and she surprised Aunt

Maal one day with a question.

“All of those things made with crystals are in little wire cages made of silver. The ones with gems are in boxes with wooden corners and are wrapped with gold wires that make the sides of the cage. Why is that?”

Aunt Maal stopped and looked at Nirvrin and cocked her head slightly. The fact that she knew crystals from gems was surprising. Realizing that they were associated with different styles of cases seemed to go a step further.

Looking around as she talked, Maal said, “I’m afraid, dear, that I would not know why. I can see that what you said seems right. I have never thought about it, though. Salvazar would be the only one who knows, but I would never deem to waste his time with such questions, and you shouldn’t, either.”

Nirvrin would never consider speaking to Salvazar. She was a quick learner and knew that it was best when she was not noticed. She wore her dark blue cloak while going along with Aunt Maal so that she could better hide in the shadows. One day, as kids sometimes do, she fell asleep in the afternoon. She was in a space in the corner next to a bookshelf, hidden from anyone not at that end of the room. Aunt Maal had moved to another room, continuing her cleaning. Nirvrin was awakened by raised voices. Salvazar was talking to his apprentice, and he did not sound happy.

“Have you learned nothing? The Terminus component of any spell uses the Aldari Crystal, not the ruby!”

“Ok, ok! I’ll get the right one next time.”

“If I hadn’t stopped you, there wouldn’t have been a next time for anything for you. This is the third time that you have mixed them up. Will you ever figure out the difference?”

Nirvirin could feel bits of the rough wooden corner post digging into her back as she pulled her knees up and did her best to retreat into the space between the bookshelf and the corner. However, she was focused on the conversation. When Salvazar asked if his apprentice would ever figure out the difference, it was not much more than a whisper, but she blurted out, “Crystals are in silver.”

Putting her hand over her mouth just a little too late, she continued to try to push herself into the corner and be as small as possible. She put her head down to her drawn-up knees and closed her eyes, hoping that she had not been heard and would go unnoticed. The silence continued too long, and she tilted her head up and opened her eyes to see the immense figure of Salvazar standing over her.

She jumped up, stammering and trying to apologize and leave as quickly as possible. “Oh, m’lord. I’m sorry. I’ll...”

She was interrupted by a gruff voice, but one with a note of amusement. “Wait. I’ve seen you. You are Maal’s girl. Who told you that crystals are in silver and gems are in gold charging cases?”

She was staring at the floor, voice barely more than a whisper. “I sit in the corner while Aunt Maal cleans. I see them. Seven are gold with gems, and five are silver with crystals. It is always gold with gems and silver with crystals.”

A hint of a smile began in Salvazar’s eyes. “You not only can count, but you think about what you see. Tell me, what do you think would happen if I put a crystal in a gold case?”

Nirvirin was still averting her eyes, looking at the floor, but the intensity of the moment, talking to the court sorcerer, made her eyes open wide. She slowly looked up at a face that was

primarily scary, but that had fleeting shadows of something else. A squeaky, little voice said, “Would the crystal not charge up, since it was in the wrong kind of case?”

Salvazar took a long look at Nirvrin. She was a skinny girl, maybe 10 or so. Her brown hair was cropped short, and she looked more like a boy in her slightly oversized cloak. Her bright green eyes caught the light of the oil lamp. They flashed in the dark corner and seemed to have a light all their own. He turned to his apprentice and said matter-of-factly, “I won’t be needing your services going forward.”

He turned back to the corner. “What’s your name?”

“Nirvrin, my lord.” She then remembered to avert her eyes and jerked her head down.

“Well, Nirvrin. What would you think of being my new apprentice? You are younger than any I’ve known, but age isn’t everything. In fact, there might be advantages to training out bad habits early. You can start just being a general helper for me and see how it works out. Oh, and it is ok to look up. As apprentice, we will be talking regularly.”

Salvazar didn’t really have to ask. No one would turn down being brought from the ward of a caretaker to the upper levels of village society. Nirvrin slowly looked up, wide eyes framed by smudges of dirt and the ever-present soot from the oil lamps. She hadn’t really smiled yet. It took time to process such a major life change.

It took some effort to get out the words, “Of course.”

“Good. That guy’s father was pushing for him to be apprenticed, but he would be better off as a hunter. He will likely be good at killing stuff. I sense that you, however, have curiosity and you aren’t just here to improve your status.”

Nirvirin just stood there with a big grin, nodding, until Salvazar said, “Ok, well, go tell Maal that you will have a job here, starting tomorrow.” Then, she had to work hard to walk calmly to the door before bursting into an excited, clumsy sprint like only a kid can do.

Nirvrin found her calling. After a year, she had still not quite reached her twelfth birthday. Being so young, she had been charged with doing chores and processing herbs, so she had not yet learned spell casting. However, she was quite good at finding the right plants in the forest, and she was learning to read so that she could mix potions and eventually read spells written in a strange language. Most spells involve a language part and a physical part. A series of runes are traced in the air and spoken at the same time. Most sorcerers learned a number of spells and how to perform their elaborate tracings, keeping their lines on an imaginary flat plane, like writing on a piece of parchment in the air.

One day, Salvazar decided that it was time for Nirvrin to try the candlelight spell, one of the simpler ones. He demonstrated, slowly tracing the sequence of three runes as he recited the words. She could see the arcane letters like they were a string of glowing embers that hung in the air for a few seconds after completion, then faded. A ball of light, about the brightness of a candle, hung in the air a little higher than their heads. She looked over at him and whispered, “Again.”

After he finished the second tracing, she closed her eyes and stood motionless for some time, then opened them and looked at Salvazar, who was still watching her. She raised her right arm, whispering the words, and slowly, but precisely, traced the pattern in the air. A small ball of light appeared between and above them.

“Excellent. It usually takes considerable practice to be able to keep everything in proportion and in the same, flat plane in the air.” Nirvrin grinned and basked in the glow of the praise. The lesson ended and Nirvrin went to work on preparing some drying racks of herbs.

Fascinated with her first spell, she did it over and over, making little balls of light, then shutting them off. She could feel the energy. Mostly, she could feel the power flowing from the palms of her hands as she made patterns in the air. At one point, she lost balance just a little and stepped slightly forward, then back, during the incantation. The back of her hand felt like a wind was blowing on it. The ball of light was slightly bigger and more yellow. Doing it again, she shifted slightly forward and to the right, instead of just forward. There was a flash as a ball of light the size of a soup bowl appeared with a sound that was a cross between a ‘poof’ and the cracking of a dead branch. She could feel the heat and dropped the spell immediately. The sound brought Salvazar from the other room.

“What was that?”

“Uh... I was practicing and noticed how things feel, how the backs of your hands feel, during the rune tracing. You taught me to keep on a perfect plane. The power flows out of your palm. If you get off, you can feel the power going the wrong way. You can end up with little or no light.”

“Right. One of the most difficult things to learn, especially in the more complex spells, is to keep the rune tracings flat, like writing it out on parchment. I remember when I was learning. When you didn’t keep it flat, you could feel the, well, I guess I’d call it leakage, but whatever, it didn’t feel right when you got off.”

Nirvrin was speaking slowly and moving her hands, “You can feel the power going the wrong way, leaking out, if you get off the imaginary parchment, but there are spots when it goes

the other way. It's hard to explain, but it just feels different on your hands, like wind blowing through from the back of your hand into the spell."

Salvazar's vague smile changed into a bit of a frown, but not an angry frown, a frown of concentration.

"Really? Is that what you just did?" Nirvrin just nodded, not sure if she was in trouble. She immediately felt better when he said, "Do it again."

Nirvrin stared at nothing. Starting high and to her left, she started Candlelight like normal. As she completed the first rune, which ended in a spiral pattern, she stepped towards the image while it hung in the air, moving her foot off to the right, just a little. Her hand pushed through the glowing pattern, then she moved back to the original starting position, slowly drawing the last part of the image. There were similar movements for the second two tracings.

There was a tremendous flash, heat, and a ball of light the size of a person's head, which blazed above them for a second. A horrified Nirvrin quickly swung her right arm to shut it off. There was that unique smell of singed hair in the air.

Salvazar did something that no one remembered seeing him do. He laughed out loud, enthusiastically.

"Whoa! Ok, good that you shut that off. Our hair will grow back, but you are going to have to replace a few of these herbs that were out on the table. How did you know that you could pull in power as well as lose it when moving off the rune's plane?"

"Uhh, it...uhh, tingles? It's like when you get off and lose power, you can feel that, but it just feels different. I noticed it while practicing."

"Do it again, until you get to the first place where you feel it gaining power."

As Nirvrin drew the pattern, Salvazar mirrored her movements. She stopped in the middle of the first pattern when she felt the power shift.

She felt kind of odd telling Salvazar what to do. “Here. Just lean forward slowly. Feel it against the back of your hand, instead of just the palm?”

“My, yes. I’ve done this for much longer than you have been alive, and never realized that the power went both ways. Our training meant that we would never feel the differences if we were doing a good job. You have a talent that I’ve never heard of.” Salvazar dropped his hand, the rune blinking out of existence. “I generally don’t teach destruction spells until much later, but let’s go outside.”

They moved outside, and Salvazar raised his hands.

“Watch. This is the basic force bolt. It calls on the earth pillar and harnesses power from deep under the ground.”

It was nearly sundown, which made the glowing rune patterns stand out against the darkening forest in the background. With each hand tracing a different path, Salvazar produced a glowing white pattern that coalesced in the air, forming a shaft of golden light that shot forward with a loud pop, hitting a nearby rock, knocking all of the sticks and dirt off. “See if you can find extra power in this one.”

Nirvrin had been watching closely. She started the rune, feeling for points of power, with delicate strings of white trailing behind her fingers. She moved to the left this time, then back to the center, doing a shift to the right for the second, and started to go back to the left for the third point. Then she dropped it.

“Oh! Well. It’s hard to do both hands at the same time. Let me start again.”

She repeated the spell with the added small movements. When her hands stopped moving, the rune became a golden spike which produced a sound like thunder, if not really that loud, as it shot away from her. It knocked a chip off the rock and sent it flying into the brush behind it.

Nirvrin jumped embarrassingly, having startled herself. Salvazar grinned, “I think we found your calling.”

“Destruction? I’m not sure I want to be a fighter.”

“No, no. Teacher. First, you need to learn the base spells. Then, you can prepare lessons to teach us all how to do what you were doing and pull in more power. It’s not often that we have discoveries like this. It needs to be documented and taught to all magic users.”

Nirvrin was taking time to process this idea. At the beginning, she had hoped to be a healer, but Salvazar taught his apprentices to be traditional sorcerers, and they could do a lot of interesting stuff, so she had put that idea aside. It took at least five years to train someone to be a self-sustaining sorcerer, sometimes much longer. Many never finished. This would be something different, a teacher of sorcerers.

Over the next few months, the diminutive figure was visited by a slow but steady trickle of those coming to learn how to feel the places where even more forces of the light can be let into a spell. Those who learned from her learned it, but found it hard to teach others. They all came to Nirvrin. They all quickly got over the fact that she was just now 12.

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Salvazar hired Nirvrin when she was almost 11 to be someone who fetched things and organized the shelves and drawers of the herbs and weird things that went into potions. It was kind of a trial to see if she could later be a sorcerer’s apprentice. When it was discovered that she

had a unique talent, she was promoted. Salvazar again needed a new helper, and he picked Gulfrum. Like Nirvrin, he was kind of a skinny kid, but there was something about the way he looked at you. There was something happening behind those dark brown eyes.

Some might consider it bad that Gulfrum's curiosity overcame his awe and respect for Salvazar. It wasn't just curiosity, though. With magical items, there can be surprises. It called to him. He felt it. He could almost hear it. He kept going back to it when no one was around and just staring at it, especially when the sun came through the window, lighting it up. It had a prominent place near the window such that, when the sun struck it in the afternoon, it cast slowly moving sparkling lights of blue and yellow all over the inside of the room. He heard it referred to once as the Aldari focusing crystal.

One night, he came back to the work area and borrowed the crystal and took it out into the woods. He had picked that night for the almost full moon that would make the forest a place of pleasantly lit clearings surrounded by solid, black shadows. He was able to read a little, and he found a spell used to call a forest sprite, to talk to it. It was a simple spell. He set the crystal on a rock in front of him and, reading the parchment that he hung from the limb of a small tree, he traced the symbols in the air. A little ball of sparkle and light appeared. He was there when Salvazar demonstrated it for Nirvrin once, for just a moment. He figured that it was a simple one that even he should be able to do, and he was right.

"Hi there. Can you talk? I've never done this before."

The sparkling blue and white ball of light moved slowly and irregularly, like something floating on a pond with just a little wind. Gulfrum heard a breeze moving through the treetops. It almost sounded like, "Yes." As he considered that, a little more breeze passed through, "Listen." Then, he realized that there did not seem to be a breeze.

Slowly, he came to understand. “Oh, that’s your voice.”

It once again almost sounded like, “Yes,” and that irregular motion like floating on waves on a pond may have been more up and down than side to side right then.

“Do you have a name?”

Nothing happened. Now, it occurred to him that he didn’t know what to say to a sprite.

“Do you watch over the trees?”

A little positive movement accompanied the whispered, “Yes.”

“What can a little ball of light do to protect the forest?”

The light just bobbed there, then out of the darkness walked a coyote. It looked right at Gulfrum and then disappeared back into the darkness.

“Well, that is something I didn’t hear them mention when Salvazar did this. When I come back here and call you again, will you remember? Will it be you who shows up next time?”

“Yessss.”

Gulfrum dropped the link and prepared to take the crystal back. He started to pick it up when it started kind of glowing, casting sparkles in the dark that were not reflections of the moonlight. Slowly, the glow got brighter. Before, he could almost hear the crystal calling to him. Now he did hear it.

“Welcome, I have not seen a new face in a long time.”

Gulfrum froze, hand in mid-reach. Suddenly, he was somewhere else. He saw a statue of a woman sitting on a throne. It was in the middle of a large room with strangely smooth, shiny walls. Light was reflected by the sheen of ice on every surface that had not accumulated bits of frost.

The voice was very soft and sounded like it was echoing down a long hallway, but it was clear. “It has been a long time since anyone called to me.”

“Who are you. Do you have a name?”

Gulfrum wasn’t sure, but it sounded like ‘Aezlyn’ or maybe ‘Aezlymi’.

“Ok.” He was again at a loss for words. “Are you a sprite?”

“No. I walk the field of dreams.”

“You live in a field of dreams? Do you miss the world?”

“No. This one is wonderful. I miss having others to share it with, though.”

Gulfrum was starting to feel tired, and before he could ask anything else, the connection collapsed. He was back in the forest. Feeling surprisingly drained, he went back to get some sleep before morning.

The next day, Salvazar took Gulfrum along to the market for a lesson in finding components for their potions. They had strolled among the stalls for some time, stopping and sometimes buying things. They were looking for an extract of the gland of one of the local fish, but it wasn’t until about the tenth try that they found someone with several small vials of it. Salvazar was negotiating while Gulfrum watched. When the vendor mentioned Alftan, the name of the cove where these fish were caught, Gulfrum didn’t hear exactly and asked, “Did you say Aezlyn? Is that off to the east?”

Salvazar’s eyes narrowed as he looked sternly at Gulfrum and put his fingers to his lips to indicate for him to be quiet. Feeling chastised, wondering what he had done wrong, Gulfrum stayed silent and well back from the action in the stalls.

Shopping ended when they got to the end of the row of stalls. On the way back, Salvazar asked, “Where did you hear the name ‘Aezlyn’?”

Gulfrum did sneak around and use the crystal without asking, but he would never outright lie to Salvazar. It was obvious that his sneaking had come to an end. He stared at the ground as they walked, afraid to look up.

“I borrowed your focusing crystal. I tried to talk to a forest sprite, and, well, I did, but I ended up talking to someone living in a dreamland in the ice, I think. We didn’t talk long. I thought she said that her name was Aezlyn or something like that.”

Salvazar was quiet the rest of the way back. They went to the main room, Salvazar’s conference and workroom.

“Sit down.”

Gulfrum had that feeling in the pit of his stomach, the feeling that something was happening that he was not going to like.

“Aezlyn. She was the village healer when I was just getting started. She was banished to a palace at the base of the Ice Mountains. It made us feel better to call it a palace or a temple, and it is impressive. However, it is really a fancy prison, or worse, a crypt.”

“Banish the healer? Why?”

“She was enamored with the world of dreams. Her specialty was using dreams to diagnose and sometimes even directly cure people from inside the dream. She studied dreams like others studied herbs and potions and got quite good at entering a person’s dream to search for the cause of their illness. She fell in love with the world of dreams. She also fell in love with the most amazing, rare event for a village healer, identical triplets. She didn’t have children, and she was totally enamored with these three boys. She was destroyed when one day, they all suddenly died of a mysterious ailment, one for which no amount of dream healing could help. She was devastated. She stayed in bed and spent increasingly more time in the dream world

without there being a patient to treat. Then, she cast a spell on the villagers. Whenever someone went to sleep, they went into the healer's dream and stayed. They didn't wake up. If we hadn't stopped it, we might all have died of starvation."

Gulfrum looked surprised. "So, she wanted to punish the village? What for?"

"Just the opposite, but she was no longer thinking clearly. The death of the boys was just too much. She wanted to help, to give everyone a gift of dreams, save everyone. She was a healer, not a sorceress. Her whole-village dream spell was not powerful. It was deceptively effective, though, you might say. Once you are in the dream, you have no desire to resist."

"Why would someone resist? Doesn't everyone have dreams already?"

"Yes, while asleep. She didn't just want everyone to dream. She wanted to put everyone in her dream world, forever. It was in some ways a noble sentiment, a healer healing everyone for everything. She wanted to give everyone a gift, but it would not have been a gift. The price would have been death. A few animals can sleep through a winter. They are special. She couldn't see the truth. Everyone would die of hunger and thirst in a few days."

"What happened? How was it that I was talking to her?"

"She cast a dream spell on the village. No one noticed at first. Nearly the whole village went to sleep that night, but my mentor was expecting a visit from a sorceress from the west, Niara. She was unique in that she was a dark energy sorceress."

"Dark, like evil?"

"Not exactly. It's hard to say what tales about her were true, surely not all of them. They say her powers come from the Deadlands, but she was at least neutral, if not really working on the side of good. She and my mentor were working on things that I was left out of at the time. However, I stayed up to meet her, as did my mentor. The importance and excitement of a visit

from this celebrity kept us awake and not taken by the spell. She was covered by a ward of dark energy. Her eyes were the only break in the black surface, creating a weird and mysterious figure.”

“She was covered in dark energy, but good? I have heard of her. I heard that she killed a wraith, maybe two, but also some townspeople, and she was banished.”

“That’s partly true. The townspeople were not hurt on purpose, and she left on her own accord to avoid having that happen again. While the tales probably overstate how dangerous she is, they probably understate just how powerful she is. She was coming to confer with us to prepare to fight future wraiths.”

“Yeah, it never made sense that a sorceress could kill a wraith, but I guess she was not a normal sorceress.”

“Normal, definitely not. Also, it was the dark magic that saved us. We were waiting for Niara when there was a strange buzzing and crackling sound coming from outside. We jumped up to see Niara walking towards our door, and there was kind of an egg-shaped aura around her with colored lights and tiny lightning bolts dancing along the surface. Her dark energy was clashing with the healer’s Khouri dream spell. When she got there, she spoke quickly, and we left.”

“Why did you leave, to where?”

Salvazar was sounding circumspect. “We didn’t realize that the dream spell was affecting us, yet, but it was obviously making that light show around her. She just said, ‘Good. You are still awake. Let’s go. Now!,’ and she turned around and started back on the path. We both just looked at the strange sight, grabbed our bags, and followed. Once we got pretty far outside the village, the aura around her went away, and she stopped.”

“Niara looked at us and said, “Ok. I’m going to have to clean you off. Close your eyes, you won’t like this, but it won’t last long.” She was right. I didn’t like it. It felt like a combination of burn, hurt, itch, and just stuff I didn’t like, but before I could do more than give a short yelp, it was over. I suddenly felt less tired. She did something to remove Aezlyn’s spell. She said that she just blasted it with dark energy and let them cancel each other out.”

Gulfrum was hanging on every word. “You escaped. What happened then? How did Aezlyn end up in a frozen palace?”

“I said how people underestimated Niara’s power. The Khouri once had more calls to ice magic, the ice elemental, but not many. Healers still use calls to morning frost for some minor injuries, but that’s about it. We hurried to one of Niara’s healer friends and brought her back. Niara doesn’t use Khouri magic, but she channeled her power through the healer’s frost healing spell to create that ice palace. It rose from the plains at the base of the Ice Mountains, elegant and complete. That was a sight. That is power. Really, when it came time to force Aezlyn into it, there was no contest. Niara sealed her in. Her body was frozen and magically maintained while her mind lived in her own dream world. She has been there for many years.”

Gulfrum looked dejected, staring at the floor. “Oh, and you are saying that I messed it up. I’m really sorry. I understand. I’ll talk to the hunters and trappers about learning their trade.”

“Well, not so fast. Most calls to the ice were removed from Khouri books. It was largely to prevent anyone from disturbing the ice field. You had the crystal, but it doesn’t create spells. You haven’t been trained. How did you manage to contact her?”

Finally, reluctantly looking up at Salvazar, he was surprised that he didn’t look more angry. It was hard to read the expression, though. “I took the forest sprite calling spell that I found in one of your old scrolls when I was cleaning up. I read it in front of the crystal.”

“Well, I assume you will not do something like this again. You did not need the crystal to perform the call to talk to the sprite. Also, it is hard to keep your hand in the right position when doing those. I’m guessing that you missed some of the power points and it leaked power into the focusing crystal. I’m not sure how it allowed Aezlyn to pull you into her palace, but I’m guessing that you did something to disturb the energy that is keeping her in. It made a crack or some pathway here.”

A parade of emotions played across Gulfrum’s face, being torn between fascination with what happened and feeling saddened, having messed up really badly, and ruined his chances for advancement to apprentice.

Salvazar went on, “When Aezlyn was imprisoned, she had been our healer, part of the village family. She wanted to help, but she wasn’t thinking clearly. We didn’t want to die while dreaming, but we didn’t want to kill her, either. We took desperate action. We trapped her with a spell that maintained her body. It took a delicate balance to create and maintain her existence in the ice palace. The Ice Elemental wasn’t one of the three pillars, so we mostly just quit using ice spells. It must have taken some effort to talk to her that way.”

“Oh. That was why I was only able to talk for a few sentences before the link was lost.”

“We can hope that it was not enough to give her a way out, but I suspect that we will be hearing from her one way or the other. Oh, and two things. You don’t have to become a trapper of otters...”

Gulfrum blurted out, “Oh, good, I really hate how the traps... Oh, sorry. Go ahead.”

“And, while you aren’t fired, you are demoted. You will do all of the really dirty, unpleasant jobs that I can find, and if you ever touch one of the gem or crystal artifacts before

being trained, I will use my imagination to decide what to do to you after you are fired.  
Understood?”

Trying to keep his smile down to a normal, happy grin, he just nodded vigorously.

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They had just gotten started on the day's activities when Salvazar shifted in his seat and waved his hand a little to get Nirvrin's attention. "You really do have plenty to do here, but I was wondering if you might do someone a favor. You may have heard me mention Linea, who lives in a tiny group, not really a village, far to the southeast. She was born with a left foot or something about her leg that doesn't work well. Using a cane or crutch all the time means that she can't travel long distances. As the only healer and beginner sorceress, for a day's travel, she does a lot of good, but she is almost totally self-taught. She could do even more with some coaching, especially your new techniques. It would be more than a day each way, but I would send Orval with you. He hunts and runs traps to the south. He doesn't usually go that far south, but he knows the area most of the way there."

"I remember talking about Linea. She is a real inspiration. They say she taught herself healing and some sorcery spells using the books left when a sorcerer from the lands of fog died there. She tried to help him, but he perished, and she was left with his books. I can't imagine where someone would start. It's one thing to read a little. It's another to read those big, complicated words in those books."

Salvazar sounded kind of amused. "You may have things in common."

"What?"

“You could do something no one else could, feel the direction of the spell flow. She has a talent for reading and learning that must be pretty exceptional. I’m sure you would find Linea interesting to talk to. You both might learn something.”

“That could be really good. I can be ready in the morning.”

“Right, I’ll tell Orval.”

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Orval was not a great conversationalist. He spent his time in nature hunting, trapping, and exploring the land. It was good to keep on top of things like the changing populations and locations of the local animals. They started off on the trail, talking about the weather, the people, and the daily routines of the village. As those topics of conversation ran out, Orval started making little side trips into the countryside. Nirvrin would just continue on the path, and he never slowed them down. Sometimes, he appeared on the trail well ahead of her after exploring a potential trapping area on a stream or going off on side paths, looking for the evidence of game animals, like rabbits and deer. When they got to Linea’s place, she made up for the lack of conversation on the way.

“Welcome, Nirvrin, Orval. Salvazar was quite complimentary. You teach people to feel power flows. That’s really great. I’m so happy to have a teacher, even just for a little while. While you are actually a teacher yourself, I envy you having a mentor, too. There were a couple of times when a sorcerer came through, and both times I got them to stay a while to teach me something from their specialty and show me new healing plants. Still, almost all I know I got from reading.”

Nirvrin forgot being road weary and immediately took to Linea. “That, in itself, is amazing. It is a long way down here, but maybe we can get more people to visit and teach you more spells, maybe bring more books.”

Linea’s eyes brightened. “More visits and more books. That would be great. Maybe we can get started after you and Orval get settled and we have something to eat.”

“Food sounds good, and Orval wants to explore the area while we talk. He almost never goes this far south.”

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Orval’s explorations would later help to drive more traffic Linea’s way. Right off, he knew someone who would be willing to come this far for the river otters that he had found. Their pelts were very useful, and they were few and hard to find farther north. He followed the river, mapped the area lakes, and noted the trails made by deer and used by the smaller animals. Linea’s neighbors were mainly two families just to the east, close enough to shout back and forth when they needed something. A third family, a young couple and their son, lived farther to the south. They were too far to think you could yell at them, but just a few minutes walk for those who could walk without a cane.

Linea had a big grin, just like Nirvrin. Linea was in her early 30s, old to Nirvrin, but they talked continuously like two girlfriends getting caught up. Linea asked about what Nirvrin used on her hair to make it so shiny, and Nirvrin was impressed with Linea’s cooking skills. It seems that the potion and poultice lessons in the old books had given her the skills to make recipes for the kitchen, too. They had fully bonded by the time they got to work on spell-casting lessons.

First, Nirvrin showed Linea the candlelight spell that she had used to demonstrate to Salvazar, showing how, in some places, moving off the imaginary writing surface lets in more power instead of losing it.

“Now, watch. When I get to the ‘aftal toma’ part, I’ll keep my arm at the same angle and lean slightly forward, but I’m shifting my feet to the right a couple of inches, and then back. We haven’t talked about your difficulty walking. Do you think this will be an issue? Your hands will be busy.”

“I’ll watch your feet, but a little side step should really be no problem.”

Nirvrin now knew how to limit the boosted candle spell to where there was no smell of burning hair. It made a pop and produced a bright ball of light that made Linea put her hand up.

“Oh! That’s quite the upgrade from a candle flame.”

Nirvrin turned it off and said with a grin, “Yes. When I first did it for Salvazar, it singed his beard. I could put more in at the second point of power, but now I hold back when I’m indoors. For Khouri spells, since they call on each of the three Pillars of Magic, there are three power points in each spell.”

Linea briefly grabbed a bit of light brown hair on the side of her head and kind of waved it as she said, “Well, good. I’ve never worried that much about how my hair looks. However, I’d just as soon it not smell like burned hair. That looks like a good and practical first lesson. Show me again where the second power point is and how much you can adjust it.”

The idea that Nirvrin was a 12-year-old teaching someone more than twice her age quickly evaporated. They were two people who were immersed in a world of fascinating knowledge that had been passed down over generations in bits and pieces. While Nirvrin was here as the teacher, she asked questions, like, “So, when you use a healing poultice spell, do you

perform the spell before or after putting it on?” as well as passing on less formal bits of sorceress information, like, “You know what’s really pretty? Casting a tiny candlelight spell inside a dandelion, ready to spread its seeds.”

Nirvrin was quite surprised to find that the books that had been left with Linea were similar, but not actually Khouri. Up until then, she had only known of two groups of magic users. The Khouri placed their emphasis on light magic, balancing the three pillars, and there were those who tapped the singular dark source, often used by those mainly interested in destruction and raw power. The books left with Linea were ancient and were based on the same teachings as the Khouri, but the groups had split. Some aspects had developed independently in the south. The differences and similarities were fascinating, which meant that time flew for the two new friends. Orval checked in each morning before his explorations of the area. It was sort of a surprise when, one evening, he said, “I’ll be ready at dawn.” Then, getting no comment, he turned and left.

Nirvrin turned to Linea, “I’d just kind of forgotten about time. This has been great. Well, I’m sure there are people who will want to come and read these old books to learn the really interesting ways you make poultices and the different versions of some of the spell calls. Also, Orval says that he thinks there will be those who want to come here to do trapping and ones who gather herbs for the market. You might develop into a real village. If people start coming here regularly, someone will set up a store, and either people will build more houses or someone might make an inn for trappers and travelers.”

“I see so few people here. Come back any time.”

Nirvrin did her best to be cheerful. “I’ll make it back as soon as I can, and I’ll start talking up the opportunities for developing trade and learning new perspectives on magic from you.”

Linea looked sad. “I wish you could stay, but I’m really glad you made it. This could be a sea change for me and our little group. We have been struggling to make enough clothes, and we really could use a source for tools.”

Orval had been watching and politely remained quiet, but when they finished, he bowed to Linea and said, “It was a pleasure, ma’am. You will likely see me again. I will see if I can bring some villagers here for the trapping, and I guess from what you two were saying, people who will want to read your old books. This could become part of a regular trade route.”

Linea’s face lit up at the idea of a stream of visitors. “Orval, call me Linea, and you also are welcome any time.”

It was fully light and they were going back on a different and slightly shorter path that Orval had found during his explorations. Nirvrin was scanning the new territory while they walked. The stream that ran along their path was small, but it was pretty full, making a pleasant rushing and gurgling sound. The trees were a kind that she hadn’t seen in the village.

“Orval, what kind of trees are those that are mainly growing along the stream? They are quite tall and seem to be releasing snow.”

“I have heard them called Rabbit Tail trees. Those white floating things are seeds carried by the wind.”

When they set up a camp that evening, they were well past halfway home. Soon after noon, the next day, they were getting to very familiar territory, close to home, when the wind

shifted back to the north. There was the hint of a cool breeze coming from the direction of the village.

Nirvrin looked at Orval, “That’s odd. Is there a cold front coming?”

“No. No weather changes happening. It should be getting warmer, not cooler.”

They stopped when they could see the first house on the trail that could be considered part of the village. It was also the first sign of dark forces. The house had a sprinkle of snow on the roof. There was a line across their path, and, on the village side of the line, the ground was covered with frost.

Nirvrin spoke slowly, quietly. “There is no one outside, no one walking around.” This was one time that Nirvrin felt like a 12-year-old, glad to have an adult around. “Should we go on?”

Orval put his hand on her shoulder. “Stay here. Don’t cross that line. If I don’t come back, go back to Linea. If you do, if I can, I’ll meet you there. If I can’t, at least you won’t be alone.”

Orval walked slowly, ready to jump back across the frost line if things were really bad, but it was like a crisp, frosty afternoon. It was cold, but the sun glistened off a million frozen droplets on the trees and houses. It was disturbingly beautiful. He walked until he was out of sight of Nirvrin and then investigated what he was most curious about. He pulled out a hunting knife, one approaching the small sword category, and went into one of the glistening, silent homes, a home in the cold with no smoke coming out of the top.

Orval spent a lot of time away from the village while hunting and trapping, but it was small, and everyone knew everyone. He knew who lived here, Mags and her husband. She was sleeping beside him, and the children were in the next room, all asleep. They didn’t wake up

when he shook them, but they looked ok other than being asleep. The picture was the same in the next three houses. Suddenly, it occurred to him that he should check on Salvazar, the sorcerer for the surrounding area.

He moved quietly through the long building that Salvazar used for work, and that the traveling healer used when she was here. It was a letdown to see Salvazar asleep, too. He couldn't be awakened. He had seen enough. It was time to decide what to do next. He sat down at a table to think. Was the cold spell also keeping people asleep? They looked so natural, peaceful, even happy in their deep sleep. He had been on the trail and out exploring for days. He was tired. His eyes started to close. His head tilted down. Then, the large knife he had in his hand dropped to the floor, making a sharp noise. Orval snapped awake, grabbed the knife, and made a quick but shallow jab into the back of his left arm.

“Ah! Good, blood. I must be awake, and I need to stay that way.”

He now felt that the sleep and the cold were connected. He didn't check every house, but all that he did check were the same. The villagers were in their homes, in their beds, asleep. He could feel the effects of the spell now, starting to slow him down. When he felt drowsy, he squeezed the wound that he had made on his left arm, producing a shooting pain and more blood. He made his way back to Nirvrin. She looked at him, face tense as he came towards where she had stayed outside the frost ring. She started to walk towards him, to meet him as he approached, and he put his hand up and yelled, “No! Stay there.” She noticed a narrow path of drying blood running down his left hand.

Nirvrin started talking as soon as he was outside the frost ring. “What happened? Why are you bleeding? Where is everyone?”

Nirvrin had been standing a few feet the other side of the frost ring and had become increasingly concerned with the lack of people. Normally, people would be out doing things this time of day. She had not seen a sign of a person the whole time that Orval was gone.

Orval walked purposefully across the frost line, took Nirvrin's arm, and kept moving, taking them back the way they came.

"It's not good. They are sleeping, but not a normal sleep. They can't wake up. I could feel the spell. I still can. I almost didn't get out."

"If everyone is asleep, why is there blood on your hand?"

"It's just a scratch. This is beyond me."

"Salvazar? If anyone could help..."

"I checked. Asleep. Like the others. I hope this is ok..." He reached into a coat pocket. "Uh-mm, I saw that Gulfrum kid sneaking around with this. I've also seen Salvazar making a big deal about it. I didn't really understand. Anyway, I just saw it and grabbed it on the way out." He held out a small, silver, wire box containing some sort of amulet with a crystal set in the middle.

Nirvrin took it and looked at it for a moment, "I've never touched that. I'm still just learning base spells and teaching people to feel power points. I've heard him call it a focusing crystal. I think it is to guide spells or maybe to concentrate them, but I don't really know."

"I'm sure you know more than me. I just saw it and grabbed it, hoping it might be useful."

"You may be right. It is definitely one of his prized items. I'll hang onto it. So, where are we going?"

“I think we should return to Linea. The two of you are the only ones with magic that I know are awake.”

“I’m a kid with a little knowledge of some basic spells, and Linea’s knowledge is sometimes impressive, but very spotty, having been self-taught with some old books, and all.”

“I grew up with Salvazar, and we still talk. He said that you are smart, a different smart. He said that you actually aren’t all that smart about mixing potions or practical stuff like laundry, but you could see things, feel things, lines of force in magic that even he can’t see. And Linea, I heard you talking when you first got there. She taught herself with some old books, a major feat. She also learned to read the bits written in the Old Tongue without already knowing how to speak it. I can’t imagine it. So, you and Linea together might make a formidable team.”

Nirvrin was starting to gulp air to talk as she walked, as they were walking so fast. Orval had not explained his fear about those asleep in the village. They were sleeping peacefully, but how long could they do that? Would the magic sustain them, or would they die of thirst or starvation? He was also afraid that once he went to sleep, he might fall prey to whatever took the others. He still felt something slowing him, making him want to relax, sit down.

It was getting dark, and time to look for a place to camp. Orval pointed out a little circle of bushes with grass in the center.

“There. It will be a little bit of windbreak and kind of hidden.”

“Hidden?”

“Well, just a thought. I’m going on ahead. You will do this last leg of the trip in the morning alone.”

“What? Why? Where are you going?”

“I’m going to Linea’s, but I’m not going to sleep, not yet. I’m traveling all night. With luck, I’ll be there before morning, and if you head out with the sun, you should be there midday tomorrow.”

“No, I’ll go with you.”

“I appreciate the thought, but you can’t. You are smart with spells. I’m smart with the forest. I’m going off the path. I’ll be going too fast for you. I won’t be able to bring you and keep up the same pace. I may not wake up when I next go to sleep. I at least want to get to Linea’s so that I’m not just left asleep and unprotected in the woods. Follow the path back the way we came. It’s not hard from here. Hopefully, I’ll be there when you get there.”

“Oh, dear. Ok. I’ll be back on the path at first light.” Then Nirvrin made a poor attempt at sounding optimistic. “See you there.”

Orval started down the path in the fading light. He was walking quickly but trying not to seem too concerned. When he was fully out of sight, he broke into a slow run, one that he could keep up for hours. At a wide place in the path, a meadow, he turned off. It was getting dark now. The moon was just past full tonight, making the occasional island of light in the woods. He left the path that had been made slowly by generations of people wearing a groove in the woods. Most could not see the paths left by a silent nighttime parade of foxes, raccoons, and all manner of small animals, but he could. When Orval and Salvazar were growing up, they often explored the woods. Salvazar realized that Orval had a talent for seeing the way that animals see and helped him develop it. It wasn’t magic, but it was a valuable skill. He was now running in the dark through what anyone else would have thought impenetrable, dense underbrush. Every once in a while, he would take his right hand and sharply strike his left arm where he had made the cut. The shooting pain helped to push back the whispers about sleep.

Nirvrin was awake well before dawn. She walked very slowly down the path. It was really a relief when she started to see pink on the horizon to her left, and soon she was able to walk normally without worrying about stepping in a hole or on a small rock and spraining her ankle. She gave no thought to lunch and jogged through some of the flatter, grassier parts of the path. When she got back to Linea's, her first words were, "Did Orval make it?"

Linea scrunched her face up, more on the right than the left. "Yes and no. Yes, he is in the back, asleep. No, he didn't quite make it. My neighbors found him. It looks like he was falling asleep and had made it as far as the path leading up to their garden. They brought him here when they couldn't wake him up."

"He was right, then, to leave me and keep going. At least we have him."

"Ok, so... You guys just left three days ago. Normally, I'd be glad to see you, but I have a feeling that I shouldn't. Why is Orval passed out in the back space, and why did you come back?"

"It's the village. They are asleep, and there is snow and ice inside a circle around the village. I stayed outside, but Orval went in. He saw how people were sleeping and was able to come back out, but he was afraid that the enchantment would take him whenever he went to sleep."

Linea parked her cane against the table and sat down with a thud. She picked up a book and flipped pages for a while. Then, she paused. "This was something left by a traveler. The Curse of Aezlyn. Although, I'm not sure 'curse' is the right word. I only know some of the words. I'm sure about the sleep, cold, and something related to spells or curses, something based in magic."

"I had never heard of Aezlyn."

“The story seems to be, she was a healer. She was devastated when the only set of identical triplets that anyone had known died in her care. She started sleeping a lot. She may have avoided the sadness by spending more and more time in the dream world. She tried to put everyone into her dream world by enchanting them and pulling them from their dreams into hers. They got three of the best magic users to trap her in her own dream and use the power of the Ice Elemental to seal her in. This says that the Ice Mountains originally just had white tips, and the icy plain leading up to them was green most of the year. They somehow froze Aezlyn in a palace of ice at the base of the highest peak. It left the whole area frozen all year round.”

“So, you said that they did something to defeat her. They apparently didn’t want to kill her. How could she still be frozen but alive?”

“No, not kill. They trapped her in her dream. I’m fuzzy on some of the words here, but they somehow sent one sorceress into the dream world, protected by two on the outside. The trio called on the Ice Elemental to freeze her in place, but keep her alive, dreaming.”

“So, have you read anything about a spell that would break another spell? I’ve been learning the basics, but not a lot of them, yet. Not one for that.”

“Since no one told me what the basics are, I just learned whatever seemed interesting at the time, or sometimes I learned a spell just because I knew all of the words.”

“Do any of them have words about breaking spells or maybe some sort of waking-up spell that could be stronger than the sleep spell?”

Holding up a worn book with a slightly odd-smelling leather binding, Linea said, “I’ll have to look. You can, too. Here, this one’s all in Khouri. See if you can spot anything useful.”

“Wow, good. These don’t look like Salvazar’s.”

They flipped pages and sometimes asked each other about words they didn't know or the effects of some of the more esoteric spells. At one point, Linea stopped and held her finger on the page, thinking. She did that long enough for Nirvrin to notice, but she knew not to interrupt. After a long minute, Linea spoke hesitantly, "This is from one of the old ones. It seems to mean dream piercer. It looks like you could get into a dream, but I'm not sure that's helpful. I'll keep looking for the word 'dream.'"

Nirvrin was thinking about dream piercing. "Could I go into Orval's dream?"

"Maybe, but he is likely in someone else's dream. I don't know what you could do, and you might get trapped, yourself. If this is Aezlyn, she has been around a long time. It's safe to say she knows a lot, and her mind may be broken. We need to find something else."

At one point, Nirvrin found an incantation that started with, "darkness," and later a word that she wasn't familiar with, but looked kind of like "fire".

"What's this? It looks like a spell, and there's a word that I haven't seen before that looks kind of like "fire," but it isn't structured like a destruction spell at all. It doesn't have a heat calibration."

"Yes, one of the non-Khouris terms. That word is closer to meaning 'light' than 'fire'. It has some subtle variations in meaning that range from literally piercing the shadows, shining a light in a dark area, to showing someone the truth."

"Could that work for showing reality instead of a dream?"

"I'm afraid that I can't tell. I know the main definition of a lot of words, but the subtleties often escape me. To me, yes. The spell definitely should dispel a dream. To the People of the Fog, who wrote this, I don't know."

“Ok, then, let’s make sure I know all of the words and can do the runes without stopping. I’ll look for power points.”

They moved into the back, where Orval was sleeping. Linea shook him again, just to see, but with no response. Nirvrin said the strange-sounding words that accompanied the tracing of the runes. As the glowing runes faded, there was a white flash, tinged with shades of blue and orange. The light came from her fingertips, leaving them with a mix of numb and sharp pin prick feelings. It illuminated Orval and the room behind him.

“Oh...”

Her exclamation was because of the pin pricks. The silence afterward was because the flash didn’t just illuminate the room. They could see into the dream world. They saw a figure, a dark figure. Pale blue eyes reflected the flash, and the outline appeared to be female. Their eyes recovered after the flash, and they looked at each other, then at Orval. Nirvrin gently, then less gently, shook Orval’s shoulder. They were disappointed.

“It didn’t work. Did you see that? What was it?”

“I’m guessing that was Aezlyn. She seemed to look this way. Maybe she could see the light.”

“Maybe, but it didn’t wake up Orval.”

They went back to reading. They forgot about life in general as symbols and arcane spell sounds cascaded through their minds in the search. When it was well past supper time, hunger started to break into Nirvrin’s train of thought. Just as she turned to Linea to say that they should take a break and eat something, Linea grabbed her cane and struck the floor sharply for emphasis as she said, “Here! If this word, symbol, thing of the Old Tongue, means what I think it means, it might work.” Pointing at something that looked like two letters that someone put their thumb

on, squished around a little, and then drew a line through it, she went on. “That smudge thing, it looks like a mess, but it is repeated very precisely all through this section. Then, here, the line through it. This is the only place that I have seen that uses a line like that, but I think it means to counter or destroy the spell.”

Nirvrin looked crestfallen at the sight of the symbol. “How do I recreate a smudge with a line through it?”

Linea stared at the page and then slowly looked up at Nirvrin. “With your eyes closed. It isn’t a visual symbol. It’s a symbol of feeling. The line, when you are done, you cross it out.”

For the next half hour, Nirvrin practiced closing her eyes and drawing the image.

“Ok, let’s go back to Orval and give it a try.”

Orval looked like he was sleeping normally. Nirvrin bit her lip in concentration and didn’t taste the blood until later. Standing close to the bed, she squinted her eyes and started drawing a graceful, glowing pattern directly over him. When she got to the end, she started to make a sweeping movement with her right hand, a sort of a slash like the one on the paper, going through the smudge, when something came over her. She touched the floor, then, highlighted in a reddish-yellow flash that seemed to come from nowhere, she quickly raised her hands in a flourish. Linea was startled. She fumbled her cane in the moment, knocking it on the ground.

Before Nirvirin could process what just happened, she bent over Orval, grabbing his shoulder, and his eyes fluttered. Grinning, she shook him, not so gently. “Hey! Wake up! We have stuff to do.”

Orval was very slow to wake up, but he did. Nirvrin and Linea were beside themselves.

Linea’s voice was high-pitched with excitement. “We did it! At least, it’s a start. Do you think that we need to...”

Linea was interrupted by a wail and a vision of Aezlyn. She had one hand reaching out, looking like she was in the room. It just lasted for a couple of seconds.

“What was that?”

Nirvin said, “I think she tried to grab him back, but couldn’t. I think Orval is safe, now.”

Once Orval was sitting on the side of the bed, he said groggily, “Water. I’m really thirsty.”

Nirvin jumped up, “Oh. Right. I’ll be right back.”

Handing him a cup, she asked while pouring, “So, what happened? Were you in a dream? What was going on?”

After a couple of slow draws, he said, “Thanks. Yes. It was a dream. The whole village was there, well, not you. I’d say that an enchantment was put on the whole village. We were away when it happened, so you are ok, and I was until I went back inside the circle around the village.”

“What was the dream like?”

“Mostly, just village life, but with a strange woman who was not part of the village in real life but seemed to be living in the village. Sometimes, there would be shifts to different scenes, then back. In the dream, it was just always normal, whatever happened. Now, I can see it was a dream.”

“Ok, one step on the path, Orval. What do you think? You were there. How do we get the village back?”

“I think the enchantment occurs when you go into the village circle. Once enchanted, when you go to sleep, you don’t wake up. It pulls you into a common dream, I guess. At least, I hope the other villagers I saw in the dream were still alive and dreaming. I am worried, though.”

“Worried, sure. We need to wake them up.”

“I didn’t say anything on the way back, but I was already worried that there is a time pressure to get them out.”

“Time pressure?”

“You know how the first thing I wanted was water? By the way, now I’m thinking food.”

Linea looked horrified and jumped up, grabbing her cane. “Of course! Right away.”

Orval continued, “The villagers may be in better shape than me because of the cold. You know, hedgehogs in the colder areas sleep all winter. I’ve seen their nests while they sleep, and once they come out, they look funny with their loose, floppy skin because they lose so much weight. I don’t think people can sleep all winter. I think we would die before that. Normally, a person would die of thirst in just a few days. Hunger takes longer, but we don’t store extra fat for winter the way the hedgehogs do. Maybe the spell helps to keep them alive, to keep them dreaming, I don’t know. I got thirsty right away, but I left the circle.”

Nirvrin closed her eyes and let out a big sigh. “The village may be dying, and we don’t know how fast. Well, we got you free. That’s a start.”

“I’m afraid that it may be harder to free people in the village. I was still affected by the enchantment, but that circle seems to mark some kind of barrier for Aezlyn. She wasn’t able to reclaim me just now. If you are inside the village, they might be taken back over as soon as you get them out of the dream.”

Linea came back in with bread and cheese. “Here, this is the best I can do quickly.”

“This is fine. Whatever we do now needs to be done quickly.”

Nirvrin turned to Linea, “He thinks they might starve.”

Linea said softly, “I heard. And going inside the circle is dangerous. From what I read about Aezlyn, it sounded like she was more disturbed than evil, and they didn’t really want to kill her, so they trapped her in her own dream. For her, the spell has kept her alive.”

Orval stopped eating, “When I went in, I didn’t recognize it at first. I think it was coming on slowly. I was starting to feel tired, relaxed, and in the mood for a nap. When I realized what was happening, I got out, but the feeling didn’t go away. If anyone goes in, they are likely to face the same enchantment.”

Nirvrin was thinking out loud, “Can we release a group, or do we have to do individuals, like we did Orval?”

Linea grabbed her cane and headed into the other room. “I’ll see if I can find anything in the writings. Did we affect Orval, help him break from the spell, or maybe we did something to the spell that weakened it? It would be good if we could attack the spell around the whole village at once.”

Orval said, “One possibility is me going back in and dragging them out, one by one. I might have to get de-enchanted each time. I was able to last for a while the first time. It would take a long time to do the whole village that way, though.”

Nirvrin sounded a little more positive. “For you to drag out all of the villagers, yes, but get Salvazar. We can use his help.”

“As a girl with a build like a bird, I know we all look big. However, Salvazar is way taller than me and his magic has kept him well fed. He is twice my weight, at least. He is some distance away from the frost line, too. Do we have any others who might help?”

“Well, since I’ve been having more and more teaching duties, Salvazar took on that Gulfrum, do-do head boy, as helper and as a tryout for apprentice. I don’t know if he learned

anything as an apprentice, yet, but at least he is a skinny kid, too. You can drag him out yourself. We can try out the idea of waking them up outside the circle, two at a time, by trying to break the enchantment for him and redoing Orval.”

Linea grinned, “Do-do head boy... so you like him, huh?”

“No, no. He’s just a boy, and he doesn’t clean up when he uses the herb grinding stuff.”

“Sure. So, Orval will be affected again, probably. We can try doing two at once. It might tell us about trying to affect the whole village or big sections of it.”

Nirvrin suddenly had a horrified look on her face and looked down, not sure what to say. “Uh, Linea. How will you get there for it to be ‘we’ who do it?”

Before Linea could say anything, Orval broke in. “I’ve been thinking about that. I can think of two possibilities. One way to bring a deer carcass out of the woods is to tie it to two poles and pull it behind you. Also, we might work on you walking in step and leaning on me instead of your cane. Maybe that and then the poles with a blanket stretched between them when you get tired.”

Linea looked doubtful, “Yeah, well, we can try. If I have to be dragged to the village, ok.”

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They arrived in the afternoon of the second day and stopped well back from the line of enchantment and frost. The air blowing through town was icy, but it was fairly warm when it was from a different direction.

Orval surveyed the scene. He didn’t mention how much he did not want to go back into the circle. His enchanted dream seemed great at first, but now that he could see it from this

perspective again, he saw it as flirting with death. He grabbed the poles that he made for pulling Linea along on the path to get there.

“I’m ready. I’ll be more aware of the spell effects, but if I feel like I’m falling asleep, I’ll drop everything and come back here at a run.”

Orval could feel the enchantment again when he stepped over the line. He knew where Gulfrum’s family lived and wished it were closer to the exit point. When he got there, he rolled him onto the blanket stretched between the two poles and headed out. He was better able to fight the spell, knowing what it was, but his face relaxed visibly when he got back over the frost line.

“Ok. Here’s the kid that was helping Salvazar.”

His skin tone was a little less natural than Orval’s when he was asleep, maybe because of the cold. Otherwise, he just looked asleep. They stretched him out and had Orval stand behind him. The spell was still hard to get right, but after one false start, Nirvrin again acted out the smudge in the spell and was rewarded with a flash of red and yellow.

“Orval, did it work for you?”

“Yes, I can feel the difference. The kid moved a little, but it’s almost as cold out here as in there. Maybe there’s some wood around here to start a fire with.”

Nirvrin grinned, “I’ve got this.” She walked a few paces away from the center of camp and started the candlelight spell, pushing the power points to where it was like when she first singed Salvazar’s beard. “There. That should take the chill off, some.”

Gulfrum was slow to wake up, and when he did, before he started talking, he scooted closer to the heat and just sat there looking around.

“Salvazar wanted water right away. How about you?”

He nodded very distinctly and remained silent.

“You were in a dream. Now you aren’t. You are just outside the south end of the village.”

He nodded slowly and took the water flask. After a couple of drinks and now moving a little away from the overpowered candlelight, he started to talk.

“This... at first it was all confusing. Dream, you say. So, it was Aezlyn’s dream, a world where she got out of her prison and had happily rejoined society. It seemed quite real, and I never questioned the idea that she had reformed and this was her life, now.”

Gulfrum quit talking to eat. He now realized that he was really hungry. He was still taking in the situation. He watched as Nirvrin was digging in her bag and set out a small package in a black bag. When the bag fell open, revealing Salvazar’s focusing crystal, he made a small, unintelligible sound with his mouth full and pointed at it.

Nirvrin looked over. “Yes, Orval got that out of Salvazar’s house. I don’t know what we can do with it, though.”

After following his mouth full of bread with some water, he said, “That’s what started it, or I’m what started it. I borrowed it once and contacted a forest sprite.”

“Borrowed without asking?”

“Yeah... but I just wanted to learn about it. I want to impress Salvazar and really become an apprentice someday. It’s really interesting looking, too. I was cleaning up and organizing some piles of stuff in the back when I found an old, faded scroll that had a spell that called up a forest sprite. I was cleaning up when he showed a spell like that to you. He said it was one of the easiest ones. I used it to try to talk to a sprite.”

Linea suddenly gasped, “You got Aezlyn, instead. You somehow... Oh, you used the focusing crystal to drive the call that was supposed to be to a sprite. You really didn’t need that. I’m thinking that it must have made some sort of a path to her, one that she followed back out.”

Gulfrum was starting to feel normal again. “I hadn’t heard of her. It seems like it’s more that she was able to draw us in, than she escaped, I think. In the dream, she lived in the village, talked to everyone, but from what you are saying, the whole village is asleep. Salvazar?”

“Orval said he would need help to drag him out. Next time, he is going to take you to get someone bigger out to help him with Salvazar. Orval and I were at Linea’s when Aezlyn cast the spell. We came back to find it like this. So, you talked to her before the dream and then in the dream, right?”

“In the light of day, hopefully this is a day and not a dream...”

Nirvrin interrupted. “Orval stabbed himself in the arm to make sure it was not a dream. He said if you see blood, it is not a dream. Want me to stab you?”

“I’ll pass for the moment but keep that in mind. So, in the light of day, yes, I talked to her once with the crystal. It was weird. I was suddenly in this huge, ice-covered temple or something with an altar that had a statue of her on a throne. All of the walls and everything sparkled with a covering of ice, with white patches of frost. She was in the shadows down a hall when she started talking to me. She seemed to be coming closer, her voice got louder, but I suddenly lost the connection. The next time I saw her was when I went to sleep. She was in the village, and it was normal. She was part of our village and always had been. She was quite nice, the village healer, always well-liked... wait. No one ever needed healing. Maybe Orval was right. If you are bleeding, it’s not a dream. Still, she was well-liked in the dream. That seems weird for someone trying to kill the whole village.”

Linea frowned but also cocked her head in that thinking way. “Her dream. She dreams of being well-liked. She is a healer, and everyone is healthy, always. When they trapped her, it was a matter of survival for the village. But, if she is happy and living in the village in her dream, do

you think perhaps that she didn't know what would happen in real life? Also, if people die, they would leave the dream, so it wouldn't be what she wanted. Something doesn't seem right."

"Well, they trapped her once to save themselves. I guess we need to know what happened when Gulfrum used the focusing crystal. If the original dream spell, the one that stayed with Orval, didn't make him cold outside the village, the cold spell that they used may still be holding her back. Gulfrum made some sort of a connection to the village that let her affect us, but still not let her escape the cold barrier."

Linea was still turning pages, looking for spells that might be useful. "So, how can we fix the crack or whatever?"

"Good question. Orval and Gulfrum are bringing out someone now who can help drag Salvazar outside the village, but it's taking time, and these enchantment removals are taking up resources. We will need to rest before doing many more."

Linea looked up. "Orval. How long have they been gone?"

Nirvrin sort of looked around, thinking about how much the sun had moved. "Oh. I think long enough to be worried. If they didn't make it out, it's just us."

"Yes, and you were saying that we need to rest, but I'm worried about that, too."

Nirvrin said, "You mean, maybe we won't wake up. I don't think I feel anything, but still, you are right. Let's just not think about sleep. What can we do? We shined a light into Aezlyn's dream. It was just a blink of an image, but I think it was her. Maybe we could talk to her. Gulfrum did from outside the dreamworld once."

"But, it may have given her a way to affect him and draw him in. I'm afraid that if one of us goes into the dream world, we will forget what we want to talk to her about. If he and Orval got recaptured, we really need to be careful."

“Yes, we may be the last ones awake. How can we talk to her without being drawn into her dream? When Gulfrum first contacted her, he saw her palace, not her dream. It was a view of reality. The dream enchantment wasn’t until he went to sleep.”

“Orval knew what he was up against, and he still collapsed near the neighbor’s house. You are right. We need protection. When they put her in there, the spell that made the frozen temple was able to contain her inside her dream. They had three sorceresses working together, though.”

Linea was flipping through the pages of an old, leather-bound book, again. “Protection, dreams, wards... What would protect someone from being sucked into a dream? A standard ward can be for physical objects or magical attacks. What we first tried with Orval and Gulfrum was not a way to talk to her, even if we did get a glimpse.”

“Hmm... Gulfrum, by accident, used the focusing crystal in a way that got through the barrier. I think we need someone like Salvazar if we want to try to seal whatever rift Gulfrum made. Unless you find something we can handle in those old books, I think we need another way.”

Linea said, “Well, I’ve been thinking. Gulfrum said that she was nice, well-liked. Without help, I think that the best we can do is to talk to her. Maybe, if we could convince her that this was a dangerous thing to do, she would quit.”

“Ok. We are just making it up as we go along, but maybe if you raise a ward around me while I use the crystal, maybe I can talk to her, and you can keep her from taking me with a dream enchantment.”

“I can manage a ward. I can do the one that shields you from magic in general. I can only hope that includes healers’ dream enchantments.”

Linea stretched backwards to grab the focusing crystal on the ground behind her, then made a little, “Ah!” sound as she leaned forward on her problem leg to hand it to Nirvrin. “Here. Whenever you are ready, let me know. I’ll start first.”

“Remember what Orval said about blood. Keep that mushroom knife handy. If you feel things slipping, give yourself a poke, really.”

“Right. I’ll keep it in my lap.”

Linea started by producing a bubble of protection around Nirvrin. She used the power point techniques that Nirvrin had just taught her to produce a barrier that would hopefully block the usually gentle healer’s spells. Seeing the ward, Nirvrin stared into the crystal while producing the call to a sprite. Suddenly, she was where Gulfrum had been, looking at the frozen form of Aezlyn sitting on an elegant throne in a building whose walls were made of ice. She heard a woman’s voice, dim, then slowly getting louder, like it was approaching.

“Another visitor, how nice. I rarely spend time here now. There is more room and better weather in the dream world. Would you like to see?”

“No. That is why I am here. You make dream worlds to heal. This one is going to hurt, kill the villagers. You need to let them out.”

A point of light started approaching in one of the main halls that radiated out from the throne in the center of the main chamber. “No, go away! I’m protecting them. They are happy.”

For a moment, the scene of the temple started to fade into the village, and Nirvrin shouted, “Linea!”

Jerking her head up, Linea grabbed the mushroom knife. She started to plunge it deep into her leg, but pulled up and instead did three or four quick, shallow pricks to get her focus back on the ward.

“Ok, Aezlyn, look. We know you want to help. Do you remember three boys, little boys who died?”

“No, no, no! They are still here with me, still three identical little faces. They can’t die. No one dies in the dream.”

“You have to let the villagers wake up.”

“No, they will never get sick here. The weather is always good. They will be happy.”

“Not for much longer. The reason your temple was made, the reason you now live in the dream world, is because you endangered others long ago. We will die if we never wake up because we need to eat.”

“No. We eat in the dream world all the time. All the best food. It will be fine.” It had been motionless, but now Azelyn’s ice-covered body gracefully rose from the frozen throne. She held a metal circle crisscrossed with an intricate pattern of gold and silver wires in front of her. “Join me, us. Salvazar has been asking about you, where you have gone.” She started advancing towards Nirvrin.

She wasn’t sure if Linea could hear her at this point, but she half-yelled, “Linea, watch out!”

Linea gave herself one more prick on her leg. Blood was starting to show as it soaked through the cloth of her skirt. This time, there was more of a shooting pain than before, which made Linea smile grimly at the satisfying energy feeding her concentration. She put her whole self into the ward around Nirvrin.

Aezlyn held out the dream catcher and looked a little confused when Nirvrin was not affected. She slowly scanned the area and seemed to notice something not obvious to Nirvrin. She turned to her left. Nirvrin had no sense of direction at this point. She didn’t know that

Aezlyn turned in the direction of the village, of Linea, who was outside the ward that she cast to protect Nirvrin.

With such a concentration on Nirvrin's ward, Linea never realized that Aezlyn's attention had shifted to her. Suddenly, Linea was dreaming that she was part of the village, happy to have left the three-family clump of houses she was living in. In fact, her foot and leg were cured. She could walk. She could run! It was great. That is, until there was a strange echo, a sound not quite heard, a name. "Linea!"

Nirvrin felt the ward slipping and yelled out, still not sure Linea could hear her. It was with a moment of sadness that Linea looked at her perfect dream leg and then closed her eyes and squeezed her real-life leg to produce more blood and more pain. When she opened them, she was again sitting near the fire, producing a ward around Nirvrin.

Nirvrin scowled at Aezlyn. "Stop it!" Moving towards Aezlyn, Nirvrin shouted, "You are a healer. Wake up! You are hurting, not healing!"

Aezlyn smiled and seemed oblivious to any suggestion that things were less than perfect. She also started closing the gap between them. "I can see you need healing, I can help. I can do it here, in the dream world, join me."

Aezlyn's comments were actually addressing Linea, reading her problems with walking. Linea started slipping back into the world where her left foot worked just like her right one. One where she could run. But one more whack on her left leg brought her back.

Nirvrin felt the surge in the ward again and went on, "You are a healer. You are sick. You need to heal yourself before you can heal others."

Aezlyn went still, almost like when she was on the throne.

"No. You will always be happy here. You will..."

It had been a long and tiring day. That, combined with Aezlyn's dream catcher spell, finally got the better of Linea. Nirvrin was there, Aezlyn was there, and everyone was happy. Linea was particularly happy. Her leg was fine. It had always been fine. Something nagged at the back of her mind. Running, why did she not remember running? It must be great! She turned to Nirvrin.

"Hey. When you run, do you swing your arms?"

"Well... yeah. Don't you?"

"I'm not sure..." Looking down, Linea saw how her skirt was blood-stained in one spot. Again, she almost remembered something. Then, she pulled up her skirt to show an undamaged thigh. A picture of stabbing her leg, her bad leg, flashed across her mind's eye. "You told me something that Orval said once, it was that if there is blood, it is not a dream, right?"

"Um, yeah. I remember telling you that. There is blood on your dress."

"But, not me, not my leg. Also, something else about my leg, but I'm not sure what. Look, do me a favor. Run to that bush right there and back."

"What?"

"Please, it's not far. Run quickly."

Nirvrin took off, ran to the small bush, rounded it, and came right back.

"Now, count to 100."

"What?"

Linea just stood there.

"1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11..."

"Ok. You just ran over there and started counting and have not had to take a breath, yet. When I saw you run, I knew something else. I have no memory of running, of moving my arms

like that. You don't have to breathe. Something about my leg is not right. We are dreaming. Think. We are in Aezlyn's dream."

A parade of confusion, surprise, and finally concentration played across Nirvrin's face. After a minute, it was clarity. "I remember. We need to talk to Aezlyn. Get her to call it off."

They held hands and squeezed really hard to remind each other that they were awake in their dream, in someone's dream, and they had to do something. Something serious.

"Ok, her place is just past the longhouse." Then, Linea got a funny look. "Run!" Releasing hands for a moment, they took off. Linea was exhilarated. It almost made her just want to stay in the dream. It also helped her remember that it was a dream. They stopped at the healer's house and found her tending the garden.

"Hello, my lovelies. What can I do for you?"

Linea was still kind of taking in the fact that she could run but again had a tight grip on Nirvrin's hand. Nirvrin focused for a minute, then spoke to Aezlyn. "You need to save us. Linea, me, my aunt Maal, everyone."

"Dears, they don't need to be saved, they are all here."

Linea's eye was caught by a slightly strange sight behind Aezlyn. Three small, identical boys were running across the grass, laughing, and doing what 3-year-olds do. The rarest of events. It was years ago when the triplets died in Aezlyn's care. They weren't real people dreaming. She was keeping them alive in her memory, in her dream.

"The boys, that's it, isn't it. You want the village to be here again to keep the boys alive in your dream. You never bleed in a dream, you never die. But you weren't able to save them. And, we will die, all of us, if you don't let us out. The boys will again have no one to talk to."

Nirvrin caught on and added, “If you do let us out, I promise I will come back to visit. I bet Linea will, too. I can’t promise for anyone else, but when everyone hears your story, I think you will have a steady stream of visitors.”

Suddenly, they were back in the ice palace. Aezlyn’s body again looked like ice but moved like flesh. There was a parade of expressions across her face, making her seem human again. After standing there silently for what seemed a long time, sometimes changing her gaze from Linea to Nirvrin and back, she moved slowly and sat back down on her ice throne. She quit moving, and her voice seemed to come from all directions. “I will await your arrival.”

Four eyes opened in unison. Nirvrin and Linea sat up, quickly looking around their camp and then over to the village.

“Do you think...? Is it over. Wait, don’t stab me.” Linea pulled her skirt up to her thigh, revealing five little red wounds and some dried blood. “Orval said there was no blood in a dream. This is dried, but I think we are back. Now, is it over?”

“Let’s go see if they are waking up.”

Linea grabbed her cane, stood up, and screamed like someone who was really afraid of spiders and who just saw a big one.

“What is it? Is Aezlyn back?”

“No, wait.” Linea walked quickly a few paces south and then back, her cane thudding on the ground each time her left foot hit the ground. “The pain, it’s gone. My ankle has never worked properly, and it hurt with each step. I won’t be running. It’s not perfect, but the pain is gone.”

“Aezlyn. She can both diagnose and treat in her dream. I bet she did what she could for you. Now, let’s try out your new and improved walking and see what is happening in the village. They have been asleep longer. They might be slow to wake up.”

Linea said, “Right. I hope everyone is still ok.”

The frost line was almost gone, and the grass looked like it was covered with morning dew. They paused and looked at each other, but silently agreed that they should go in and hope for the best. It took some villagers longer than others to come around, but they all did. People slowly started coming outside, moving kind of slowly. Orval and Gulfrum had fallen asleep in the house of Aaron, their first choice for help with dragging people outside the frost line. They were some of the first to come wandering out.

Gulfrum was looking around as he talked. “So, it looks like you didn’t need Salvazar. I hate to ask, but what did you do to her, to Aezlyn?”

Nirvrin looked kind of thoughtful, “Made friends. I offered to come visit, and I can say that we all have a standing invitation.”

“We almost died, and we are considering an invitation to come back? I still don’t think this is making sense. Orval, perhaps you should poke me just a little. Are we, well, me, am I dreaming?”

Orval waved that big hunting knife, “Any time.”