

Fruit Stones

by Samuel Marshall

Sunlight glared brightly, suddenly on the book, startling its reader from his concentration. Ulin Majere looked up in some annoyance, which faded quickly to unease. Lost in old magic and items of sorcery, he'd forgotten to keep track of time. He got to his feet, wincing as his legs adjusted after their long quiescence, and peered through the window at the sun's position.

It was mid-morning already; he'd started reading just after dawn, planning to take only a few minutes. Reluctantly, he put aside the book – a technical history of magic use since the First Cataclysm, borrowed from his father – and hurried from the house. He didn't bother to take a cloak; the summer weather had been fine for weeks, and looked set to continue that way. Chances were fair, in any case, that he would not need to leave Solace's walkways and could even return to his study. On many days, the healer Shiri had little to do and did not need his help.

Speckles of light, filtering through the leafy canopy overhead, rippled across his skin and clothes as he made his way through the town. A gentle breeze played with his chestnut-brown hair as he walked, blowing strands from one side to the other, but he didn't mind; it also took the edge from the heat. Even in the shade of the great trees the air was warm, though not yet oppressive.

He passed a few townsfolk, nodding brief good-mornings. They were not people he knew well; most of his friends were apprenticed to a trade and would be busy working on their craft. He himself had not taken such action; with his father's help he studied magic as often as possible, even though most of the old power appeared to have left Krynn with the gods a few years before Ulin was born. The legends and factual accounts of ancient magecraft enthralled him, leaving him awed at the feats of wonder that individuals had been able to achieve. Even dry accounts of the theory behind particular spells held his interest. If only he had been born a century ago, he would have been well on his way to becoming a fully-fledged wizard; but the world was a different place now, and he had to spend at least a proportion of his time doing something useful and productive. More specifically, he helped

the town's healer, a middle-aged woman who had once been a cleric of the goddess Mishakal. He mostly did odd jobs for her, but also learned a little of her work.

He approached his destination. Like most of Solace's buildings, the healer's residence and workplace was high among the vallenwoods, nestled in the branches of one tree and connected to the others by high walkways of wood and rope – Ulin hadn't needed to descend to ground level for the journey.

With that thought, he briefly glanced downward, and something caught his eye – perhaps a person walking? But a more careful look showed nothing except the usual grass, low undergrowth and shady paths beneath the trees. He'd had the 'being watched' feeling a few times recently, and nothing had come of it. Maybe he was getting paranoid.

Shrugging, the young man knocked at the healer's door and got a pleasant "Come in!". Entering swiftly, he greeted Shiri, avoiding her eyes; he knew he was late, and felt a little guilty. The healer was not normally overworked – it was a small town, after all – but, unlike Ulin, she gave her all to the job. In her youth she had been a cleric of Mishakal, and her devotion to the goddess's work continued, though the actual goddess had long since left Krynn; abandoned them, Shiri would say in her more bitter moments. And she *was* bitter, though she tried very hard not to let that show, hiding it behind an always-pleasant manner. In early middle age, the healer was not stunningly attractive, but her appearance was pleasing enough. She was small and slim, so much that it seemed she might even have a little elf blood, though in other ways she was human enough. Her brown eyes revealed little of what she felt, though her face was expressive and she smiled readily. She wore her dark-brown hair short, so as not to get in her way, and preferred practical, dull-colored clothing in forest shades.

"Oh – Ulin," Shiri acknowledged him. "I have a job for you today, but you'd better hurry. I'm almost out of aishleaf."

The powerful herb had a variety of uses, Ulin knew, mostly to help against pain; a piece of leaf was torn off and used to make a tea. It could be poisonous too, in larger doses or if the leaf was too fresh, and even when taken correctly there was some small danger. Shiri was sparing with such remedies, preferring those less powerful, but sometimes there was no option.

Ulin nodded. "Where can I find it?"

"I only know one place," the healer explained. "There and back, it's about a day's travel, so you should leave right away." She gave directions; the herb grew beside a spring-fed pool that nestled in bushes, beside a rocky outcropping on a hill some way to the northwest. The hill was easily recognizable by the single old tree that grew at its peak; Ulin remembered seeing it on a previous outing in that direction.

"I'll set off immediately," the youth said, heading for the door. It was best to be back indoors by nightfall, even in this relatively safe area. He waved goodbye to Shiri, thankful she hadn't chastised him for tardiness, and began the climb down many stairs to ground level.

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Away from the town, he made good time. The smooth, hilly countryside around Solace

was perfect for walking, interspersing clear views with hidden beauties, and in this weather the going was easy, with none of the boggy patches that appeared after a few weeks of rain. Occasionally, clear streams ran across Ulin's path and he would stop to drink; the youth hadn't taken a water bottle, and the warm sun caused him to sweat a little, creating thirst.

Several times he had the feeling he was being watched, but when he looked back he saw nothing. It was possible, he thought, that somebody was following him and keeping in the cover provided – by the occasional copse of trees or more thoroughly wooded area, by one of the large boulders that were sprinkled throughout the area, by a stand of low bushes – but more likely that he was simply getting a little jumpy for some reason.

It was well past noon when he finally reached the hill Shiri had mentioned. Low undergrowth covered the slopes, so he followed an animal track which made an easier path, winding up and around the steep slope. The hill was higher than its neighbors, providing a fair view of the surrounding lands even though he hadn't reached the top. It was dotted with ash saplings, poking out from the undergrowth like the masts of a sinking ship. For some reason, there didn't seem to be any older trees, apart from the solitary survivor at the heights which was – Ulin tilted his head upwards to one side – just barely visible from his position, where the upwards slope made a sheer angle.

The goat track rounded a corner, past a rugged fold in the hillside – and within that fold, Ulin saw thankfully, was the pool he sought. It was roughly circular, the water trapped between a jumble of stone at the base of a rocky outcropping. Steep walls, speckled with moss, rose up on either side of the pond, making a V-shaped indent into the hillside and providing shelter from the breeze; the water lay flat and smooth. Occasionally its millpond-stillness was disturbed by a drip that fell from a small crack in the rocks above, where a stain marked the passing of water since time immemorial. The spring was probably almost dry in this weather, but would normally be far more generous.

The pool stretched only a few yards across – barely enough to bathe in, if Ulin had time, which he didn't – leaving a little space in the sheltered alcove for a scattering of angular, dry rocks. Surprisingly, the aishleaf bush grew amidst this untidy pile, its thin, spidery thorned branches supporting a splash of dull green-gray leaves.

Ulin clambered over the rocks past the pool, taking care not to lose his footing and slip into the water. He sat uncomfortably in front of the plant; the stones beneath him seemed to be all points and edges, but to avoid them he would need to hold an infeasibly awkward kneeling position. He began to harvest leaves, careful to pick in the pattern he'd been taught would minimize damage to the bush. More than a few times, he caught his fingers on the thorny stems, and had to suppress curses as the sharp jabs pierced his soft skin; he spent too much time with books and too little working with his hands. Of course, it would also have helped if he'd brought a knife or some other tool to cut the plant. He would normally carry a dagger when he left town, in case of danger from wild animals or the like, but today his departure had been necessarily rushed.

Finally, he finished the task. His belt pouch was now stuffed with enough leaves to last the next six months – aishleaf remained effective in dried form, though it lost much of its dangerous potency – and he was ready to leave. Sighing, he looked longingly at the pool. With its shady surroundings, this would have been the perfect place to eat a quick lunch and then bathe, set out refreshed for the journey back. But he hadn't brought any food – his

stomach grumbled with complaint – and he didn't have time to waste. Even if he hurried, it was unlikely he'd get back by nightfall, though he should be pretty close.

Resolutely, he got to his feet. He was just adjusting the fit of his belt so that the pouch hung more comfortably... when he heard a noise. It was the chink of metal on stone, a dropped coin or armor or a weapon, and it had sounded from just round the corner.

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“Hey, who's there?” he called impulsively, realizing immediately afterwards that it might have been wiser to feign ignorance of his follower, and sneak away somehow. Well, at least he now knew he hadn't been imagining things earlier. He looked around for ways to escape; within the small inlet, the walls looked climbable but not in a hurry. Carefully, he made his way back around the pool towards the hillside exit, moving with all the stealth he could muster.

There was a long pause, and he wondered if the mysterious stranger had chosen to remain unseen despite detection. Eventually, though, a voice called out. “Ulin Majere? Don't worry, I mean you no harm.”

As he was wondering who the voice belonged to – it struck a chord in his mind, but he couldn't quite place it – its owner stepped around the corner, treading surely on the goat track Ulin had followed some minutes before. It was a young woman, perhaps a year or two his junior. She was small and lithe, with a narrow, sharp face and features to match – little, glittering dark eyes, a small mouth, a tightly pointed nose. Her hair was jet black, tied near the top of her head with a piece of deep-green cloth so that it fell down behind, almost like a kender's topknot. She wore a faded gray blouse, and pants made from the green cloth.

It took a few moments, but Ulin recognized the girl. She was the daughter of wandering traders, a couple who'd been staying with their wagon in Solace for the past few weeks. Having sold their merchandise, they earned a living for the present by mending and doing odd jobs.

“I wasn't worried,” he answered automatically, as his heart rate drifted back towards normal.

She laughed. “Then you should have been, Ulin Majere. You carry no weapon for your defense, and none of the ancient magic you study will protect you now.”

“Look, will you stop calling me by my full name?” he asked, irritated – though more by her close-to-the-mark comments than her way of speaking. “Anyway, why were you following me? I don't even know your name.”

It was her turn to look away. “I'm called Aysha,” she muttered. There was a long silence.

“And?” Ulin prompted.

“I wanted to find you alone, Ulin Ma– Ulin.” She looked defiantly at him, as if in challenge.

“I've been alone all day,” he pointed out slowly, wondering. He knew, without vanity, that he was good-looking. Some of his mother's beauty, including her golden eyes, had passed to him. Female attention was not a rarity for him, but to follow him for half a day through the summer heat...

She nodded, answering his implied question. “I lost my nerve.”

The admission didn't seem to bother her unduly, as though her look of defiance gave her the necessary strength to say whatever she liked. He looked at her some more, studying her face. She was pretty – not so pretty as some others in Solace, but she had a neat look about her and an honest look, and she didn't try to play her appearance for all it was worth, in the manner that was common. Ulin hadn't been that interested in girls, unlike some of his friends who were halfway towards marriage, not to mention others who would father a dozen children by a dozen different mothers unless they were very lucky. He had figured there was plenty of time later for that sort of thing, and that right now he should concentrate on his studies.

Right now, though, he was a fair way from that concentration. Steeling himself, he looked away from the girl – Aysha – and glanced instead at the path downwards. “We'd better start back, it's late already. At this rate we'll never get home by nightfall.”

She motioned agreement, the fierce expression gone from her face. Relaxed once more, she said as they set off, “We may still. You didn't come the fastest way; we can save a little time by cutting through some woods.” She named a valley that he knew, some way back; he'd considered taking that route earlier, but had decided the trees might be difficult to pass. Evidently, her explorations had suggested differently.

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They made the journey back in silence. Despite her earlier candor, she seemed satisfied simply to walk with him, or more accurately near him. Aysha moved like some cross between a cat and a squirrel; she prowled around, sometimes darting quickly from one place to another. She was near-silent, but she wasn't like the elves, who were said to be catlike; elves *glided* through undergrowth and plant life, as if they were fully a part of nature themselves. Aysha's movement was sometimes abrupt and startling. It also reminded Ulin a little of kender, as had her hair. He could easily see, though, how she'd followed him before, flickering from one hiding place to the next.

It was several hours before they reached the valley she had suggested. Woodland lay before them, coating the base of the valley for the next mile or so. There didn't appear to be a particular path leading into the trees, but the ground was easy to travel, mostly flat and scattered with small twigs and last year's needles from the evergreens. Ulin welcomed the shade of the forest; he sweated from the heat and exertion, although Aysha's energy seemed limitless.

Abruptly she looked towards him. “I smell smoke ahead,” she announced quietly, checking the wind direction with an outstretched finger. “Perhaps we should avoid it, circle around.”

Ulin sniffed the air. She was right; he detected a faint aroma of burning wood. “It's probably a forester, cooking a meal. Maybe he'll share with us.” His stomach still felt awfully empty, and Aysha didn't appear to have any food either, though she hadn't complained.

She still looked doubtful.

“We'll be cautious,” Ulin assured her. “Approach quietly, take a look first.”

Aysha shrugged dubiously, but she followed him as he continued into the forest. Soon the scent of woodsmoke became more pronounced, and Ulin did his best to move more

quietly, keeping close by the trees where he would be less easily seen. He was reasonably successful, although he couldn't match Aysha's stealth.

The woods were becoming slightly more difficult to traverse in this region; brambles grew up to head height in places, while on the ground, arching extensions of the plants formed tripwires for the unwary. They had to go around the worst of this, skirting the thorny undergrowth with care. The roundabout route this entailed meant that Ulin lost track of distance, and he was surprised when he finally caught sight of the flickering fire, on the other side of a thick screen of bushes.

But not as surprised as when he saw the goblins.

Immediately, he froze in place, holding back a gasp of shock. He hand-signaled silence behind his back, hoping that Aysha would notice. Still as stone, he analysed the scene. Half a dozen goblins sat around the campfire, above which a cooking pot bubbled gently. The food smelt like rabbit stew, though it was almost undetectable beneath the strong scent of goblin. Each of the small, green-skinned humanoids was dressed in nondescript leather armor, and had a shortsword close at hand. In contrast to the typical habits Ulin had heard ascribed to goblin bands, the armor and weapons were clean and in good condition.

As slowly as he could, he eased down and away from the bush. He motioned to Aysha, and the two crept away from the campfire at a crouch until they were far enough away, Ulin judged, to at least whisper. Leaning over to the woman's ear, he told her what he'd seen.

"Then let us leave, Ulin Majere," Aysha advised quietly. "Goblins are cruel and dangerous, and neither of us is equipped to defend against six of them. If we hurry away, we can give them a wide berth and be home safely."

Ulin shook his head. "But why are they here? Goblins don't lair in this area, never have."

"The dragons may have displaced them from their homes," Aysha speculated. Enormous dragons had conquered most of Krynn, altering the climate and terrain of their lands to suit themselves – regardless of how it suited those who already lived there. "But that doesn't matter. We should get away while we still can."

"It didn't look like a few poor displaced creatures." Ulin countered stubbornly. "It looked like a scouting party, perhaps for some army. We have to find out more. They might be planning to attack Solace."

Aysha shook her head, visibly disturbed. "We do *not* have to find out more. Once we get home, we can simply warn those who need to know. In any case, how were you planning to find out their plans? Do you understand the goblin tongue?"

"No," he admitted, a little defeated; stupidly, he hadn't thought of that. Of course, he knew of spells that – twenty years ago – would have enabled him to understand the creatures' guttural language, but that was little comfort right now. "Do you?"

She sighed. "I had hoped you wouldn't ask. Yes, a little."

"Then will you help me?"

Aysha looked down, twisted her hands together and apart and together again, and hesitated. She seemed torn between what she evidently considered common sense, and something else, perhaps a desire to please him. Eventually she raised her head to give an answer. "I–"

She was interrupted by a harsh chuckle. Instantly, the girl was on her feet, and Ulin

jumped up immediately after. They turned to face a single goblin, who'd crept up – from the opposite direction to the camp – while they were crouched in conversation.

“Two for the pot,” the goblin leered, in badly accented Common, dropping a dead rabbit he'd been holding. He brandished a shortsword, waving it threateningly at the pair.

“Get behind me!” Aysha ordered Ulin. She had a dagger in each hand, and was holding them in defensive stance. “See if you can find some stones to throw or something.”

The youth was more than a little worried about Aysha's chances; after all, her daggers had a shorter reach than the goblin's sword. But there wasn't much he could do beyond what she suggested, so he scanned the ground for suitable stones. Most of those he could see were far too small... finally, he found one that looked suitable.

Aysha and the goblin had already engaged in combat. The girl was fast, but the extra distance afforded by the creature's weapon gave it a distinct advantage. So far, she had parried its slashes, but that didn't look like continuing. Ulin tried to circle around to get a good angle at the goblin, but the path was narrow, constricted by the brambles to either side, and the combatants were moving too much for him to get a clear throw.

The goblin leapt forward, cutting past Aysha's guard. She held back a shout, instead hissing in pain as a bright streak of blood grew from the shoulder he'd slashed. With the dagger in her other arm, she retaliated, in a furious counterattack that forced the overextended goblin back several paces but only slightly scratched his tough green skin. Even so, this was Ulin's chance. He finally had a suitable angle, and he hurled the stone at the enemy's head with all his might.

The missile flew true, in fact more accurately than Ulin had honestly aimed for. It smashed into the goblin's left temple with a dull thud. The green creature slumped over untidily to the floor, knocked unconscious.

“Come on – run!” Ulin called, but as the words left his mouth he felt himself grabbed from behind. A sudden pain blossomed in his head, and everything faded into fuzzy darkness.

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Gradually the world blurred into focus. Raising his head, Ulin could see trees in front of him, a mess of leaves and greenery that made up a cluster of brambles, and not much else. His wrists were tightly bound behind his back, the circulation to his hands almost cut off, and rope also formed a painful constriction around his chest. The trunk of a tree dug into his back. His left leg hurt, scratched and torn by a thorned branch from the brambles, but there was nowhere else to move it. A dull ache throbbed through his head to overlay the scene, making thinking a painful chore; but he was struck by a sense of urgency that forced him to consider the situation. Captured. By goblins.

“Are you conscious?” A whisper from one side interrupted his thoughts. The speaker – Aysha, he remembered now – was using the elven language of the Qualinesti. Presumably she was trying to ensure their captors couldn't understand the conversation, if it was overheard. Her pronunciation, though, was terrible.

“I think so,” he whispered back in the same tongue, though hopefully with more accurate vowel sounds. He tried to turn his head towards the woman, but could see only tree-trunk. Presumably she was bound to the other side. “What's happening?”

“We’re tied to the same tree; I can just about see your legs. I’ve been trying to work my bonds loose, but I haven’t got very far.”

“And the goblins?” He could hear the creatures a short distance away, talking in their own guttural language. It sounded like some kind of argument.

She paused, probably wondering whether to protect him from the news. “They’re trying to decide whether to keep us as hostages, or to kill and eat us. And they’re still waiting for the one you hit to wake up. I’m facing their campfire, a short distance away.”

“Oh,” Ulin said blankly, trying to think. “Is there any chance you could get to your daggers?”

“No. The goblins took them, and in any case my hands are firmly tied.”

Ulin considered the situation. Could he get out of the ropes somehow? They were pretty tight; no amount of wriggling was going to loosen them. Something sharp... but the only thing he could think of was the bramble thorns which still scratched at his leg. They might be sharp enough to cut rope, but probably only if used to painstakingly split off tiny thicknesses and then snap those; it would take hours, and the chances were they wouldn’t *have* hours.

“Any ideas?”

“Not really,” Aysha said. “Perhaps if there’s a next time, Ulin Majere, you’ll listen to my advice more promptly.”

A lot of help that was. If only the old magic still permeated Krynn. Then he could unbind the ropes, put the goblins to sleep, magically charm one of the creatures into releasing him, anything. Well, anything that didn’t require the use of his hands, of course. But that still left... he stopped himself. Although he hadn’t spoken out loud, he could almost hear Aysha’s response, from before. *None of the ancient magic you study will protect you now.* She had been disdainful then of his studies and daydreams, and now she would have all the more reason; it was imperative that he think of some practical cause of action of use *now*, not twenty years in the past.

What did he have available? Clothes. No weapon, no armor, certainly no magical artifacts. His pockets were empty. The belt pouch contained only the aishleaf herb. He had nothing else... wait. The herb, which had its dangers, and was even more potent when fresh... and the goblins’ cooking pot. Was there a way...?

“Are your legs free, like mine?” Ulin asked, his heartbeat rising faster with the excitement.

“Yes.”

“Could you reach my belt pouch?”

“With my toes? Probably.”

“And the cooking pot?”

“It’s three or four yards away,” Aysha said gently.

Ulin’s heart sank. That was it, then. There would be no short, easy throw of the kind that might be possible using the toes. Of course, it would be easy to throw a ball of the leaves into the pot with their hands, but those were tightly bound.

“What did you have in mind, Ulin Majere?” Every time, she pronounced his name slightly differently, giving it an intonation that had most often been some form of irony. This time her voice contained some respect and also what seemed like a hint of hope.

“The herb in my pouch is poisonous. If you could grab some leaves with your feet, maybe roll them into a ball, then throw it into the goblins’ food when they weren’t looking...

but you can't throw anything that far with your feet."

Very quietly, she giggled; he wondered how she could find amusement at a time like this, but perhaps it was a mild form of hysteria. "Who needs feet for that, Ulin Majere? I will take the herbs from your pouch in that way, and then put them in my mouth. I can roll them into a ball and spit it at the cooking pot."

He blinked, not having considered that at all. "You can *spit* accurately, that far?"

"Of course. Did you never play spitting contests, with fruit stones?"

"Can't say I did," Ulin muttered. He was beginning to feel as if his education was in some way lacking; it was pretty lucky that his elven had even *included* the word 'spit'. And nothing short of a miracle that hers did, given her atrocious pronunciation; still, once you got used to somebody speaking elven as if it were Common, she was easy enough to understand.

"Move around the tree a little, to your left," Aysha told him. "I will be able to reach your pouch more easily, and in less danger of the goblins' sight."

Their enemies were still arguing, perhaps because the seventh had not yet recovered. Wriggling, Ulin managed to inch around the tree very slightly, causing intense pain in his left leg as the bramble thorns dug into it once more and scraped along. He reached the point where the ropes wouldn't stretch any further; hopefully that would be enough.

A quiet thud probably meant that Aysha had shed one of her boots. She would have used one foot to hold it, yanking her other leg out with brute force. Hopefully any stockings she wore could be removed by a similar method.

There was a sudden silence, apart from the goblins' continued chatter. "They're looking this way," Aysha reported, her whisper quieter than before.

Ulin's heart was in his mouth. If the goblins noticed that she was up to something, had removed her boot... He held his breath.

"It's okay," she told him at last, her voice for once betraying a little fear. "The one you hit is waking up, and they're all looking at him now. I'd better do this quickly."

Looking as far to the left as he could, he saw her leg twist round the side of the tree. She must be performing some fairly impressive contortions in order to get it that way, but he'd not doubted her ability on that score, having seen the way she moved before. Deftly, her bare toes poked into the open mouth of his pouch, wriggling to loosen the drawstring and widen the gap. She withdrew her foot with half a dozen leaves clutched between the toes. Quickly, her leg twisted back around to the other side of the tree.

"Will this be enough?" Aysha asked.

"More than. They're very potent when fresh... oh." Suddenly he realized. "Putting them in your mouth could be pretty dangerous. I think it should be okay, as long as you make very sure not to swallow any liquid that's been in contact with them. Any *at all*."

"Mmmm."

She must already have the leaves in her mouth, Ulin thought. He heard her spit. Though he listened very carefully, he didn't hear the resulting hoped-for splash; hopefully it had been covered by the bubbling of the watery stew. But first things first.

"Spit again, clear your mouth out. And again if necessary."

There was a pause. "But this feels really nice," she whispered, surprised. "Can't I swallow even a little...?"

“No!” He tried very hard not to raise his voice in his urgency. “If you can feel it already, you’ve had too much. Get rid of it *now*.”

She spat a few more times, which reassured him. Still, she’d clearly had a pretty hefty dose; unfortunately, there was nothing he could do about it.

“Did you get it in?” he asked.

“Mmmm,” she said again; this time without the excuse of a full mouth to explain her incoherency. “Yes... I told you, just like fruit stones.”

She’d lapsed back into Common, which was probably a bad sign. Then she giggled quietly, which was worse. He suddenly remembered. “Put your boot back on. We don’t want the goblins to suspect anything.”

“I will.” There was a pause, and a surprised giggle. “Oh! It’s difficult.”

Ulin held his breath, hoping the leaves hadn’t dulled her reflexes to the point of uselessness.

“Done it!” she proclaimed triumphantly, and a little too loud. Luckily, the goblins appeared to have resumed their argument, and didn’t notice the outburst.

“Okay,” he told her quietly, “now, don’t talk. Just try to go to sleep.” The herb did make people drowsy, and when she slept her system would be able to concentrate more of its efforts on cleansing itself. Getting her to drink a lot of water would probably help, too, but that wasn’t really an option now. She had taken a rather higher dose than was safe, he judged by the speed of the effects, but probably not more than two or three times the usual strength. That would likely kill an old or feeble patient; somebody as young and strong as Aysha would wake up in perfect health. He hoped. Of course, he wasn’t really an expert.

In any case, it was nowhere near the amount the goblins would get, when the leaves had the time to infuse into their stew, and when they would actually swallow some mouthfuls. With a bit of luck, that would work on the same sort of timescale as it had on Aysha – about thirty heartbeats to the initial effects, as the body took time to absorb it – but those effects would be far more acute. Of course, this plan rather relied on all the goblins beginning their meal at the same time. And on them eating the stew before they decided to change their minds and eat *him*.

The quiet sound of his companion’s slow, steady breathing provided some reassurance of her health, and also relaxed him a little. He tried to listen to the goblins’ harsh speech, but couldn’t pick out even a single word. Then, though, he heard a chink, and perhaps a little splashing sound. Perhaps, he thought, his spirits rising, they were ladling out the stew.

More of the sounds followed, and then there was a brief silence. Unless he was imagining things, the sound that broke it was a goblin’s slurp. If the gods were still with Krynn, Ulin thought, this would have been a good time to pray.

Instead he simply waited, more tense than he’d ever been. There was a brief comment from one creature. It all depended, Ulin realized, on whether that single utterance had been Goblin for “Hey, this stew is nice,” or “What’s this funny leaf doing in my bowl?”

Suddenly, there was a thudding sound. One of the goblins, Ulin guessed, had collapsed. A round of laughing – short, staccato chuckles that conveyed no real expression of mirth, at least to human ears – began, but tapered off quickly after a sudden rattle; perhaps a dropped bowl as another one hit the floor. The laughter was replaced by urgent, almost squawking noises, which gradually slurred a little, quietening as some of the voices faded into oblivion.

The youth held his breath. Had all of the creatures succumbed? If not, the chances were his life was at an end.

A thick, angry voice dashed his hopes. “Human! What have you done to my companions?”

The creature was out of Ulin’s sight still, on the other side of the tree. Evidently, it hadn’t realized that the girl slept. A few dull thuds sounded as it kicked her body and Ulin winced, glad of his position; out of sight, out of mind. For the moment only. Once it got no response from Aysha, the goblin would surely turn its tender attentions on him.

“What have you done?” it repeated. This time, though, its voice seemed a little dulled, and the young man’s heart leapt. Soon... soon... and sure enough, there was a quiet thud as the creature toppled over.

Ulin waited, beginning to relax somewhat. He listened carefully, but could hear only his companion’s smooth breathing over the fire’s crackle and the sounds of the forest; twittering, cheery bird calls and the rustling of animals moving through undergrowth. After a few minutes, he felt almost safe.

Of course, he was still tied to a tree in a forest miles from home, as night threatened. So perhaps the situation wasn’t ideal.

When he’d changed position, the painful bramble branch had been brought closer to his bonds. He supposed that, since he now had all the time in the world, it would make sense to free himself. Pushing his weight over onto the right leg, he simultaneously reached down and forward with his fingertips, behind his back; he managed to pull the branch to the left and closer to his bound wrists. Leaning over in an extremely uncomfortable position, he began to work away at the ropes, alternately pushing them into the thorns to split them apart, and sawing them against the sharp plant. This would take some time.

* * *

The sky was shading towards darkness before Ulin’s hands were free. Finally, he had worn the ropes to such an extent that they slipped looser, and his hands could wriggle free. Blood rushed through the sore, aching wrists, and his fingers tingled as a more normal circulation resumed. It was now a relatively simple matter to untie the cords that bound his chest, and he was free.

It felt good, really good, to stand up again. Even though his body ached with cramp, and he could feel the numerous scratches across the back of his left leg re-opening to bleed a little, the sense of freedom in simply being able to look around the other side of the tree was incredible.

The goblin’s camp was scattered with green bodies. Some lay where they’d been sitting to eat, a little way from the fire; a few had fallen as they staggered up in surprise; and the seventh had collapsed almost on top of Aysha, crumpled up on the dirt with an elbow across the young woman’s legs. Ulin shoved it off, checking it was dead, and then repeated the test on the other goblins. None of them had survived. Though testing for their pulses was a little distasteful, Ulin didn’t feel any guilt; after all, these had been evil monsters.

The goblins each wore a medallion of some sort, made of wood with a crudely-carved triangle symbol that might represent an army to which – he feared – they’d belonged. He

took one and also retrieved Aysha's daggers from the other side of the campfire. Then he used one of the pair to slice through the girl's bonds, lifting her carefully to a more comfortable resting place on the ground. He checked the wound on her arm, but it wasn't bleeding and seemed to be healing acceptably; the goblin's sword had been clean and was unlikely to cause infection. Nevertheless, he bound it with a strip cut from his tunic, to protect the injury from dirt and dust. Ideally he would have used water to clean it, but there wasn't a stream immediately visible.

Aysha still slept deeply and peacefully. He judged it would be another few hours at least until she woke; until then, since he didn't fancy carrying her and it wouldn't be fair to leave her, he would simply have to wait. Sitting by the young woman, he watched the surroundings as best he could in the deepening gloom. Perhaps he should build up the fire again – a pile of dull-glowing embers was all that remained below the deadly cooking pot – but he didn't want to attract any more attention tonight.

A few times his eyes drifted towards the sleeping girl, drawn to her smooth, neat features. Softened by the darkness into a barely-distinguishable patchwork of contours, her face gained both beauty and mystery. A faint smile seemed to rest on her lips, whether the result of natural serenity or the herb's effect Ulin didn't know. He felt a strange compulsion simply to touch her cheek, a compulsion which he resisted with some effort, wondering what was wrong with him. Resolutely, he turned away to guard more thoroughly against the night, going through a litany of spell workings and components in his mind.

* * *

As he'd thought, it was some hours before she woke. She stirred a little, and lifted her head – barely visible in what little moonlight filtered through the overhead tree branches – to peer about.

"Aysha?" he asked quietly.

There was a pause, as she took stock of the situation. "Ulin Majere," she said finally, thoughtfully. "Your plan worked?"

"Yes. The goblins are dead."

She was silent for a moment. Then, sighing, the girl pushed herself up to a sitting position. "My head hurts."

Of course, that triggered Ulin's own headache, which he'd managed almost to ignore for the while. He winced, resisting an urge to feel the sore spot where a goblin had knocked him unconscious. Her pain would be one of the after-effects known from aishleaf's use.

"Me too," he confirmed. A thought crossed his mind and he started to speak, then stopped again.

"Yes?" Aysha prompted.

"Oh... it's nothing. A simple technique Shiri told me for relieving headaches."

"Go on."

"You simply massage the person's head with your fingers," Ulin explained, "very gently. And imagine that you are drawing the pain away. Sometimes that helps." He didn't tell her of the healer's belief that this trick only worked because patients trusted in it and perceived a lessening of pain, there being no actual effect.

“Could you try that, Ulin Majere? Please?” She leant towards him, presenting her head.

Ulin considered trying to extract a promise that she’d quit using his full name, but it seemed to be a permanent habit of hers; she wasn’t simply making fun of him as he’d thought initially. “Okay,” he agreed instead, reaching his hands toward the darkness of her hair. He wondered if, subconsciously, he’d only brought up the technique as an excuse to touch the girl. Regardless, he would do his best now. He brushed his fingers across her head softly, in a series of arcs that were symmetrical about his two hands. Just on the off-chance of some real effect, he tried to concentrate on teasing out some imaginary, visualized pain from her scalp, though such concentration proved quite difficult when he could sense the girl so close to him.

Regardless, the trick seemed to succeed, eliciting the occasional relaxed murmur. After some minutes, she seemed to be satisfied, and he pulled away from her.

“Your turn,” she pronounced softly.

Ulin wondered if he should tell her it was unlikely to work, since he knew the secret. Well, it might relax him, he rationalized, sitting himself down lower and bending his head so she could more easily reach him. “Be careful for the bruise where the goblin hit me. It’s rather sore.” He’d already checked that once, testing to see if it bled; thankfully there was no tell-tale dampness, but the spot had burned with pain anyway.

In silent acknowledgment, her touch glided very lightly across his hair. She brushed her fingers slowly and gently, in circles like Ulin had, but at an even more leisurely pace. After a few moments, he closed his eyes; it *was* a relaxing feeling, calming his thoughts and gathering away some of the pain that still assaulted him.

Eventually she finished, pulling her hands away after a final, lingering caress. She held silence for a long time, some minutes perhaps, then said, “We should be going.”

“We should,” Ulin agreed, wanting nothing more than to sleep where he was; the day’s exertions had caught up with him. Of course, there would be people worrying back at Solace. It wouldn’t be fair on them just to take the night out, sleeping in the wilderness. Even if it was a pleasantly warm summer night. But still...

“Come on.” Aysha coaxed him to his feet, pulling him up with her hand under his arm. Once he acquiesced, she let go and stepped away a little.

“I can hardly see,” Ulin groused, but quietly. It *was* very difficult; the tree-trunks and other obstacles were barely distinguishable in the darkness.

“We should head uphill. There were no trees covering the ridge’s top.”

Out of the forest’s confining shadow, the moonlight – on a clear night like this – should make travel much easier. He followed the woman, as she led the way to the right up a gentle slope. They walked for about twenty minutes – reaching a point where the hill became somewhat steeper – until, suddenly, Aysha stopped.

“Hold still,” she whispered. “I think I heard someone behind us.”

Ulin had noticed nothing unusual, but he stopped where he stood.

“Ooof!” somebody said, walking into him from behind. Ulin span around, jumping back a little.

His assailant appeared – as far as it was possible to tell in the shadow – to be short, slim, and point-eared. A kender, Ulin realized with some relief. That wasn’t an emotion he would ordinarily associate with meeting a kender, but at this stage, anything was better than a

goblin.

“You should watch where you’re going!” the kender admonished him cheerfully. “Especially on a dark night like this. I don’t believe we’ve met before – my name’s Shea Mothbitten.”

Mothbitten? Ulin didn’t ask. This tired, he could hardly cope with a kender in any case. Automatically, he shook the proffered hand. “Ulin Majere. And she’s Aysha.” The ‘she’ in question had not made any effort to come closer; if anything she seemed to be keeping well clear of the kender.

“You don’t seem to be very well-equipped,” Shea said dubiously. Evidently the kender had found out that Ulin carried nothing worth ‘borrowing’. “What are you doing wandering in the woods after dark without a lantern, anyway?”

“I didn’t plan to,” Ulin said grumpily. “Anyway, *you* don’t seem to have a lantern either.” He nodded in what he hoped was a ‘good-bye’ manner and set off walking again, hoping the kender would take the hint, or failing that trip over a rock and break his neck.

“Actually, I do,” Shea corrected, hurrying to catch up. “But the bit where the oil goes is broken, so it’s not much good. I didn’t mean to be up so late, but I was trying to catch up with my goblins, and then I found you, too, so I followed you to see if you’d make anybody else drop dead, only I stayed at a distance in case it would be me, if you get my meaning, because it didn’t look like a particularly interesting way to die. So, I’d rather you don’t kill me, if you please.”

The young man blinked. “*Your* goblins?”

“Yes. At least, I followed them all the way from, well, I don’t know where exactly, but at least two days away, so that has to count for something. I wasn’t exactly friends with them, though, not since *their* friends back in the camp tried to use me for a snack, which I think was pretty unkind. Is that why you killed them? I mean, were they trying to eat you too? How did you do that anyway?”

“Yes, and never mind,” Ulin answered the kender’s questions, sighing. He glanced ahead; Aysha was barely visible, picking her way through the darkness. A few hundred yards further on, though, the land seemed to brighten; perhaps they were nearing the trees’ edge. A thought occurred to him. “Are there any other goblins near?”

“Not as far as I know,” Shea told him after some thought. “Why, do you want to kill some more? Only I don’t think it’s very nice to go around just killing goblins for no reason, I mean, ones who aren’t trying to eat you.”

“I don’t want to kill any more goblins,” the young man nearly shouted. He’d finally lost his temper. Moderating his voice, he snarled at the kender, “I’m trying to avoid the goblins so they don’t kill *us*. Okay?”

Shea looked taken aback at the outburst. He looked as if he were about to say something, then changed his mind and nodded instead. For a few minutes more, the kender was silent. The three trod carefully through the woodland, walking slowly enough that they would not fall when they caught a foot on an almost-invisible fallen branch or the like. Gradually, though, the trees thinned a little and some more of the blue-white moonlight shone through. And all at once the woodland ended, abruptly as if the remaining trees had been felled, leaving them on a grassy slope high on the ridge. Krynne’s pale moon floated above, throwing clear light across the landscape through the cloudless night. Climbing the slope a little further,

they could see out across the countryside, a wide spread of hills and woodlands all doused in the bluish gleam. The occasional pool or stream glittered brightly from the valleys. In the distance, even some of the far-off mountains were visible, hazy peaks adding a rugged unevenness to the horizon. It was a startlingly beautiful sight.

“Magic never left Krynn,” Aysha said, softly. She stood near, a distance behind his right shoulder. “And it’s not to be found in your dry books, Ulin Majere...”

He felt a tingle run through him, knew his skin was rough with goosebumps despite the evening’s warmth. The truth of her words didn’t irk him as it had before; now he accepted it, accepted that his study would never be of more than historical interest, that his daydreams were simply daydreams, that it was time for his life to move on. Even in the absence of magic’s wonder and power, the world was still a place worth living. He nodded to her, not turning to look back.

“I’m sorry I annoyed you earlier, Ulin – I can call you Ulin, can’t I?” the kender said, breaking a brief silence. Shea sounded very slightly more subdued than before. He put a hand on Ulin’s arm. “I didn’t mean to, but I’m not very used to humans. Forgive me?”

The youth shrugged unenthusiastically. “I guess,” he allowed. It was hard to stay angry with kender for too long; they never *meant* any harm, and it wasn’t their fault they were kender.

“Come on,” Aysha ordered. “We’d better get going. Solace is about four miles from here, still.” She set off southwards along the ridge.

“You’re going to *Solace*?” Shea asked excitedly, hurrying to catch them up, and to keep pace with the longer-legged humans. “That’s where Tasslehoff Burrfoot lived! *And* there’s a monument to him, near. And the people live in trees. Wow. I always wanted to go there.”

“Didn’t you know where you were?” Ulin asked curiously.

The kender shrugged. “I don’t have a map. I thought maybe the goblins might go someplace interesting.”

“Tomorrow, we’ll *find* a map, and you can point out where that goblin camp is.” Ulin figured somebody definitely needed to know, if a goblin scouting party was investigating the Solace area, and his father was probably one of the somebodys – despite the lack of magical power, some of the wizards’ artifacts still worked, and the magic-users formed the closest thing to a cohesive decision-making network that Krynn had left. Palin held an important position among his brethren, although he’d been somewhat disparaging about their effectiveness of late. He spent much of his time worrying about, and discussing with his compatriots, the threat to Krynn from the powerful dragons.

They walked in silence for a while, apart from the occasional yawn. Even the kender appeared to have run out of things to say, probably because Shea was as tired as Ulin. Aysha might have been a little fresher, with her sleep earlier; but her body would have had to struggle to deal with the aishleaf, sapping its strength. She looked as near collapse as the others.

The small woman dropped back a little to walk by Ulin, with the kender a short way behind. She said, “What will you do?”

It was in reference to the conversation they’d had a few minutes ago, if a brief few words and a nod could be counted as conversation, but Ulin understood. She meant, if he quit his pointless study.

“Spend more time with the healer, perhaps. She has skills worth learning.”

Aysha nodded, apparently satisfied with his answer. She smiled a little and moved away from him slightly; in anyone else, that body language would be contradictory. To Ulin, she was beginning to make a strange kind of sense. “I’ll stay in Solace for a while,” she acknowledged. “I’m glad you can grow past your obsession, Ulin Majere.”

“It wasn’t—” he began to protest, then stopped himself. Maybe it had been.

She laughed a little, a quiet, tired laugh. “Chasing after power from a magic that no longer exists? That’s an obsession.”

“Oh, but it does,” Shea said brightly. The kender had been listening to their conversation. “Magic, I mean. Exist.”

* * *

Ulin stopped so suddenly that the kender almost walked into him again. He cut off Shea’s protests. “What do you mean? How do you know?”

“Well,” the kender admitted, “actually I heard it from the goblins. Their war-leader is a great wizard, apparently, the only one on Krynn with magical power. He gets it from a new god. That advantage will enable them to defeat the human menace and protect them from dragons. Something like that, anyway. My Goblin’s a little rusty.”

Ulin felt a rush of hope, his resolve of a few moments ago shattered. “I need to see this goblin!”

“I don’t want to put a damper on things,” Shea said cautiously, “but you know, if he’s a war-leader, he probably lives in the middle of a really big goblin army or something, and it might be kind of hard just to go and see him.”

The young man shrugged it off. “I need to find out more, even so. Tomorrow, after you’ve shown Palin where their camp is, I’ll head back out there and find out where the main army is based. Then I’ll travel that far to find out if there’s any truth to this rumor.”

“Palin and Usha won’t let you,” Aysha said. She’d been glaring daggers at the informative kender.

“They’ll have to. I’m old enough to look after myself now. And you said yourself” – she hadn’t, but she’d implied it – “it’s time I did something with my life. This could be it.”

“Well, *I* am not coming with you.”

He shrugged, then regretted the gesture almost immediately – a slight tense in her face showed that it had hurt. “I mean, I’ll be back in a month at the outside,” he amended, trying to repair the damage.

It hadn’t worked; she smiled sadly. “I lied, then, Ulin Majere. I will travel with you whether you want me there or not. Somebody needs to protect you from your own impulsiveness.”

Ulin didn’t consider himself too impulsive, but he was too distracted to consider that now; he nodded vaguely at the girl. There was a possibility that magic *did* still work, that the goblin had somehow discovered how to access it, even that a god had returned. Admittedly, the possibility was based solely on a tale reported through goblins and a kender, but there was still a *chance*, and he had to take it. It might turn out that his years spent in study would be useful after all.

The pale moon, forgotten, made his hair shimmer in the slight breeze. He didn't notice the kender's confused gaze; didn't notice Aysha's distressed expression, the twisting of her clasped hands, her final resolution when she seemed to draw strength from inside herself, standing a little straighter and staring at the ground with her look of defiance.

"Come on, Ulin Majere," she said finally.

He followed her instruction automatically, but she didn't seem important, just a person, halfway to being a shadow in the night. She didn't matter.

Only the magic was real.

end

Thanks for reading this story. It's not the best I've ever written and I'm not a published writer in any case, but even so I hope you enjoyed it.

If you have comments, complaints, congratulations, or even something that *doesn't* begin with a 'c', to express, you can do so.

My email address is SamuelMarshall@poboxes.com (which should be valid indefinitely) or sm277@cam.ac.uk (which is valid until about September '98). You can find my web page at <http://www.poboxes.com/SamuelMarshall/> - that should've been where you got this story, but I figure you might have forgotten to bookmark it. Finally, it's conceivable that I might be reading the [alt.fan.dragonlance](#) newsgroup, so if all else fails you could look for a "sam" there.

If *none* of these work (or you don't have email - in which case, I don't see how you're reading this, unless somebody illegally redistributed it of course) then I do have a snail-mail address too: 31 Budebury Road, Staines, Middx TW18 2AZ, United Kingdom.