

The Heart of the Matter

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PREFACE

Hello. Thank you for selecting this work to peruse. It has a tale to tell I am sure we both hope you will come to enjoy and share with others.

Part I: Pollyfina

Chapter 1: All About Smidgeon

Our tale begins in a time of sorcelrousness, combatance, and chivialtry. The place is the island continent of Aerthus in The Nether Realms, in a small hamlet called Diddlebury. Here, our hero, Smidgeon, a silly boy of but twelve, is coming-of-age for his first lesson in live combat against what his father has convinced him are the “deadly” grumblebutts.

It should be noted that grumblebutts are neither evil nor essentially deadly. They are merely green, toothy, fat-bodied, thin-limbed, squat humanoid creatures that offend the eyes and happen to be in overstock supply at the murky edge of the forest adjoining the saethern border of Diddlebury, which, in turn, has become the starter “training ground”. They derive their name from their tendency to grumble a great deal and the fact that under their loincloth belts in back...their butts sag. Full disclosure: These are really a sad and people-fearing lot who would rather be left alone. Most unfortunately for the grumblebutt kind here, however, is the ease with which they can be made into “safe” combat training fodder for the coming-of-age youth in Diddlebury.

Smidgeon is given his first taste of battle in a small fenced area where he is pitted against a single grumblebutt. Smidgeon is armed with, well...two arms...but he also wields a short sword in his right hand and a shield over his left arm. Taking up the ready stance, his combat trainers release the grumblebutt as Smidgeon's love interest, the fiery red-haired young Pollyfina comes into view.

Smidgeon is smitten through the heart by her beauty as surely as only a true bolt from Cupid himself could. With a sigh of enamoration he stands straight and, clearly distracted, tilts his head with a smile curling up across his lips as his gaze meets Pollyfina's sparkling azure eyes. Pollyfina comes to the wooden fence "perimeter" to be closer to Smidgeon, and his expression goes goofy as Pollyfina holds his gaze. Smidgeon's limbs drop to his side in complete relaxation and his armaments drop at his feet as his google-eyes are entranced with Pollyfina.

The dim-witted grumblebutt needs no other sign than this to see its only opportunity to live, and pounces upon the sword and shield. As the creature runs our hero through, his google-eyes take a whole new expression, and Smidgeon is smitten yet again, in quite another way.

Wait! Smidgeon was our hero...the grumblebutt runs him through...what in the...? Ah! Okay! Pollyfina, our now heroine, cries a wail of bloodthirsty rage and, hurdling the fence, charges the dumbfounded grumblebutt. The grumblebutt turns and, for the first time, notices Pollyfina. It is immediately entranced by her red locks and drops the armaments to reach for the silky strands. As Pollyfina arrives before the creature, she deftly brings down her hands to grasp the combat items by their respective handles and in a fluid motion rising forward impales the grumblebutt on the sword.

It is thus that Pollyfina reaches level two, and Smidgeon drops to level zero. Pollyfina is about to have a new and very real problem, however, as combat art is forbidden to the young ladies of Diddlebury in this world...yet...there is no going back. Pollyfina has tasted blood. Grumblebutt blood, by the way, is nasty. Pollyfina has experienced combat...and yet another tenet of the Diddlebury decrees states that once set upon a profession, none may alter the course of the apprentice.

It takes some time and deliberation among the elders of the hamlet, but in the end, the decision is clear. Pollyfina is to be apprenticed to the Sergeant-at-Arms as the first ever female squire. Only a day after the decision is made final and announced, Pollyfina reports to the Sergeant-at-Arms at the training grounds to “continue” her training.

Chapter 2: Practical Matters

“The first thing we need to do with you,” says the Sergeant-at-Arms to Pollyfina, “is get you fitted with the proper arms and armor. I’ve never trained a girl in the combat arts. Indeed, no one has. That’s why you were assigned as my squire, no doubt...to learn from the best.” He looks at her with a wink and a smile, adding: “Although I mayhap be a mite biased. Now...where in Diddleham-?”

“Diddlebury,” Pollyfina corrects him.

“What?” asks the Sergeant-at-Arms, not used to being spoken back at by a girl or a squire.

“Beg pardon, Sir. It’s Diddlebury,” she replies.

“Yes...well...where in Diddlebury is your tailor?” he asks, brushing off both his and her faux pas. The good Sergeant had come from the province’s capitol city when he received the missive assigning Pollyfina to him and had decided to take up local quarter to train her. Pollyfina leads him the way, and in short order the tailor is busy taking measurements.

“I will need all of those written down,” the Sergeant tells the tailor, referring to the measurements. With a nod, the tailor never breaks stride. Pollyfina notices that the measuring tape being used is thick and wonders why the Sergeant wants to overestimate her size. Then she notices for every single measurement, the tailor scribbles down

two entries after glancing at both sides of the tape. *It must give both inner and outer measurements. For what, though?*

Pollyfina doesn't ask her wondering aloud. She figures when the time is right, she will find out. When the tailor has finished poking and prodding her and taking measurements of seemingly every inch of her in what was beginning to feel like endless fashion, the Sergeant is given a scrawled copy of the measurements and asks directions to the local smithy. A short walk later, he begins overwhelming the smithy with details of how he wants her shield and armor made.

"That's going to cost a pretty sum of goldens!" blurts the smithy. "I don't have the titanore you need for the metal none neither."

"I will supply the materials," says the Sergeant. The smithy's face lights up.

"You...you have real titanore? I get to work...with real titanore?!"

"Shhhh!" admonishes the Sergeant, glancing about worriedly at first, then relaxing as he realizes the blunder has not caught any public interest. "Yes," the Sergeant now replies curtly, using one hand under the smithy's chin to help close a mouth now gaping in awe. The smithy, still beaming if no longer gaping, turns to Pollyfina.

"Miss, I'm going to make you the finest and best shield and armor I've ever made!" he announces. Pollyfina blushes.

"Here is your down payment," says the Sergeant as he drops a sack of silverbits on the smithy's table. "You get the rest when I have approved your craftsmanship fully. Now, Armorer...point me to the weaponsmith."

That'd be me partner in business. It's a small hamlet. We share the forges. Makes things easier."

"I see. And...where is he?"

"Be along anytime now."

The weaponsmith arrives and the Sergeant-at-Arms again goes into detail about the weapon to be crafted for Pollyfina.

“I want the guard to enclose around the grip, like this.” He shows the smithy his own sword. He dictates the length of the blade and handle and, again, insists it be fashioned from titanore he will provide. The second smithy looks to the first, who nods with a wide toothy grin and holds up his sack of money. “Er...I’m sorry,” the Sergeant goes on, “That’s the down payment for everything...to be split among you as you see fit. You will, however, each get the prices you have asked when done to our satisfaction.” At this, the first smithy seems a tad taken aback, but shrugs it off.

“How soon do you think they will have it finished?” Pollyfina asks excitedly.

“Too soon,” replies the Sergeant. “We will need to fit you with some steelen armor in the meantime.”

Why did you not just choose a steelen make for my custom armor?” Pollyfina asks.

“You shall see,” replies the Sergeant. When they return to the Diddlebury training grounds, the Sergeant sizes her up with some small-framed piecemeal steelen armor he had brought in anticipation of this eventuality. As she gets fully clad, it is hard to move. They decide to ditch the upper sleeves and gauntlets, then the leggings and the boots. The breastplate works, for Pollyfina’s figure at twelve is still very boyish, as is the plate’s design. The helmet is clumsy and, it’s decided, must go too. In the end, Pollyfina has just that...a boy’s steelen breastplate. The Sergeant gives her a short sword and a sturdy shield.

“Well?” she asks, anticlimactically.

“You look every bit the scrawny squire part!” he belts out with a smile...stifling a chuckle.

“I hope I get my real armor soon!” she announces with a pout.

“And I hope they take their time and get it right.” Pollyfina thinks at first that perhaps the Sergeant enjoys seeing her like this. Then she thinks better of it and realizes he is right.

Chapter 3: The Excitement

“For your first real lesson in danger.” Says the Sergeant-at-Arms, “I have planned graet excitement!”

“Oh, yes?” asks Pollyfina. “What is it? Some slow-moving, bloodthirsty creature for me to best?”

“You catch on quick. It is best to train you early on with danger that is more easily dispatched. Only when one has a sense for self-defense in an easy arena should one step things up to a livelier pace.”

“Then I’m not sure how exciting this will be.”

“Oh! You wait! Your opponent today is such an exciting creature that it has been given that very name for its species: the excitement!”

“I’m literally going to fight the excitement?”

“An excitement,” he corrects her.

“Okay. Take me to the training grounds.” Together they walk and, as they arrive at the training grounds, there before Pollyfina on a stool sits a creature that moves like a three-toed sloth and resembles a cross between a sloth and a lemur.

“Oh! It’s so cute!” Surely you can’t expect me to dispatch such a creature as this?”

“I know you will. Now...go face the excitement!” Hesitantly, Pollyfina moves to do as bidden. She isn’t at all sure what to make of this whole seemingly farcical situation. As she approaches the creature, it doesn’t move in any apprehensive manner. It doesn’t bare any teeth, hiss, show claws, spit poison...just sits and stares at her and seems to smile a warm, friendly smile as she approaches.

“Ready your sword!” commands the Sergeant. Pollyfina looks back at him with a scowl. “Just do it! What harm can it do to be ready?” Pollyfina gives this a thought and shrugs. What harm indeed? This was not at all exciting, nor what she expected, but she draws her sword as commanded. *It’s not as though I must use it just because it’s drawn. I’ll play his little game, then let the poor, innocent creature go.*

She draws very near to the seemingly hapless creature and as she does, its eyes open wide with a loving gaze that melts her heart. Suddenly, Pollyfina is being entranced by the creature and her heart rate begins to rise. It’s as if she’s suddenly racing through a series of non-stop events in her mind. She can see herself dodging in and out of boulders running down a mountainside in an avalanche, racing through an obstacle course of traps in a dungeon cavern, coming within inches of being crushed by the club of a hulking monster...her thoughts are racing through one life threatening scenario after another and as real as though she were there, yet no longer beknown to her mind, she is physically standing still. She tries to blink. She remembers this all began with the gaze of the excitement, and figures if she can only break the trance for a second...but she can’t!

“I can’t handle all this excitement!” she manages to state aloud, then adds, “The excitement is killing me!” With this last pronouncement, seeing no other way clear, she raises her sword, and vanquishes the foe...lopping its head clear off. As the Sergeant-at-Arms approaches, Pollyfina is still breathing heavily from her dangerously induced high pulse rate. Pollyfina falls to the ground in exhaustion, visibly shaken, and drenched in sweat.

“I think you’ve had enough excitement for one day.” States the Sergeant-at-Arms. Pollyfina gives a faint nod before passing out. If nothing else, Pollyfina learned to trust her trainer from that day forward.

Chapter 4: Creature Biology I

The next morning, as Pollyfina breaks fast, her Sergeant trainer is nowhere around. She goes to the

training ground to seek him out once finished eating.

He is waiting there with a domesticated dog by his side.

“Good morrow, Young Apprentice!” he calls.

“Goodly morrow, Sir Shecklin. I trust today’s lesson is to be less exciting.”

“Aye, Pollyfina.” he replies. “Do you see this here mongrel?”

“Clearly. I hope this is no test like yesterday.”

“Not at all.” states Sir Shecklin. “Have a seat on yon stump.”

Pollyfina sits at the stump nearby he indicates. As she looks on, he kneels beside the dog, a hound, and he draws back the flappy skin hanging over its mouth to reveal the canine’s canines.

“Dogs, Pollyfina, are basically wolves that we humankind have trained to obey. They are tamed wolves. The teeth you see here, on a wolf, are called fangs.”

He releases the mouth and lifts a paw.

“Now. Do you see these?” he indicates the row of sharp claws at the end of the paw. She nods. “These claws are relatively harmless to you and I... but put them on a wild animal...not necessarily just a wolf, but a bear, a draconis, anything, and they are a weapon for that creature.” He releases the paw, and grasps the dog’s tail, holding it firm yet causing the dog no pain. “And as long as we are making the connection, imagine this innocent tail designed to keep flies from this hound’s behind representing the tail on a large creature, compared to which, you are a fly. Do you take my point?”

Pollyfina nods. “Every creature great and small has a natural defense mechanism. ‘Monsters’ are mostly just creatures which are still dangerous to men, usually for their size or ferocity although some have learned to think...even speak. Some are magical as well. Still, yesterday’s lesson ties into today’s. Remember that

every wild creature has its defenses, and you won't go wrong. For the excitement, its only defense was its gaze, but that was all it needed."

"Don't I know it."

Sir Shecklin nods. "Fighting any creature requires awareness of its weapons: horns, teeth, claws, stingers, poison, gaze, magic, and so on. One of the best ways to win a battle against any monster is to take away its defenses, which, I should add, are its offensive measures as well. If the creature is intelligent, going for the head is often best...unless it's a haedra. Regardless of the creature, if it's natural, the heart is the quickest means of dispatch. Come here and hug this dog."

Pollyfina gladly obliges. "Now, as you feel the soft, welcome warmth of its fur, let your hands roam its ribs of its underbelly and try to find its heartbeat."

Pollyfina did so. "Remember that location. Four-legged creatures the world over have similar placement,

and can be the hardest to fight. They often charge and pounce. It doesn't give time for thought. Be ready to react."

"Yes, Sir." Pollyfina replies.

"You may one day face a draconis. It is laid out the same as if the dog had wings. The difference is that the draconis has protective scales, not soft, fluffy fur."

"So... how do I--"

"With stealth, if you have the advantage of surprise. If not, you must get the angle right. I have heard it said, the best way to a draconis brain is through its eye. Some have ventured to guess that the insides of the beast are softest, but with fire breath, I doubt any draconis would let you in unless you were already being fried."

"So... you don't really know?"

"The draconis is the legend of all beasts: armed and armored all over...and huge! Underneath it all is a skeletal structure, however. Perhaps a tactical strike to

sever the head from the neck at the spine...”

“And how would one accomplish that?”

“Again...it would take the element of surprise.

The draconis would need to be sleeping or very still.

The slayer would have to climb the spine of the beast

from the tip of its tailbone to the base of its skull and

stay right on the bony outcrops to avoid contact with its

scales.”

“Why couldn’t one touch the scales?”

“Draconae have very sensitive skin beneath their

scales. It’s how they know where an attack comes from

when a single scale gets plinked.”

“Aethersta!”

“Yes, indeed! May the goddess help us if such a time

were to come. Now...I have some straw targets. Let us

teach you a thing or two about the bow and bolt.”

Pollyfina and Sir Shecklin spend the day in archery

practice, and she imagines she is shooting the legend-

ary graet waerm draconis Jhaga in the eye. She isn't

faring very well, but the mental imagery makes the

prospect more fun.

“Tomorrow, I think, we shall work on your stealth
and cunning.”

“I thought I was learning how to be a swordfighter,
not a coward.”

“A stealthy swordfighter is a wise swordfighter.
Show me the swordfighter who always announces their
presence, and I'll show you a skeleton in armor.”

Chapter 5: The Bog

Pollyfina awakens the next day well-rested and pre-
pared for another lesson. Oddly enough, she is enjoy-
ing her daily lessons. *Who would have thought? This
adventurer training, it turns out, is fun!* After eating a bowl of oaten meal, Pollyfina sets off to meet Sir Shecklin for
her first day of stealth art. As she approaches the training grounds, she sees Sir Shecklin speaking with an elder
gentleman adorned in robes. *A maegist?* Sir Shecklin seems full of surprises.

“Good morrow, Young Apprentice!” calls Sir

Shecklin in his becoming usual way.

“Goodly morrow, Sir and...?”

“Pollyfina, may I introduce, the good and graet
sorcelror Mawdrin.”

“She has the look!” Mawdrin exclaims with wide
eyes and makes all haste to bow low, dropping even to
one knee. “Miss... Pollyfina. It is an honor!” He adds,
removing his hat, holding it over his heart, head tucked
chin to chest, revealing his rather bald scalp. Pollyfina
and Sir Shecklin exchange looks of surprise. Mawdrin
looks up, then bounds to his feet. “She is the first...The
Bearer of Destiny, The Child of Light! Yet she is all of a
child herself! I can hardly contain my excitement!”

“You have an excitement?” Pollyfina asks.

“No. Not the creature...the welling up inside!”

Pollyfina looks to Sir Shecklin, who merely shrugs sheep-
ishly. He looks to Mawdrin.

“Mawdrin? What--?”

“Not now. Not now. We must train this one with haste! Introduce the lesson!”

Sir Shecklin, having learned the same regard for Mawdrin which Pollyfina now has for her trainer, begins:

“Pollyfina, today I have set before you a short and simple

quest. Come!” He leads her along with Mawdrin to a

murky bog. “Within the dead wood of this area I have

placed a golden chalice. You are to recover it. Be warned,

however; this is no simple undertaking. You must stay

small and vary your movement. You must move quickly

out of lit areas and slowly, surely, plan your path from

the shadows. You must regulate your breathing for

silence...both in and out through the nose. You must be

fleet of foot and your plan must keep you on safe

ground. The bog waters contain sinkholes and not all

that looks like land will support you. You must be care-

ful not to stir the bog waters. This area is relatively safe,

but bog creatures do pop up unannounced from time to time.”

“Um...wow!” responds Pollyfina. “Anything else I should know or you’d like to add?”

“Yes.”

“Graet!” she says, throwing her hands up, “And what might that be?”

“Mawdrin here shall perform necromance to--”

“Neck romance? Now see here--!”

“That’s what they call magic dealing with the dead. He is going to summon up the fallen in the vicinity.”

“The fallen?”

“People have died out here. Mawdrin is going to make them members of the reliving briefly as part of your training. They are the ones you must outmaneuver and avoid with your stealth.”

“But...why don’t I just hack my way in?”

“Because your sword will do you no good against

the reliving. They are made in magic. Your sword is not.”

“Then, shall I leave it here with you, where it is safe?”

“No. You must never part with your weapon. It may save you should a bog creature arise. Besides, on a real quest there shall be none to hold it for you. Even if there were...I would not trust my sword in the hands of another. They may be untrustworthy or turn traitor.”

“Sage advice.” agrees Mawdrin.

“Very well.” sighs Pollyfina. “So, it’s capture the chalice among the reliving?”

“Yes.”

“When do we begin?” she asks. Mawdrin is already working up the summons. In short order, the daed begin to rise within an area of the swampy waters. With them comes a stench which brings water to Pollyfina’s eyes. It is all she can do not to gag, let alone retch at their hideous odor.

Pollyfina deftly takes cover with her back to a nearby
standing husk of grey wood, and peers with one eye
around the trunk. She slides down to a crouched position
and her hand feels around the mossy ground momentar-
ily until it lands on a stone. Rising gently into a ready
stance, she hurls the stone over her left shoulder to
hear it splash into the water. Of the roughly twenty
bodies Mawdrin had brought up in the area, ten bit on
the sound of the decoy. Pollyfina makes her way deeper
into the bog. Well...not deeper down, but...you get me.

As she makes her way from one mud plot to another, she plods carefully. A few times she feels suction at one
of her feet and rapidly repositions. Still, the murk
has oozed into her boots and made the whole exercise
even more unpleasant.

As she hides, crouched near a fallen log, the wind
changes direction. The reliving that had fallen for the
decoy suddenly seem to have an awareness of a
change. They look in Pollyfina's direction. *They*

can smell me. The dread at the realization is nearly unbearable. Pollyfina rolls over the log and into the mud. A thought now flashes across her mind. *I've been going about this all wrong. Sir Shecklin said stay low.*

She begins to slither on her belly like a large yet silent salamander. Water and mud have seeped and soaked into her armor all over now. Her face and hair are slicked with the muck. Rolling softly and smoothly onto her back, she looks back to find that the reliving have lost her scent. *Thank Aethersta!*

Then she hears it. A loud snapping sound comes from her right. She chances a glance to see a spray of water droplets. Something has just snatched a meal. From nearly the same spot, large bubbles rise with a burbling sound. Pollyfina glances to her left. There is a land bar she can back her way up to. *Gently.* She is looking straight up from her back at the bog wood rising

around her to the sunlit sky. *Alright. I'm moving. I'm surviving. I'm actually doing quite well, I think. Now... where's that blasted chalice? I'll never find it laying on my back like this, of course!* Pollyfina stands up slowly in clear view. The reliving do not regard her any differently than as one of their own...for now.

I must move as they do. She studies them as she goes, being sure to keep her head on a slow swivel until...*There! Ha! I knew I'd find you!* Half hidden in a hole of a dead wood Pollyfina sees it...the base of the chalice sticking out. She makes her way to its spot across the mire. She reaches to grasp the chalice only to find it wedged in place. Carefully, she shifts her feet for leverage and tries to loosen the chalice.

As it slips from its hiding place, the chalice adds just enough to Pollyfina's weight that the ground beneath her gives a lurch. She is almost instantly being sucked under and swallowed up by the bog land. It is

all she can do not to scream in her surprise. Water

rushes over her head and Pollyfina nearly loses hope. She manages one last gasp for air as she goes under. It is peaceful, drifting somewhere between the unknown depth below and the air still very likely close above. Without struggling, Pollyfina arches her back and lets her air-filled lungs rise. Her face crests above the water, yet she is careful only to relieve her strained lungs by breathing through her nose. Oh! But the stench! With a silent propelling kick under the water, she eases herself back to a mudbank. *Now. Let's get out of here!*

Pollyfina finds herself wending her way back to

Sir Shecklin and Mawdrin, who have observed her guile

and tenacity with great admiration. As she leaves the bog,

the reliving drop back into the water.

“Here!” she cries out. “Here is your chalice!”

“You have done exceedingly well, Young Miss.”

says Sir Shecklin. “Now, let us get you bathed and

warmed by a fire.”

As the three sit around the fire, they sup on a

fine meal of succulent roast boar and dragon fruit.

“I think you shall like tomorrow’s lesson better

than today’s” Sir Shecklin chuckles.

“Why? What is tomorrow’s lesson?” asks Polly-

fina with a scowl.

“Have patience. I know today was not fun. Not everything you will learn will come as the result of fun.”

Pollyfina thinks on this. It is true enough. This work will always have its share of inconveniences. Recouping after an unpleasant encounter such as today’s might become more the rule than the exception.

Chapter 6: Flamebrand

The next morning comes with its usual soft sunrise. The rays meet Pollyfina’s eyes to wake her gently. She rises as she usually does, raring to start a new day. After her morning meal, she makes her way as is fast becoming habit, to the training grounds. Mawdrin is there alone.

“Goodly morrow, Fair Pollyfina.” he says, bowing low.

“And unto you, Good Maegist Mawdrin.” she

greet him back with a curtsy. "Where is Sir Shecklin?

He seemed eager to mention today's lesson yesternight."

"Indeed." laughs Mawdrin. "He knew you would favor this one a mite."

"He did say that." she agrees.

"I think you will, too...and not just because today I am your trainer." Mawdrin reveals.

"You?" Pollyfina asks with a raise of one eyebrow.

"Yes, me." he says, straightening his posture and drawing a sword he wears sheathed at his side. Pollyfina suddenly realizes that this is off kilter. Mawdrin doesn't carry a sword. "Allow me to introduce you, Pollyfina, to Flamebrand." Pollyfina draws her own sword, standing at the ready.

"I'll thank you not to, impostor!" she cries.

Mawdrin hesitates, "Wha--? Oh! No! No, no, no." he laughs, suddenly understanding her confusion.

"Pollyfina, I am showing you your weapon for today's lesson. This is the magical blade dubbed Flamebrand."

He sets the sword back in its sheath and presents it to her sheathed to alleviate her doubts. She accepts the offered weapon without offering hers back in case this is a trick...donning it on the hip opposite her other sword. "I'm glad you are careful, though it may make today's training more difficult." notes Mawdrin.

"Now...draw the blade and regard it." Pollyfina does. It looks like many other swords she had seen.

"What's so special about it? I mean...given it has the moniker it does, I would guess it is a flame spell sword, correct?"

"Correct indeed!" he smiles. "Could you tell by looking?"

"No. It looks very plain, actually."

"Look at it again." Mawdrin instructs. Pollyfina does.

"What am I--?" Pollyfina begins to ask as the edges of the sword's blade begin to glow the color of hot metal. Her eyes go wide...I mean...wide open...not

wide apart. “Wow!” She looks up to ask Mawdrin if he

sees it too, and notices that he is making it happen. Mawdrin stops mouthing a chant, lowers the pointy fingers he has been aiming askew at the blade, and the glow fades. Mawdrin smiles at Pollyfina’s look.

“Did you notice how it was only at the very cutting edge that the blade glowed?” he asks. Pollyfina nods with a great grin. “Some magical weapons are crafted clumsily. On most blades such as this, the whole flat of the blade would glow, too.”

“Wouldn’t that be preferable?” asks Pollyfina.

“It depends. Would you rather have a blade you can’t even chance touching yourself, or a blade you can push against the flat of if you needed to defensively? Swords were made to pierce and slice, with the flat being useful to subdue. The fire enchantment is intended to make the sword more offensive, not less defensive. This is but one advantage of the enchantment, however.”

“And... the others?”

“Well, for one...you’ve not noted the weight.”

“I see.” she responds, swinging the light-as-a-feather blade. “Why...it’s balance is superb!”

“Now you’re getting it.” he agrees. “And,” he says with emphasis, “a magical weapon can damage magical creatures.”

“Like the reliving?”

“Exactly like the reliving.” he says with a smile.

“Now...come with me.” he concludes, and walks her to the bog. Once there, Pollyfina is only too quick to guess today’s lesson.

“Am I going to rescue the chalice against the reliving again...but this time armed to fight them?” Mawdrin simply smiles and nods. Pollyfina does a jig. Mawdrin summons up the fallen again.

“These creatures,” he says, “are called brittle men. They require little to destroy them and, as all reliving, are weak to fiery enchantments.” Pollyfina looks at him with a smile, then looks at the bog with glee. Mawdrin

notices Pollyfina's smile and then with a grin of his own

says, "Oh! And be sure to have fun!"

Pollyfina races ahead with a yell. She isn't going to use the least bit of stealth. She is all about "rescuing" the chalice in as little time as possible. Of course, she is careful to follow her sure-footed path from the day before. She doesn't want to be swallowed again. That was the worst. The brittle men trudge and sludge toward her and their death as she makes quick work of dispatching them...sometimes two at a time!

Pollyfina sees the large bubbles rise with a burble again, this time right in her path. She looks at her blade, then looks at the water and forms a hypothesis. Dipping the tip of the blade in the water causes it to boil. The blade hisses as steam rises from the very points where the edges meet the water. *Just as I thought.*

Come get me, Mister Denizen. As if it can hear her thoughts, the denizen approaches to a point, then feels the heat and beats a hasty retreat.

Pollyfina lifts Flamebrand from the murk and
glances around. *Now then, Dear Chalice, where did they
hide you today?* She scans around in a sweeping man-
ner. *There you are!* The chalice is dangling, wedged
betwixt two branches of a still standing yet long dead
tree. Pollyfina looks at Flamebrand, then looks at the
branches. They are within range to cut, barely.

Pollyfina sheaths Flamebrand and unsheathes her
non-magical sword. She cuts the branches with a one-
handed swing, and catches the falling chalice still necked
in the “V” they form. Sheathing her sword, she uses
both hands to free the chalice from the branches’ grasp.

Mawdrin looks on in astonishment. Pollyfina has
shown what he believed to be more scrutiny than he
would have guessed. As she walks triumphantly out of
the test area, there are no brittle men remaining for him to put back to rest.

“How was that?” she asks with a cocksure grin.

“Commendable!” he replies. “How did you know

the sword would react so with the bog water?" he

questions with a tilt of his head.

"I didn't. I had to see. Once I tried it, it was clear to me how things would work out."

"And... why didn't you use Flamebrand to cut the chalice free?"

"I had a hunch." she replies, drawing Flamebrand. She steps carefully to a nearby tree and touches it with the blade's edge. In a moment, the whole of the tree is ablaze. "That's why." she says, pointing Flamebrand at the tree. "I wanted the chalice back intact, not as a melted mess."

"Sir Shecklin was right!"

"About?"

"About you! Scrutiny, discretion, honor...natural-born instinct!" Now Mawdrin dances a jig until he stops, rather suddenly, with a "Drat!"

"What's wrong?"

"I owe Sir Shecklin a silverbit!"

"Why? Ahhhh! Wait! You bet against me?!"

“A harmless bet.”

“Ugh!” Pollyfina stomps off.

“Leave...the sword!” Mawdrin calls after her, somewhat sheepishly. Pollyfina drops the scabbard holding Flamebrand as she makes her way, angrily yet dejectedly, back to last night’s campfire spot. Seated there waiting is Sir Shecklin. As she approaches, he is grinning; but as she nears and he senses her emotion, his grin fades.

“You...failed?” he asks.

“No!” Pollyfina looks at him angrily. “You failed! Where were you?!”

“I was...right here. Mawdrin had things well in hand, I thought. Magic is more his thing.”

“Or did you not want to be accused of helping me so you could win your stupid bet?!”

Sir Shecklin’s head falls as Pollyfina’s eyes blaze at him.

“He told you about that, did he? Braggart! I’m
sorry, Pollyfina. I didn’t mean to--”

“Didn’t mean to what? Hurt me?” Sir Shecklin
manages a slight nod. “Well, you did! You hurt me be-
cause you bet at all!”

“Pollyfina, I was just so sure...and Mawdrin was so
unsure...I thought it would teach him.” Pollyfina gives
the situation a short thought.

“Hmmm...” she says. “Well...I guess you did that!”
she adds with a smile and a playful push on his chest.
Sir Shecklin, taken off guard, falls back off the log he has
been sitting upon. He rights himself in further sur-
prise. “I won?!”

Pollyfina glares.

“I mean...of course you succeeded! I knew you
would!” Pollyfina tries to stifle a laugh but her cheeks
puff out and then she lets loose. As she and Sir
Shecklin exchange belly laughs, Mawdrin ambles up.

“Yes, yes. Have your fun!” he says, tossing Sir Shecklin a silverbit. Pollyfina catches it in the air and then everybody laughs.

“Serves us right!” says Sir Shecklin to Mawdrin.

“Indeed.” says Mawdrin, adding, “But tomorrow will be a day of rest, I think...so...Miss Pollyfina, your next lesson begins here, tonight.” Pollyfina has learned not to be too inquisitive about future lessons and, although she will ask again, doesn’t this time.

Chapter 7: Aerthan Time

As the sun begins to set, they meet up again at the campground and light a fire. Mawdrin points to the setting sun and begins to quiz Pollyfina.

“What map direction is that?”

“The sun sets to the Waest.”

“And rises?”

“In the Aest.”

“Good! Now...as we face the setting sun...what
map direction is to your left?”

“Saeth?”

“Are you asking me, or telling me?”

Pollyfina tries to find a clue to confirm what truly
had been a guess.

“Yes! It’s Saeth to the forest!” She smiles.

“So then the last map direction--”

“Is Naerth! Easy!”

“I’m glad you’re good with map directions now.
You need to remember how they work so you don’t get
lost. You won’t be in Diddlebury forever.”

“Thank Aethersta!”

“Yes, and we shall get to more about her shortly,
too. Now...this realm is like many others.”

“This realm?”

“Yes, My Dear, this realm.” The sun has now
completely set and the sky is rapidly turning jet

black with only points of light, the stars, breaking its
uniformity. “Look out there.” Mawdrin points at the
sky. “There are other places far away from here. Some
are out there. Some are distanced from us by time.
Still others are in different space and time than ours
altogether. Here, where we live, are the Nether
Realms.”

“So... there are other realms...on other worlds?”

“Precisely. Now...I would tell you more of these
other places, but...you need only concern yourself with
this land in this realm. It has been foreseen.”

“This land?”

“This island continent...Aerthus. Have you seen
this continent on a map?”

“I have. It resembles a crescent moon.”

“Like that?” he points at the moon.

“Yes.” says Pollyfina, realizing this was no accident-
ally timed lesson.

“That moon in particular comes once every thirty days.”

“Every month.” says Pollyfina.

“Twelve times in a year.”

“This lesson is odd.” says Pollyfina. “Why--?”

“Because,” interrupts Mawdrin, “Aerthan time is special...magical...perfect.”

“Perfect?”

“Yes. Now, allow me to explain, please.” Pollyfina clamps her mouth shut. “As I said, ‘This realm is like many others.’ The others not on this world, however, have imperfect time.” Pollyfina wants to interrupt, but trusts the perfect and imperfect discrepancy will get explained soon. “Their time includes months with differing amounts of days and the occasional year with an odd day or three added or cut. Our time--”

“I get it. Our time is perfect because every year is three hundred sixty days, every month is five weeks,

every week is six days..." she chimes in.

"Yes, on the larger scale of calendar time. Now let me tell you more." he says, taking out a map of Aerthus.

"We have established that you have seen this, or one like it, before." he takes the map and rolls it around so the Waest edge meets the Aest edge and Aerthus faces out at them. "Maps are flat to make them easy to look at and draw and write on...but the world is not like a map. It is more like this."

"What--?"

"Tut tut! No interrupting!" he pauses. She nods apologetically for him to go on. "Now... Sir Shecklin, please hold the map in place here as I have it." He does. Mawdrin pulls a clear glass marble out of his pocket. "Now...imagine this is the sun in the sky. Sir Shecklin, spin the map a bit keeping the seam straight up and down. Do you see, Pollyfina?" Pollyfina notices that as Sir Shecklin spins the map, the sun is first directly over Aest Aerthus, then middle Aerthus, then

Waest Aerthus, and then wraps around to Aest again.

“I... I do see.” see says in a fascinated tone. “We are on a round world that spins!” Mawdrin looks pleased with himself.

“Now,” he addresses Sir Shecklin, “tilt the map as it addresses the sun.” Sir Shecklin does. Mawdrin looks to Pollyfina, who scrunches up her nose and tilts her head.

“That’s not right.” she says. “If the map gets tilted like that, then part of Aerthus is closer to the sun, and the other end farther away. It’s not like that.”

“You’re right!” says Mawdrin. “Other realms have something called seasons which occur due to hot and cold changes in their climate when the sun is nearer or farther. This also affects the amount of sunlight in their days.”

“But our days always have the same...climate. Sun up and sundown are always twelve hours apart exactly.”

“Perfect, yes?” Pollyfina nods and smiles. “Now,

look at this.” he says, setting the marble down and draw-ing an ellipse around it in the dirt with a stick. “The marble is still the sun. Imagine the ellipse around it is the path our world goes around, or orbits, it.”

“It can’t be!” Pollyfina spits out.

“Why not?” Mawdrin asks with a knowing smile.

“Because again, that would make us close to the sun sometimes and farther others and make changes in climate.”

“You’re right! Every other known world has this kind of orbit. Ours looks like this.” He moves the marble to a fresh spot, then draws a circle around it. “A perfect circle.” Pollyfina scrunches up her face again.

“But, if every other known world does that...?” she trails off.

“Why does ours do this?” Mawdrin finishes her question. She nods and looks to him for the answer.

“Magic!” comes his reply. “This world and its realms came into being entirely out of magic!” Pollyfina fur-

rows her brow, trying to understand what this means.

“You wonder what this means?” Mawdrin asks. She

nods. “It means everything, and nothing. It means

we are in a magical place which will be bound by the laws

of the powers that bind it into being. It means the goal

for which this world was built, perfection, must be

striven toward.” Pollyfina looks at him questioningly.

“You mean perfect peace. Perfect...good?”

Mawdrin nods.

“Such was the will of Aethersta...yet...there is still

strife here...still evil. Magical evil.”

“Then--”

“The scale must tip to perfection. One way...or...”

They all look down in a moment of silence. Then, in unison, they look up at the stars.

“Aethersta?” Pollyfina asks.

“Yes.” Mawdrin nods. “She was unrivaled in

power and sought to order the sum of all realms, but,

some believe, spread herself too thin merely with ours.

Still, though she vanished, our world has attained many signs that she had succeeded here...and the utterance of her name, it is widely held, still garners favor from her as though she is not gone, but all around us, and still powerful to magically grant the needs of the desperate.”

“I believe in Aethersta.” Pollyfina says.

“Then perhaps you have a silent and powerful ally.

For now, all anyone knows for sure is this...if Aethersta is still...there...she is quiet...waiting...and letting events unfold as they will themselves to.”

A wood log in the fire gives a loud crack and everyone jumps; they turn to one another with smiles and chuckles, and the conversation turns to pleasant banter before bedtime.

Chapter 8: Mite

After a weekly day of rest was observed, Pollyfina ate, then headed to the training grounds. Sir Shecklin

was there, waiting in a ridiculous costume.

“Today, you will fight Mite a mite.”

“Mite?”

“Do you like it?” he swept his arms across himself

to indicate his costumed persona ‘Mite’.

“Er...what is it?”

“Just a silly getup. At its base is a normal suit of

armor. We are going to spar today, you and me. You need

to know how to face a human opponent. Guarden!”

“Garden?” Pollyfina looked at some nearby flowers.

“Not that kind of garden. Guarden! It means, ‘Get ready!’”

“Ah!” Pollyfina took a ready stance.

Sir Shecklin yelled out,

“MITESMITESMITESMITE!” and charged her. Polly-

fina dropped her ready stance in confusion and “Mite”

had to swerve to avoid injuring his confused apprentice.

“What are you doing?” he called out.

“I should ask you the same thing,” she replied.

“Look...the enemy isn’t going to quietly fight you.

They will say all manner of things to throw you off...

funny, stupid, threatening, belittling, enraging, even

something they merely find self-empowering. You can’t

let anything steal your steel and still your blade. You need

to maintain composure.”

“It’s hard not to laugh at you like that, though.”

“That’s partly the point. You need to...not laugh.”

“And what was that ridiculous thing you were shouting?”

“Mite’s mights might smite!”

“A little alliterative, eh? And what does ‘mitesmitesmitesmite’ mean?”

“Mite’s,” he pointed to himself, “mights”, he flexed his biceps, “might”, he held up a pointy finger, “smite!”

he smashed a fist into his other palm.

“Ah! Now I get it...Al-mite-ey Mite.” she said with a

snicker.

“We shall see who is laughing when this lesson is over!” he retorted.

“Mite” showed Pollyfina how to block with both sword and shield. Her form improved quickly, though not so quickly that her arms were spared a grueling workout. They ended up tired, achy, and limp at her sides. When she could no longer block, he taught her to dodge until she seemed nearly spent. It was the hardest workout she had had in her life, and she was using muscles she didn’t even know she had.

“Had enough?” Mite asked, grinning.

“Never!” she spat, breathing heavily, seated on a rock and glaring up at him with her head still tilted slightly down. The effect of the look was greatly unnerving. Mite knew she had nothing left physically, but she clearly had spirit, drive, determination, a... calling, if you will. She was thirsty two ways.

“Here. Have a drink.” he proffered her some water.

“Is this my enemy, ‘Mite’ offering?” she asked.

“No. It’s your sergeant-at-arms trainer. You look almost flush. It will do you no good to continue.”

“Then what do we do? The lesson can’t be over!”

Sir Shecklin smiled. It was time to quench her second thirst...for knowledge.

“It isn’t. Sit there and watch me.” He showed her all sorts of melee combat maneuvers against a training dummy made of wood. As he showed her each maneuver he would stop mid-strike to point out weaknesses in his attack she could take advantage of if she were still facing him. Her eyes darted to find what he might point out next, trying to get a feel for it. *How is it that my hardest and stupidest lesson is the one I am most enthralled by yet? I simply know that I must know this!*

“Why do men fight?” she asked, suddenly. Sir Shecklin was thrown by this question and looked at her

quizzically. “I mean...you’re teaching me how to fight

other people now. Why can’t we--?”

“Oh, Dear Pollyfina,” he said with sudden understanding and knowing tenderness. She lowered her head.

“if only any realm of the physical were like that. Your heart, spirit, honor, and morals are so pure.” He went to her, cupped his hand under her chin, and raised her face to see a tear streak down her cheek. He looked her in one eye, then the other, then his gaze faded out to look her in both. He could see she was fighting inside. “You want peace very badly. I can see it. Mayhap here, with the help of Aethersta, you can have it.” For a while, they sat; then Pollyfina seemed determined to move on.

“I will see you again tomorrow?” she asked.

“Yes, and I will see you through this.” he promised.

Chapter 9: On Horseback

The next morning, upon completion of her ritual, Pollyfina finds Sir Shecklin seated upon a horse and holding the reins of another alongside him.

“Do you like it?” he inquires.

“Do I--? This...horse...is for me?”

“She has seen a graet deal of battle and will not spook easily. This is important. Never trust a horse either before or after its time. It needs to be seasoned and hardy. An older horse will serve well only if it is hale and has learned a trick or two about avoiding scrapes. Do not, therefore, grow too attached.”

“Aember,” Pollyfina says.

“What?” queries Sir Shecklin.

“I’m going to name her Aember...the color of her coat. She’s beautiful.” Pollyfina remarks breathily, in awe.

“Yes.” says Sir Shecklin, shaking his head. “You did

hear what I just said, didn't you?" he adds expectantly.

"Don't get too attached." she repeats in a mesmerized fashion. Sir Shecklin snaps his fingers, and Pollyfina turns her focus and attention to him.

"Stay with me now." he admonishes her. "Hooves," he begins, lifting a foot on Aember to show Pollyfina, "shod with precision metal handiwork." He releases. "Legs and haunches," he indicates them, "strong...not withered." Next, indicating each in turn as he names them, "saddle, reins, bridle, bit...the equipment of a rider. Make certain to check them frequently. Keep them in good repair. With time, you may be able to ride with less or even none of them...although I don't recommend doing so in combat."

"Combat?"

"Yes, Pollyfina, combat. This will be your horse to ride into battle upon, not simply a pet or mode of transport. This isn't a pony. It's a courser without the armor,

and it will suit and serve you well. Now...note the stirrups hanging from the saddle. They are key to riding high in the saddle with the kind of balance that fosters confidence you will not fall whilst engaging enemies on horseback. It is a very clumsy thing to try to fight when riding bareback.”

“Bareback?”

“When you are attuned to...Aember...then you will be able to ride her like the wind without a saddle. Doing so should be limited to leisure rides and breakneck getaways.”

“Getaways?”

“You’re not going to win every battle. Sometimes you’ll need to retreat, rest, and rethink before giving another go.”

“Aember,” Pollyfina says, slipping back into a trance.

“Yes, well...I can see this may finally be a challenging lesson for you. Let’s start slow.”

Sir Shecklin spends the rest of the day teaching Pollyfina not to stand behind Aember, how to address Aember from the side to mount her, and how to sit in the saddle as he leads Aember around the fenced grounds. At lesson's end, Pollyfina says a lengthy good-night to Aember, hugging her, petting her, and listening to her heart.

“Ah, yes! One more thing...” throws in Sir Shecklin, “Listen to the strength of that heartbeat and once more note the location. This is the vital organ of your friend. Never let her fall to your enemy.”

The words hit Pollyfina hard. Aember was to be a silent companion so that Pollyfina didn't have to be alone out on the road, a comrade in battle, and a source of swift transport. She was vital...and she was a responsibility. Again, Pollyfina had to think that Sir Shecklin has outdone himself. *What will he teach me tomorrow?*

Chapter 10: On Magic (Day 3 Week 2)

As it turns out, Sir Shecklin teaches Pollyfina nothing this next day. Mawdrin does. Sir Shecklin is otherwise occupied checking in with the armorer and preparing other affairs of Pollyfina's learning.

"To begin, Miss Pollyfina," Mawdrin starts off, "there are a graet many disciplines of magic you should have at least a cursory knowledge of."

"Why?"

"Because magic has a way of making those who wield it powerful, and power corrupts many."

"Magic hasn't corrupted you."

"I did not learn the mystic arts of sorcelry to become powerful. In truth, my mastery of magic came out of need and persistence. It was my worst subject, but I excelled at my other studies, so...at times, out of boredom, I worked on the challenge of magic to make it my strength." he says, drifting off into nostalgia as he stares into the middle ground. Then, catching himself, continues, "But that is

not the story of the maegists you will encounter. They are power hungry and thirst for dominance. They will use tricks and forces you must become familiar with to try to make you serve them, or remove you from their way.”

Pollyfina shudders. “You will need to know the magic of those creatures you encounter which have spell casting ability as well.” Pollyfina considers this a moment. It makes perfect sense. She nods.

“The most important type of magic you must be familiar with is harming magic. This is, well, anything that can hurt you: fireballs, lightning, magic darts, and such.”

“How do I defend myself?”

“The good news is that most attacking spells like these, looking to do physical damage, manifest themselves in a physical way. They can be blocked or dodged.”

“What about lightning? That’s got to be awfully hard to block or dodge!”

“Yes. Sir Shecklin and I have the solution for that. Never fear. You shall be safe. Besides...the more powerful

the spell...such as that...the longer the casting takes.”

“Good.”

“Unless...”

“Unless?! Unless what?!”

“Unless the caster has a magical accelerant. A rod, staff, wand, orb, or other device imbued with magic.”

“So... watch for them to have an accessory.”

“Yes. And remove them from it if you note one.

It may be near impossible to detect. It may even be a ring or amulet they wear. They will have to point or clasp it in those cases, though, so there will again be some telltale sign.”

“Watch them closely.”

“You can never watch a maegist too closely. Just don’t spend all of your time watching or you’ll be toast!”

“Don’t give them an easy target. Got it.”

“Good. The next discipline of magic you need to be Aware of is the opposite: healing magic.”

“I know what that is.”

“Do you?”

“Sure. It’s magic that heals you.”

“Okay, Smarty. Tell me all about it.”

“Erm...”

“It can close cuts, mend bones, expel toxins from a victim, and more. I can give you trinkets for minor healing, but for deeper wounds you will need to seek out a healer. They offer their services for a price. The best can do amazing things.”

“If hurt badly, seek a healer.”

“Yes. Now...summoning magic.”

“Like the necromance?”

“Similar. I called up bodies that existed by adding magical life to them. Summoning brings a creature completely into magical existence.”

“The creature isn’t real?”

“The creature will seem as real as any other, but is

a magical construct. When defeated, it will not slump

into a lifeless heap, but vanish!”

“Deceiving!”

“Yes! And that is the last type of magic we must

discuss...deceiving magic.”

“Magic that misleads.”

“Precisely! Illusions mostly. They can be used to

hide real dangers, such as triggers to traps.”

“Wow! This is a lot!”

“It’s only the heart of combat magic. There are

many other magical things to learn as well...but most

will not be of concern to you: clairvoyance, telekinesis,

teleportation, tempoportation--”

“Tempoportation? I’ve heard of some of those others.

What is tempoportation?”

“Stories often call it time travel, but that’s a

misnomer. Tempoportation is like teleportation with

space and time being reversed in its description. That is...

teleportation is the instantaneous travel across a space...

whereas tempoportation is also instantaneous, but

travels across time in the same space.”

“Instantaneous across time?”

“Yes. Across, not through.”

“So, tempoportation is like a time ‘jump’?”

“Erm...maybe. Your terms are unclear. I think you get it. Anyway, like I said...not in the lessons really. Now, you can tell just how powerful a maegist is by sizing up the spells they use, literally. A powerful mage will use spells that are stronger, last longer, or have larger effects. A really powerful maegist can cast spells with permanence.”

“Beware the big fireball caster.”

“Yes. Now...aside from blocking with your shield or dodging, you will have your suit of armor to absorb some damage and you can use your stealth training to hide or even surprise enemies. While most maegists

are intellectual forces to be reckoned with, you will find
one or two on occasion who you may outsmart...but if
all else fails...there's this." he says, holding out an amulet
on a long chain."

"What's this?"

"A ward."

"Like a medal?"

"Not an award. This is a ward. Warding means fend-
ing off. Keeping at bay. This ward, so long as you wear it,
will keep you safe from many a magical attack. It is the
most powerful ward we have at our disposal...and you
will need it."

Pollyfina takes the amulet and puts it on. "It's
beautiful!"

"Craftsmen of the better things usually want their
work to shine in appearance as well as function. Do not
lose this ward or part with it lightly! Tell no one lest it
be stolen! Its purpose is your safety! Be safe."

Pollyfina nods understanding. At this, she and Mawdrin begin testing the ward and practicing her defenses in combat against magic until late in the day, when Sir Shecklin returns dejectedly.

“Did they have my armor done?” Pollyfina asks.

“Yes.” comes a somber reply.

“Can I see it?”

“No. I had to order them to make a number of adjustments and oversaw their work all day. It will be a while yet, but I can see they are skilled. They will get it right in time. How goes the training?”

“You have an amazing young talent in this girl.”

says Mawdrin.

“I know.” replies Sir Shecklin with a smile to

Pollyfina.

[Pollyfina will face a creature that disappears. She will slump back, thanking Aethersta, then realize the mage doesn't know she has been taught this lesson, and readies herself in her prone position for a mage battle.]

“There is one last order of business to attend to,” says Mawdrin.

“What could that be?” asks Pollyfina.

“Soul trapping and essence trapping.” Pollyfina shudders.

“Why would I want to-”

“You don’t! Not ever! The dark forces do these things...but know that there is a difference.”

“How so?”

“The soul merely gives life to a being. It does not comprise memories or personality...things of the essence.”

“Okay. So soul trapping catches a being’s life force and essence trapping catches a being’s...”

“Everything that makes them who they are, except their body.”

“Oh, Dear.”

“Yes. Know that as enemy number one to the forces of darkness, your soul will be their target. They will not want your essence to survive.”

“Okay. Wait. This is heavy stuff. Why are we talking about this? Why am I enemy number one...?” she trails off. Mawdrin looks to Sir Shecklin, who nods him to proceed.

“Child, I knew the day I saw you. The next Graet Eclipse is upon us. You are the prophesied savior of us all: The Bearer of Destiny...The Child of Light.”

“What? Wait. Me?! Surely there must be some-”

“There is no mistake. Mawdrin is right. This all comes down to simple fact. You are the one.”

“But...I can’t be! I’m twelve!”

“We will train you as best we can with whatever time we have...but the prophecy is in motion,” says Mawdrin.

“The prophecy?”

“The Oldest and Best Prophecy, as it is self-titled”

“What makes it the best? It sounds like the worst to me?”

“It foretells the death of Jhaga and the rise of perfection across all of Aerthus for the forces of good. The final victory against the recurrence of The Graet Eclipse.”

“And my role in all of this is-”

“Savior.” Mawdrin and Sir Shecklin kneel before Pollyfina, who is horrorstruck. A thought occurs to Pollyfina, and she regains her composure.

“Well...you’ve seen all the signs...but there’s no danger at present, yes?”

Mawdrin looks up. “That is correct. We will use the time we have to prepare you to fulfill the destiny you bear.” The men rise and all nod agreement.

Chapter 11: On Traps (Day 4 Week 2)

“Today, Pollyfina, I’d like to discuss some of the more sinister methods agents of the dark will employ. You need to know how to detect traps and sense when danger or a nefarious plot is afoot. Let’s start with the ambush.”

“I know what an ambush is.”

“Of course you do...but have you ever been the victim of one?”

“Well...no...”

“Then you do not know how to detect one.”

“Isn't the point of an ambush to surprise your prey without being detected?”

“Yes, but that doesn't mean every ambush is unavoidable or undetectable. There are conditions that must be met for an ambush to even be possible. We will start there. Every ambush requires cover. The hiding place must always be along your path, which must be well defined for the enemy to be assured you will pass close enough for the ambush to be a success. The enemy will either know your destination to anticipate your route, or you will be following a well traversed passage. Just knowing when you are traveling in these conditions can be a boon to raise your awareness of the possibility of an ambush. Next, there is the sound tip-off.”

“The sound tip-off?”

“Yes. Ambushers like quiet and strive to be silent. In an open wilderness road setting, for example, it is normal to hear occasional sounds of wildlife. When thugs invade a grove to set up an ambush, it requires movement around the vicinity of the ambush, and nearby wildlife tends to scatter.”

“So, if the wilderness gets too quiet...”

“You're being tipped off.”

“So... what then?”

“That will depend upon the situation. You may want to double back and find a new route. This may be possible, or it may not. Another mark of the ambush is that they tend to be at crossings which are all but unavoidable, such as mountain paths and canyons.”

“So... I might know I'm walking into a trap, having all the right conditions and having been tipped off, and still be required to press forward into the waiting ambush?! Ugh!”

“But it's not an ambush anymore, you see? You know what's coming to some extent, and they don't know that you're aware. Without turning back, you can pause. Ambushers hate this. They get antsy. While you're stopped short of their ideal ambush site, size up the situation. Where is the cover? Ready a concealed throwing dagger and your shield. Create a diversion. I once travelled with a master archer through just such a mountain valley pass. We smelled ambush and he set out horses off ahead of us. When the ambushers tried to jump our horses, he began picking them off from a safe range.”

“Amazing!”

“Yes...but in hindsight, the ambushers were on foot and never could have caught our horses, so we would have done better to just stay mounted and ride at top speed through and past the ambush. We ended up on foot the rest of the way and lost supplies as well as our horses!”

“But you couldn't have known that at the time.”

“As I said...in hindsight. Now...being surrounded...”

“Oh Boy!”

“Yeah. This is a tough one. The ironic thing about it is, they're usually not about killing you when you're surrounded. They just want to ensure you don't escape. They may knock you out, but the plan is to capture you and take you somewhere. Someone up the food chain wants an audience. In fact, the enemies who surround you are usually afraid. After all, why are so many of them needed unless you're a serious threat?”

“That is ironic...overpowered by cowards.”

“Yeah. I'd say the best plan is to surrender peaceably. You may avoid the ugly getting knocked out, which means you can spend time planning your next move, and you may garner respect from some of the cowards who would turn coats, which means you may be able to coax out some information about what you're headed into.”

“Hmmm... What if I don't surrender peaceably?”

“Well...if the theory is correct that you're facing cowardly minions, then about a third of your foes will face off with you timidly, about a third will run at the first sign of a fight, and the last third or so will face off with you fiercely because they fear their master's wrath more than yours.”

“So...”

“I'd say you can chance a fight if you're alone and surrounded by six, or traveling with a companion and surrounded by nine. Upwards of that, I wouldn't recommend it, and my first advice still stands.”

“Is there more to say on ambushes?”

“There is always more to say on every topic, Pollyfina...but there's no time. Let's move on. There are other traps to discuss...such as trip lines.”

Chapter 12: On Survival (Day 5 Week 2)

"Pollyfina, today we should discuss your basic survival skills."

"I thought everything we've been discussing is vital to my survival."

"Vital, yes...basic, no."

"What do you mean...basic?"

"Eating."

"I know how to cook. I-"

"Pardon, Pollyfina, I know that. Have you camped before?"

"No."

"Have you hunted, fished, foraged, or farmed for your own feeding?"

"I see where you are going."

"Somewhat, I'm sure, but let's start with these."

He holds up a metal piece and stone.

"I told you! I know how to cook! I can start a fire!"

"Yes, Pollyfina...yes...but...not like this!"

He strikes the stone across the metal, directly aimed at a set of logs, and a small bolt of lightning zaps the fire alight instantly. Pollyfina's jaw drops in wonder and astonishment.

"What are they?"

"The metal tube is parsinium. The stone, magmathrite. Both are rare and precious. Guard them with your life!"

"Wait...these aren't just for quick and easy cooking, are they?"

"You are most astute. No. They make for quick and easy dispatch at a range and may even pass you off as a seemingly minor maegist."

Chapter 13: The First Year of Lessons

Training between Pollyfina, Sir Shecklin, and Mawdrin continues for a few months as Pollyfina works to perfect the form, style, and execution of each new facet in the combat arms she learns. The time goes by quickly. Too quickly for Pollyfina and Sir Shecklin is beside himself about the time constantly, it would seem. Today in the middle of training, Pollyfina stops abruptly.

"What are you doing?! Put your guard back up!"

“No.” Her voice is a whisper, lilting on the breeze. Her countenance is fallen. Sir Shecklin’s constant worry about the time has reached her.

“No?! What in blazes do you MEAN, no?! We haven’t the time-”

“Exactly! That’s exactly why I stop now! You teach me day in and day out with expertise, yet you teach me as though you are the constant, defeated warrior.”

“I AM defeated!”

“What?”

“I am defeated.”

“I haven’t bested you.”

“No. No...not by you...by life.”

“By life?”

“Yes. By life. I’ve been defeated by life, okay?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean...look...I don’t expect you to understand. You’re young. Your whole life is ahead of you.”

“My life as the prophesied savior of Aerthus...”

“Well my life is LOST by comparison.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean...this was my chance...my one chance to make everything alright.”

“You ARE making everything alright.”

“No. I’m failing you. Just like I failed all the others before. My successes prepared me for nothing. They prepared me to fail.”

“How are you failing me? Every day you come with something new and fresh for me to learn. Lessons of the highest caliber!”

“Yes! And you learn them so well, but...”

“But?”

“Here.” Sir Shecklin holds out a scroll for Pollyfina to take. Pollyfina does. “In your hand you now hold my plans for your first year of lessons.” Pollyfina regards the scroll, still closed, and can see that much parchment comprises it. “We’ve scratched the tip of the mountaintop and yet our time dwindles.”

“Dwindles?”

“Oh, Pollyfina. You are so young and innocent. Our training is due to be interrupted, and you are not prepared. I am failing you as a trainer.” Pollyfina opens the scroll and reads the list of lessons to herself, beginning to skim as line after line the content builds like a snowball. She looks the list up and down again, passes the scroll back over to him, then sighs listlessly.

“I don’t understand, Sir Shecklin.” she offers. He rolls up the scroll, sets it aside, then sighs listlessly himself.

“Well, then...perhaps I should explain.” he begins.

Chapter 14: The Truth About Sir Shecklin

“My name is not Sir Shecklin, verily.”

“It’s not?” Pollyfina asks.

“No. This is a moniker I have assumed for myself.

My real name is Sir Holdfast.”

“Then why do you go by Sir Shecklin? It does your
wealth of knowledge injustice!”

“My wealth of knowledge, perhaps...but my effect-
iveness with said knowledge...”

“You are an amazing teacher!”

“Tell that to the Pomerisans.”

“Who?”

“The Pomerisans are a non-Aerthan people brought
to this island against their will. They were sold into
slavery until the most recent Age of Enlightenment
revealed that slavery was not the will of Aethersta.”

“So... what do they have to do with--?”

“I’m coming to that.” he paused, breathing deep.

“Pomerisan freedom here has been short-lived; I’d say about one hundred-fifty years or so ago. Pomerisans have been acclimated into our culture just as furlongs, elves, dwarves, gnomes, halflings, and other races...but due to their green skin, they are regarded by many, even today, as unworthy to live among us as equals.”

“How sad.”

“My thought exactly. I was not part of the travesties that led their people to be here, but rather am sympathetic to their plight. I, after all, come from a non-Aerthan race as well...though you could not distinguish me from a native Aerthan, so I do not suffer as their descendants do.”

“So... they see you as--”

“The enemy. I had signed up to train class after class of their people in my wealth of knowledge only to be shunned because they didn’t want either the knowledge

I had for them, or the 'Aerthan' teacher I appeared to

be.”

“Didn’t you explain to them--?”

“I tried numerous times through my words and actions to communicate my acceptance of them. I tried to distance the issue and keep the topic to my lessons. I even shared my own heritage which, to a lesser degree, included slavery as well. I guess it is hard to accept for very different people on both sides. I wonder how long it will take; if it will ever get better.”

“I don’t understand why--”

“...it has to be this way? I know, Pollyfina. I know.”

Chapter 15: The Half Hearts

It is deep into the night hours when the town bell rings warning, waking Pollyfina with a start. She bolts to her feet and throws on her makeshift armor as cries, screams, shrieks, yelling, and general commotion break out in the streets outside. As she rushes to the stairs, she meets Sir Holdfast on his way up to brief her on the situation at hand.

"What is it?" Pollyfina inquires.

"Half hearts, I'm afraid."

"Half hearts?"

"Think of the reliving you faced in the swamp and imagine they have roughly half the normal human capacity for thought."

"Wouldn't that make them half-wits?"

"Literally, yes, but they are known as half hearts for they are resigned to their evil master's will. They have no hope, for they have already died, yet they are dangerous because they can think."

"How am I to-?"

"Ah, yes! I have an old friend for you." He holds out the sheath instantly identifiable as holding Flamebrand. "Now, get to work!" Pollyfina nods, seizes the sheath, and races down the rest of the steps as Sir Holdfast proudly follows at a slow jaunt behind. The scene in the streets is chaos. People are running amok as they are chased by reanimated cadavers. Pollyfina wields Flamebrand and begins menacingly swiping left and right in circular arcs in front of her. The half hearts which spot her first let out a chittering that draws the rest to them as she begins to carve her way through the animosity. Her fierce presence is undeniable as she advances without hesitation, fluidly, even gracefully, with sheer determination her constant expression. The half hearts do know fear. They have, after all, died once already. Now seeing their kind being dispatched a second time, they know they are at their doom...but also their destination.

"Stop!" they cry in unison. Pollyfina, taken aback at this tack, lowers her sword to stand at ease.

"You address me?"

"Yes. You are The One."

"The One?"

"Yes. We have a message for you."

"A message?"

"Yes."

"From whom?"

"You will know when you meet, if you meet, but first... 'Die!'" At that, they rush, but Pollyfina was ever truly at the ready and meets their advance with a series of slashes which verily make short work of the swarm...now a column advancing single file before her yet merely advancing to meet her blade. In the end, Pollyfina slumps as the last half heart falls. She is breathing heavily, panting for air, covered in filth as the town square falls silent in wonderment. The silence breaks to a cheer as the crowd rallies its morale back. Many thanks go to Pollyfina, yet only Sir Holdfast approaches her as she is yet in the stench of the fallen on her. His visage changes from pride to sorrow.

"Pollyfina, I'm afraid the time has come. The half hearts are the lead scouts. Jhaga has awakened and the next Graet Eclipse has begun. You need to leave Diddletown."

"Diddlebury!"

"Yes! Bury this Diddle place and have a heart for all of Aerthus now!"

"But..."

"I know it's your home. This is what you have trained for, though. Here. I have something for you." He leads her to Aember's stall.

"My sword, shield, and armor!"

"They were finally, just now, done to my approval."

"Oh! Sir Sheck...Sir Holdfast!"

"I know. I'm not much for goodbyes either. I wish we had more time, too. You know there was still a lot to go over...but you're ready. You must be. It's your destiny."

"Thank you! Thank you for everything."

"You're welcome! Thank you in return! It's not every day you get to train the world's savior. Now take Aember and your things. Here's some money. Spend it sparingly. We've no idea how long you'll be gone or what expenses you'll have. Be frugal."

"You think of everything!"

"It's my duty."

"Thank you again. Oh! I shall miss you."

"I shall miss you, too...so hurry back!"

"Oh, no!"

"What?"

"Mawdrin!"

"I'll need say your goodbyes for you. This cannot wait. He will understand."

"Here. He'll want Flamebrand ba--"

"No. He won't. He always wanted you to have it...just not until this time arrived." Pollyfina looks at him still slightly unsure but accepts his words with a nod.

"I wish I could say goodbye myself, but I know you are right. Farewell, Sir Holdfast! I shall do you proud."

"You already have." Pollyfina rushes Sir Holdfast and gives him a hug around the waist, her right ear pinned to his chest. He looks down at her lovingly, as a good father would his daughter, and breaks gently away with a knowing smile.

"Aethersta be with you!" Pollyfina nods, smiles, and gathers her things. She washes herself off and suits up in her armor to discover that it is amazingly durable, flexible, and lightweight. She also notes it is padded inside and figures the tailor's notes on her dimensions must have taken this into account. Suited up and armed, she goes to her room to see her reflection. She absolutely glimmers. She returns to Aember only to find her horse has been suited up as well...another surprise of Sir Holdfast. Pollyfina checks her pack, secured on Aember's back, and mounts her steed, prepared to begin her journey to Jhaga peak.

As Aember trots forth from her stable, Pollyfina is greeted by one last surprise of Sir Holdfast. Lining either side of the way from the stable down the road out of town are the people of Diddlebury. They watch as she advances, smiling with gleams of hope in their eyes. Her parents are there. Mother is sobbing and trying to pull herself together, choking the life out of a handkerchief. Pa is holding Mother reassuringly but never breaks a proud stare at his daughter, a seeming woman now before him. He waves to her and she awkwardly, almost sheepishly, waves back. As Aember ambles through this...procession of sorts...people see Pollyfina wave and they begin to wave. Pollyfina realizes she has the hearts of these local townsfolk. She is the embodiment of their hope. She smiles and waves left and right as Aember slowly advances down the path. Mothers hug their children. Fathers lift them up to see better. People point, waving others on, as they rush to join the lineup. As Pollyfina reaches the edge of the hamlet that is Diddlebury, the last well-wishers, the town officials, bow to her as they each extend an arm in the direction she must go...removing their hats as they do so. Pollyfina gives one last, disheartened glance back as Aember breaks into a gallop. Pollyfina nearly loses her balance, but spins back to face forward and rights herself in time.

She thinks, *"Alright, World. What have you in store for me?"*

Part 2: Darren

Chapter 16: Pollyfina Fails

Aember and Pollyfina lose the view of their onlooking well-wishers and Aember breaks to an easy lope. Riding atop her trusty steed, Pollyfina has all the ease and confidence of a well-seasoned warrior. Her poise and nonchalance is something to behold. Thirty seconds later, she has dismounted Aember and is feverishly fending off three rather ravenous wildebaests. The first falls easily, but the two remaining flank her and manage to pin her to the ground. Aember charges one, which flees, and the other, hunched over her, suddenly falls lifeless before it can end her.

“You managed to fend off two, but the third had you daed to rights. Hello! What have we here? Isn’t it some time before the next dress up day?” The words come from a dashing blonde boy of 16.

“This isn’t merely some costume! I am trained in the arts of combattance.”

“Not well enough, it would appear.” The young man helps Pollyfina to her feet.

“Do not disparage my training!”

“I know naught of your training. Mine eyes can simply not belie my brain that thou art aensaen.”

“What?”

“Since when does your fair gender school in combattance?”

“Ah! I see your confusion, My Dear Rescuer.”

“Darren.”

“Yes. You are quite daring—”

“No. Darren. My name’s Darren.”

“Apologies, Darren. I am the first of my kind.”

Darren pauses to study Pollyfina for a moment. “You’re serious.”

“Quite.”

“Well...you’re well armed and armored.”

“I am very well provisioned and trained.”

“Said the she-warrior bested by a pack of three wildebaest.”

“I had the situation in hand.”

“You were pinned and about to have that lovely face gnarled.”

“Lovely?”

“Look...I’m being chivialrous Miss...?”

“Pollyfina.”

“Pollyfina. A pleasure.” He kneels and kisses her hand. “Why...praytell...have you chosen the odd life of combattance?” Pollyfina, taken aback by his act and sincere question, takes a moment to think...removing her helmet and revealing her lustrous red hair. Darren’s heart skips two beats.

“It was the right thing to do at the time, I think. I avenged a young apprentice who had fallen in just his first training scenario. I fear I may have been the cause of the distraction that led to his demise. Besides, I have since discovered I am prophesied to be the savior of Aerthus.” With that, Darren snaps back to reality.

“Aensaen speak!”

Pollyfina pauses and smiles. “Think as you like. I must off naerth.”

“Naerth?”

“To Jhaga Peak.”

“Jhaga Peak?”

“Yes. To rid this world of the graet waerm draconis.”

“I’ll go with you.” Darren replies, suddenly looking stunned at his own offer. “I mean...you have training...but methinks you lack experience.”

“This is true.”

“Goodly then. I shall accompany you as a fighting companion. It is dangerous—”

“To venture forth unattended to?”

“Yes.” With that, they begin heading naerth together. “Tell me more about this young apprentice who fell--”

“There’s not much I can tell you. I had only just chanced to stumble upon his training ground as his first match began. I stopped to watch. He seemed scruffy, goofy, clumsy...awkward.”

“You said he was distracted.”

“I think he had a fondness for me.”

“Lusty.”

“No. I think his intentions were to get to know me.”

“But he was still only attracted to your beauty.”

“Alas, yes, I suppose. He didn’t really know me otherwise.”

“He was more a lover than a fighter.”

“That’s almost certain.”

“Almost?”

“Who can say if he was any better at loving than fighting now?”

“I mean...his heart was more inclined to—”

“I know what you meant. You’re right.”

“Was your bosom exposed at all?”

“What?!”

“Was your bosom exposed at all?”

“What does that have to do with—”

“A lot! Many men are most distracted by a woman showing her bosom.” At first, Pollyfina takes offense at this remark. Upon a moment’s reflection, she is inclined to agree. *Men are kind of that way.*
Wait...is Darren looking...?

“Hey! Eyes up here!”

“What? Um...”

“No! My bosom was not exposed! I do not dress like that. Smidgeon’s distractedness—”

“Smidgeon’s?”

“Yes. I came to learn at his funeral his name was Smidgeon.”

“Well that tells me a little bit.”

“Don’t besmirch his name and memory with bad jokes!”

“What?”

“You know perfectly well what you’re doing. The word smidgeon literally means a little bit of something. Don’t disrespect that poor boy by playing word games with his name.”

“Sorry. You are right. Listen, we should camp here. I know this way and there won’t be much opportunity for a good site for at least another day’s ride.” Pollyfina agrees, and together they begin to set their bedrolls. Pollyfina decides she is safe with Darren and Aember, and slides out of her armor, down to her tunic. Darren watches with great anticipation followed by disappointment. Pollyfina is not so curvy as her breastplate.

“Ah! That feels better. Armor can get stuffy.”

“You’ll get used to that armor in no time.”

Pollyfina looks at Darren and sees him ogling her chest again. She looks down and up and is about to redirect him again when she notices the look is not the same this time. She sees the disappointment and crawls into her bedroll. “I’m sure you’re right. Good night, Darren.” She says, rolling her back to him.

“Good night, Pollyfina.” Darren replies, noting the demeanor of her response. He can’t help but feel he has done something wrong, although he is certain he has no idea what it is. Pollyfina tucks her head down to look at her chest in her bedroll before straightening out, then curling up into her normal position to sleep. *Men! What do I care? He can **have** his disappointment.* But secretly, Pollyfina was disappointed, too. She already liked Darren and she wanted him to like her, too. Of course, he did like her. She just didn’t realize that yet, so she cried on the inside and only let one tear roll down each cheek. There just seemed to be a couple of things getting in the way of them understanding one another...for now...

Chapter 17: The Justin Brothers

The night is a long and restless one as a first night in a bedroll in the open air would be for a young woman used to sleeping on a mattress in a cottage in a hamlet. Noises of the night, lumps of hard ground, and a slight chill offer just the right amounts of discomfort to generate significant tossing and turning. It takes hours for Pollyfina to settle into actual slumber. She wakes to broad daylight.

“What? The sun is up!”

Darren, already preparing a breakfast of fish over a fire, replies, “I know.”

“Why didn’t you wake me when you got up?”

“You had a restless night. I let you sleep. You’ll need your rest. I know it takes a little getting used to, being out here. You’re from that little hamlet just saeth of here, aren’t you?”

“Diddlebury, yes.”

“Well the only creature comforts out here are comforting the creatures out here. Your body will get used to doing without them soon enough, though.”

“I suppose this whole way of life is going to keep offering inconveniences.”

“Life does that regardless of the way, if you let it.”

“If I let it?”

“It’s a matter of attitude...perspective...choice.”

“I can choose whether or not I’m inconvenienced?”

“You can choose whether or not to feel inconvenienced...and to what degree you allow the feeling to fester. Negative feelings we hold onto inside do that, you know? Fester.”

“If I didn’t rest well because I didn’t sleep well, then I will naturally be grumpy. That means I was inconvenienced. I can’t choose to change that fact with feelings.”

“But you did rest well because I let you sleep. You are choosing to be inconvenienced. Choose instead to acknowledge it as part of the life you now live and accept it and you can even learn to grow content with it.”

“Well...I do appreciate that you let me get rested...”

“There you go. Now...are you hungry?”

“Fish?”

“Are we going to repeat the lesson we just claimed to learn about inconveniences?” Darren smiles at her wryly. Pollyfina smiles back, realizing he has a point.

“Sorry. Yes. I’m rather famished, actually.” She slips out of her bedroll and sits on a rock, still in her tunic. As Darren finishes preparing the fish, she can’t help but notice he is looking at her legs. Inside her that spot of hurt finds a well of healing. *I have other assets to win a man’s heart.* Darren glances at Pollyfina’s face and notices she is smiling, having caught him staring at her legs.

“Eyes up here.” She says, this time more playfully. Darren obliges with a sheepish look and apologetic grin. Once finished packing up, suiting up, and dousing the fire, Pollyfina mounts Aember. Darren, who up until now has been walking alongside Aember’s trot, moves to mount Aember behind Pollyfina.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m preparing to ride behind you.”

“You’ll do no such thing! I don’t know what you—”

“Listen. I told you last night the next good place to camp is a day’s ride from here. Not a day’s walk. If I keep walking alongside your horse, we’ll take many days to reach that same point.”

Pollyfina thinks about this and gives out a huff of deep breath. She’s trying really hard not to feel inconvenienced again. “Alright. Get on. Mind yourself, though!”

“Have no worries. You are in a suit of armor. I am not the enemy.”

Pollyfina glances him up and down.

“Don’t be so sure.” She turns forward and lowers the face shield on her helmet as she spurs Aember into a gallop. Darren, unsure where to grab to hold on, hugs Pollyfina around the waist before he very nearly falls off.

The road takes them along the Crescent Cliffs. Pollyfina realizes this is why there's no good place to camp. On one side of the road you have thick brush, and on the other side, a sheer drop. *This would be a terrible place to get ambushed.*

The thought is quickly met with a feeling in the pit of Pollyfina's gut. On the road ahead she sees two figures, blocking passage. She halts Aember.

"What's going on?" asks Darren.

"There are two figures up ahead blocking the road and no way around."

"Only two? Surely your horse could charge right through them."

"Yes. That's why I'm not sure if it's an ambush."

"I see. Tell you what...I'm going to dismount and walk beside you. If there are more in the brush, I'll be ready to defend on foot. Be prepared to dismount quickly as well if needed and stay alert."

Pollyfina nods. "Good plan."

"I've had better, but this is an awkward situation. Not a lot of time to come up with better."

"Stop being modest. Alright. Let's do this."

Pollyfina on Aember and Darren on foot approach cautiously.

"Hold it! Stop right there!" says one of the figures, raising a loaded crossbow. Aember and Darren halt. Pollyfina and Darren hold their hands open to reveal their palms to the strangers.

"We mean you no harm. We have no quarrel and wish no trouble. We mean merely to pass safely."

"Good." Replies the figure with bow drawn. "I do have this quarrel, however, and I aim to secure your safe passage with it!" he says, firing the quarrel from his crossbow. Pollyfina and Darren watch helplessly as the quarrel

flies at them for an instant, then spin to see it lodge in a large cat that had sprung to pounce on them from behind. Turning back in surprise, they find the figure has lowered his crossbow and is now approaching with a great friendly smile and an empty hand extended as though to shake greetings. “Right! Glad to meet you, folks! I’m Justin and this here’s my brother, Justin.”

Pollyfina and Darren exchange a glance and exhale deep sighs of relief. “Thank you. You really—”

“Don’t mention it, Ma’am. Comes with the territory.”

“The Crescent Cliffs?”

“Ah! No! No! Let me be clear. Cats like that one, yeah...they come with the territory of the cliffs. I was talking about people running into me.”

“I’m confused.”

“You were thanking me for saving you from that cat’s attack, right?”

“Yes.”

“Saving people comes with the territory of meeting me.”

“People are always in trouble when they meet you.”

“More specifically any time they encounter me, it would seem.”

“That seems impossible to believe.”

“Justin doesn’t lie.” Says the until now silent brother. Darren now joins the conversation to express his confusion and need for clarification...

“You’re both named Justin?”

“Yes.” They reply in unison.

“Allow me to tidy up the understanding here.” Says the Justin with the crossbow. “I’m Justin Time, and this is my brother...Justin Case.”

“Ah!” Says Darren. “Still lost.”

“We were twins born a minute apart, but on separate days of separate months of separate years of separate decades of separate centuries of separate millennia. Mom said I was born just in time, in the last minute of the second millennium. She said my brother was born as a just in case. Ever since it’s like our names defined our lives. Now we work in the rescue business. I rescue people last second and he sells supplies to rescue you in advance. If you don’t mind...business has been tight as of late...and I did just save you...so...”

“We’ll take a length of rope, a fifth of shaedownstalk, and—”

“Your crossbow!” Pollyfina jumps back in. Everyone looks at her in disbelief, and she looks at Darren. “I have my reasons. Trust me.”

Darren nods and turns back to the Justins. “You heard her. How much?”

“You can’t afford it. I’ll never part with my bow.”

“Name your price.”

“Peace in our day!”

“What?” Asks Darren.

“Done!” Says Pollyfina.

“What?” Ask Darren and the Justins simultaneously.

“I am the Bearer of Destiny, The Child of Light. Give me the crossbow and you shall have peace in our day.”

The Justin brothers look at each other skeptically, then to Darren who shrugs sheepishly.

“I will give you one shot with my bow. Show me you are what you say and it’s yours.”

Pollyfina nods agreement and takes the bow. Hurriedly, she detaches one corner of the line which slings the quarrels and slides the parsinium tube over it before fixing the corner back. She then places the magmathrite into the quarrel chamber so that the parsinium will slide over and across the magmathrite...striking it properly. With her new contraption set, she takes aim at the sky and fires a true bolt into the blue. “Fifty silverbits for the rest sound good?” She asks.

The Justins look at one another in confusion and disbelief. “No charge.” Says Justin Time.

“I wouldn’t think of it. You deserve pay. You saved us as well.”

“Fifty silverbits.” Justin Time nods his agreement and thanks.

“Keep it.” Pollyfina says, tossing him a golden. Pollyfina mounts Aember confidently as Darren looks on slack-jawed. “Ready?” Pollyfina asks Darren. Quickly he comes back to his senses, nods, and mounts up. They ride away leaving the Justins chattering in disbelief over their good luck at making a golden.

Note: The rescue business usually pays one silverbit at best. People are cheap.

Act Three - The reader is introduced as a third and final member of the adventuring party. Together, the reader, Pollyfina, and Darren fight the Great Wyrms Jhaga and its magically risen Dracolich form, as well as the dreaded Matter.

Red Shirts: Justin Time, Justin Case

Characters: Twylla, Tricia Laeven, Kaleb Damarang, a Furline Furlong Cha’rrta, Haemistra, Laevendra, Swortho

Enemies: Brittle Bones, Hollow Men, Assassaens, Aensaen ones

Part 3: The Reader

Chapter X: Vous Entrez!

You are standing with family and friends around a round table upon which, in front of you, sits a birthday cake. You are instructed to make a wish and blow out the candles. Your arms are interlocked with your well-wishers around the table. You close your eyes and bow your head as you aim to blow...yes...you, dear Reader. You are here in this moment because you are an integral part in this story. You give a deep exhalation and open your eyes to find your surroundings completely changed. On either side of you are tangle vines interlaced with your arms holding you prisoner in a jungle. Before you lies a stretch of road

that turns at your position to continue to your left. In

the distance straight ahead and approaching are two

people on foot. As they near, you can make out a young

man and woman, both clad in medieval attire. They re-

gard you strangely as they approach.

“Do you think this the one?” asks the girl.

“Probably” replies the boy.

She looks you up and down. “So... this is to be our third? Captured in tangle vines?”

“Look, I don’t know. All I can say is we haven’t seen hide nor hair of another and Mawdrin was very clear about the strange attire.”

“You there!” she addresses you, “How did you come to let these simple tangle vines best you?”

Everything being the crazy whirlwind it has been,
you carefully assemble your best response, “I don’t
know.”

“Oh no! It can’t be this one.” she states. “They
hardly have the mental capacity--”

“Mawdrin was also very clear about the state of con-
fusion the traveler would be in.”

“Um...terribly sorry”, you throw in, “but...could
somebody get me down, please and thank you?”

“Mawdrin was also very clear--”

“I know. I know.” came the girl’s reply. “They
would need our help. Very well!”

With two quick slashes of her blade, she makes
quick work of the vines on either side of you.

“Thanks again!” you say, quite relieved to be able
to put your arms down and relax. “Where are we?”

“Okay, now this is too much!” shouts the girl.

“How can this so-called traveler not even know where they have travelled to?!”

“Look,” you say, “all I know is, one minute I’m about to blow out candles on a cake, and a moment later, I’m here stuck in tangle vines. I didn’t ‘travel’ in the normal sense of the word, nor was I ‘bested’ by these vines. Are we in Europe?”

“I do not know of this... You’re Up of which you speak.” says the boy.

“No. Not you’re up...Europe. It’s a whole continent! How can you not know about Europe?!”

“It is not a continent of our realm.” replies the girl.

“And what realm is that?” you ask.

“You are on the island continent of Aerthus in the Nether Realms.”

“Aerthus?”

“Yes, Aerthus. A-E-R-T-H-U-S. Aerthus.”

“Well, there’s no Aerthus where I’m from. So, I

still don't really know where I am, but..."

"Where are you from?"

"The planet I'm from is called Earth."

"Earth?"

"Yes, Earth. E-A-R-T-H. Earth."

"Oddly similar."

You consider suggesting that you have somehow crossed dimensions or entered another universe, but somehow you figure from the looks of these two, they wouldn't immediately understand the concept. You decide to offer another explanation when the girl offers it for you.

"It must have been magic," she proffers.

"Yes. There is no other real explanation for my sudden and complete change of location."

"Yet you did not control this teleportation?"

"They could not have, or they would know this place."

“They could have tried and had something go wrong.”

“No. They have already told us this was no errant spell, but an errant event. They said they were blowing out candles on a cake--”

“Yes! Strange customs on this...Earth, you have.”

“I suppose. So... who are you two, if I may know the names of my rescuers?”

“I’m Darren.” says the boy.

“I’m Pollyfina.” says the girl.

“Pleased to meet you both, and thank you.”

You introduce yourself by name as well and are treated to the local salutation of “Well met.” from both.

“So... who’s Mawdrin? He must be a magic user you know if he was able to tell you about our encounter.”

“Excellent divination!” says Darren.

“More like deduction.” says Pollyfina, adding

“Mawdrin is a sorcelror. He told us of the treacherous

battles which await us in order to fulfill our destinies.

You are to accompany us on our final battles as we two alone cannot hope to succeed.”

“Wait! I just got here, and I’m supposed to join you in battles?!”

“Ah, yes!” says Darren. “Here. I have this extra shield I have been wearing on my back and this light, well-balanced sword with scabbard I have been keeping for you to my off-hand side.”

You take the armaments somewhat dumbfounded while they are handed to you very matter-of-factly.

“I--I--Um...Okay...What am I to help you...dispatch? Also...armor?”

“Armor is easy. We have been building our store of monies over our past quests and can easily afford a good, strong, and light suit of armor for you.” says Darren.

“As for the baddies,” says Pollyfina, “we have the great pleasure of ridding the realm of the great waerm

draconis known across Aerthus as Jhaga, and then we
face the most cursed creature in the land...the matter!”

“What’s the matter?” you ask.

“Nothing. What’s the matter with you?” Darren
replies jokingly.

“This one really doesn’t need that right now,
Darren. They have only just arrived, are quite out of
sorts, and are now being enlisted to participate in life-
and-death struggles.”

“Hey! Yeah! Actually...why am I doing this? I mean,
you two seem nice enough and all, but...what’s in it for
me?”

“Mawdrin told us a secret. He said you might not
like it. Unfortunately, you must come with us to
finish the quest. That’s apparently how you return
home to Earth.” says Pollyfina.

“And if I refuse?”

“That’s the funny part...Mawdrin said you could

quit any time you wanted, and you'd be fine...there

is no real danger to 'the you' still on Earth, so...it's up

to, he said, 'The Reader' to keep us all moving toward

the fulfillment of our destinies."

"Then help you, I shall." you say and are suddenly

flooded with all the knowledge of Darren and Polly-

fina acquired by The Reader up to now.

"You seem somehow transformed." says Pollyfina.

"Yes. More prepared?" offers Darren.

"Once you mentioned The Reader I was reminded.

I know what's going on...and I'm ready."

"Excellent! Then let's travel to the last town before

Jhaga Peak and get you that armor, shall we?"

"Yes. Let's!"

You travel together to Brindleburg and camp down

for the night. As the traveler, you wonder how long you

will be missed by your loved ones back on Earth.

Chapter X: Tricia Leaven

The three of you are quite tired from your day of shopping in Brindleburg, and settle down in a room at a posh, if not also somewhat quaint, room-letting establishment called Ye Olde Newout Inn. You feel the day has been quite successful in presenting you with satisfying options for your purchases and a lovely bed now beckons.

“I’m going to head down to the bar,” says Darren. “Today’s been lucky. I’d like to see if that luck will still pay off.”

“Stick to the rules!”

“Yes. Polly. I will only take...ten goldens.”

“Ten?!”

“Out of a cool hundred, that’s a paltry sum. Besides, no self-respecting gambler down there is going to be caught with less.” Pollyfina shrugs. She knows it’s true. In fact, ten is almost nothing itself in bar gambling. She also knows the money is as good as lost for this same reason. Still...Darren can have his fun and they won’t be broke, so...

“Oh, alright!”

“Yes!”

“But this also means if you lose-”

“I touch nothing again until our purse has doubled in size. Yes, yes...I know...and I agree to the terms.”

Chapter X: Kaleb Damarang

“I’ll not let that wench tart off wi’ me thin’s!” Kaleb

cries. “She’s ‘eaded due Naerth! Wot a spot o’ luck!

We’ll catch ‘er up at th’ Boundin’ Main!”

“The Bounding Main?”

“‘aven’t ye ‘eard tell o’ th’ inf’mous Boundin’ Main! I’ve even immortalized it in one o’ me songs.”

“That’s very nice. I’m sure we-”

“Over th’ Boundin’ Main, sing louder. Over th’ Boundin’ Main. If ye’re a gnome, ferget yer ‘ome...once over th’ Boundin’ Main.”

“Lovely. Now-”

“Over th’ Boundin’ Main, sing louder. Over th’ Boundin’ Main. If ye’re a dwarf, ferget th’ wharf...once over th’ Boundin’ Main.”

“Yes. Very good-”

“Over th’ Boundin’ Main, sing louder. Over th’ Boundin’ Main. If ye’re halfling, ferget ev’rything...once over th’ Boundin’ Main.” At this, you all fall hushed, listening intently as Kaleb goes on. “Over th’ Boundin’ Main, now whisper. Over th’ Boundin’ Main. If ye’re an elf, ferget yerself...once over th’ Boundin’ Main. Over th’

Boundin' Main. No, never! Over th' Boundin' Main. If ye're a man, ferget, ye can...once o-ver...th' Boun...din' Main."

As a trio you agree the song is well writ if not rather repetitive and singsong. It certainly gets the message across about The Bounding Main. It is a point of no return.

Chapter X: Jhaga's Lair

Pollyfina is the first to enter the cave lair of Jhaga.

Looking around, she spies first and foremost the mass of wealth in pile after pile. Second, she notices the bones in nearly as great supply. Third, she notices...no Jhaga?

"Um...Hey! You two!" she whispers forcefully. "I don't see--" And then, it happens. "Fog" begins to billow across the floor of the lair with a distinct smell of Brimstone.

"Well that's not good." says Darren.

"Who disturbs my slumber?" comes a deep and massive voice from the darkness. You all chance a glance at one another, shrugging. "Identify yourselves or face the wrath of Jhaga!" Pollyfina kneels as she identifies herself first.

“I am Pollyfina, the Bearer of Destiny, O Graet and Powerful Waerm Jhaga!”

Following her lead, you identify yourself next, with an impressive flourish.

“And I... I’m...D-Darren,” he stammers. “I’m with them.” he motions to the two of you and you look at one another in surprise. Is Darren afraid for once?

“Throw down your weapons at once or join my brittle hordes!” bellows the voice. Your weapons all drop in unison with echoing clangs. A stream of smoke shoots at the three of you, billowing at your feet. The cave is darkness and smoke now...nothing else...until...a menacingly large shadow snakes its way through the haze...the head of Jhaga! From the silhouette, you can tell the beast is colossal if this is only the head. You can see the rough, scaled surface of its head in outline. You can make out two webbed ears flapping like bat wings just outside a pair of horns atop the head. Large and round yellow

eyes suddenly open out of seemingly nowhere in the darkness to regard the three of you. A furrow of the legend's brow becomes apparent as the tops of the eyes become occluded. "The Bearer of Destiny?" Jhaga asks.

"Aye!" Pollyfina replies. "'Tis I!"

"Rrruh! Ruh! Huh!" Jhaga tries to stifle a laugh.

"And from whence do you derive this title?" Jhaga challenges.

"From the Oldest and Best Prophecy," Pollyfina replies tersely.

"The...Oldest...and...Best...Prophecy?" Jhaga replies wistfully, eyes going round in appearance again.

"Aye." confirms Pollyfina.

"The...Oldest...and...Best...Prophecy..." Jhaga repeats reverently. The brow furrows again. "I...I...know this...prophecy." Jhaga seems to be trying to remember.

"Who was its author?"

"It dates back over a thousand years. No one knows

its origin...” Pollyfina replies.

“Ah.” says Jhaga. “Then...let me see.” Jhaga’s head disappears back smoothly into the mist. Fire shoots in an upward arc, illuminating the room. You can see the great form of what is clearly a black beast as it sprays the wall to your left with fire. In the wall are many alcoves. Jhaga reaches to the top leftmost alcove, retrieving a set of inscribed stone tablets. “Mmm hmmm...” Jhaga intones, reading to itself. “I see. The answer is clear. I authored it.” Jhaga states.

“But...that’s impossible!” Pollyfina cries out. “No seer has ever made a self-prognostication!”

“Oh, Child.” comes Jhaga’s reply. “You have much to learn. This...here...is my oldest and best prophecy.”

“But...how could you?”

“I couldn’t. Not knowingly. I merely recorded what I saw...a graet waerm draconis being slain by a fabled ‘Bearer of Destiny’. How was I to know the graet waerm

would be me one thousand years later?”

Chapter X: The Matter

The matter of fact was that the matter was fact and standing before them, staring them matter of factly in the eyes. It didn't matter that the matter was staring them in the eyes...and yet, it mattered all the same. They tried to compare it to something like a simile, but could only see it was a metaphor. Round and round it they ovaled...or perhaps ellipsed...for they did not perfectly circle it. The matter was dark. Dark matter to its core. It reached up deftly and blew a loud blast from a horn it wore slung over its shoulder...the Matterhorn! Suddenly, there is stirring from above, and a groggy youthful voice asks “What is it Auntie?” So... that's the secret! This dark matter monster is Auntie Matter! Finally, from its left, Darren lashes out with his sword only to see it demateria-

lize as it contacts the dark beast. From the right, Pollyfina suffers the same effect almost simultaneously. Then it occurs to them both and they call to you. “The Sword of Light!” it must be the only weapon that can slay the dark matter. It’s our only hope! With a swift thrust, you plunge the sword at the heart of the matter, but find that getting to the heart of the matter, as always, is difficult. Still...your enchanted weapon has held up...so you now know you have the right weapon, and both Darren and Pollyfina share in your relief at this fact. The matter reaches to grab your wrist. With the matter almost at hand, you attempt to slash your blade in a sweeping motion from its left side to its right. Your attempt to get right to the heart of the matter strikes more truly, but lacks depth. Still, at this point you are left knowing exactly what to do to bring the matter to an end, and you stab deeply at the point where it bellowed in agony at the end of your last slash. Your stab is deep and true and gets

down to the heart of the matter. The matter beast falls before you and immediately you are embraced on either side by Darren and Pollyfina, who are amazed by your accomplishment. “You did it!” they cry in unison.

Suddenly, the plodding of tiny feet running to the cave room reminds you of the presence of the matter’s young relation’s presence. “Auntie!” Then, turning to address your party, “Why were you so anti-matter?” Then, back to the fallen beast, “Please, Auntie, don’t die!”

“Never fear.” came the reply from the beast, now turning from darkness to color and rising back to its feet. “These adventurers have not killed me, but rather cured me. Congratulations! You have brought the evil matter to an end.” Pollyfina and Darren rush up to meet you, and you put your hands on their shoulders as they put their hands on yours. You lower your heads, close your eyes, and breathe a collective sigh of relief.

“Happy birthday!” you hear as your eyes begin to

open. There before you is a cake with the candles seemingly just blown out by your exhalation. You pick your head up and look around and realize you have two new guests at your party standing with you, arms woven in the huddle...Pollyfina and Darren. They smile at you. It is a happy birthday after all.

EPILOGUE

“Go ahead!” calls out your best friend at the party. “Open my present first! I know you’ll get your wish!” The present is offered up to you and you smile your thanks before ripping into the wrapping paper. You see immediately that it is a book. As you finish unwrapping it, you read the title aloud.

“The Bearer of Destiny.” You look at your friend, and smile knowingly.

“You told me you were really enjoying that book

called The Heart of the Matter. This is the sequel!”

You look down at the book, beaming. Suddenly, a thought occurs to you and you glance up to see Pollyfina and Darren disappearing. They are smiling as they fade away. You look back at the book. *At least I know where I can find you two again.*

OUTRO

And now, dear Reader, I would like to congratulate you as well. Not because you have finished my book, but because every day you are a hero to the people in your life to whom you matter...including you...even if you are alone. Life for most of us is not easy. There is toil; there is hardship and there are tests. Every day you put up the good fight to live it...matters. Take your life... wait...that’s not what I mean at *all*...take the time you have left in this life and spend it looking out for yourself

and those around you. Have a good heart. Give of
yourself. Share who you are. Dare I say, love? Be true.
Most of all, perhaps...believe in yourself. Most of us
don't do enough of that. You may not believe me
when I say it, but even though I don't know you
personally, I believe in you. Now...go seize this day!

BIO

John Michael O'Brien II is a first-time author with this book. Originally from Sheboygan, Wisconsin, he is the father of two wonderful adult children named Ben and Amanda, holds a Master of Science in Mathematics Education, has numerous Microsoft Certifications, and has studied game art and design. Currently, he lives in Manitowoc, Wisconsin.

The Bearer of Destiny

by John M. O'Brien II

PREFACE

Hello. Thank you for continuing to follow our story. I hope you enjoy your return.

Part 1: The Graet Eclipse

Chapter 1: The Reader “Returns”

Pollyfina is lying in bed as a voice comes to her in her lucid state of awakening. *“The Reader’s awareness is here.”*

“What?” Pollyfina asks the voice. “The Reader?”

“The Reader is ready and anxious to know-”

Pollyfina opens a channel to you with her thoughts, *“Oh! Thank Aethersta! Reader! You are here? I have SO MUCH to tell you. You have been gone so very long! I was twelve, now I’m twenty! Darren is here, with me. We are camped. It is night. I am speaking to you silently with my thoughts because he sleeps beside me. We are husband and wife, and I am with his child...our first! We thought we were finished when we laid the evil matter to rest...but we were wrong! We had only fought back mayhap HALF of the forces of darkness. Neither Jhaga, nor the matter were responsible for them. Darren and I fight on, still driving their forces back, but it is slow going. They gain in power with each advance we make to the Naerth...to the source. Settlements we find are more and more sparsely populated. We find more and more nomadic and gypsy types roaming the less traveled roads and in hiding, living in fear. They speak of the source: The Scorlord...an evil being of pure darkness. This is not matter, but pure dark energy. We fought as far as we could, but my third trimester has seen me unfit to fight, and our advance has become*

a retreat. We hold the line where Darren can stand alone until I deliver and can once again join my strength with his, but I have seen his optimism begin to fade. I know he loves me...and I, him. I just don't know how long we can live like this."

The voice speaks to her again. *"That is all well and good. You have filled The Reader in amply. They shall remain apprised of events until they once more play a role."*

Chapter X: Twylla

Chapter X: The Glade

Pollyfina and Darren continue their quest Naerth when Pollyfina spots something out of the corner of her eye to the Waest.

"Whoa, Aember."

"What is it?"

"Look Waest."

Darren complies. There, he thinks he sees what Pollyfina is pointing out...but it is not quite so.

"That forest glade. It isn't dark, like the rest," he notes.

"True. I thought I spied something else, mayhap."

“Such as?”

“A unihorn paegasus!” she whispers forcefully. Darren looks again.

“That could explain the glade untouched by darkness.”

“Can we have a look-see?”

“Of course, My Sweet.”

Together they go...into the glade.

“This is so nice,” says Pollyfina.

“It truly is,” replies Darren. “How long has it been since we have heard the birds sing, or the stir of wildlife?”

“Too long. This is what we will make the whole of Aerthus, though...in time...together...you and I.”

Darren smiles at the thought.

Part 2: Destiny Borne Away

Chapter X: The “Happy Event”

As the contractions come closer together, Pollyfina and Darren halt Aember and set up camp in a beautiful strath. Twilight radiance colors the sky. Darren is doting on Pollyfina with his every action. He cradles her in his arms as she grunts, pushing, sweaty long strands of red sticking to his breastplate. Pollyfina’s breaths become quick and, well...labored.

“I love you, Pollyfina.” Darren says softly, kissing her forehead.

“I love you too.” she replies under the strain of another push. “The baby...it’s coming.” Her eyes are wide with concern and urgency as she turns a pleading gaze on Darren. He nods quiet, confident understanding that she means now, and rests her head gently in the grass. Pollyfina looks up to the early night sky and sees a shock of light. *Is it a shooting star?* She wonders, as a shooting pain brings with it a final excruciating push. Pollyfina is spent.

“Oh, my Goddess!” she cries in relief, breathing heavily.

All else is silent for a moment. For that moment, Pollyfina thought all was finally right with the world.

“What sorcelry is this?!” Darren outbursts.

“Darren, Honey, what's--?”

“Don’t you ‘Honey’ me you...Witch!”

“What--?!”

“I stand with you, fight by your side, give you of myself, give you a child, and this is how you repay me?!”

Pollyfina is taken completely aback. “What do you mean?”

“I have no more time for you; for any of this!”

“Darren!” she scorches out a tear stained screech of a betrayed heart. “What are you doing?!”

“I’m packing. I’m leaving!”

“But...what about the baby?! Our--!”

“See for yourself, Witch!”

Pollyfina musters herself up to a seated position and looks down to her newborn babe...her stillborn albino girl. She is a very pale blue in the face with darker blue lips. Her eyes shut. Not a lock of hair to be found. Strangled in her birthing cord. Pollyfina wails sobs of a heart being shattered and rent at the same time. “How could you!” she curses the sky. Darren almost takes offense until he sees the direction of her gaze. He moves to load his pack on Aember, but Aember trots away toward Pollyfina.

“It's like that, is it?” Darren asks of the horse. “Fine!

You can **have** each other!” With that, he ambles away in remorseless disgust, muttering to himself as he goes. Pollyfina cries after him, shouting his name and sobbing disconsolately yet she is weak from the birthing and in this most vulnerable of moments simply wants to embrace her poor, miscarried child.

Pollyfina picks up her babe, cradling its head and holds it to her bosom in a soft hug which elicits a spluttering attempt at breath from the newborn. Pollyfina's eyes grow wide and hurriedly she unravels the birthing cord from around the baby's neck. The baby cries.

Yes! Thank you, Aethersta. Yes!

Mother and daughter regard one another.

“You are beautiful,” she says as a realization hits her, “Destiny! Your name is Destiny. Oh, Dear Destiny. What shall we do now? You are only just born, and your father has run off. Oh, look at you. You don't understand at

all. So much innocence..." Destiny gurgles. "Mayhap it is best if we rest. Let us remain here for now in case your father comes to his senses and returns. If not, we can track him. He will not get so far on foot that Aember cannot catch him up in a day or less. He must see you as you are now... positively brimming with life!" Pollyfina sets Destiny in a cozy bundle secured to Aember, and as though possessed of a mindless trance, removes her ward, placing it around Aember's neck. Before she retires, she whispers one last command to Aember, "Keep her safe."

Chapter X: Keeping Her Safe

In the night air, her ears ever vigilant as she rests, Aember detects something amiss. Her eyes bolt open and dart around as she grunts softly. There, in the distance, at the shadowy edge of the strath she sees the dark spaectres floating in. Her first instinct would be to fight...but not with the child. Slowly she maneuvers toward Pollyfina. A hoof clomp on the ground gets no response from the sleeping mother. Another and another fare the same. Now the wispy figure in the distance seems to fan out into two, then three. Aember knows her duties to both mistress and child and decides it best to try to serve both as best she can. She begins to head for the glade with the babe, keeping her head craned around to see the spaectres floating about. They seem confused and unaware, not chasing after her immediately as would be their natures. Now, rather than clomps, Aember's hooves touch the ground as stealthily as a shod horse can stride. She edges her way closer to the brush that can cover her escape to the glade. Her advance is agonizingly slow, yet the spaectres still seem unaware of what is causing them to be on the alert. Aember exhales in relief, but as the breath escapes her, her lips flap. Her eyes grow wide, and glancing back, she sees the dark spaectres now silently screaming toward her! She breaks into a gallop and makes a beeline for the brush. She is losing ground as the phantaesms pursue...but reaches the brush. Hurdling the brush now, Aember's hooves reach the forest floor, sending fir needles flying as she continues to gallop at breakneck speed though the forest and in and out of trees sprinting all out for the glade. The babe awakes, then coos and giggles in confusion. Aember is glad to hear the child is comfortably enjoying the ride, if not also distressed at the added signal the enemies now have with which to pursue them. Now she sees it. It is the boulder they passed by on their way out from the glade. Yes! Aember finds a

second wind and blindly breaks a tripwire. Quarrels hiss at her, most bouncing off her armor...yet one finds its way into her. She rears in pain with a loud whinny, then stumbles forward. The glade...it's right there. She reaches the edge of the glade, her eyesight blurring and body burning. The quarrel must have been treated with something. She cannot go on. She needs to lie down. The babe is to one side and the quarrel to the other. She kneels forward placing her forehead to the ground. If she falls, she thinks, she must fall to the side of the quarrel, not the babe.

"What are you doing here?" asks a familiar voice. Gasp! "You're hurt!" The babe cries. "My goodness! What's all this?!"

Aember cannot bear the pain any longer. She begins to slowly roll to the quarrel side.

"Not on MY watch!" says another voice. Aember is stopped and rolled to her opposite side by... something... but she passes out before she can know what.

Chapter X: Betrayal Upon Betrayal

When Pollyfina awakes, Aember is gone. Pollyfina stands at a start, glancing around frantically, calling Aember, but to no avail. She stands there, now utterly alone. *What is HAPPENING? WHY is this happening? Did I-Did I KNOW this would happen? Why did I give Aember my WARD?* Pollyfina waits and waits... but in the end resolves that Aember will not be back. *What do I DO? I've lost my mate, our offspring, my steed, and then there's this cursed prophecy to fulfill. Well, I'm sorry prophecy, but Darren and Destiny come first!*

Destiny trumps Darren in Pollyfina's heart, yet she has no clue which way Aember went. She hypothesizes perhaps back to the glade, but her attempts to find any trace of Aember's doubling back fail. It is as if Aember simply vanished without a trace. She decides if she can catch Darren up, then mayhap they can find their Destiny together. Moving in the direction he left in a huff, she quickly and easily finds his trail and follows a well-beaten road to a nearby village.

"Aye!" says the barkeep at the first local tavern she stops in to inquire at, "He was here. Sobbed and muttered the whole time about your offspring."

“Our offspring...his and mine.”

“That’s not how he saw it.”

“Say again?”

“He said the features was all wrong for it to be his.”

“Our daughter is albino. Perfect as virgin silken cloth.”

“‘Is’? You mean, ‘was’.”

“I do not misspeak. Our child lives.”

“Then mayhap he was right about you.”

“I am no witch. He ran off rather abruptly. The child spluttered. The birthing cord was tight to her throat. I released it and she breathed and cried her first, though clearly not loud enough for her father to hear.”

“He did not speak to whether or not he heard the babe cry. Only that the babe itself reviled him.”

“I have come the wrong way. He will not help me find our daughter.”

“Mayhap no. Mayhap yes. Although I would not chance to reunite them. His help to locate her would be to dispatch what he called an aberration.”

“I don’t understand how this has all come to pass.”

“Life is not so simple to foresee.”

“Not for most. Mine, however, is a fate tied up and bound by the oldest and best prophecy.” At this, the barkeep lets out an uproarious belly laugh.

“I thought you said you weren’t a witch.”

“I’m not. I am the Child of Light.”

“We all know the fabled prophecy of old. It’s the first nursery rhyme we teach our spawnlets. ‘The Bearer of Destiny, The Child of Light.’”

“No longer do I bear the child Destiny. She is the springlet of which we had spoken, yet still I bear a destiny in the role I am to play in ending The Graet Eclipse.”

“Whoa! Lady! You’re talking nonsense and tree tales!”

“Have you not been living in fear of the dark forces moving all around you these past few months?”

“Listen...darkness and imperfection is the way of the world-”

“But that’s not the call of Aethersta!”

“A ha! Now we get to the point! Aethersta, eh? Goddess of perfection? How long have you believed in that nonsense?”

“It isn’t nonsense!”

“Prove it.”

“Prove it to be nonsense.”

“Look around you. Do you see perfection? Eh? Why would the Goddess creator design such imperfection, I ask...why?”

“Yet look at our days and nights...a perfect split. Look at our years, months, and weeks, all evenly dividing six ways. The Graet Eclipse comes to pass, though neither side, good nor evil, has perfected its cause...so the battle wages on.”

“You really believe in all this ‘prophecy’ and ‘destiny’ grumbletalk?”

“I do. I must. I am the embodiment of its fulfillment.”

“Then you don’t have a choice.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, you could decide to stay put here, forever...but if your fate is to win perfection for good, something will drive you out to fight off the evil and defeat the Scorld. If destiny is real, then you can’t run from it or change it. I don’t believe in such nonsense. I believe we make our destinies.”

“And what if I do have a choice, but my choice is to follow the path of the prophecy to fulfillment?”

“Then you’ll most likely die a fool, trying to obtain the unobtainable.”

“You really don’t believe in anything, do you?”

“I believe in myself.”

“Then we are completely the same.”

“Hardly.”

“You believe in yourself as far as life will take you in your chosen profession as barkeep. I believe in myself as far as life will take me in my role as The Child of Light. You just don’t have a prophecy to guide you.”

“Delusions of grandeur will get you nowhere...except killed...or worse.”

“Worse?”

“Trust me. The Scorld can do much worse than kill you outright.”

“I’m wasting my time speaking to you.”

“If you’re trying to convince me-”

“No. I’m not. I have a destiny to fulfill. I’m wasting time here.”

“If you’re right about your destiny, you can’t rush it anyway.”

“You said you want me to prove I’m right?”

“Verily, I did.”

“Then farewell, Barkeep. I am off to do precisely that!”

Chapter X: The Babe!

Aember awakes with a start and quickly rises to her feet, glancing around.

“Easy there, Girl.” Says the last voice she heard. She looks to see a unihorn paegasus. She lets out a whinny.

“The babe is safe.” Says Twylla. Aember turns her head in surprise to see her friend. “I’m glad to see you, too. You brought us a little one. Well...for a human. Ha! Where’s Pollyfina?”

Aember relays to Twylla and Maen the events from the child’s birth to the present, and they in return tell Aember that Twylla had taken Destiny as Maen had “caught” Aember with his snout and, with the babe safely away, pushed her over onto her other side. It took but a moment to touch his horn to the quarrel and reverse the physical damage that was done to her. Still, she had taken a day to recover fully. The dark spaectres were unable to pursue Aember into the glade due to Maen’s (and, indeed, Twylla’s) magical protection. After growling their dissatisfaction at losing their prey, they floated off in a direction other than that in which they came. This news, of course, pleased Aember. Clearly they hadn’t detected Pollyfina, or they would have gone straight back for her.

“Aember, you need to stay here and rest, where it’s safe.” Says Twylla. Aember nods agreement. “Pollyfina may come for Destiny, but haeven knows their reunion must wait. Pollyfina needs a clear mind and conscience. You said she wanted Destiny safe. I’ll take Destiny to the Saeth...to her mother’s home in Diddlebury.” Aember tells Twylla about the ward. “I see. I’ll take that, too. I may be protected, but Destiny may need it. Stay with Maen here and you’ll be well.” Aember feels a warmth in her heart at this notion. Maen is quite the stallion. Twylla giggles and whispers. “I think he likes you.” Aember glances around at Maen, whose horse hearing caught Twylla’s whisper. Maen quickly glances away with a double take. Aember looks back at Twylla, who smiles knowingly and nods. “Alright, you two. I’m off with Destiny.”

Chapter X: The Birth of Daeth

Darren wanders aimlessly Naerth. His life, he feels, is a sham in shambles. For a time, as he ambles forth the forces of darkness give way around him...knowing he has been the force to hold them at bay all this time Pollyfina has been coming to term. Once he has traveled far enough Naerth, however, the evil forces seize him easily and drag him before the Scorld. Darren puts up no resistance. Gone is the fight in him. Gone is the light in him. He is resigned. He feels worthless, useless, hopeless, and empty.

“You are the one who has been ruining my plans?”

“I was.”

“Was?”

“That’s not me anymore.”

“I can smell your despair. You speak the truth. I am unopposed, then.”

“No.”

“No? You alone have been thwarting me. If you are here, then who-?”

“Her name is Pollyf-”

“HER name? Ha! Ha! Ha! How rich!”

“She is The Child of Light from the Oldest and Best Prophecy.”

“The Child of Light, you say? A girl? Hmmm...most unexpected...but not unlike Aethersta to oppose me with such a dubious twist. Tell me about this...”

“Pollyfina.”

“Polly...bwah! Ha! Ha! What a name, too! Seriously. Are you sure this wasn’t just a ploy so you could get to me and end this easily? Come on. What’s your angle here?”

“No angle. I understand you are a soulless being.”

“Tish tish. I shall not reveal secrets. The importance of my soul plays a part in my victory over even the prophecy.”

“I know. That’s why I’m here.”

“I’m afraid I’m not following you.”

“I’m here to surrender my soul to you.”

“Surrender your soul?”

“Yes.”

“Seems a tad too easy for me. What’s in it for you?”

“I get to know my soul will go on to crush the one who destroyed my heart.”

“Ah! Pollyfina was your love.”

“Yes.”

“Truest love turned vilest hate. Ha!”

“Look. I’m done. Take my soul. Defeat Pollyfina. Put an end to the prophecy. The Graet Eclipses might still go on, but at least I will have had my bittersweet revenge.”

“Kneel.”

Darren does as commanded and the Scorlord reaches a hand over Darren’s forehead. Out from Darren’s body, filling the Scorlord with power, comes Darren’s soul. His shell of a body falls lifelessly on the ground.

“Yes! Yes! I can feel my power growing! Ah! This...Darren. He is the one I’ve been waiting for! Such hate! Such anger! Such resignation! Lovely!”

“Your Lordship is-”

“Stop!”

“Sorry, Sire.”

“STOP!”

“Mm?”

“Henceforth, address me as Daeth.”

“Daeth, your new look with a soul, it’s positively awe inspiring!”

“Is it?” The minion nods. “Good. Now then, Excrement...”

“Yes, Daeth?”

“Take this corpse where it can be properly reanimated to face Pollyfina.”

“Yes, Daeth! At once!”

“After all, you can’t keep a good man down.”

Part 3: Forging Victory

In this last part of the book, Pollyfina and The Reader will be forcing the dark minions and forces of the evil scorlord back. Pollyfina and The Reader face off against the scorlord itself. The Reader charges the scorlord. The evil master opens a portal between them that The Reader rushes into...

EPILOGUE

“Watch where you’re going!” cries a driver out his window as he narrowly misses you...back in the crosswalk.

You glance around in total confusion and disarray, then sprint to the corner you were headed toward before you were whisked away. Time, it would seem, stood still here on Earth. You came right back to the same instant you left. The same space...as if by tele-tempoportation! At the corner you catch your breath and look up to find a poster on a bus stop advertising the last book in a trilogy: *The Child of Light*.

OUTRO

And now, dear Reader, you have my thanks again. Not because you have finished my second book, but because every day you are here, YOU are here. There is not another you. I may not know what it is about you, but it is there. Don’t deny it. Be you. Wonderful, amazing, unique and powerful you. Powerful? Yes! Powerful! Give every day your everything. Never give in and never live another day with regrets! You are smarter than even you may

think and stronger than you imagine! Put your skills to good use. Be creative! Be inspiring! Be happy! Because life is too short and the list of lessons is too long.

BIO

John Michael O'Brien II is a second-time author with this book. He is the father of two wonderful adult children named Ben and Amanda, holds a Master of Science in Mathematics Education, has numerous Microsoft Certifications, and has studied game art and design. Currently, he lives in Manitowoc, Wisconsin.

The Child of Light

by John M. O'Brien II

PREFACE

Hello. Thank you for your rejoinder in the conclusion of our tale. I hope you find it to your satisfaction.

Part 1: Victory

Chapter 1: A Destined Meeting

Destiny has grown into a fine young lady, reared by
Sir Holdfast (Shecklin) and Mawdrin and trained as Pollyfina was.

Destiny is in the open market perusing the edible fare as
a man rides up on horseback, arguing with his sword.

“Oh, shut up, will you?” half demands and half
pleads the rider. Surprisingly to her, she hears the sword’s
reply.

*“I will do no such thing! You know, you really are a
brute! How many times do I have to tell you to keep your
guard arm up? And another thing--!”*

“That’s it!” the rider cries out. “Go bug somebody
else, you think you’re so smart!” He sheaths the sword
and casts it on the ground. People all around are regard-
ing the man as a nut as he looks around, red with embar-
rassment, then quickly spurns his steed to ride off. “Our
destiny resides in Diddlebury.” she hears him say mock-
ingly as he rides away. She casts her gaze back to the
sword.

“Goodly morrow!” says the sword brazenly.

Destiny’s eyes grow wide with surprise.

“Look at this!” says a passerby. “That muffinhead left a perfectly good s--whoa!” he had been going to pick the sword up when Destiny, entirely on instinct, drew her own sword and hurriedly announced, “Back off! He left that for me!”

“I’m sorry, Miss.” he pauses; then, thinking he has the upper hand anyway, continues to pick up the sword. “Actually, he left it on the ground. If it were for you--”

“I am!”

“Aaaaah!” shrieks the man, dropping the sword in a surprised, defensive stance. “That things possessed!” he wails, running away. Destiny and the sword share a laugh.

“Please hurry to pick me up before we have to go through that again with someone else.”

Destiny nods. “Are you possessed?”

“After a fashion, you might say I am. In truth, I’m trapped.”

“How’s that?”

“I was once...very much like you...but my soul was trapped in this sword.”

“Wow!”

“I know that must seem fascinating to you...but--”

“Oh! I’m so sorry.” Destiny weeps, imagining the inconvenience of being imprisoned in an inanimate object.

“It’s quite alright.” the sword coos softly. “I can tell you are very empathetic. Well, it’s not all bad; I’m here now, and you’re ready.”

“Ready?”

“Yes. Ready. Now...stow me away and take care when and how you speak with me around other people, or they will think you crazed.” Destiny self-consciously bends at the knees and alertly looking around, picks up the

sword. She hangs its scabbard at the off-hand side of her belt.

“If you can speak,” Destiny whispers, trying not to move her lips, “then do you have a name?”

“*Victory!*” the sword shouts.

“Shhhh!” Destiny admonishes the sword back.

With a laugh, it replies, “*No, silly. They can hear you.*”

They can't hear me.”

“But--”

“*Only those who have held me can hear me.”*

“But--”

“*I revealed myself to you.”*

“Do you--”

“*...know what you're thinking? No. I can't read minds. Your thoughts in this instance were easy to ascertain because most anyone in your place would have the same wonderings. Now...I'm afraid we have some business to attend to.”*

“We--”

“Take me to Sir Shecklin and Mawdrin.”

“Sir Sheck-?”

“Oh, he didn’t use that name with you, did he? Well...good! Mayhap he learned something from our talk.

Take me to Sir Holdfast and Mawdrin.”

Destiny blinks surprise. “How do you know that

I know--?”

“Because you are Destiny, The Child of Light.”

“How--?”

“Destiny, there’s really no time now. We must

hurry!”

Destiny nods, rushing off to meet with Sir Hold-

fast and Mawdrin. *It really is shaping up to be quite the*

morning!

Chapter X:

“Why did I not know about this line of the prophecy sooner?!”

“Beg pardon, Master. We had only just learned of it ourselves.”

“All this time I had the opportunity to see The Graet Eclipse through! I can’t believe I let her get to me and cast away Victory!”

“It does sound rather foolish when you put it like that, Maester.”

“Shut it! Victory may have slipped through my fingers...but I shall have it back in my grasp! Years now trying to get one stinking sword back when we could’ve been completing the takeover of Aerthus! Years! This celestial event won’t last forever. Time is running out!” With that, the portcullis opens, and a team of darkdire scouts enters the sanctum to report. “What news of the sword, Baengrel?”

“It rides with a horseman Saeth to the cusp of Aerthus, Oh Daeth.”

“The cusp? Hmmm...Pollyfina was from the cusp...a small hamlet...Diddlebury. She must be returning home for something! Very good, Baengrel! There is mutton in the troughs! Enjoy and await further orders!”

“Yes, Oh Daeth.” He replies with both front legs flat and head down as if bowing before retiring with his pack out a side passage.

“This troubles me.”

“I agree, Daeth.”

“The sword has been seen with several different champions. It would seem they have all been fighting our forces in the Naerth and keeping our advance at bay and yet now, suddenly, a champion rides Saeth with Victory to her home.”

“It sounds like an invitation to advance the siege again, Daeth.”

“Of course it does, Nincompoop! And we shall! I struggle to understand why they allow this. It flies smack against the face of sense! Puke!”

“Yes, Oh Daeth,” replies another shadowy henchman.

“Get details on the new champion from Baengrel and relay them to the Vaeltures. I want to keep a bird’s eye view of this progress and, if possible, seize the opportunity to get the sword.”

“Very good, Oh Daeth.”

“Tell them their reward is nil should they return empty hand-er taloned!”

“As you command, Oh Daeth.”

Chapter X: Pairing

“You know, Dear, it’s funny how life goes. They used to call me the bearer of Destiny when I was alive. Now here we are, you and I, and you are the bearer of...me.”

“Yes...as The Bearer of Victory, I think things are well in hand.”

“Now we just need to learn to work together as a well paired team.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well Dear, examine my guard between the grip and the blade.”

Destiny looks at the sword just above the handle, and from behind a metal lid, an eye opens to reveal itself.

“Yeeeagh!” she cries, dropping Victory. “Sorry, Mom.”

“It’s alright, Dear. I know I startled you. I was prepared for it and closed my eye before I hit ground.”

“You’re not hurt?”

“No, Dear. With my eyes shut, I’m just a sword on the outside.”

“Oh. Okay. Well...I’m glad I didn’t hurt you. Why did you choose to show me your eye now? Why wait?”

“Dear Destiny, how I love your inquisitive heart. Don’t ever change. I showed you my eye only now because I was unsure you were ready to see it sooner. Judging by your reaction, even now was a stretch.”

“I suppose.”

“But now we are talking about pairing.”

“Yes. Pairing. What is that?”

“And that’s what I was about to show you. May I open my eye again?”

“Certainly, Mother.” The eye slowly opens and regards Destiny.

“You have grown into a beautiful young lady.”

“Thank you, Mother.”

“Now. Turn me over.” The eye closes and Destiny does as instructed. On the opposite side, Destiny notes the same closed eye feature, which slowly opens. *“You see? I still have two eyes...though not like before.”*

“But...why?”

“It’s the design of the living sword. Living swords, as I have become, are meant to give their bearers not only a weapon to fight with, not only a magically enhanced weapon, and not only an intelligent weapon, but indeed also a truly decisive advantage. When you wield me, I become a second set of eyes. We must train together. I need you to always sheathe me one way, always draw me one way, and always hold me in front of you consistently the same way.”

“Why?”

“Because, Dear, just like you still do, I once had a left eye and a right eye...but now...I have a ‘front’ eye and a ‘back’ eye, so...I need to know where my eyes are looking if I am to warn you of danger.”

“Okay. Whoa. So, you’re telling me-”

“Unlike you, I literally have eyes in the back of my head. If you hold me before you as standard, my eyes will look to your left and right, and I can warn you of any flanking dangers I see.”

“Wow! This is so cool!”

“You want cool? Try this on for size. Hold me to your side, where one eye faces as yours do, and my other eye can warn you of dangers approaching from behind.”

“But, how do you know which eye is-”

“That’s why we need to practice and why you need to always maintain my orientation.”

“Okay. I’m going to sheathe you now.” Destiny does. In a moment, glancing down at her hip, she sees Victory’s eye open.

“Okay. You seem to have sheathed me with my...well...my once ‘left’ eye open to the world.”

“Is that good?”

“It’s really fine either way. I’ve paired with a few wielders as I waited for this day and have gotten the hang of being carried one way or the other. The real trick is in how you draw me, use me, and sheath me again. If you don’t confuse me, you’ll always have a useful second set of eyes to keep you on top.” Destiny gives a sigh of relief at the thought, smiling down at her mother, at Victory. *“Now then, Dear, we have work to do.”*

Chapter X: Return of the Vaeltures

Daeth paces around a stone dais in his sanctum, anxiously awaiting news. The vaelture leader flies into the sanctum from an open window, approachable only by air due to jagged peaks to its outside below. In the vaelture’s talons it carries the horseback rider who left Victory in Diddlebury. He had been returning home when he was abruptly scooped off his horse’s back, leaving the spooked horse to run off at top gallop. The vaelture drops the rider before Daeth. The rider is weak, having spent days aloft in one set of talons or another without food or water. He lands on all fours with a thud, trying hard to lift his head to address the Scorlord.

“Where is Victory?!”

“Victory. Hah!” He wipes his nose and settles back on his haunches, still kneeling, but now more upright. “That sword was more trouble than it was worth!”

“Tell me what I ask, not what I know.”

“Oh! Alright! Victory had to go find her destiny!”

“Her destiny was to defeat me or die trying. Why has she stopped?!”

“Oh. I dunno, Mate. She kept insisting ‘our destiny resides in Diddlebury’. Don’t make a lick of sense, does it?”

“What’s in Diddlebury? What is she after? How does she defeat me like this?”

“Once again, Mate, I really dunno. We got there, she started into me being insufferable and whatnot, and I left her there!”

“You left her there?”

“On the ground. Yeah. Rode away, conscience clear as a bell.”

“Perhaps she sought counsel from her trainers.”

“Aw naw! I can tell you right up she thinks she knows it all. That ain’t it at all!”

“Perhaps she has given up--”

“You can stop that train of thought right there. She’s got no quit in her. It was fiery determination driving her to ‘our destiny’. Hah! Not ‘our’ destiny if you ask me!”

“No. She only included you because her destiny up to Diddlebury included you. She knows her destiny is here...so why go to Diddlebury?”

“I--”

“Dunno. Yes. So you’ve said. Well, you’ve been cooperative...helpful even...so I believe you. Very well. Scaethe?”

“Yes, Daeth?” replies the Vaelture leader.

“Enjoy him with the others.”

“What?! No!!!” cries the informant as Scaethe greedily laughs and takes him away.

Part 2: Defeat

Chapter X:

Part 3: The End of All

Chapter X: Welcome Back!

Chapter X: The Final Battle

“So... the Scorld is my father, Darren, and you
want me to drive you through his heart to destroy him?”

*“Oh, Destiny, Honey...It’s okay. I’ve pierced your
father’s heart before. It’s no big deal.”*

The portcullis opens to reveal the all too familiar inner sanctum. Destiny looks at you from beneath her hood. Having lost your last battle here, you can’t help but return her sad, almost fearful, uncertain look. A steelen resolve enters you, commands your countenance, and you nod a newfound readiness to Destiny that reassures her. You step forward together into the audience chamber before the Scorld. The guards flanking the inner edges of the door take ready fighting stances as you enter, as they had before, and the Scorld commands them at ease, as before.

“So. You have returned to fail again. This time not with my wife, but...whom?”

Destiny unclips her cowl and drops its entirety to the floor, her armor, skin, and hair glowing in the moonlight. The Scordlord's jaw drops in disbelief as Darren stares at the grown figure of his ghost daughter.

"You! But...how?!"

"Mother saved me."

"The witch? I suppose I shouldn't be surprised."

"My mother was no witch."

"Explain it then."

"Explain what?"

"Your look. You are an abomination!"

"I am the child of Darren and Pollyfina."

"No! Not Darren! You take that back!"

"I've nothing to take back. I am the fulfillment of the prophecy as Aethersta saw fit to create me."

"No! Your mother was the Bearer of Destiny! She was the Child of Light! She failed!"

"Wrong! My mother was the prophesied Bearer of Me! I am Destiny! I am The Child of Light! Look on me, Father!"

"Don't call me that!"

"I am the spawnling of all the light possessed in your and mother's hearts for one another...for once your hearts burned so brightly for each other that no other result could come to pass...except me. THERE is your explanation!"

“No! You were dead! This is further witchcraft!”

“You gave up on us all to quick and soon. Gone in a flash, as Mother tells. I spluttered. She saw the birthing cord constricting my throat and cut the serpent like thing to free my breath.”

“She did not come after me!”

“Right then?! Right there?! Of COURSE not! She was weak and alone with her newborn just revived and her heart torn from her by her most trusted! She needed to know WHAT to do next.”

“Enough of this history lesson! Fine! You are my accursed offspring here to join your mother in her fate!”

“Ah! So you plan to steal my essence for a sword, eh?”

“No! I—wait...how did you-?” Destiny draws Victory from her sheath.

“Hello, Darren.”

“You again. I thought I had gotten rid of you. Ah well, it is for the best that our daughter has brought Victory back to me. I discovered only after I cast you out that you were the one final piece I needed to complete The Graet Eclipse and perfect this realm in darkness forever. Destiny, be a dutiful daughter, set your mother down, and walk away. I know you don’t wish to fight me.”

“Don’t listen to him, Destiny. That’s NOT your father anymore.”

“No. He’s the Scorld...but father is in him.”

“Not his essence...only his SOUL.”

“No, Mother. His essence is there. He is right. I don’t wish to fight him.”

“Destiny!”

“Good, Child. You are wiser than your mother.” With that, Destiny slowly approaches the Scorld, taking Victory by the blade as though to offer her by the handle to his waiting sword hand. She turns her head to you and winks. *What are you up to, Destiny?* As she arrives before the Scorld, she extends Victory toward him, but as he reaches to take Victory, she presses the handle into his breast, just over his darkheart, and Victory entraps Darren’s essence as well! The Scorld lets out a shriek as the essence is ripped from its being. The guards spring to life to charge Destiny and you quickly advance to stand back-to-back with her at the defense. As Darren’s essence completes its drain from the Scorld, it falls back in shock and awe at the sudden turn of events, crossing an arm before itself defensively. Destiny turns Victory about in her hands so that it now faces the Scorld blade first.

“Stop!” cries the Scorld. All motion ceases.

“What?” asks Destiny, a tad in disbelief.

“I yield! Stop!”

“Destiny, your father is here with me, now...and we agree. You need to end him.”

“How do I know this isn’t a trick? Why do you yield?”

“Without a soul, I cannot win.”

“How do I know-?”

“I can’t steal your soul? Your essence is light.”

“What of The Reader?”

“This one’s soul is safe in another realm whence I cannot reach it.”

“You say you cannot win. Why not try to stop us from winning?” The Scorld is speechless, but you can all see it in the empty being’s eyes. Fear. As the realization dawns upon everyone, the Scorld and his minions begin to fade. The *“Congratulations, Children and Visitor.”*

“Aethersta!”

“Yes, Destiny. So you have named me in this realm, I Am.”

“Then...we have won?”

“According to the promise of My Word put down for you, The Graet Eclipse shall be no more. Goodness has prevailed over evil. Now all that remains is to welcome you and all your people into a perfect place. A utopia. A haeven. Pollyfina and Darren shall be freed from Victory. Reader, I must return you to your Earth now, but know this...your friends here will be happy forever...and my sign to you that this has come to pass will be a simple symbol of perfection you will know when you come to see it.” Destiny rushes to hug you, teary eyed. You hold one another for a lengthy goodbye.

“Goodbye, Reader. Thank you. Thank you from all of us, for everything.” You close your eyes and she fades from your grasp. Suddenly, you feel as though you are falling. You wake to the blinding light of the sun, and turn to find the book at your side, open to the pair of following pages:

EPILOGUE

The perfect pair of blank pages. You smile a knowing smile.

OUTRO

It's all been said, and it's all been done. Thank you for everything, Dear Reader. I've expressed my wishes for you in these outros. My final wish is that you never lose hope. If there is one thing in your life that you hold onto with everything dear and sacred...hold on to hope. You can take everything else a person has...but short of taking their life you can't kill their spirit. Go. Look in the mirror and know that the warrior staring back at you has everything they need to live, to love, to learn, to grow, to blossom, to be happy, to be set. Now...breathe...and go get 'em!

BIO

John Michael O'Brien II is a third-time author with this book. He is the father of two wonderful adult children named Ben and Amanda, holds a Master of Science in Mathematics Education, has numerous Microsoft Certifications, and has studied game art and design. Currently, he lives in Manitowoc, Wisconsin.

PREFACE

Hello. Thank you for selecting this work to peruse.

It has a tale to tell I am sure we both hope you will come to enjoy and share with others.

Part I: Pollyfina

Chapter 1: All About Smidgeon

The tale begins in a time of sorcelrousness and combattance. The place is the island continent of Aerthus in The Nether Realms, in a small hamlet called Diddlebury. Here, our hero, Smidgeon, a silly boy of but twelve, is coming-of-age for his first lesson in live combat

against what his father has convinced him are the
“wicked and deadly” grumblebutts.

It should be noted that grumblebutts are neither
evil nor essentially deadly. They are merely green,
toothy, fat-bodied, thin limbed, squat humanoid crea-
tures that offend the eyes and happen to be in overstock
supply at the murky edge of the forest adjoining the
saethern border of Diddlebury, which in turn has be-
come the starter “training ground”. They derive their
name from their tendency to grumble a great deal and
the fact that under their loincloth belts in back...their
butts sag. Full disclosure, these are really a sad and
people-fearing lot who would rather be left alone. Most
unfortunately for the grumblebutt kind here, however,
is the ease with which they can be made into “safe”
combat training fodder for the coming-of-age youth in
Diddlebury.

Smidgeon is given his first taste of battle in a small
fenced area where he is pitted against a single grumble-
butt. Smidgeon is armed with, well two arms...but he
also wields a short sword in his right hand and a shield
over his left arm. Taking up the ready stance, his combat
trainers release the grumblebutt as Smidgeon’s love in-
terest, the red-haired young Pollyfina comes into view.

Smidgeon is smitten. With a sigh of enamoration
he stands straight and, clearly distracted, tilts his head
with a smile as his gaze meets Pollyfina’s. Pollyfina

comes to the wooden “fence” perimeter to be closer to Smidgeon, and Smidgeon’s expression goes goofy as Pollyfina holds his gaze. Smidgeon’s limbs drop to his side in complete relaxation and his armaments drop at his feet as his google-eyes are entranced with Pollyfina.

The dim-witted grumblebutt needs no other sign than this to see its only opportunity to live, and pounces upon the sword and shield. As the creature runs our hero through, his google-eyes take a whole new expression, and Smidgeon is smitten yet again in quite another way...wait!

Smidgeon was our hero...the grumblebutt runs him through...okay...Pollyfina, our now heroine, cries a wail of bloodthirsty rage and, hurdling the fence, charges the dumbfounded grumblebutt. The grumblebutt turns and, for the first time, notices Pollyfina. It is immediately entranced by her red locks and drops the armaments to reach for the silky strands. As Pollyfina arrives before the creature, she deftly brings down her arms to grasp the combat items by their respective handles and in a fluid motion rising up and forward impales the grumblebutt on the sword.

It was thus that Pollyfina reached level two, and Smidgeon dropped to level zero. Pollyfina was about to have a new and very real problem, however, as combat art was forbidden to the young ladies of Diddlebury in this world...yet there was no going back. Pollyfina had

tasted blood. Grumblebutt blood, by the way, is nasty.

Pollyfina had experienced combat, and yet another tenet of the Diddlebury decrees was that once set upon a profession, none may alter the course of the apprentice.

It took some time and deliberation among the elders of the hamlet, but in the end the decision was clear. Pollyfina would be apprenticed to the Sergeant-at-Arms as the first female squire. Only a day after the decision was made final and announced, Pollyfina reported to the Sergeant-at-Arms to “continue” her training.

Chapter 2: Practical Matters

“The first thing we need to do with you,” says the Sergeant-at-Arms to Pollyfina, “is get you fitted with the proper arms and armor. I’ve never trained a girl in the combat arts. Indeed, no one has. That’s why you were assigned as my squire, no doubt...to learn from the best.”

He looks at her with a wink and a smile, adding,

“Although I may be a mite biased. Now, where in Diddleham--?”

“Diddlebury,” Pollyfina corrects him.

“What?” asks the Sergeant-at-Arms, not used to being spoken back at by a girl or a squire.

“Beg pardon, Sir. It’s Diddlebury.” she replies.

“Yes. Well...where in Diddlebury is your tailor?” he asks, brushing off both his and her faux pas. The good Sergeant had come from the province’s capitol city when

he received the missive assigning Pollyfina to him, and had decided to take up local quarter to train her. Pollyfina leads him the way, and in short order the tailor is busy taking measurements.

“I will need all of those written down.” the Sergeant tells the tailor, referring to the measurements. With a nod, the tailor never breaks stride. Pollyfina notices that the measuring tape being used is thick and wonders why the Sergeant wants to overestimate her size. Then she notices for every one measurement, the tailor scribbles down two measurements after glancing at both sides of the tape. *It must give both inner and outer measurements. For what, though?*

Pollyfina doesn't ask her wondering aloud. She figures when the time is right, she will find out. When the tailor has finished poking and prodding her and taking measurements of seemingly every inch of her in what was beginning to feel like endless fashion, the Sergeant is given a scrawled copy of the measurements and asks directions to the local smithie. A short walk later, he begins overwhelming the smithie with details of how he wants her shield and armor made.

“That's going to cost a pretty sum of goldens!” says the smithie. “I don't have the titanore you need for the metal none neither.”

“I will supply the materials,” says the Sergeant. The smithie's face lights up.

“You...you have real titanore? I get to work...with

titanore?”

“Yes.” replies the Sergeant curtly, using one hand to help the smithie close his gaping mouth. The smithie, still beaming if no longer gaping, turns to Pollyfina.

“Miss...I’m going to make you the finest and best shield and armor I’ve ever made!” he announces.

Pollyfina blushes.

“Here is your down payment,” says the Sergeant, dropping a sack of silverbits on the smithie’s table. “You get the rest when I have approved your craftsmanship fully. Now, Armorer...point me to the weaponsmith.”

“That’d be me partner in business. It’s a small hamlet. We share the forges. Makes things easier.”

“I see. And...where is he?”

“Be along anytime now.”

When the weaponsmith arrives, the Sergeant-at-Arms again goes into detail about the weapon to be crafted for Pollyfina.

“I want the guard to enclose around the grip, like this.” he shows the smithie his own sword. He dictates the length of the blade and handle and, again, insists it be fashioned from titanore he would provide. The second smithie looks to the first, who nods with a wide grin and holds up his sack of money. “Er...I’m sorry.” the Sergeant goes on. “That’s the down payment for everything...to be split among you as you see fit. You will, however, each get the prices you have asked when

done to our satisfaction.” At this, the first smithie seems a bit taken aback, but shrugs it off.

“How soon do you think they will have it finished?” Pollyfina asks excitedly.

“Too soon.” replies the Sergeant. “We will need to fit you with some steelen armor in the meantime.”

“Why did you not just choose a steelen make for my custom armor?” Pollyfina asks.

“You shall see.” replies the Sergeant.

When they return to the Diddlebury training grounds, the Sergeant sizes her up with some small-framed piecemeal steelen armor he had brought. As she gets fully clad, it is hard to move. They decide to ditch the sleeves and gauntlets, then the leggings and the boots. The breastplate works, for Pollyfina’s figure at twelve is still very boyish, as had been its design. The helmet is clumsy and, it’s decided, has to go too. In the end, Pollyfina has just that...a boy’s breastplate. The Sergeant gives her a short sword and a sturdy shield.

“Well?” she asks anticlimactically.

“You look every bit the scrawny squire part!” he says with a smile...stifling a chuckle.

“I hope I get my real armor soon!” she announces with a pout.

“And I hope they take their time and get it right.” Pollyfina thinks at first that maybe the sergeant enjoys seeing her like this. Then she thinks better of it and realizes he is right.

Chapter 3: The Excitement

“For your first real lesson in danger,” says the Sergeant-at-Arms, “I have planned great excitement!”

“Oh, yes?” asks Pollyfina. “What is it? Some slow-moving, bloodthirsty creature for me to best?”

“You catch on quick. It is best to train you early on with danger that is more easily dispatched. Only when one has a sense for self-defense in an easy arena should one step things up to a livelier pace.”

“Then I’m not sure how exciting this will be.”

“Oh, you wait! Your opponent today is such an exciting creature that it has been given that very name for its species: the excitement!”

“I’m literally going to fight the excitement?”

“An excitement.” he corrects her.

“Okay. Take me to the training grounds.”

As they arrive at the training grounds, there, before Pollyfina, on a stool, sits a creature that moves like a three-toed sloth and resembles a cross between a sloth and a lemur.

“Oh! It’s so cute! Surely you can’t expect me to dispatch such a creature as this?”

“I know you will. Now...go face the excitement!”

Pollyfina isn’t at all sure what to make of this whole seemingly farcical situation. As she approaches the creature, it doesn’t move in any apprehensive manner. It doesn’t bare any teeth, hiss, show claws, spit poison...

just sits and stares at her and seems to smile a warm, friendly smile as she approaches.

“Ready your sword!” commands the Sergeant.

Pollyfina looks back at him with a scowl. “Just do it! What harm can it do to be ready?”

Pollyfina shrugs. What harm indeed? This was not at all exciting, nor what she expected, but she draws her sword as commanded. *It’s not like I have to use it just because it’s drawn. I’ll play his little game, then let the poor, innocent creature go.*

She draws very near to the seemingly hapless creature and as she does, its eyes open wide with a loving gaze that melts her heart. Suddenly, Pollyfina is being entranced by the creature and her heart rate begins to rise. It’s as if she’s suddenly racing through a series of non-stop events in her mind. She can see herself dodging in and out of boulders running down a mountainside in an avalanche, racing through an obstacle course of traps through a dungeon cavern, coming within inches of being crushed by the club of a hulking monster...her thoughts are racing through danger, yet she is standing still. She tries to blink. If she can only break the trance for a second... but she can’t!

“I can’t handle all this excitement!” she manages to state aloud, then adds, “The excitement is killing me!”

With this last pronouncement, seeing no other way clear, she raises her sword, and vanquishes the foe...

lopping its head clear off. As the Sergeant-at-Arms approaches, Pollyfina is still breathing heavily from her dangerously induced high pulse rate. Pollyfina falls to the ground in exhaustion.

“I think you’ve had enough excitement for one day.” states the Sergeant-at-Arms. Pollyfina gives a faint nod before passing out. If nothing else, Pollyfina learned to trust her trainer from that day forward.

Chapter 4: Creature Biology I

The next morning, as Pollyfina breaks fast, her Sergeant trainer is nowhere around. She goes to the training ground to seek him out once finished eating. He is waiting there with a domesticated dog by his side.

“Good morrow, Young Apprentice!” he calls.

“Goodly morrow, Sir Shecklin. I trust today’s lesson is to be less exciting.”

“Aye, Pollyfina.” he replies. “Do you see this here mongrel?”

“Clearly. I hope this is no test like yesterday.”

“Not at all.” states Sir Shecklin. “Have a seat on yon stump.”

Pollyfina sits at the stump nearby he indicated. As she looks on, he kneels beside the dog, a hound, and he draws back the flappy skin hanging over its mouth to reveal the canine’s canines.

“Dogs, Pollyfina, are basically wolves that we

humankind have trained to obey. They are tamed wolves.

The teeth you see here, on a wolf, are called fangs.”

He releases the mouth, and lifts a paw.

“Now. Do you see these?” he indicates the row of sharp claws at the end of the paw. She nods. “These claws are relatively harmless to you and I...but put them on a wild animal...not necessarily just a wolf, but a bear, a draconis, anything, and they are a weapon for that creature.” He releases the paw, and grasps the dog’s tail, holding it firm, yet causing the dog no pain. “And as long as we are making the connection, imagine this innocent tail designed to keep flies from this hound’s behind representing the tail on a large creature, compared to which, you are a fly. Do you take my point?” Pollyfina nods. “Every creature great and small has a natural defense mechanism. ‘Monsters’ are mostly just creatures which are still dangerous to men, usually for their size or ferocity although some have learned to think...even speak. Some are magical as well. Still, yesterday’s lesson ties in to today’s. Remember that every wild creature has its defenses, and you won’t go wrong. For the excitement, it’s only defense was its gaze, but that was all it needed.”

“Don’t I know it.”

Sir Shecklin nods. “Fighting any creature requires awareness of its weapons: horns, teeth, claws, stingers, poison, gaze, magic, and so on. One of the best

ways to win a battle against any monster is to take away its defenses, which, I should add, are its offensive measures as well. If the creature is intelligent, going for the head is often best...unless it's a haedra. Regardless of the creature, if it's natural, the heart is the quickest means of dispatch. Come here and hug this dog."

Pollyfina gladly obliges. "Now, as you feel the soft, welcome warmth of its fur, let your hands roam its ribs of its underbelly and try to find its heartbeat."

Pollyfina did so. "Remember that location. Four-legged creatures the world over have similar placement, and can be the hardest to fight. They often charge and pounce. It doesn't give time for thought. Be ready to react."

"Yes, Sir." Pollyfina replies.

"You may one day face a draconis. It is laid out the same as if the dog had wings. The difference is that the draconis has protective scales, not soft, fluffy fur."

"So...how do I--"

"With stealth, if you have the advantage of surprise. If not, you must get the angle right. I have heard it said, the best way to a draconis brain is through its eye. Some have ventured to guess that the insides of the beast are softest, but with fire breath, I doubt any draconis would let you in unless you were already being fried."

"So...you don't really know?"

"The draconis is the legend of all beasts: armed

and armored all over...and huge! Underneath it all is a skeletal structure, however. Perhaps a tactical strike to sever the head from the neck at the spine..."

"And how would one accomplish that?"

"Again...it would take the element of surprise.

The draconis would need to be sleeping or very still.

The slayer would have to climb the spine of the beast from the tip of its tailbone to the base of its skull and stay right on the bony outcrops to avoid contact with its scales."

"Why couldn't one touch the scales?"

"Draconae have very sensitive skin beneath their scales. It's how they know where an attack comes from when a single scale gets plinked."

"Aethersta!"

"Yes, indeed! May the goddess help us if such a time were to come. Now...I have some straw targets. Let us teach you a thing or two about the bow and bolt."

Pollyfina and Sir Shecklin spend the day in archery practice, and she imagines she is shooting the legendary great waerm draconis Jhaga in the eye. She isn't faring very well, but the mental imagery makes the prospect more fun.

"Tomorrow, I think, we shall work on your stealth and cunning."

"I thought I was learning how to be a swordfighter, not a coward."

“A stealthy swordfighter is a wise swordfighter.

Show me the swordfighter who always announces their presence, and I’ll show you a skeleton in armor.”

Chapter 5: The Bog

Pollyfina awakens the next day well-rested and prepared for another lesson. Oddly enough, she is enjoying her daily lessons. *Who would have thought? This adventurer training, it turns out, is fun!* After eating a bowl of oaten meal, Pollyfina sets off to meet Sir Shecklin for her first day of stealth art. As she approaches the training grounds, she sees Sir Shecklin speaking with an elder gentleman adorned in robes. *A maegist?* Sir Shecklin seems full of surprises.

“Good morrow, Young Apprentice!” calls Sir Shecklin in his becoming usual way.

“Goodly morrow, Sir and...?”

“Pollyfina, may I introduce, the good and great sorcelror Mawdrin.”

“She has the look!” Mawdrin exclaims with wide eyes and makes all haste to bow low, dropping even to one knee. “Miss...Pollyfina. It is an honor!” He adds, removing his hat, holding it over his heart, head tucked chin to chest, revealing his rather bald scalp. Pollyfina and Sir Shecklin exchange looks of surprise. Mawdrin looks up, then bounds to his feet. “She is the first...The Bearer of Destiny, The Child of Light! Yet she is all of a child herself! I can hardly contain my excitement!”

“You have an excitement?” Pollyfina asks.

“No. Not the creature...the welling up inside!”

Pollyfina looks to Sir Shecklin, who merely shrugs sheepishly. He looks to Mawdrin.

“Mawdrin? What--?”

“Not now. Not now. We must train this one with haste! Introduce the lesson!”

Sir Shecklin, having learned the same regard for Mawdrin which Pollyfina now has for her trainer, began: “Pollyfina, today I have set before you a short and simple quest. Come!” He leads her along with Mawdrin to a murky bog. “Within the dead wood of this area I have placed a golden chalice. You are to recover it. Be warned, however; this is no simple undertaking. You must stay small and vary your movement. You must move quickly out of lit areas and slowly, surely, plan your path from the shadows. You must regulate your breathing for silence...both in and out through the nose. You must be fleet of foot and your plan must keep you on safe ground. The bog waters contain sinkholes and not all of what looks like land will support you. You must be careful not to stir the bog waters. This area is relatively safe, but bog creatures do pop up unannounced from time to time.”

“Um...wow!” responded Pollyfina. “Anything else I should know or you’d like to add?”

“Yes.”

“Great!” she said, throwing her hands up, “And what might that be?”

“Mawdrin here is going to perform necromance to--”

“Neck romance? Now see here--!”

“That’s what they call magic dealing with the dead.

He is going to summon up the fallen in the vicinity.”

“The fallen?”

“People have died out here. Mawdrin is going to make them members of the reliving briefly as part of your training. They are the ones you must outmaneuver and avoid with your stealth.”

“But...why don’t I just hack my way in?”

“Because your sword will do you no good against the reliving. They are made in magic. Your sword is not.”

“Then, shall I leave it here with you, where it is safe?”

“No. You must never part with your weapon. It may save you should a bog creature arise. Besides, on a real quest there shall be none to hold it for you. Even if there were...I would not trust my sword in the hands of another. They may be untrustworthy or turn traitor.”

“Sage advice.” agreed Mawdrin.

“Very well.” sighed Pollyfina. “So it’s capture the chalice among the reliving?”

“Yes.”

“When do we begin?” she asked. Mawdrin was already working up the summons. In short order, the dead

began to rise up within an area of the swampy waters.

With them came a stench which brought water to Pollyfina's eyes. It was all she could do not to gag, let alone retch at their hideous odor.

Pollyfina deftly took cover with her back to a nearby standing husk of grey wood, and peered with one eye around the trunk. She slid down to a crouched position and her hand felt around the mossy ground momentarily until it landed on a stone. Rising gently into a ready stance, she hurled the stone over her left shoulder to hear it splash into the water. Of the roughly twenty bodies Mawdrin had brought up in the area, ten bit on the sound of the decoy. Pollyfina made her way deeper into the bog. Well...not deeper down, but...you get me.

As she made her way from one mud plot to another, she trod carefully. A few times she could feel suction at one of her feet and rapidly repositioned. Still, the murk had oozed into her boots and made the whole exercise even more unpleasant.

As she hid, crouched near a fallen log, the wind changed direction. The reliving that had fallen for the decoy suddenly seemed to have an awareness of a change. They looked in Pollyfina's direction. *They can smell me.* The dread at the realization was nearly unbearable. Pollyfina rolled over the log and into the mud. A thought now flashed across her mind. *I've been going about this all wrong. Sir Shecklin said stay*

low.

She began to slither on her belly like a large yet silent salamander. Water and mud had seeped and soaked into her armor all over now. Her face and hair were slicked with the muck. Rolling softly and smoothly onto her back, she looked back to find that the reliving had lost her scent. *Thank Aethersta!*

Then she heard it. A loud snapping sound came from her right. She chanced a glance to see a spray of water droplets. Something had just snatched a meal. From nearly the same spot, large bubbles rose with a burbling sound. Pollyfina glanced to her left. There was a land bar she could back her way up to. *Gently.* She was looking straight up from her back at the bog wood rising around her to the sunlit sky. *Alright. I'm moving. I'm surviving. I'm actually doing quite well, I think. Now... where's that blasted chalice? I'll never find it laying on my back like this! Of course!* Pollyfina stood up slowly in clear view. The reliving did not regard her any differently than as one of their own...for now.

I must move as they do. She studied them as she went, being sure to keep her head on a slow swivel until...*There! Ha! I knew I'd find you!* Half hidden in a hole of a dead wood Pollyfina could see it...the base of the chalice was sticking out. She made her way to its spot across the mire. She reached to grasp the chalice only to find it wedged in place. Carefully, she shifted

her feet for leverage and tried to loosen the chalice.

As it slipped from its hiding place, the chalice added just enough to Pollyfina's weight that the ground beneath her gave a lurch. She was almost instantly being sucked under and swallowed up by the bog land. It was all she could do not to scream in her surprise. Water rushed over her head and Pollyfina nearly lost hope. She Had managed one last gasp for air as she had gone under. It was peaceful, drifting somewhere between the unknown depth below and the air still very likely close above. Without struggling, Pollyfina arched her back and let her air-filled lungs rise. Her face crested above the water, yet she was careful only to relieve her strained lungs breathing through her nose. Oh! But the stench! With a silent propelling kick under the water, she eased herself back to a mudbank. *Now. Let's get out of here!*

Pollyfina found herself wending her way back to Sir Shecklin and Mawdrin, who had observed her guile and tenacity with great admiration. As she left the bog, the reliving dropped back into the water.

"Here!" she cried out. "Here is your chalice!"

"You have done exceedingly well, Young Miss." said Sir Shecklin. "Now, let us get you bathed and warmed by a fire."

As the three sat around the fire, they supped on a fine meal of succulent roast boar and dragon fruit.

"I think you shall like tomorrow's lesson better

than today's" Sir Shecklin chuckled.

"Why? What is tomorrow's lesson?" asked Pollyfina with a scowl.

"Have patience. I know today was not fun. Not everything you will learn will come as the result of fun." Pollyfina thought on this. It was true enough. This work would always have its share of inconveniences. Recouping after an unpleasant encounter such as today's might actually become more the rule than the exception.

Chapter 6: Flamebrand

The next morning came with its usual soft sunrise. The rays met Pollyfina's eyes to waken her gently. She arose as she usually did, raring to start a new day. After her morning meal, she made her way as was fast becoming habit, to the training grounds. Mawdrin was there alone.

"Goodly morrow, Fair Pollyfina." he said, bowing low.

"And unto you, Good Maegist Mawdrin." she greeted him back with a curtsy. "Where is Sir Shecklin? He seemed eager to mention today's lesson yesternight."

"Indeed." laughed Mawdrin. "He knew you would favor this one a mite."

"He did say that." she agreed.

"I think you will, too...and not just because today I am your trainer." Mawdrin revealed.

"You?" Pollyfina asked with a raise of one eyebrow.

“Yes, me.” he said, straightening his posture and drawing a sword he wore sheathed at his side. Pollyfina Suddenly realized that this was off-kilter. Mawdrin didn’t carry a sword. “Allow me to introduce you, Pollyfina, to Flamebrand.” Pollyfina drew her own sword, standing at the ready.

“I’ll thank you not to, impostor!” she cried.

Mawdrin hesitated, “Wha--? Oh! No! No, no, no.” he laughed, suddenly understanding her confusion. “Pollyfina, I am showing you your weapon for today’s lesson. This is the magical blade dubbed Flamebrand.” He set the sword back in its sheath and presented it to her sheathed to alleviate her doubts. She accepted the offered weapon without offering hers back in case this was a trick...donning it on the hip opposite her other sword. “I’m glad you are careful, though it may make today’s training more difficult.” noted Mawdrin. “Now...draw the blade and regard it.” Pollyfina did. It looked like many other swords she had seen.

“What’s so special about it? I mean...given it has a moniker I would guess it is a flame spell sword, correct?”

“Correct indeed!” he smiled. “Could you tell by looking?”

“No. It looks very plain, actually.”

“Look at it again.” Mawdrin instructed. Pollyfina did.

“What am I--?” Pollyfina began to ask as the edges

of the sword's blade began to glow the color of hot metal. Her eyes went wide...I mean...wide open...not wide apart. "Wow!" She looked up to ask Mawdrin if he could see it too, and noticed that he was making it happen. Mawdrin stopped mouthing a chant and lowered the pointy fingers he had been aiming askew at the blade and the glow faded. Mawdrin smiled at Pollyfina's look.

"Did you notice how it was only at the very cutting edge that the blade glowed?" he asked. Pollyfina nodded with a great grin. "Some magical weapons are crafted clumsily. On most blades such as this, the whole flat of the blade would glow, too."

"Wouldn't that be preferable?" asked Pollyfina.

"It depends. Would you rather have a blade you can't even chance touching yourself, or a blade you can push against the flat of if you needed to defensively? Swords were made to pierce and slice, with the flat being useful to subdue. The fire enchantment is intended to make the sword more offensive, not less defensive. This is but one advantage of the enchantment, however."

"And...the others?"

"Well, for one...you've not noted the weight."

"I see." she responded, swinging the light-as-a-feather blade. "Why...it's balance is superb!"

"Now you're getting it." he agreed. "And," he said with emphasis, "a magical weapon can damage magical creatures."

“Like the reliving?”

“Exactly like the reliving.” he said with a smile.

“Now...come with me.” he concluded, and walked her to the bog. Once there, Pollyfina was only too quick to guess today’s lesson.

“Am I going to rescue the chalice against the reliving again...but this time armed to fight them?” Mawdrin simply smiled and nodded. Pollyfina did a jig. Mawdrin summoned up the fallen again.

“These creatures,” he said, “are called brittle men. They require little to destroy them and, as all reliving, are weak to fiery enchantments.” Pollyfina looked at him with a smile, then looked at the bog with glee. Mawdrin noticed Pollyfina’s smile and then with a grin of his own said, “Oh! And be sure to have fun!”

Pollyfina raced ahead with a yell. She wasn’t going to use the least bit of stealth. She was all about “rescuing” the chalice in as little time as possible. Of course, she was careful to follow her sure-footed path from the day before. She didn’t want to be swallowed again. That was the worst. The brittle men trudged and sludged toward her and their deaths as she made quick work of dispatching them...sometimes two at a time!

Pollyfina saw the large bubbles rise with a burble again, this time right in her path. She looked at her blade, then looked at the water and formed a hypothesis. Dipping the tip of the blade in the water caused it to

boil. The blade hissed as steam rose from the very points where the edges met the water. *Just as I thought. Come get me, Mister Denizen.* As if it could hear her thoughts, the denizen approached to a point, then felt the heat and beat a hasty retreat.

Pollyfina lifted Flamebrand from the murk and glanced around. *Now then, Dear Chalice, where did they hide you today?* She scanned around in a sweeping manner. *There you are!* The chalice was dangling wedged betwixt two branches of a still standing yet long dead tree. Pollyfina looked at Flamebrand, then looked at the branches. They were within range to cut, barely.

Pollyfina sheathed Flamebrand and unsheathed her non-magical sword. She cut the branches with a one-handed swing, and caught the falling chalice still necked in the “V” they formed. Sheathing her sword, she used both hands to free the chalice from the branches’ grasp.

Mawdrin looked on in astonishment. Pollyfina had shown what he believed to be more scrutiny than he would have guessed. As she walked triumphantly out of the test area, there were no brittle men for him to put back to rest.

“How was that?” she asked with a cocksure grin.

“Commendable!” he replied. “How did you know the sword would react so with the bog water?” he questioned with a tilt of his head.

“I didn’t. I had to see. Once I tried it, it was clear

to me how things would work out.”

“And...why didn’t you use Flamebrand to cut the chalice free?”

“I had a hunch.” she replied, drawing Flamebrand. She stepped carefully to a nearby tree and touched it with the blade’s edge. In a moment, the whole of the tree was ablaze. “That’s why.” she said, pointing Flamebrand at the tree. “I wanted the chalice back intact, not as a melted mess.”

“Sir Shecklin was right!”

“About?”

“About you! Scrutiny, discretion, honor...natural-born instinct!” Now it was Mawdrin’s turn to dance a jig. Then, suddenly, he stopped with a “Drat!”

“What’s wrong?”

“I owe Sir Shecklin a silverbit!”

“Why? Ahhhh! Wait! You bet against me?!”

“A harmless bet.”

“Ugh!” Pollyfina stomped off.

“Leave...the sword!” Mawdrin called after her, somewhat sheepishly. Pollyfina dropped the scabbard holding Flamebrand as she made her way, angrily yet dejectedly, back to last night’s campfire spot. Seated there waiting was Sir Shecklin. As she approached, he was grinning; but as she neared and he sensed her emotion, his grin faded.

“You...failed?” he asked.

“No!” Pollyfina looked at him angrily. “You failed!”

Where were you?!”

“I was...right here. Mawdrin had things well in hand, I thought. Magic is more his thing.”

“Or did you not want to be accused of helping me so you could win your stupid bet?!”

Sir Shecklin’s head fell as Pollyfina’s eyes blazed at him.

“He told you about that, did he? Braggart! I’m sorry, Pollyfina. I didn’t mean to--”

“Didn’t mean to what? Hurt me?” Sir Shecklin managed a slight nod. “Well, you did! You hurt me because you bet at all!”

“Pollyfina, I was just so sure...and Mawdrin was so unsure...I thought it would teach him.” Pollyfina gave the situation a short thought.

“Hmmm...” she said. “Well...I guess you did that!” she added with a smile and a playful push on his chest. Sir Shecklin, taken off guard, fell back off the log he had been seated upon. He righted himself in further surprise. “I won?!”

Pollyfina glared.

“I mean...of course you succeeded! I knew you would!” Pollyfina tried to stifle a laugh but her cheeks puffed out and then she let loose. As she and Sir Shecklin exchanged belly laughs, Mawdrin ambled up.

“Yes, yes. Have your fun!” he said, tossing Sir Shecklin a silverbit. Pollyfina caught it in the air and

then everybody laughed.

“Serves us right!” said Sir Shecklin to Mawdrin.

“Indeed.” said Mawdrin, adding, “But tomorrow will be a day of rest, I think...so...Miss Pollyfina, your next lesson begins here, tonight.” Pollyfina had learned not to be too inquisitive about future lessons and, although she would ask again, didn’t this particular time.

Chapter 7: Aerthan Time

As the sun began to set, they met up again at the campground and lit a fire. Mawdrin pointed to the setting sun and began to quiz Pollyfina.

“What map direction is that?”

“The sun sets to the Waest.”

“And rises?”

“In the Aest.”

“Good! Now...as we face the setting sun...what map direction is to your left?”

“Saeth?”

“Are you asking me, or telling me?”

Pollyfina tried to find a clue to confirm what truly had been a guess.

“Yes! It’s Saeth to the forest!” She smiled.

“So then the last map direction--”

“Is Naerth! Easy!”

“I’m glad you’re good with map directions now.

You need to remember how they work so you don’t get lost. You won’t be in Diddlebury forever.”

“Thank Aethersta!”

“Yes, and we shall get to more about her shortly,
too. Now...this realm is like many others.”

“This realm?”

“Yes, My Dear, this realm.” The sun had now
completely set and the sky was rapidly turning jet
black with only points of light, the stars, breaking its
uniformity. “Look out there.” Mawdrin pointed at the
sky. “There are other places far away from here. Some
are out there. Some are distanced from us by time.
Still others are in different space and time than ours
altogether. Here, where we live, are the Nether
Realms.”

“So...there are other realms...on other worlds?”

“Precisely. Now...I would tell you more of these
other places, but...you need only concern yourself with
this land in this realm. It has been foreseen.”

“This land?”

“This island continent...Aerthus. Have you seen
this continent on a map?”

“I have. It resembles a crescent moon.”

“Like that?” he pointed at the moon.

“Yes.” said Pollyfina, realizing this was no accident-
ally timed lesson.

“That moon in particular comes once every thirty
days.”

“Every month.” said Pollyfina.

“Twelve times in a year.”

“This lesson is odd.” said Pollyfina. “Why--?”

“Because,” interrupted Mawdrin, “aerthan time is special...magical...perfect.”

“Perfect?”

“Yes. Now, allow me to explain, please.” Pollyfina clamped her mouth shut. “As I said, ‘This realm is like many others.’ The others not on this world, however, have imperfect time.” Pollyfina wanted to interrupt, but trusted the perfect and imperfect discrepancy would get explained soon. “Their time includes months with differing amounts of days and the occasional year with an odd day or three added or cut. Our time--”

“I get it. Our time is perfect because every year is three hundred sixty days, every month is five weeks, every week is six days...” she chimed in.

“Yes, on the larger scale of calendar time. Now let me tell you more.” he said, taking out a map of Aetthus. “We have established that you have seen this, or one like it, before.” he took the map and rolled it around so the Waest edge met the Aest edge and Aerthus faced out at them. Maps are flat to make them easy to look at and draw and write on...but the world is not like a map. It is more like this.”

“What--?”

“Tut tut! No interrupting!” he paused. She nodded apologetically for him to go on. “Now...Sir

Shecklin, please hold the map in place here as I have it.”

He did. Mawdrin pulled a clear glass marble out of his pocket. “Now...imagine this is the sun in the sky. Sir Shecklin, spin the map a bit keeping the seam straight up and down. Do you see, Pollyfina?” Pollyfina noticed that as Sir Shecklin spun the map, the sun was first directly over Aest Aerthus, then middle Aerthus, then Waest Aerthus, and then wrapped around to Aest again.

“I...I do see.” she said in a fascinated tone. “We are on a round world that spins!” Mawdrin looked pleased with himself.

“Now,” he addressed Sir Shecklin, “tilt the map as it addresses the sun.” Sir Shecklin did. Mawdrin looked to Pollyfina, who scrunched up her nose and tilted her head.

“That’s not right.” she said. “If the map gets tilted like that, then part of Aerthus is closer to the sun, and the other end farther away. It’s not like that.”

“You’re right!” said Mawdrin. Other realms have something called seasons which occur due to hot and cold changes in their climate when the sun is nearer or farther. This also affects the amount of sunlight in their days.”

“But our days always have the same...climate. Sun up and sun down are always twelve hours apart exactly.”

“Perfect, yes?” Pollyfina nodded and smiled. “Now, look at this.” he said, setting the marble down and draw-

ing an ellipse around it in the dirt with a stick. “The marble is still the sun. Imagine the ellipse around it is the path our world goes around, or orbits, it.”

“It can’t be!” Pollyfina spat out.

“Why not?” Mawdrin asked with a knowing smile.

“Because again, that would make us close to the sun sometimes and farther others and make changes in climate.”

“You’re right! Every other known world has this kind of orbit. Ours looks like this.” He moved the marble to a fresh spot, then drew a circle around it. “A perfect circle.” Pollyfina scrunched up her face again.

“But, if every other known world does that...?” she trailed off.

“Why does ours do this?” Mawdrin finished her question. She nodded and looked to him for the answer.

“Magic!” came the reply. “This world and its realms came into being entirely out of magic!” Pollyfina furrowed her brow, trying to understand what this meant.

“You wonder what this means?” Mawdrin asked. She nodded. “It means everything, and nothing. It means we are in a magical place which will be bound by the laws of the powers that bind it into being. It means the goal for which this world was built, perfection, must be striven toward.” Pollyfina looked at him questioningly.

“You mean perfect peace. Perfect...good?”

Mawdrin nodded.

“Such was the will of Aethersta...yet...there is still strife here...still evil. Magical evil.”

“Then--”

“The scale must tip to perfection. One way...or...”

They all looked down in a moment of silence. Then, in unison, they looked up at the stars.

“Aethersta?” Pollyfina asked.

“Yes.” Mawdrin nodded. “She was unrivaled in power and sought to order the sum of all realms, but, some believe, spread herself too thin merely with ours. Still, though she vanished, our world has attained many signs that she had succeeded here...and the utterance of her name, it is widely held, still garners favor from her as though she is not gone, but all around us, and still powerful to magically grant the needs of the desperate.”

“I believe in Aethersta.” Pollyfina said.

“Then perhaps you have a silent and powerful ally. For now, all anyone knows for sure is this...if Aethersta is still...there...she is quiet...waiting...and letting events unfold as they will themselves to.”

A wood log in the fire gave a loud crack just then and everyone jumped; they turned to one another with smiles and chuckles, and the conversation turned to pleasant banter before bedtime.

Chapter 8: Mite

After a weekly day of rest was observed, Pollyfina ate, then headed to the training grounds. Sir Shecklin

was there, waiting in a ridiculous costume.

“Today, you will fight Mite a mite.”

“Mite?”

“Do you like it?” he swept his arms across himself to indicate his costumed persona ‘Mite’.

“Er...what is it?”

“Just a silly getup. At its base is a normal suit of armor. We are going to spar today, you and I. You need to know how to face a human opponent. Guarden!”

“Garden?” Pollyfina looked at some nearby flowers.

“Not that kind of garden. Guarden! It means, ‘Get ready!’”

“Ah!” Pollyfina took a ready stance.

Sir Shecklin yelled out, “MITESMITESMITESMITE!” and charged her. Pollyfina dropped her ready stance in confusion and “Mite” had to swerve to avoid injuring his confused apprentice.

“What are you doing?” he called out.

“I should ask you the same thing,” she replied.

“Look...the enemy isn’t going to quietly fight you. They will say all manner of things to throw you off... funny, stupid, threatening, belittling, enraging, even something they merely find self-empowering. You can’t let anything steal your steel and still your blade. You need to maintain composure.”

“It’s hard not to laugh at you like that, though.”

“That’s partly the point. You need to...not laugh.”

“And what was that ridiculous thing you were shouting?”

“Mite’s mights might smite!”

“A little alliterative, eh? And what does ‘mitesmitesmitesmite’ mean?”

“Mite’s,” he pointed to himself, “mights”, he flexed his biceps, “might”, he held up a pointy finger, “smite!” he smashed a fist into his other palm.

“Ah! Now I get it...Al-mite-ey Mite.” she said with a snicker.

“We shall see who is laughing when this lesson is over!” he retorted.

“Mite” showed Pollyfina how to block with both sword and shield. Her form improved quickly, though not so quickly that her arms were spared a gruelling workout. They ended up tired, achy, and limp at her sides. When she could no longer block, he taught her to dodge until she seemed nearly spent. It was the hardest workout she had had in her life, and she was using muscles she didn’t even know she had.

“Had enough?” Mite asked, grinning.

“Never!” she spat, breathing heavily, seated on a rock and glaring up at him with her head still tilted slightly down. The effect of the look was greatly unnerving. Mite knew she had nothing left physically, but she clearly had spirit, drive, determination, a... calling, if you will. She was thirsty two ways.

“Here. Have a drink.” he proffered her some water.

“Is this my enemy, ‘Mite’ offering?” she asked.

“No. It’s your sergeant-at-arms trainer. You look almost flush. It will do you no good to continue.”

“Then what do we do? The lesson can’t be over!”

Sir Shecklin smiled. It was time to quench her second thirst...for knowledge.

“It isn’t. Sit there and watch me.” He showed her all sorts of melee combat maneuvers against a training dummy made of wood. As he showed her each maneuver he would stop mid-strike to point out weaknesses in his attack she could take advantage of if she were still facing him. Her eyes darted to find what he might point out next, trying to get a feel for it. *How is it that my hardest and stupidest lesson is the one I am most enthralled by yet? I simply know that I must know this!*

“Why do men fight?” she asked, suddenly. Sir Shecklin was thrown by this question and looked at her quizzically. “I mean...you’re teaching me how to fight other people now. Why can’t we--?”

“Oh, Dear Pollyfina,” he said with sudden understanding and knowing tenderness. She lowered her head.

“if only any realm of the physical were like that. Your heart, spirit, honor, and morals are so pure.” He went to her, cupped his hand under her chin, and raised her face to see a tear streak down her cheek. He looked her in one eye, then the other, then his gaze faded out to look her in

both. He could see she was fighting inside. "You want peace very badly. I can see it. Mayhaps here, with the help of Aethersta, you can have it." For a while, they sat; then Pollyfina seemed determined to move on.

"I will see you again tomorrow?" she asked.

"Yes, and I will see you through this." he promised.

Chapter 9: On Horseback

The next morning, upon completion of her ritual, Pollyfina finds Sir Shecklin seated upon a horse and holding the reins of another alongside him.

"Do you like it?" he inquires.

"Do I--? This...horse...is for me?"

"She has seen a great deal of battle and will not spook easily. This is important. Never trust a horse either before or after its time. It needs to be seasoned and hardy. An older horse will serve well only if it is hale and has learned a trick or two about avoiding scrapes. Do not, therefore, grow too attached."

"Aember," Pollyfina says.

"What?" queries Sir Shecklin.

"I'm going to name her Aember...the color of her coat. She's beautiful." Pollyfina remarks breathily, in awe.

"Yes." says Sir Shecklin, shaking his head. "You did hear what I just said, didn't you?" he adds expectantly.

"Don't get too attached." she repeats in a mesmer-

ized fashion. Sir Shecklin snaps his fingers, and Pollyfina turns her focus and attention to him.

“Stay with me now.” he admonishes her. “Hooves,” he begins, lifting a foot on Aember to show Pollyfina, “shod with precision metal handiwork.” He releases. “Legs and haunches,” he indicates them, “strong...not withered.” Next, indicating each in turn as he names them, “saddle, reins, bridle, bit...the equipment of a rider. Make certain to check them frequently. Keep them in good repair. With time, you may be able to ride with less or even none of them...although I don’t recommend doing so in combat.”

“Combat?”

“Yes, Pollyfina, combat. This will be your horse to ride into battle upon, not simply a pet or mode of transport. This isn’t a pony. It’s a courser without the armor, and it will suit and serve you well. Now...note the stirrups hanging from the saddle. They are key to riding high in the saddle with the kind of balance that fosters confidence you will not fall whilst engaging enemies on horseback. It is a very clumsy thing to try to fight when riding bareback.”

“Bareback?”

“When you are attuned to...Aember...then you will be able to ride her like the wind without a saddle. Doing so should be limited to leisure rides and breakneck getaways.”

“Getaways?”

“You’re not going to win every battle. Sometimes you’ll need to retreat, rest, and rethink before giving another go.”

“Aember,” Pollyfina says, slipping back into a trance.

“Yes, well...I can see this may finally be a challenging lesson for you. Let’s start slow.”

Sir Shecklin spends the rest of the day teaching Pollyfina not to stand behind Aember, how to address Aember from the side to mount her, and how to sit in the saddle as he leads Aember around the fenced grounds. At lesson’s end, Pollyfina says a lengthy good-night to Aember, hugging her, petting her, and listening to her heart.

“Ah, yes! One more thing...” throws in Sir Shecklin, “Listen to the strength of that heartbeat and once more note the location. This is the vital organ of your friend. Never let her fall to your enemy.”

The words hit Pollyfina hard. Aember was to be a silent companion so that Pollyfina didn’t have to be alone out on the road, a comrade in battle, and a source of swift transport. She was vital...and she was a responsibility. Again, Pollyfina had to think that Sir Shecklin has outdone himself. *What will he teach me tomorrow?*

Chapter 10: On Magic (Day 3 Week 2)

As it turns out, Sir Shecklin teaches Pollyfina nothing this next day. Mawdrin does. Sir Shecklin is other-

wise occupied checking in with the armorer and preparing other affairs of Pollyfina's learning.

"To begin, Miss Pollyfina," Mawdrin starts off, "there are a great many disciplines of magic you should have at least a cursory knowledge of."

"Why?"

"Because magic has a way of making those who wield it powerful, and power corrupts many."

"Magic hasn't corrupted you."

"I did not learn the mystic arts of sorcery to become powerful. In truth, my mastery of magic came out of need and persistence. It was my worst subject, but I excelled at my other studies, so...at times, out of boredom, I worked on the challenge of magic to make it my strength." he says, drifting off into nostalgia as he stares into the middle ground. Then, catching himself, continues, "But that is not the story of the maegists you will encounter. They are power hungry and thirst for dominance. They will use tricks and forces you must become familiar with to try to make you serve them, or remove you from their way." Pollyfina shudders. "You will need to know the magic of those creatures you encounter which have spell casting ability as well." Polyfina considers this a moment. It makes perfect sense. She nods.

"The most important type of magic you must be familiar with is harming magic. This is, well, anything that can hurt you: fireballs, lightning, magic darts, and such."

“How do I defend myself?”

“The good news is that most attacking spells like these, looking to do physical damage, manifest themselves in a physical way. They can be blocked or dodged.”

“What about lightning? That’s got to be awfully hard to block or dodge!”

“Yes. Sir Shecklin and I have the solution for that. Never fear. You shall be safe. Besides...the more powerful the spell...such as that...the longer the casting takes.”

“Good.”

“Unless...”

“Unless?! Unless what?!”

“Unless the caster has a magical accelerant. A rod, staff, wand, orb, or other device imbued with magic.”

“So...watch for them to have an accessory.”

“Yes. And remove them from it if you note one. It may be near impossible to detect. It may even be a ring or amulet they wear. They will have to point or clasp it in those cases, though, so there will again be some telltale sign.”

“Watch them closely.”

“You can never watch a maegist too closely. Just don’t spend all of your time watching or you’ll be toast!”

“Don’t give them an easy target. Got it.”

“Good. The next discipline of magic you need to be Aware of is the opposite: healing magic.”

“I know what that is.”

“Do you?”

“Sure. It’s magic that heals you.”

“Okay, Smartie. Tell me all about it.”

“Erm...”

“It can close cuts, mend bones, expel toxins from a victim, and more. I can give you trinkets for minor healing, but for deeper wounds you will need to seek out a healer. They offer their services for a price. The best can do amazing things.”

“If hurt badly, seek a healer.”

“Yes. Now...summoning magic.”

“Like the necromance?”

“Similar. I called up bodies that existed by adding magical life to them. Summoning brings a creature completely into magical existence.”

“The creature isn’t real?”

“The creature will seem as real as any other, but is a magical construct. When defeated, it will not slump into a lifeless heap, but vanish!”

“Deceiving!”

“Yes! And that is the last type of magic we must discuss: deceiving magic.”

“Magic that misleads.”

“Precisely! Illusions mostly. They can be used to hide real dangers, such as triggers to traps.”

“Wow! This is a lot!”

“It’s only the heart of combat magic. There are

many other magical things to learn as well...but most will not be of concern to you: clairvoyance, telekinesis, teleportation, tempoportation--”

“Tempoportation? I’ve heard of some of those others. What is tempoportation?”

“Stories often call it time travel, but that’s a misnomer. Tempoportation is like teleportation with space and time being reversed in its description. That is... teleportation is the instantaneous travel across a space... whereas tempoportation is also instantaneous, but travels across time in the same space.”

“Instantaneous across time?”

“Yes. Across, not through.”

“So, tempoportation is like a time ‘jump’?”

“Erm...maybe. Your terms are unclear. I think you get it. Anyway, like I said...not in the lessons really. Now, you can tell just how powerful a maegist is by sizing up the spells they use, literally. A powerful mage will use spells that are stronger, last longer, or have larger effects. A really powerful maegist can cast spells with permanence.”

“Beware the big fireball caster.”

“Yes. Now...aside from blocking with your shield or dodging, you will have your suit of armor to absorb some damage and you can use your stealth training to hide or even surprise enemies. While most maegists are intellectual forces to be reckoned with, you will find

one or two on occasion who you may outsmart...but if all else fails...there's this." he says, holding out an amulet on a long chain."

"What's this?"

"A ward."

"Like a medal?"

"Not an award. This is a ward. Warding means fending off. Keeping at bay. This ward, so long as you wear it, will keep you safe from many a magical attack. It is the most powerful ward we have at our disposal...and you will need it."

Pollyfina takes the amulet and puts it on. "It's beautiful!"

"Craftsmen of the better things usually want their work to shine in appearance as well as function. Do not lose this ward or part with it lightly! Tell no one lest it be stolen! Its purpose is your safety! Be safe."

Pollyfina nods understanding. At this, she and Mawdrin begin testing the ward and practicing her defenses in combat against magic until late in the day, when Sir Shecklin returns dejectedly.

"Did they have my armor done?" Pollyfina asks.

"Yes." comes a somber reply.

"Can I see it?"

"No. I had to order them to make a number of adjustments and oversaw their work all day. It will be a while yet, but I can see they are skilled. They will get

it right in time. How goes the training?”

“You have an amazing young talent in this girl.”

says Mawdrin.

“I know.” replies Sir Shecklin with a smile to

Pollyfina.

[Pollyfina will face a creature that disappears. She will slump back, thanking Aethersta, then realize the mage doesn’t know she has been taught this lesson, and readies herself in her prone position for a mage battle.]

Essence trapping versus soul trapping

Chapter 11: On Traps (Day 4 Week 2)

“Today, Pollyfina, I’d like to discuss some of the more sinister methods agents of the dark will employ. You need to know how to detect traps and sense when danger or a nefarious plot is afoot. Let’s start with the ambush.”

“I know what an ambush is.”

“Of course you do...but have you ever been the victim of one?”

“Well...no...”

“Then you do not know how to detect one.”

“Isn’t the point of an ambush to surprise your prey without being detected?”

“Yes, but that doesn’t mean every ambush is unavoidable or undetectable. There are conditions that must be met for an ambush to even be possible. We will start there. Every ambush requires cover. The hiding place must always be along your path, which must be well defined for the enemy to be assured you will pass close enough for the ambush to be a success. The enemy will either know your destination to anticipate your route, or you will be following a well traversed passage. Just knowing when you are traveling in these conditions can be a boon to raise your awareness of the possibility of an ambush. Next, there is the sound tip-off.”

“The sound tip-off?”

“Yes. Ambushers like quiet and strive to be silent. In an open wilderness road setting, for example, it is normal to hear occasional sounds of wildlife. When thugs invade a grove to set up an ambush, it requires movement around the vicinity of the ambush, and nearby wildlife tends to scatter.”

“So if the wilderness gets too quiet...”

“You’re being tipped off.”

“So...what then?”

“That will depend upon the situation. You may want to double back and find a new route. This may be possible, or it may not. Another mark of the ambush is that they tend to be at crossings which are all but unavoidable, such as mountain paths and canyons.”

“So...I might know I’m walking into a trap, having all the right conditions and having been tipped off, and still be required to press forward into the waiting ambush?! Ugh!”

“But it’s not an ambush any more, you see? You know what’s coming to some extent, and they don’t know that you’re aware. Without turning back, you can pause. Ambushers hate this. They get antsy. While you’re stopped short of their ideal ambush site, size up the situation. Where is the cover? Ready a concealed throwing dagger and your shield. Create a diversion. I once travelled with a master archer through just such a mountain valley pass. We smelled ambush and he set out horses off ahead of us. When the ambushers tried to jump our riderless horses, he began picking them off from a safe range.”

“Amazing!”

“Yes...but in hindsight, the ambushers were on foot and never could have caught our horses, so we would have done better to just stay mounted and ride at top speed through and past the ambush. We ended up on foot the rest of the way and lost supplies as well as our horses!”

“But you couldn’t have known that at the time.”

“As I said...in hindsight. Now...being surrounded...”

“Oh Boy!”

“Yeah. This is a tough one. The ironic thing about it is, they’re usually not about killing you when you’re surrounded. They just want to ensure you don’t escape. They may knock you out, but the plan is to capture you and take you somewhere. Someone up the food chain wants an audience. In fact, the enemies who surround you are usually afraid. After all, why are so many of them needed unless you’re a serious threat?”

“That is ironic...overpowered by cowards.”

“Yeah. I'd say the best plan is to surrender peaceably. You may avoid the ugly getting knocked out, which means you can spend time planning your next move, and you may garner respect from some of the cowards who would turn coats, which means you may be able to coax out some information about what you're headed into.”

“Hmmm... What if I don't surrender peaceably?”

“Well...if the theory is correct that you're facing cowardly minions, then about a third of your foes will face off with you timidly, about a third will run at the first sign of a fight, and the last third or so will face off with you fiercely because they fear their master's wrath more than yours.”

“So...”

“I'd say you can chance a fight if you're alone and surrounded by six, or traveling with a companion and surrounded by nine. Upwards of that, I wouldn't recommend it, and my first advice still stands.”

“Is there more to say on ambushes?”

“There is always more to say on every topic, Pollyfina...but there's no time. Let's move on. There are other traps to discuss...such as triplines.”

Triplines = choose a new direction because they are generally found in daed ends. They are meant to be crossed one way, which leads to the trap being set.

Chapter 12: On Survival (Day 5 Week 2)

“Pollyfina, today we should discuss your basic survival skills.”

“I thought everything we've been discussing is vital to my survival.”

“Vital, yes...basic, no.”

“What do you mean...basic?”

“Eating.”

“I know how to cook. I-”

“Pardon, Pollyfina, I know that. Have you camped before?”

“No.”

“Have you hunted, fished, foraged, or farmed for your own feeding?”

“I see where you are going.”

“Somewhat, I'm sure, but let's start with these.”

He holds up a metal piece and stone.

"I told you! I know how to cook! I can start a fire!"

"Yes, Pollyfina...yes...but...not like this!"

He strikes the stone across the metal, directly aimed at a set of logs, and a small bolt of lightning zaps the fire alight instantly.

Pollyfina's jaw drops in wonder and astonishment.

"What are they?"

"The metal is parsinium. The stone, magmathrite. Both are rare and precious. Guard them with your life!"

"Wait...these aren't just for quick and easy cooking, are they?"

"You are most astute. No. They make for quick and easy dispatch at a range and may even pass you off as a seemingly minor maegist."

Chapter X:

She looks the list up and down again, passes the scroll

back over to him, then sighs listlessly.

"I don't understand, Sir Shecklin," she offers. He rolls up the scroll, sets it aside, then sighs listlessly himself.

"Well, then...perhaps I should explain," he begins.

Chapter X: The Truth About Sir Shecklin

"My name is not Sir Shecklin, verily."

"It's not?" Pollyfina asks.

"No. This is a moniker I have assumed for myself.

My real name is Sir Holdfast."

"Then why do you go by Sir Shecklin? It does your wealth of knowledge injustice!"

"My wealth of knowledge, perhaps...but my effectiveness with said knowledge..."

"You are an amazing teacher!"

“Tell that to the Pomerisans.”

“Who?”

“The Pomerisans are a non-Aerthan people brought to this island against their will. They were sold into slavery until the most recent Age of Enlightenment revealed that slavery was not the will of Aethersta.”

“So...what do they have to do with--?”

“I’m coming to that.” he paused, breathing deep.
“Pomerisan freedom here has been short-lived; I’d say about one hundred-fifty years or so ago. Pomerisans have been acclimated into our culture just as furlongs, elves, dwarves, gnomes, halflings, and other races...but due to their green skin, they are regarded by many, even today, as unworthy to live among us as equals.”

“How sad.”

“My thought exactly. I was not part of the travesties that led their people to be here, but rather am sympathetic to their plight. I, after all, come from a non-Aerthan race as well...though you could not distinguish me from a native Aerthan, so I do not suffer as their descendants do.”

“So...they see you as--”

“The enemy. I had signed up to train class after class of their people in my wealth of knowledge only to be shunned because they didn’t want either the knowledge I had for them, or the ‘Aerthan’ teacher I appeared to be.”

"Didn't you explain to them--?"

"I tried numerous times through my words and actions to communicate my acceptance of them. I tried to distance the issue and keep the topic to my lessons. I even shared my own heritage which, to a lesser degree, included slavery as well. I guess it is hard to accept for very different people on both sides. I wonder how long it will take; if it will ever get better."

"I don't understand why--"

"...it has to be this way? I know, Pollyfina. I know."

Chapter X: The Half Hearts

It is deep into the night hours when the town bell rings warning, waking Pollyfina with a start. She bolts to her feet and throws on her makeshift armor as cries, screams, shrieks, yelling, and general commotion break out in the streets outside. As she rushes to the stairs, she meets Sir Holdfast on his way up to brief her on the situation at hand.

"What is it?" Pollyfina inquires.

"Half hearts, I'm afraid."

"Half hearts?"

"Think of the reliving you faced in the swamp and imagine they have roughly half the normal human capacity for thought."

"Wouldn't that make them half-wits?"

"Literally, yes, but they are known as half hearts for they are resigned to their evil master's will. They have no hope, for they have already died, yet they are dangerous because they can think."

"How am I to--?"

"Ah, yes! I have an old friend for you." He holds out the sheath instantly identifiable as holding Flamebrand. "Now, get to work!"

Pollyfina nods, seizes the sheath, and races down the rest of the steps as Sir Holdfast proudly follows at a slow jaunt behind.

The scene in the streets is chaos. People running amok as they are chased by reanimated cadavers. Pollyfina wields

Flamebrand and begins menacingly swiping left and right circular arcs in front of her. The half hearts which spot her first

let out a chittering that draws the rest to them as she begins to carve her way through the animosity. Her fierce presence is undeniable as she advances without hesitation, fluidly, even gracefully, with sheer determination her constant expression. The half hearts do know fear. They have, after all, died once already. Now seeing their kind being dispatched a second time, they know they are at their doom...but also their destination.

"Stop!" they cry in unison. Pollyfina, taken aback at this tack, lowers her sword to stand at ease.

"You address me?"

"Yes. You are The One."

"The One?"

"Yes. We have a message for you."

"A message?"

"Yes."

"From whom?"

"You will know when you meet, if you meet, but first...'Die!'"

At that, they rush, but Pollyfina was ever truly at the ready and meets their advance with a series of slashes which verily make short work of the swarm...now a column advancing single-file before her yet merely advancing to meet her blade. In the end, Pollyfina slumps as the last half heart falls. She is breathing heavily, panting for air, covered in filth as the town square falls silent in wonderment. The silence breaks to a cheer as the crowd rallies its morale back. Many thanks go to Pollyfina, yet only Sir Holdfast approaches her as she is yet in the stench of the fallen on her. His visage changes from pride to sorrow.

"Pollyfina, I'm afraid the time has come. The half hearts are the lead scouts. Jhaga has awakened and the next Great Eclipse has begun. You need to leave Diddletown."

"Diddlebury!"

"Yes! Bury this Diddle place and have a heart for all of Aerthus now!"

"But..."

"I know it's your home. This is what you have trained for, though. Here. I have something for you."

"My sword, shield, and armor!"

"They were finally, just now, done to my approval."

"Oh! Sir Sheck...Sir Holdfast!"

"I know. I'm not much for goodbyes either. I wish we had more time, too. You know there was still a lot to go over...but you're ready. You must be. It's your destiny."

"Thank you! Thank you for everything."

"You're welcome! Thank you in return! It's not every day you get to train the world's savior. Now take Aember and your things. Here's some money. Spend it sparingly. We've no idea how long you'll be gone or what expenses you'll have. Be frugal."

"You think of everything!"

"It's my duty."

"Thank you again. Oh! I shall miss you."

"I shall miss you, too...so hurry back!"

"Oh, no!"

"What?"

"Mawdrin!"

"I'll need say your goodbyes for you. This cannot wait. He will understand."

"Oh, Dear! But you are right! Farewell, Sir Holdfast! I shall do you proud."

"You already have."

With that, Pollyfina sets off to prepare for her journey to Jhaga peak.

Part 2: Darren

Chapter X: The Justin Brothers

[Act One - Pollyfina continues to level up by fighting increasingly dangerous creatures which she is put to the task of facing off against

Note: Have you ever heard the saying fight fire with fire? Well...fight patience with patience!

Act Two - Pollyfina is joined by Darren....a daring higher level adventurer who accelerates her learning curve, and fights alongside her as she hits her duo level difficulty assignments

Act Three - The reader is introduced as a third and final member of the adventuring party. Together, the reader, Pollyfina, and Darren fight the Great Wyrn Jhaga and its magically risen Dracolich form, as well as the dreaded Matter.

Red Shirts: Smidgeon, Justin Time, Justin Case

Characters: Twylla, Tricia Laeven, Kaleb Damarang, a Furline Furlong Cha'rrta

Part 3: The Reader

You are standing around a round table upon which, in front of you, sits a birthday cake. You are instructed to make a wish and blow out the candles. Your arms are interlocked with your well-wishers around the table. You close your eyes and bow your head as you aim to blow... yes...you, dear Reader. You are here in this moment because you are an integral part in this story. You give a deep exhalation, and open your eyes to find your surroundings completely changed. On either side of you are tangle vines interlaced with your arms holding you prisoner in a jungle. Before you lies a stretch of road that turns at your position to continue to your left. In the distance straight ahead and approaching are two people on foot. As they near you can make out a young man and woman, both clad in medieval attire. They regard you strangely as they approach.

“Do you think this the one?” asks the girl.

“Probably” replies the boy.

She looks you up and down. “So...this is to be our third? Captured in tangle vines?”

“Look, I don't know. All I can say is we haven't seen hide nor hair of another and Mawdrin was very clear

about the strange attire.”

“You there!” she addresses you, “How did you come to let these simple tangle vines best you?”

Everything being the crazy whirlwind it has been, you carefully assemble your best response, “I don’t know.”

“Oh no! It can’t be this one.” she states. “They hardly have the mental capacity--”

“Mawdrin was also very clear about the state of confusion the traveler would be in.”

“Um...terribly sorry”, you throw in, “but...could somebody get me down, please and thank you?”

“Mawdrin was also very clear--”

“I know. I know.” came the girl’s reply. “They would need our help. Very well!”

With two quick slashes of her blade, she makes quick work of the vines on either side of you.

“Thanks again!” you say, quite relieved to be able to put your arms down and relax. “Where are we?”

“Okay, now this is too much!” shouts the girl. “How can this so called traveller not even know where they have travelled to?!”

“Look,” you say, “all I know is, one minute I’m about to blow out candles on a cake, and a moment later, I’m here stuck in tangle vines. I didn’t ‘travel’ in the normal sense of the word, nor was I ‘bested’ by these vines. Are we in Europe?”

“I do not know of this...You’re Up of which you speak.” says the boy.

“No. Not you’re up...Europe. It’s a whole continent! How can you not know about Europe?!”

“It is not a continent of our realm.” replies the girl.

“And what realm is that?” you ask.

“You are on the island continent of Aerthus in the Nether Realms.”

“Aerthus?”

“Yes, Aerthus. A-E-R-T-H-U-S. Aerthus.”

“Well, there’s no Aerthus where I’m from. So I still don’t really know where I am, but...”

“Where are you from?”

“The planet I’m from is called Earth.”

“Earth?”

“Yes, Earth. E-A-R-T-H. Earth.”

“Oddly similar.”

You consider suggesting that you have somehow crossed dimensions or entered another universe, but somehow you figure from the looks of these two, they wouldn’t immediately understand the concept. You decide to offer another explanation when the girl offers it for you.

“It must have been magic.” she proffers.

“Yes. There is no other real explanation for my sudden and complete change of location.”

“Yet you did not control this teleportation?”

“They could not have, or they would know this place.”

“They could have tried and had something go wrong.”

“No. They have already told us this was no errant spell, but an errant event. They said they were blowing out candles on a cake--”

“Yes! Strange customs on this...Earth, you have.”

“I suppose. So...who are you two, if I may know the names of my rescuers?”

“I’m Darren.” said the boy.

“I’m Pollyfina.” said the girl.

“Pleased to meet you both, and thank you.”

You introduce yourself by name as well and are treated to the local salutation of “Well met.” from both.

“So...who’s Mawdrin? He must be a magic user you know if he was able to tell you about our encounter.”

“Excellent divination!” says Darren.

“More like deduction.” says Pollyfina, adding
“Mawdrin is a sorcelror. He told us of the treacherous battles which await us in order to fulfill our destinies. You are to accompany us on our final battles as we two alone cannot hope to succeed.”

“Wait! I just got here and I’m supposed to join you in battles?!”

“Ah, yes!” says Darren. “Here. I have this extra shield I have been wearing on my back and this light,

well-balanced sword with scabbard I have been keeping for you to my off-hand side.”

You take the armaments somewhat dumbfounded while they are handed to you very matter-of-factly.

“I--I--Um...Okay...What am I to help you...dispatch? Also...armor?”

“Armor is easy. We have been building our store of monies over our past quests and can easily afford a good, strong, and light suit of armor for you.” says Darren.

“As for the baddies,” says Pollyfina, “we have the great pleasure of ridding the realm of the great waerm draconis known across Aerthus as Jhaga, and then we face the most cursed creature in the land...the matter!”

“What’s the matter?” you ask.

“Nothing. What’s the matter with you?” Darren replies jokingly.

“This one really doesn’t need that right now, Darren. They have only just arrived, are quite out of sorts, and are now being enlisted to participate in life-and-death struggles.”

“Hey! Yeah! Actually...why am I doing this? I mean, you two seem nice enough and all, but...what’s in it for me?”

“Mawdrin told us a secret. He said you might not like it. Unfortunately, you have to come with us to finish the quest. That’s apparently how you return home to Earth.” says Pollyfina.

“And if I refuse?”

“That’s the funny part...Mawdrin said you could quit any time you wanted and you’d be fine...but there is no real danger to ‘the you’ still on Earth, so...it’s up to, he said, ‘The Reader’ to keep us all moving toward the fulfillment of our destinies.”

“Then help you, I shall.” you say and are suddenly flooded with all of the knowledge of Darren and Pollyfina acquired by The Reader up to now.

“You seem somehow transformed.” says Pollyfina.

“Yes. More prepared?” offers Darren.

“Once you mentioned The Reader I was reminded. I know what’s going on...and I’m ready.”

“Excellent! Then let’s travel to the last town before Jhaga Peak and get you that armor, shall we?”

“Yes. Let’s!”

You travel together to Brindleburg and camp down for the night. As the traveller, you wonder how long you will be missed by your loved ones back on Earth.

Chapter X: Tricia Leaven

The three of you are quite tired from your day of shopping in Brindleburg, and settle down in a room at a posh if not also somewhat quaint room letting establishment called Ye Olde Newout Inn.

Chapter X: Kaleb Damarang

“I’ll not let that wench tart off wi’ me thin’s!” Kaleb cried. “She’s ‘eaded due naerth! Wot a spot o’ luck!

We'll catch 'er up at th' Boundin' Main!"

Chapter X: Jhaga's Lair

Pollyfina is the first to enter the cave lair of Jhaga.

Looking around, she spies first and foremost the mass of wealth in pile after pile. Second, she notices the bones in nearly as great supply. Third, she notices...no Jhaga?

"Um...Hey! You two!" she whispers forcefully. "I don't see--" And then, it happens. "Fog" begins to billow across the floor of the lair with a distinct smell of Brimstone.

"Well that's not good." says Darren.

"Who disturbs my slumber?" comes a deep and massive voice from the darkness. You all chance a glance at one another, shrugging. "Identify yourselves or face the wrath of Jhaga!" Pollyfina kneels as she identifies herself first.

"I am Pollyfina, the Bearer of Destiny, O Great and Powerful Waerm Jhaga!"

Following her lead, you identify yourself next, with an impressive flourish.

"And I...I'm...D-Darren," he stammers. "I'm with them." he motions to the two of you and you look at one another in surprise. Is Darren afraid for once?

"Throw down your weapons at once or join my brittle hordes!" bellows the voice. Your weapons all drop in unison with echoing clangs. A stream of smoke shoots at the three of you, billowing at your feet. The cave is

darkness and smoke now...nothing else...until...a menacingly large shadow snakes its way through the haze...the head of Jhaga! From the silhouette, you can tell the beast is colossal if this is only the head. You can see the rough, scaled surface of its head in outline. You can make out two webbed ears flapping like bat wings just outside a pair of horns atop the head. Large and round yellow eyes suddenly open out of seemingly nowhere in the darkness to regard the three of you. A furrow of the legend's brow becomes apparent as the tops of the eyes become occluded. "The Bearer of Destiny?" Jhaga asks.

"Aye!" Pollyfina replies. "'Tis I!"

"Rrruh! Rruh! Huh!" Jhaga tries to stifle a laugh. "And from whence do you derive this title?" Jhaga challenges.

"From the Oldest and Best Prophecy," Pollyfina replies tersely.

"The...Oldest...and...Best...Prophecy?" Jhaga replies wistfully, eyes going round in appearance again.

"Aye." confirms Pollyfina.

"The...Oldest...and...Best...Prophecy..." Jhaga repeats reverently. The brow furrows again. "I...I...know this...prophecy." Jhaga seems to be trying to remember. "Who was its author?"

"It dates back over a thousand years. No one knows its origin..." Pollyfina replies.

"Ah." says Jhaga. "Then...let me see." Jhaga's head

disappears back smoothly into the mist. Fire shoots in an upward arc, illuminating the room. You can see the great form of what is clearly a black beast as it sprays the wall to your left with fire. In the wall are many alcoves. Jhaga reaches to the top leftmost alcove, retrieving a set of inscribed stone tablets. “Mmm hmmm...” Jhaga intones, reading to itself. “I see. The answer is clear. I authored it.” Jhaga states.

“But...that’s impossible!” Pollyfina cries out. “No seer has ever made a self-prognostication!”

“Oh, Child.” comes Jhaga’s reply. “You have much to learn. This...here...is my oldest and best prophecy.”

“But...how could you?”

“I couldn’t. Not knowingly. I merely recorded what I saw...a great waerm draconis being slain by a fabled ‘Bearer of Destiny’. How was I to know the great waerm would be me one thousand years later?”

The matter of fact was that the matter was fact and standing before them, staring them matter of factly in the eyes. It didn’t matter that the matter was staring them in the eyes...and yet, it mattered all the same. They tried to compare it to something like a simile, but could only see it was a metaphor. Round and round it they ovalled...or perhaps ellipsed...for they did not perfectly circle it. The matter was dark. Dark matter to its core. It reached up deftly and blew a loud blast from a horn it

wore slung over its shoulder...the Matterhorn! Suddenly, there is stirring from above, and a groggy youthful voice asks "What is it Auntie?" So...that's the secret! This dark matter monster is Auntie Matter! Finally, from its left, Darren lashes out with his sword only to see it dematerialize as it contacts the dark beast. From the right, Pollyfina suffers the same effect almost simultaneously. Then it occurs to them both and they call to you. "The Sword of Light!" it must be the only weapon that can slay the dark matter. It's our only hope! With a swift thrust, you plunge the sword at the heart of the matter, but find that getting to the heart of the matter, as always, is difficult. Still...your enchanted weapon has held up...so you now know you have the right weapon, and both Darren and Pollyfina share in your relief at this fact. The matter reaches to grab your wrist. With the matter almost at hand, you attempt to slash your blade in a sweeping motion from its left side to its right. Your attempt to get right to the heart of the matter strikes more truly, but lacks depth. Still, at this point you are left knowing exactly what to do to bring the matter to an end, and you stab deeply at the point where it bellowed in agony at the end of your last slash. Your stab is deep and true and gets down to the heart of the matter. The matter beast falls before you and immediately you are embraced on either side by Darren and Pollyfina, who are amazed by your accomplishment. "You did it!" they cry in unison.

Suddenly, the plodding of tiny feet running to the cave room reminds you of the presence of the matter's young relation's presence. "Auntie!" Then, turning to address your party, "Why were you so anti-matter?" Then, back to the fallen beast, "Please, Auntie, don't die!"

"Never fear." came the reply from the beast, now turning from darkness to color and rising back to its feet. "These adventurers have not killed me, but rather cured me. Congratulations! You have brought the evil matter to an end." Pollyfina and Darren rush up to meet you, and you put your hands on their shoulders as they put their hands on yours. You lower your heads, close your eyes, and breathe a collective sigh of relief.

"Happy birthday!" you hear as your eyes begin to open. There before you is a cake with the candles seemingly just blown out by your exhalation. You pick your head up and look around and realize you have two new guests at your party standing with you, arms woven in the huddle...Pollyfina and Darren. They smile at you. It is a happy birthday after all.

EPILOGUE

"Go ahead!" calls out your best friend at the party. "Open my present first! I know you'll get your wish!" The present is offered up to you and you smile your thanks before ripping into the wrapping paper. You see immediately that it is a book. As you finish unwrapping it, you read the title aloud.

“The Bearer of Destiny.” You look at your friend,
and smile knowingly.

“You told me you were really enjoying that book
called The Heart of the Matter. This is the sequel!”

You look down at the book, beaming. Suddenly, a
thought occurs to you and you glance up to see
Pollyfina and Darren disappearing. They are smiling as
they fade away. You look back at the book. *At least I
know where I can find you two again.*

OUTRO

And now, dear Reader, I would like to congratulate you
as well. Not because you have finished my book, but
because every day you are a hero to the people in your
life to whom you matter...including you...even if you
are alone. Life for most of us is not easy. There is toil;
there is hardship and there are tests. Every day you put
up the good fight to live it...matters. Take your life...
wait...that’s not what I mean at ***all***...take the time you
have left in this life and spend it looking out for yourself
and those around you. Have a good heart. Give of
yourself. Share who you are. Dare I say, love? Be true.
Most of all, perhaps...believe in yourself. Most of us
don’t do enough of that. You may not believe me
when I say it, but even though I don’t know you
personally, I believe in you. Now...go seize this day!

BIO

John Michael O'Brien II is a first-time author with this book. He is the father of two wonderful adult children named Ben and Amanda, holds a Master of Science in Mathematics Education, has numerous Microsoft Certifications, and has studied game art and design. At this time, he lives in Sheboygan, Wisconsin.

Book Two: The Bearer of Destiny

Part 1: The Great Eclipse

Part 2: Destiny Borne Away

As the contractions come closer together, Pollyfina and Darren halt Aember and set up camp in a beautiful strath. Twilight radiance colors the sky. Darren is doting on Pollyfina with his every action. He cradles her in his arms as she grunts, pushing, sweaty long strands of red sticking to his breastplate. Pollyfina's breaths become quick and, well... labored.

"I love you, Pollyfina." Darren says softly, kissing her forehead.

"I love you too." she replies under the strain of another push. "The baby...it's coming." Her eyes are wide with concern and urgency as she turns a pleading gaze on Darren. He nods quiet, confident understanding that she means now, and rests her head gently in the grass. Pollyfina looks up to the early night sky and sees a shock of light. Is it a shooting star she wonders as a shooting pain brings with it a final excruciating push. Pollyfina is spent.

"Oh, my Goddess!" she cries in relief, breathing heavily. All else is silent for a moment. For that moment, Pollyfina thought all was finally right with the world.

"What sorcery is this?!" Darren outbursts.

"Darren, Honey, what's--?"

"Don't you 'Honey' me you...Witch!"

"What--?!"

“I stand with you, fight by your side, give you of myself,
give you a child, and this is how you repay me?!”

Pollyfina is taken completely aback. “What do you
mean?”

“I have no more time for you; for any of this!”

“Darren!” she scorchs out a tear stained screech of a
betrayed heart. “What are you doing?!”

“I’m packing. I’m leaving!”

“But...what about the baby?! Our--!”

“See for yourself, Witch!”

Pollyfina musters herself up to a seated position and
looks down to her newborn babe...her stillborn albino girl.

She is a very pale blue in the face with darker blue lips. Her eyes shut. Not a lock of hair to be found. Strangled in
her birthing cord. Pollyfina wails sobs of a heart being
shattered and rent at the same time. “How could you!” she curses the sky. Darren almost takes offense until he sees the
direction of her gaze. He moves to load his pack on Aember, but Aember trots away toward Pollyfina.

“It’s like that, is it?” Darren asks of the horse. “Fine!
You can **have** each other!” With that, he ambles away in
remorseless disgust, muttering to himself as he goes.

Pollyfina picks up her babe, cradling its head and holds it to her bosom in a soft hug which elicits a spluttering
attempt at breath from the newborn. Pollyfina’s eyes grow wide and hurriedly she unravels the birthing cord from around
the baby’s neck. The baby cries.

Yes! Thank you, Aethersta. Yes!

Part 3: Forging Victory

In this last part of the book, Pollyfina and The Reader will be forcing the dark minions and forces of the evil scorlord back.

Pollyfina and The Reader face off against the scorlord itself, Darren having been consumed to give it the final piece it needs...a soul. The scorlord adopts the name Daeth.

The scorlord defeats Pollyfina and has her soul entrapped in a living weapon forged at the maelstrom of lava...a weapon named Victory.

The Reader charges the scorlord. The evil master opens a portal between them that The Reader rushes into...sending The Reader back to Earth. The Reader is determined it can't end this way, and discovers that there is to be a third and final book in the series...The Child of Light.

Book Three: The Child of Light

Part 1: Victory

Chapter 1: A Destined Meeting

Destiny has grown into a fine young lady, reared by Sir Shecklin and Mawdrin, and trained as Pollyfina was.

Destiny is in the open market perusing the edible fare as a man rides up on horseback, arguing with his sword.

“Oh shut up, will you?” half demands and half pleads the rider. Surprisingly to her, she hears the sword's reply.

“I will do no such thing! You know, you really are a brute! How many times do I have to tell you to keep your guard arm up? And another thing--!”

“That's it!” the rider cries out. “Go bug somebody else, you think you're so smart!” He sheaths the sword and casts it on the ground. People all around are regarding the man as a nut as he looks around, red with embarrassment, then quickly spurns his steed to ride off. “Our destiny resides in Diddlebury.” she hears him say mock-

ingly as he rides away. She casts her gaze back to the sword.

“Goodly morrow!” says the sword brazenly.

Destiny’s eyes grow wide with surprise.

“Look at this!” says a passerby. “That muffinhead left a perfectly good s--whoa!” he had been going to pick the sword up when Destiny, entirely on instinct, drew her own sword and hurriedly announced, “Back off! He left that for me!”

“I’m sorry, Miss.” he pauses; then, thinking he has the upperhand anyway, continues to pick up the sword. “Actually, he left it on the ground. If it were for you--”

“I am!”

“Aaaaah!” shrieks the man, dropping the sword in a surprised, defensive stance. “That things possessed!” he wails, running away. Destiny and the sword share a laugh.

“Please hurry to pick me up before we have to go through that again with someone else.”

Destiny nods. “Are you possessed?”

“After a fashion, you might say I am. In truth, I’m trapped.”

“How’s that?”

“I was once...very much like you...but my soul was trapped in this sword.”

“Wow!”

“I know that must seem fascinating to you...but--”

“Oh! I’m so sorry.” Destiny weeps, imagining the inconvenience of being imprisoned in an inanimate object.

“It’s quite alright.” the sword coos softly. “I can tell you are very empathetic. Well, it’s not all bad; I’m here now, and you’re ready.”

“Ready?”

“Yes. Ready. Now...stow me away and take care when and how you speak with me around other people, or they will think you crazed.” Destiny self-consciously bends at the knees and alertly looking around, picks up the sword. She hangs its scabbard at the off-hand side of her belt.

“If you can speak,” Destiny whispers, trying not to move her lips, “then do you have a name?”

“Victory!” the sword shouts.

“Shhhh!” Destiny admonishes the sword back.

With a laugh, it replies, *“No, silly. They can hear you. They can’t hear me.”*

“But--”

“Only those who have held me can hear me.”

“But--”

“I revealed myself to you.”

“Do you--”

“...know what you’re thinking? No. I can’t read minds. Your thoughts in this instance were easy to ascertain because most anyone in your place would have the same

wonderings. Now...I'm afraid we have some business to attend to."

"We--"

"Take me to Sir Shecklin and Mawdrin."

Destiny blinks surprise. "How do you know that I know--?"

"Because you are Destiny, The Child of Light."

"How--?"

"Destiny, there's really no time, now. We must hurry!"

Destiny nods, rushing off to meet with Sir Shecklin and Mawdrin. *It really is shaping up to be quite the morning!*

Chapter X:

"I can't believe I let her get to me and cast away Victory!"

"It does sound rather foolish when you put it like that, Master."

"Shut it! Victory may have slipped through my fingers...but I shall have it back in my grasp!"

Chapter X: Pairing

"You know, Dear, it's funny how life goes. They used to call me the bearer of Destiny when I was alive. Now here we are, you and I, and you are the bearer of...me."

"Yes...as The Bearer of Victory, I think things are well in hand."

"Now we just need to learn to work together as a well

paired team.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well Dear, examine my guard between the grip and the blade.”

Destiny looks at the sword just above the handle, and
from behind a metal lid, an eye opens to reveal itself.

“Yeeeagh!” she cries, dropping Victory.

Part 2: Defeat

Part 3:

“So...the scorlord is my father, Darren, and you
want me to drive you through his heart to destroy him?”

*“Oh, Destiny, Honey...It’s okay. I’ve pierced your
father’s heart before. It’s no big deal.”*

