

TALES FROM THE TEAKETTLE



Tales of Epistomolus

Transcribed by Dennis Dawson

The Story of Brendan Brewer

In Which a Tavern Keeper Receives a Boon and a Burden

The Teakettle Tavern is nestled in a tiny valley near a small patch of woods near the center of the world.

The building itself is a rough-hewn log attempt to replicate a teakettle. It's round in a pointy sort of way, with a large chimney shaped like a crooked spout and a handle added on the other side as a sort of joke. People have long forgotten whether the building is based on the name or the other way around.

Inside, the Teakettle Tavern is dark with rich red woods, warm with the glow of banked embers, rich with the heavy smell of fresh bread, heady stew, onions and wood smoke.

But it isn't the food that brings people in (though it's very fine) or the stout (also quite good) or even the tea (heavenly and hypnotic). It's the telling of tales that makes the Teakettle Tavern a popular place. Lighthearted stories of whimsy and adventure are most loved, tales of human foibles and fantastic feats. In fact, any time someone speaks with filigreed facts and unembarrassed embellishment, those around the tavern call it a "tale from the Teakettle," both because it's the sort of tale that might be told there, and because it amounts to little more than a puff of steam (or a passing gas).

The location doesn't hurt, either. The Teakettle Tavern sits next to the intersection of the North-South passage and the East-West road. Anytime anyone goes anywhere, the path is bound to pass the Teakettle, and few travelers pass without taking their rest.

The Teakettle Tavern is owned and operated by Brendan Brewer and his wife Melinda. They are up before the sun, cooking and baking, cleaning, hauling water, tending horses, scolding their three boisterous boys (Bram, Brice, and Bracken), and generally performing all of the tasks necessary to run a busy traveler's rest. Long after the sun has disappeared behind the trees, they bank fires, bid their patrons a pleasant rest, kiss their children good night, then collapse into bed, spooned together, snoring away in preparation for the next day.

Like most people in their little town, Brendan and Melinda have some magic in their blood. Not so much that they can sit back and be idle - they can't enchant a broomstick to fetch the water, or any of that foolishness. But the care and effort they put into their work is always rewarded with a shinier shine, a heartier hearth, and stouter stout.

Hard as their life may seem, they are a happy couple, happier with their lot in life than most people... for once upon a time, they had an opportunity to take stock of what they have, and learn to appreciate it indeed.

It began normally enough. Late one night, after the lights were doused and the door barred, there came a weak knock. Brendan had always been a light sleeper. He carefully picked his way between the pallets in the common room and opened the main door. Standing before him was a thin man, old or old before his time, shivering in the slushy snow.

"Good lord, man, get yourself in here." Brandon said in a failed attempt at whispering. He seized the poor man by his cloak and all but threw him into the rocking chair by the fire. He frantically brushed the weather off the man's twiggy shoulders, then went after the embers with a poker to revive the fire.

Melinda peered in from the back room. “What is it, Brandon?”

“A guest, my love. And half-frozen from the look of him. Bring him the quilt, while I make him some tea, darlin’?”

She pulled the quilt off their bed and quickly wrapped it around the man. The palette sleepers in the room grumbled and rolled a bit, but went quiet soon enough. Brendan swung the kettle over the fire, then rubbed and warmed his hands.

“Have you eaten, friend?” he whispered (in a loud sort of way). “Not from the looks of you. Not nearly enough.” Brandon swung the porridge pot into place and hurried to the back. He returned with a wedge of bread and a chunk of strong cheese.

“Here you go, now. You start on that till I can get you something hot.”

Slowly, shakily, the old man nibbled at the modest meal. Halfway through the bread, and before his tea had stooed, he slumped in the chair and fell hard into a deep sleep. Melinda bunched the quilt around his neck to make him more comfortable while Brendan stowed the pots and banked the fire, then they tiptoed back to their bed.

“Now what will *we* do without our quilt?” she asked.

“Get in bed, woman, I know how to warm you up.” said Brendan, giving her a solid pinch on her ample rump.

In the morning, they found the quilt heaped in the chair, the tea drunk, and the food gone.

“Now look at this, would you? He’s skipped off without a word,” said Brendan.

“Well, dear, it’s not the first time someone’s come and gone overnight.” said Melinda.

“True, true, but that doesn’t make it polite. Ah well, he must have had something important to tend to.” They asked the others if they had seen him leave, but the other palette guests hadn’t seen the old man at all.

As Brendan started to pick up, he saw, nestled in the center of the quilt, a small wooden box, the kind used for snuff or jewelry. He scooped it up and put it in his apron pocket. It rattled a bit, probably a couple of coppers inside to cover the night’s scanty accommodations. He spread the quilt on his bed and went about his morning routine, preparing for another day.

He didn’t think of the box again, in fact, until he was preparing for bed that night. He removed his apron and he heard the box rattling. It occurred to him that there could be anything in there, perhaps something more than a couple of coppers. Maybe it was jewelry, a ring or something he could give to Melinda. That would be a caution, wouldn’t it? He turned to his wife as she started to undress and said, “The old man left us a present. What do you think it might be?”

Melinda peered at it. “Well, it’s a lovely little box.”

Brendan thought about that. “It’s true. The box itself is worth a night’s lodging, certainly more than a crust of bread and a hard seat by a small fire.”

“Well, open it Brendan.”

Brendan winked at her and started to lift the lid.

While Brendan was no more than a hedge wizard, he knew great magic when he felt it. Wild magic. Dangerous magic. Magic of possibilities. Melinda felt it too. Brendan paused. They exchanged a quick glance. Melinda nodded slowly, and he continued to open the box.

The lid lifted smoothly, revealing a faint pinkish glow.

“Look, Melly, it’s some kind of brooch, I think.”

“Oh, no Brendan. It’s a shell from the sea. Oh! Brendan! It’s a wishing whelk!”

“No, are you sure?”

“I’m not sure, but I’ve heard tell of them. My auntie said she saw one once. Like a snail’s shell, it is, but more pointy. Striped pink. Just like that. Like she said. Oh, he must have brought it all the way from the shorelands. You’ll not find them here.”

“A wishing whelk. Well I’ll be whipped.”

“Oh, what will we wish for, Brendan? What will we wish for?”

“Now, hold on. Calm down.” He put an arm around her shoulder and held it close for her to inspect. “We have to be very careful with this. We can’t rush into this, now.”

“I know, I know...but what will we wish for?”

“Well, nothing tonight, my dear. We’ll need a clear head and a sober tongue to do this right.”

“Oh, Brendan, don’t take on so.”

“Don’t “oh Brendan” me, my love. What about the story of the boy who said, ‘I wi-’” Brendan clapped his hands over his own mouth, his eyes as wide open as his mouth was shut tight. “You see what I mean? One false move and our goose is cooked. I was going to say, the boy who wanted to fly, and he flew into the sun and was never seen again. Or the man who wanted to find treasure, fell into a chasm, and died on a chest of gold. Or the woman who wanted her beauty to be eternal, and wound up frozen on a mountain top. If anything *can* go wrong, it certainly *will* go wrong. This will take some thought.”

“I suppose you’re right. But what will we wish for?”

Brendan gave her a warning look. “I only know one way to stop that mouth of yours,” he said, and he covered her mouth with his own.

“Mmmf - I don’t see how I can get any sleep tonight. This is so exciting!” Melinda tossed and turned for almost a full minute before the day’s labors caught up with her and she drifted off into dreams of wealth and ease. Brendan was calm and collected as he lay awake that night, trying to figure out how to use their treasure to its best effect.

Morning came too soon, but Brendan dipped his aching head in the wash basin and got to work. He groped his way into the main room, where Melinda was already kneading the day’s loaves. “Ah, Melly, the one thing I would ask is that you never have to lift a finger for another boarder.”

“Oh, that’s sweet, Brendan love.”

“But, of course, if I were to ever request such a thing you’d surely catch your fingers in your spinning wheel and rip them clean off, or some nonsense like that.” Brendan sighed. “Whatever we ask for, we’ll have to word it so carefully it can’t possibly go awry.”

“You’ve always had a way with words, my love. I’m sure you’ll choose the right way to get our fondest wi— our strongest desire.”

“Yes, love. We’ll figure it out.”

“Now, all we have to decide is what we want.”

“That’s tricky, though, isn’t it. It has to be something big enough to be worthwhile, but not so large as to seem greedy. Gettin’ above ourselves, we’ll attract all manner of evil spirits to curdle our plans.”

“I’m sure you’re right.” said Melinda. “Now, what will we ask for?”

“I suppose we could ask for a new house. Not too grand, just rooms for us and the children, the goats, not far from the tavern of course, just out back....”

“Oh, Brendan, you can build a new house yourself, anytime you like. Surely we can do better than that.”

“We’ll need to think on it darlin’. The last thing we want to do is rush this.”

Brendan hummed softly to himself as he tried to figure out the perfect wish. It had to be just right. Ask for too much, and the fates would put him in his place. If he were too timid, and asked too little, fate would punish him for a coward.

The faraway look never left his eyes that day. For the first time, a customer had to ask twice for a tankard. Brendan blushed, drew a thick ribbon of stout and served it up on the house, then drifted off again.

He was no closer to a decision as he crawled into bed that night.

“Ah Melly,” he said, “We could ask for a healthy new son, but you might die a-birthin’. We could ask for new shoes and our feet might fall off. We could ask for long life, then be thrown in prison. Ask for new clothes, and wear them to our son’s funeral.”

“Oh, don’t say such things, Brendan.”

“I won’t say anything until I figure out the right thing to say. This is harder than I thought.”

Melinda yawned. “I guess I’ll try to dream up something. I did last night, I think.”

Brendan perked up a bit and looked at her intently “What did we ask for, lovey?”

“I don’t remember.”

He pinched her smartly on the bottom, and she squealed. She snuggled into his arms and slipped softly to sleep. He watched her for a while, then lay back with his red eyes burning, trying to figure out what to do, what to do...

At some point, he may have drifted off; he may have dreamt or hallucinated; he wasn't sure; he wished for a new inn, a shiny teakettle inn of gleaming silver with diamond windows in golden sills. Melinda dressed all in white silk, reading to the children gathered at her feet by the hearth, when a stray ember catches on the fine new rug. In a flash, they're all engulfed in flame; he watches as his boys melt like candle wax, their golden hair a flaming crown around their charred skulls. He wanted to be away from the inn, anywhere but the site of such horror; he was whisked off to an island paradise, surrounded by dark beauties with little or no clothing, the sun soaking through to his bones, bright yellow and red fish swimming over the white sand in water so clear it seemed as if they were flying through the air. "Oh Melly, isn't it lovely." He turned to his wife...but she wasn't there. Alone in paradise, he was living just another vision of hell. The world spun, and there was his Melly, sitting on a magnificent throne; the entire court bows before her, then rises and cheers for their sovereign; she nods in appreciation, smiles at her husband, then waves her hand in a casual gesture; ten beggars are beheaded before his eyes; she laughs loudly as the heads drop with a rapid succession of sticky thuds.

He sat up, ground his palms into his eyes, all but bolted from the bed. He stumbled quietly into the common room taking a seat in the rocker by the fire and stared into the embers.

Melinda found him there in the morning, holding the shining shell before his eyes, catching the light of the fire.

“Look at it, Melly dear. It’s so tiny, light as baby’s breath; and it’s the heaviest burden I’ve ever carried.”

“Oh, Brendan, you look terrible. Let me get you some tea, love.”

“What to do, what to do, Melly? I don’t dare use this. I can’t imagine it turning to anything but ruin.”

“Then why not just give it away? Like the old man gave it to us?”

“Too late for that, I fear. The demonics are sure to have noticed by now. If I don’t use it, they’ll punish me anyway.” He looked up with tears in his red-rimmed eyes. “I don’t know what to do, my love.”

Melinda wrapped her hands around her husband’s. “Oh, Brendan, I wish we could just be content with the good life we’ve made for ourselves.”

The whelk glowed brighter, illuminating Melinda’s shocked face as the realization struck her. Brendan’s face contorted with horror...rage...despair...and relief. He heaved an enormous sigh. The whelk crumbled in his hand to a fine powder and swirled away.

“Oh, ho, ho, Melly what have you done/?”

“I’m so sorry, Brendan...I’m...I’m such a fool!” She sobbed and buried her face in her hands.

“Hush now, oh, hush Melly” He pulled her close and kissed her head. “Oh, bless the day I married such a good soul.”

And that is how the stouter stout became stouter still, the best bread baked became better, the paltry pallets more pliable, and the cheerful children cheekier (including a

healthy new son the very next year), because the Teakettle Tavern is run by the two happiest proprietors in the known world.

The Story of Angela Weaver

In Which a Harried Mother Weaves a New Yarn for Herself

In one of the eight corners of the Teakettle Tavern, there is a loom. A large bolt of cloth is gathered underneath, woven with maroon, beige, and grey diamonds of varying sizes. The rows are even and taught.

It seems out of place, such a bulky object, sitting idle all day. That is, until evening, when Melinda's sister Angela comes to visit....

Angela was a soft-spoken girl with emerald green eyes and always the hint of a smile on her lips. She would help Melinda at the Teakettle Tavern after she finished her own chores at home. She enjoyed being in the light and warmth of the Tavern after dark, and the business was always a little more steady when men knew she was going to be working.

Angela was a sweet and open hearted person, which was a good thing, because she could not hide her emotions. Literally. When she blushed, the air would glow faintly pink around her. When someone used coarse language toward her, a cloud would form over her head and rain tears down her cheeks. When she sang, the golden light of dawn illuminated her face and the people around her. When she was happy, she was exquisite, and when she was sad, it was heartbreaking. Everyone was on their best behavior around Angela, because they couldn't bear to see her unhappy.

Thomas Weaver was traveling with his master when he first saw her. It was Angela's long butter-yellow braids that first attracted Thomas Weaver's attention.

“I’d like to try my hand at weaving that,” he’d say, “like spun gold it is.” Angela smiled, not a word passed her lips, but (unbeknownst to her) a tiny cupid appeared to fly from the top of her head and fire golden arrows in his direction.

When Thomas won journeyman status, he immediately moved to Teakettle Crossroads and set up shop. He and Angela were married within the month.

Thomas reveled in his newfound freedom and his lovely wife. He produced bolt after bolt of fine fabrics, tossing the shuttle with vigor. The “Shoop! Smack! Click-clack!” rhythm would get Angela to humming, then singing along as she went about keeping house. The loom would look smoother and shinier, the warp threads tighter, the shuttle lighter. This made the time fly by for Thomas, and he was happy, productive, and more than ready for bed after a long day. Angela was there to be sure he didn’t waste all of his time sleeping.

As if to prove how happy and productive they could be together, a year after they were wed, Angela gave birth to triplets. Two girls and a boy, Alice, Annie, Andrew, each as beautiful as their mother. Thomas and Angela were beside themselves with joy. Thomas worked all the harder, while Angela tended to the home and children. From the start, the babies were easy to care for. They, too, were entranced by the constant rhythm of the loom, and set their burbles and cries to its rhythms. When they were fussy, Angela would sing to them, and they would watch to see how her happiness would manifest itself. At first, it was the warm pink glow or the light of dawn, but over time she created more tangible images — a kitten playing with yarn, or a rose bush that bloomed and buzzed with bees, a waterfall with jumping fish. The children babbled along happily, singing

with her in their own secret language, sometimes catching her melody, sometimes improvising a freeform counterpoint, but remarkably pleasing to the ear.

“That’s quite a chorus you have going there, my Angel” Thomas would say, providing the percussion with his loom.

And it was quite a chorus they had year later when the second set of triplets arrived (two boys and a girl, Berrick, Brighton, Bella). The cacophonous cries of the newborns were unsettling to the older group, who set about quieting and smoothing out their melodious household. Rather than being a burden, the older children seemed to understand that their mother needed their help, and they did what they could to make her life easier. Melinda had just weaned her third boy, and was able to help with the feeding.

When Angela sang for the children, they all sang or burred with her. Before her first set could talk, they could sing with her note for note, and started to harmonize with her. Their singing strengthened her imagery, and they created elaborate gardens with flowers of every shape and color, butterflies with magnificent wings of opalescent wonder, dragons that breathed fire and ice. Angela found that she could control the images like puppets, if she wanted, but usually she just allow them to find their own way, letting them evolve as they wished. These displays were so fascinating that Thomas would sometimes pause at the loom and gape, only to have the visions vanish as his grounding rhythm abruptly stopped.

“Oh, my,” he’d say, sheepishly, and get back to work. His weaving business was thriving; he had created an exquisite silken cape for the Baroness, which the guild unexpectedly judged to be his masterpiece, and Thomas was declared a master craftsman.

Thomas felt a little like he had cheated, since he credited much of his success to the love and support of his wife and family and his happy working environment.

Even as their mother swelled with yet another pregnancy, the children would sit in front of her in a semi-circle, singing with her, helping her with simple tasks or pretending to help in preparation for the day when they could. They followed her about in a line, the older children taking their younger brothers and sisters by the hand, swinging their arms and singing along with their mother. Townsfolk would see Angela out of the corner of their eye, and she would appear to be followed by a line of ducklings, or by a string of bubbles, or clouds shaped like puppies. They'd shake their heads and look again, only to see her blond-headed brood, bobbing along behind her.

When the third set of triplets arrived (Carlina, Clarrisa, Carmella), Angela was delighted to have three more girls, and exhausted. Thomas had been able to purchase more looms, and built a workshop adjacent to the house so that he could be close if needed (and so that he could hear the singing). He took on two apprentices, who worked hard and well, for they too were entranced by the harmonious household. The shuttles either worked in synchrony, or in sonorous sympathetic syncopation when master and apprentices were warping and weaving.

The children largely looked after themselves. The oldest were talking, now, but they were also able to babble along with the younger children. And the stories they told were vividly displayed in golden images above their heads. They created epic tales of love and beauty, patience and empathy, caring and growth. The seasons would fly by, kingdoms rise and fall as the children sang and laughed and created worlds of beauty together.

They might have gone on like this for the rest of their lives, singing to the sound of the shuttles, when one day Thomas paused, trembled slightly, and collapsed over his loom. The children knew at once that their father was gone, and fell silent. Tears filled Angela's eyes as she closed Thomas's forever. The light had gone out in hers, as well.

The community gathered around and helped Angela with the funeral arrangements. The children were good as gold, comforting themselves and each other. When everything settled down, the apprentices went back to their families, and Angela was left in her home with nine mouths to feed, three still suckling.

The toddlers seemed to understand why their mother was so sad, and were very tender with her. But the wee ones had more pressing issues on their minds. They could be patient only so long, and then they wanted to be fed and tended to. Angela mechanically went through the motions, dutifully performing the tasks required of her, but there was no music in her step, no light in her eyes. She would hold one or two of the babes and rock by the window for hours at a time, just staring into space.

For the first time, her offspring became fussy. They knew that something had changed, but they missed the music, the laughter, the joy they had known from birth. The older ones finally had to step in.

They joined hands and formed a circle, and they began to sing. Their voices were as sweet as ever, and a faint glow flickered to life. The light spiked and sputtered in a way it never had before. The notes were pure, but the intervals were unsteady, and the chords shifted from delightful to dissonant as they sought to match one another. It was eerily beautiful, but not the same song. The light flickered turned reddish-orange, and the

dissonance increased. Angela's eyes widened; she was suddenly very aware of the children, the song, the danger.

"Shush now! Stop!" she hissed.

The glow faded then disappeared with a barely audible pop.

The children looked at their mother with stark disbelief. Never in their lives had she spoken sharply. Tears stood in their eyes.

"Oh my dears, come to me," she said. "You did no wrong. Not that you would know. But your song was summoning the wrong kind of attention, my loves." She was speaking mostly to herself, the children just huddled around her and were glad to have caught her attention, if nothing else.

"Here now," she said. She turned her rocker toward them and they sat around her. She began to rock and hum one of the old tunes they all knew well. She used the squeak as she rocked back and the squawk rocking forward to keep the time. The children understood, and began to sing with her. Squeak, squawk, squeak, squawk, squeak, squawk. The familiar glow like the sun's early rays emerged in the circle as the children swayed back and forth in a steady rhythm. The heart of the home was beating as one again.

Over the next few weeks, the children cheered Angela and Angela cheered the children. She spent many hours rocking and singing with them. The glow was there, if not the remarkable images and sparkle from happier times. The littlest ones could shakily stumble about on their own, now, and the little family began to take walks in the sunshine again.

Things were better, but not quite right. Not yet. Though everyone had been very kind and helpful, Angela knew she couldn't count on the charity of her family and friends forever, they had little more than she. She couldn't bear the thought of separating from her children, farming them out to various relatives (who would jump at the chance for another pair of hands to help with chores, in time).

She was rocking and humming, kneading over these ideas with her mind. They were singing, but the glow was faint. The effect wasn't joyful, but wistful.

"Ah, my darlings, whatever shall we do?" she murmured.

Andrew, her oldest boy, said "Shoop-shoop."

"What dear?"

Andrew repeated "Shoop-shoop. Do the shoop-shoop."

He pointed at the loom. Angela chuckled.

"Oh, no, that was your papa who did the shoop-shoop, love."

"Do the shoop-shoop." he pointed more emphatically. All the other children started to chant with him. "Shoop-shoop! Shoop-shoop! Shoop-shoop!"

Angela had watched her husband work his magic on the loom for years, and he had tried to teach her to use it once, but she had enough to do just tending to the tots. She left the weaving to him and his apprentices. She looked at the loom, sitting just as it had been when Thomas had... just as it was. She blinked back tears.

Andrew took her right hand, Annie took her left, and they tugged her to the loom. She sat in front of it, and gripped the shuttle. The children looked on in silent awe and anticipation. Angela took the shuttle and slid it left. Shoop. The children laughed and clapped their hands. She used the reed to compact the threads, changed the warp, and

tossed the shuttle again. Shoop. She wasn't worried about weaving, it was all about the rhythm. She just wanted to bring back the feeling, the joyful noise of her husband at the loom, the children singing along. The loom had been a problem before, but now it felt natural to her. She quickly found the rhythm and felt as if Thomas were guiding her hands. The rhythm returned - Shoop! Smack! Click-clack! Shoop! Smack! Click-clack!

Angela and, the children sang, and laughed, cried a bit, too. Above their heads, a vision of young birds with red breasts and golden wings fluttered from cloud to cloud. Carlina, Clarrisa, Carmella spun in stumbly circles, watching the display, clapping their hands and gibbering along with the tune.

Somewhere between the singing, her love for her family, and simple necessity, Angela found herself weaving fabric as lovely as anything her husband had ever made. He had been right— his talent was as much a family affair as it was his training and steady hand. She felt his soul in the loom, and was able to make the family whole once more.

When Melinda brought some food later that evening, she was stunned and a little confused to see Angela working away. The room was filled with dancing bears, wolves and elk, the children spinning happily between them. Melinda slipped away unnoticed and ran back to the Teakettle Tavern.

“Brendan, come with me.”

“Melly, darlin', it's the peak hour. I can't leave the tap.”

“You won't be sorry, my dear, but you have to come now.”

Brendan looked in his wife's eyes. Mellinda was not prone to excitability or exaggeration. He put his oldest boy behind the bar (“Just see that no one takes more than one topping off!”) and he scuttled after his wife.

When they reached Angela's doorstep, they stood agog. The animals were now replaced with jugglers, acrobats, fire-eaters and conjurers.

"What in the name of Zeus?!" cried Brendan, and it was all gone in the blink of an eye. Angela stopped weaving. The children turned toward the door.

"Uncle Bren'an! Mama do the shoop-shoop!" squealing with glee, all but one voice. Angela blushed, a bright light bursting forth and showering down in piles of pink petals.

"Well, Melly, there's the Angie we know and love. Oh, give us a hug darlin'."

After hugs all around (which took a good little bit) they say and chatted a bit.

"Melinda, Brendan, isn't it wonderful? Look at this fabric. I did this much just this afternoon."

"This is your work? Oh, this is fine, just fine. I'll be your first customer, and thank you for the pleasure." said Melinda.

Brendan was stroking his chin. "That circus you had in here while you were singin'. Can you do that again?"

"I suppose so. We'd never seen the circus before. I don't really know how we do it. I don't *try* to make things. It just happens."

"You mean you get a different little show every time?"

"Yes, I suppose."

"Well, do you suppose you could do it in the Tavern?"

Melinda fairly bounced in her chair. "Oh, yes, Brendan! Wouldn't that be lovely!"

"You mean move the loom in there?" asked Angela.

"The loom? Well, yes, if you think you need it, why not?" said Brendan.

The next evening, the regulars were quick to give Brendan a ribbing for his new décor.

“What, Brendan, you taking up a hobby in your old age?” said Jacob Miller.

“I’m a damn sight younger than you, Jakey, and I have plenty to do just keeping your tankard full.”

The door opened, and everyone was pleased to see Angela coming back to the tavern and looking so well. They were not so sure about her nine knee-high nippers, though, as they filed in behind. She solemnly approached the loom and sat, and the children sat in two rows, facing the crowd, just as they’d practiced. The patrons sat and silently wondered what was about to happen.

Angela started in on the loom: Shoop! Smack! Click-clack!

She hummed for a bit, then started to sing, that same sweet voice they all knew so well. But they were taken aback when the children began to pick up the melody and join in. The golden glow swelled then burst into a thousand spinning spheres, twinkling in the tavern, illuminating every corner. The patrons could see themselves reflected everywhere they turned, bathed in warm light and luxurious chords. The spheres changed colors and spun in shapes and swirls, dancing around the room.

Magic was nothing new to them, but beauty is always a fresh experience. They were thrilled, delighted, inspired. No one wanted it to end. When it was time to stop and put the children to bed, the patrons clapped and begged them to stay. Brendan chimed in, “Oh, they’ll be back again, don’t you worry. But it would surely encourage them if you found a copper or two for the little ones to help them to remember.” The children circulated around the room with their hands outstretched, and they collected quite a sum for an hour of what for them had been pure pleasure.

Angela brought the children back to the tavern for a little while every night, and between the weaving and the tips they had enough to get along very well.

Word does tend to travel quickly, particularly when the topic is something this amazing happens nightly at the crossroads of the world. Merchants and noblemen who had always made a point of stopping at the tavern anyway began to make up excuses to travel just so that they could see the spectacle once again. When word reached the king, he was unable to convince his queen that they needed to take a trip themselves, so he had no choice but to invite Angela and her brood to appear for him at court. He sent three carriages and a wagon to transport the brood and a loom to the castle.

They stayed with the king for several months. They were particular favorites of the queen, not only for the beauty of their singing, but also for the fine fabrics that were a byproduct of the performance.

All visitors were enthralled with Angela Weaver and her family. When it came time to leave the castle, they had no dearth of invitations to visit other nobles. Angela and the children spent the next several years weaving their way throughout the kingdom. The accommodations were lovely, her fabric in great demand (particularly for anyone who has seen her at work), so there was no reason for them to rush home.

But return they did. Angela missed her own hearth, and she wanted her family to experience the serenity of their home in Teakettle Crossroads, not spend their lives as pampered guests without a place of their own.

They spend their days in harmonious industry; the older children are finding their rhythms with their own looms, and much of the burden has been relieved for Angela. But for a little while each evening, it's Angela working the loom at the Teakettle Tavern, with

the patrons hushed and happy, with the children gathered around her, with the music raising the rafters, with the magic of a mother's love lighting the room.

The Story of Luvilia Tanner

In Which a Little Girl's Dream Comes True*

There is a framed drawing in ink on vellum that hangs to the right of the hearth of the main hall of the Teakettle Tavern. It depicts a little girl about ten years old presenting a bouquet of flowers to the queen. The girl is dressed in a beautiful gown. She curtsies low as she stretches out to offer her gift. The queen is a stunning and magnificent figure, beaming at the little girl as she extends a graceful hand to accept the token. It is a moment of great pride to the town of Teakettle, preserved by the practiced eye and steady hand of a fine artisan. Perhaps, I should add, a kind eye and sympathetic hand as well....

Daniel was a fine alchemist. He apprenticed with Epistomolus, and together they created an astonishing assortment of potions and lotions. His sleeping tonic could drop the blacksmith with two drops, but the sleep was peaceful and came with no headache or other side effects. His wrinkle cream would make an elephant's hide look like a baby's bottom. These products sold well, and once he became a journeyman Daniel's pockets were jingling with his fair share of the profits.

When he set off on his own, he turned his attention to what to most would seem an incredible waste of his talents. He became Daniel Tanner, and opened a tanning and dye works. He enjoyed working with the colors, the fibers, matching the right pigments in the right amounts to the right textures to create just the right effect. He created shimmering satins, linens both vibrant and peaceful, colors no one had seen before. His leathers were of every hue, enhancing the natural grain while imbuing it with the purest pigments.

* sort of

While he didn't make nearly as much money as he might have by selling his potent potions, he worked hard and he certainly did well enough. He was a wealthy man, by local standards, but also a generous and responsible citizen.

Daniel married a woman named Lavender, the daughter of a merchant with whom he had close business ties. Lavender was a good wife, but she preferred to keep her home and stay away from the smells and stains in the working areas.

Finally, she took his hand one morning. "Daniel, my pet. I admire the work you do, and wouldn't change you for the world. But...."

"Yes, love?"

"But wouldn't you sleep better a little farther from your job. So it wouldn't intrude so on your home life?"

"I sleep fine."

"Yes, I know *you* do."

"Ah, I see."

He built her a fine new house, far on the other side of crossroads, the first in town with a second story. Through some careful bartering and bargaining (including exchanging a few custom-made potions), Daniel was able to acquire a richly carved front door, beveled glass windows, brass fittings, and other adornments that were considered an extravagant waste of time and money by most folks. Lavender was delighted, of course.

When their daughter, Luvilia was born, Daniel's business had grown to the extent that he spent less time in the day-to-day operations, more time in his tiny shed behind his house, experimenting with new pigments, finding better ways to get the colors to fuse

with the fabrics, and generally improving what any other tanner would have considered “good enough.”

Luvilia was raised in love and luxury. Daniel and Lavender doted on her. They loved to dress her in fine clothes and show her off to their many visitors. On sunny days, they would get into an open carriage and ride around to enjoy the countryside and stop to chat with the neighbors, all of whom would nod and smile and say what a lovely child was Luvilia, quite the little lady indeed, yes, yes.

As Luvilia grew, her opinion of herself could not help but grow higher and more expansive. She grew more graceful, poised, and regal every day. She dreamed of going to castles, attending fancy balls, meeting other people as sophisticated as she.

Her playmate was her neighbor, Beatrice, who would come to visit whenever she got the chance.

“What shall we play today?” Luvilia would ask. “Queen and her entourage? Princess and her nurse? Baroness and the scullery maid?”

“Oh, queen and her court, m’lady” Beatrice would answer, pleased that she was allowed to choose.

Beatrice would tend to Luvilia’s wishes, comb her hair, run little errands, and generally do Luvilia’s bidding until it was time for her to go home and do her chores.

Just after her tenth birthday, there was great excitement in the town. Each year, the king rewarded some of the towns under his protection for their cultural, military, or (especially) monetary contributions. Teakettle had grown steadily, and the taxes collected and goods produced had not been overlooked by the royal advisors. Teakettle was to

receive the honor of presenting their best products to the king himself. Traditionally, a child was selected to escort lead the procession and present a bouquet to the queen.

“I wonder who they’ll pick to meet the queen,” Luvilia asked Beatrice.

“Oh, certainly you, miss.”

“Really? Do you really think so? Because I was going to tell father that I think they should let you do it.”

“Oh, no! I couldn’t! All those fine people staring at me, oh, I’d just die. I would.”

“Well, don’t worry, they probably won’t choose either of us.”

She knew that was a lie. Teakettle was growing, but it was still a rather small village and there weren’t that many little girls to choose from. Certainly not many who were as well dressed, well spoken, and well mannered as Luvilia, and she knew it.

Before long, Bram Brewer appeared at Daniel Tanner’s door with a short note in long hand.

Daniel broke the seal, scanned the message, then broke into a huge grin. “It’s from the Circle of Twelve.” The Circle were a group of townsmen who met in secret and acted as a sort of town council. No one seemed to mind, because their decisions were sound, and it saved the trouble of holding an election. “They want me to lead the delegation to deliver our tithes to the king!”

Lavender gasped with delight and ran to look.

Luvilia gaped. “They want *you* to represent the town?”

“Yes dear, isn’t it wonderful?” said Lavender

“But I... suppose it is...” said Luvilia.

“We’ll all get to come won’t we, Daniel?” asked Lavender.

“Of course, of course. And especially you, Luvilia. It says here that you’re to give the queen her bouquet.”

Luvilia smiled and jumped a bit, then composed herself. Phew! The world hadn’t gone completely mad.

“When will we leave?”

“Soon, soon, darlin’,” said Daniel. “The tribute won’t be ready for a few days yet, so you’ll have plenty of time to get ready.”

Luvilia went right up to her room and started tearing through her chests, looking for the right gown to wear. She held up the powder blue silk and the forest green velvet, but they were plain, so plain, she needed something grand, something regal, something that would make her stand out as she approached the throne. She knelt and wept in frustration.

Lavender came in and soothed her. “I thought I’d find you here. Now don’t you worry. I wouldn’t let you go to court without dressing your properly, you know that.”

“Oh, mother, thank you.” Luvilia looked up with dewy eyes, then gave her mother a hug.

“We’ll take in my gold brocade.”

“But that’s your best dress, mother!”

“And it will look magnificent on you, dear.”

Luvilia was restored to her former self. Lavender called in the maids, and they set to work immediately, spinning Luvilia and pinning the dress around her slender form. It was looking better already.

When the day finally came to leave for Kingsbridge, Beatrice was there to see her off.

“Oh, Luvilia, you have to remember everything and tell me all about it when you come home.”

“I wish you could come with me, Bea, we’d have such fun. I’ll bet they’d let you carry my train up the aisle.”

“Oh! They wouldn’t, would they?”

“They might. But there’s nothing to be done now. I’ll tell you every last detail when I get back. Of course, there’s no telling how long we’ll be there. The king may invite us to stay a while, once they’ve met us and all.”

“Don’t stay away too long! You have to come tell me about it. I tell you, I won’t sleep a wink until you’re here again!”

Luvilia touched her friend on the cheek and smiled in a very royal, condescending way, and her father lifted her up onto the wagon. Her father gave the “gee-yaw” and the little parade set off, four wagons full of fine produce and wares from the town, to be delivered directly to the king himself. And there was Luvilia, seated in the front of the foremost wagon.

She had wanted to wear her golden gown so that everyone they passed would know that she was an important person on an important journey, but an hour into the dusty journey, she decided her mother had been right to pack it away. It was slow going, and hot, and rather boring, to get right down to it. Daniel tried singing some traveling song he’d learned as a boy, but his voice wasn’t good to begin with and the dust didn’t help. Eventually Luvilia settled back and just drowsed as the countryside slowly slipped by.

They stopped for the night at a little tavern. Lavender sniffed at the wine with distaste and declared the bread too dry to eat, but Daniel ate more than one plate of hogmeat and

lentils. “It’s not the Teakettle, m’love, but the ale cuts through road dust and my belly stopped its growling.”

There were no rooms available, and the common room was full as well with other delegations headed to Kingsbridge, so they all made themselves as comfortable as they could in the wagons and slept under the stars.

The dawn came earlier on the road than it did at home, but Luvilia was just as glad to get moving. She felt a little stiff and sore from a sack of potatoes that had shifted against her back during the night. She was anxious to get to Kingsbridge. The queen would ask how she was, and she could tell her that she’d spent the night on potatoes, and the queen would gasp in horror and offer her a feather bed for the night. She would sleep on silken sheets under a thick comforter, and have breakfast served to her right there in bed by three ladies in waiting. This cheered her up a little.

The trip into Kingsbridge became more interesting by the minute. There were many wagons headed their direction now, and people walking beside the road pulling hand carts as well. There were people driving hogs before them and pulling sheep behind. They passed a man wearing twenty caps on his head (Luvilia counted). A blind man with a long white beard was leading a bear that walked on its hind legs.

A dark-skinned sorcerer drifted by on a richly embroidered carpet, smoking a long white pipe that produced tiny whirlwinds of sweet-smelling green smoke. He smiled at Luvilia, displaying only three teeth as white as his turban and robes.

A stone wall rose up beside them, the road became flat and solid, and as they crested a hill they could see the King’s bridge in the distance, and to the right of that, the castle.

An old woman riding a very large goose flew over their heads, leading a diamond shaped array of ducks.

They passed a circus setting up to the right of the near side of the bridge, with animals she'd never seen before and couldn't name. A line of women dressed in scarves were practicing some kind of dance. Jugglers wandered in and out between the passersby, reminding everyone to come back for the show that evening. It would be something to see, based on the antics of the acrobats clambering up the sides of the bridge, leaping from one support to another, walking on their hands, and linking their arms and legs to create remarkable shapes and contortions.

"Father, can we come back for the circus?" Luvilia asked.

"Well, we might. We just might. We'll have to wait and see."

"I've never seen a circus."

"I know, love, we'll see."

They crossed the bridge, and entered the city of Kingsbridge itself. It was hot and noisy, the air close and thick with the smell of animals, feces and the unwashed. People were shoving to get by, yelling at those who were blocking their way. After traveling so far, Luvilia felt like she was further away from the castle than ever. It took several hours before they had their wagons at the castle's market gate.

Daniel talked with an official looking man who was writing in a very large book. The man didn't smile, didn't look up, just pointed left or right every time Daniel asked a question. Daniel smiled and thanked the man, who continued writing.

"Hurry now, we need to get ready. We're to go right in."

Daniel found their trunk. Lavender and Luvilia hopped down and had to change their clothes right there in the courtyard, behind the wagons.

“Mother, is that a new gown?” asked Luvilia. Her mother was slipping into a silver brocade, accented with tiny glass beads, a high collar and puffy sleeves.

“Yes, your father surprised me with it. Isn’t it wonderful?”

“It’s beautiful. You look beautiful. Oh no!”

Luvilia let her skirt dip a bit into a fresh pile of horse dung, which was everywhere. Lavender smoothed her daughter’s hair the best she could.

“I thought there would be more time, dear. You have a smudge on your face.”

Lavender licked her thumb and did the best she could to wipe off the dirt, using her other hand to keep her own skirt above the muck.

Daniel hurried them through a door and into an anteroom where there was already an awkward gathering of girls in one corner and men huddled in a jovial group opposite them. Daniel handed a bunch of flowers to Luvilia, and gave her a little nudge toward the girls.

“Go and meet your new friends, love, while I talk with their fathers.”

Luvilia approached the girls. Her bouquet was smaller than the others, she noticed.

“Hello.” she said.

“Oh look, the outlanders are starting to arrive.” said a very pretty girl. The others giggled. “Isn’t it awful how they herd us in here like swine, and now you have to go before the queen looking like that?” Her face was all sympathy. Her own dress was magnificent, similar to her mother’s, but a rich blue with many more beads depicting

flowers and hummingbirds. The collar was higher than her mothers, and the sleeves puffier.

Luvilia was confused. “This is my mother’s best dress!” she said.

“That’s nice,” said another girl. “Hand-me-downs are very thrifty. You’re lucky.” The girls giggled some more.

“And that style was one of my favorites, when it was popular.” Her own gown was a deep burgundy, very similar to... all the other girls’ dresses, puffy sleeves and all.

Luvilia blushed a deep red. She didn’t know what to do. Fortunately, a door opened and a very fat man in a fancy purple velvet jacket appeared. “His Excellency will receive you now,” he said in a booming voice.

The fathers and daughters lined up. Everyone seemed to know where to go and what to do. Daniel and Luvilia shuffled somewhere almost at the end of the line.

The fat man stood by the open door. The first man in line whispered to him, and the fat man announced “Manfred Fletcher of Catsborough and Amelia Fletcher.”

The pair started forward. Luvilia couldn’t see what happened once they went through the door. She looked down at her flowers, which were a little wilted, having been cut the day before and driven here in a dusty wagon.

“Pritchard Cobbler of Slotsbrow and Tandy Cobbler...Richard Tanner of Mountburrow and Camelia Tanner...Franklyn Smith of Paddle Port and Starla Cartwright.”

The line was moving at a good clip. The names seemed to come very quickly. Luvilia had to hurry a bit to get to the door. She stepped on her gown and heard it tear a little.

“Marcus Dowser of Sandpitch and Eliza Dowser...Daniel Tanner of Teakettle and Lubiddya Teakettle.”

No! He'd gotten her name all wrong! Her mouth dropped in horror as she entered the great hall. The courtiers were gathered to either side of the aisle, talking amongst themselves. She could see the king and queen looming ahead on their thrones. Eliza, the girl in front of her, executed an elegant curtsy and extended her bouquet. A stern woman in grey robes took the flowers and piled them in a heap beside the throne, along with the others.

Luvilia stepped on her dress again, heard another little tear. She blushed yet again and looked quickly around. Fortunately, no one had seen. In fact, no one was paying attention to her at all. She had come all this way, put on this lovely dress, and no one was even looking.

When their turn came, Daniel presented the bill of lading to a court official. The official smiled broadly and said to the king "This fellow is from Teakettle. He's brought four casks of the finest ale you've ever tasted, your majesty."

The king chuckled and nodded at Daniel, who bowed deeply. The queen smiled at Daniel as well. Just as Luvilia was presenting her bouquet. The queen was looking at her father. Luvilia froze.

The stern woman said, "give me the flowers, girl."

Luvilia hesitated. The line stopped behind her. She only paused two breaths, but it seemed an eternity.

"These are for you, your majesty." Luvilia said. She bowed, just as her father had.

The room fell silent. Everyone looked at Luvilia. But not the way she had hoped, not the way she dreamed it would be. The stern woman was even more stern, now. The court official was shocked. The king was irritated. The queen...the queen was worst of all. She

looked angry, then puzzled, then sorry. Sorry for Luvilia. Someone (the mean woman, she guessed), snatched the bouquet from her arms.

“Thank you child,” she said with a sort of half smile, and turned back to the king.

Daniel bowed, took Luvilia by the hand and guided her quickly away through the side door.

When they were clear of the hall, she whispered, “What did I do?”

Daniel laughed, “Well, dear, on one speaks to a queen until spoken to.”

“I didn’t know.”

“I know. I suppose I should have told you. But no harm done, sweet thing. No harm done. You did very well, and I’m proud of you.”

“They didn’t like my flowers. They were old and wilted.”

“Oh, hush now, they were just fine. All of those bunches certainly made for a grand bouquet, didn’t they?”

And that was that. Daniel oversaw the unloading of the wagons. When he presented a cask of ale to the man with the book (one that was *not* listed on the king’s manifest), the man looked up, actually smiled, and shook Daniel’s hand. Luvilia changed to her traveling clothes and slumped into her seat.

Leaving the city was much easier than coming in, and they found themselves across the bridge just as the sun was disappearing behind the hills. Daniel waved the other wagons ahead. “We’ll catch up to you.” he said.

Daniel paid a boy to tend the wagon and escorted his family into the chaotic crowd. Luvilia tried to enjoy herself at the circus. Her father bought her sweets and a whistle, and she oohed and ahhhhed in the correct places. As they left, she realized that she

should have paid more attention so that she could tell Beatrice about it. Then she wouldn't have to talk about her humiliating experience in front of the queen.

But just as they were leaving, an old man sitting on a stump called out, "Good master, would you like a rendering of your pretty ladies as a memento of your time here?"

"A drawing? What an excellent idea. Luvilia here met the queen today."

"Met the queen? Get on with you!"

Luvilia blushed, "No, it's true sir, I did."

"Well, then, you must have a royal portrait! Stand still a moment, my lady."

Though he looked shaky, like a man on his last gasp, his hand was true and steady. He worked in ink, capturing Luvilia's pretty face, touching up her hair, using swift strokes of his narrow brush to coax her into an elegant curtsy. He knew the queen's face well, too, for he pictured her exactly as she had appeared to Luvilia. Except with a pretty smile.

That was how it should have been. The picture had it right.

Daniel said, "It's spot on. What do I owe you, my good friend."

The old man shook his head, "Oh I couldn't ask for money for the privilege of drawing such a beautiful lady."

Luvilia beamed. "Thank you so much, sir."

"No, thank you, m'lady."

Daniel shook the man's hand. Luvilia thought she saw a flash of silver when her father let go, but it was probably a trick of the light.

She snuggled against her father as he eased the wagon back onto the road and slipped off to sleep, dreaming of a kindly king who drew nice pictures and a smiling queen who liked little girls.

When she arrived home late the following day, Beatrice was beside herself with joy.

“It’s you, it’s you! You came straight back! Tell me all about it! Was the queen very beautiful? Did she invite you to tea? Where did you sleep?”

Luvilia gave her friend a hug, and showed her the picture.

“Look how lovely you are. You are so lucky,” said Beatrice.

“The room went silent when she met the queen,” chuckled Daniel, and winked. “She was the center of attention.”

“Really? That’s wonderful, Luvilia. Let’s act it out, right now. Only... are you going to be the queen, or are you going to be you...?”

Luvilia smiled. “Let’s take turns.”

And they acted out the scene in many roles in many ways for many years to come.

The Story of Bram Brewer

In Which a Lad Encounters a Fountain of Knowledge

After the harvest, it's traditional for area artisans and craftsmen to consider taking on apprentices. In Teakettle Crossroads, the process takes on a festival atmosphere. Boys of the right age visit potential masters who demonstrate their crafts. The masters ask questions and inspect the boys for their suitability. The masters then talk with the boys' fathers and deals are struck. Most of these decisions are made well in advance, of course, and Apprentice Day is just a picnic. For others, it is literally the most important day of their lives, determining how they'll make their livelihood and under whose tutelage....

It was three days before Apprentice Day. Veniglius, splendid in his dark robes, his long black hair streaming behind him, strode to the center of the square and scowled at those around him. The market was suddenly silent. In a reedy tenor voice he said quietly "I seek an apprentice."

He met the eyes of everyone in turn, his black brows arched almost to his widow's peak. Then he swirled imperially and fairly glided out of the square, in a whiff of brimstone.

The bustle and noise of the square resumed, and people went back to what they had been doing. It was no surprise that the town wizard would be seeking an apprentice. Everyone in town knew the previous apprentice had run off one night last spring, probably back where he came from. Veniglius maintained that the boy had been lazy and stupid, but he was the third lazy and stupid apprentice to run away in the past five years. If he did, in fact, run away.

But the gossip spread quickly, of course, and by the next day the word of mouth had spread to all the neighboring towns.

The local boys could talk of little else. They lingered around the platform in the town square, as if that would make Sunday come faster.

“This is my year. I feel it in my bones,” said Drake Miller.

“Is that really a divination or just a hunch?” asked Tom Fletcher.

“A hunch. But my hunches are good, mostly.” said Drake.

Bram Brewer snorted. “You should use divination as your magery mark. If you predict you’ll win and he chooses you, that will be proof of our power.”

Drake thought about that for a moment. “That’s not a bad idea.”

Bram rolled his eyes. “Of course it’s a bad idea, walnut-head. You think he’s going to go along with the divination of his new apprentice? He’d choose the opposite just to spite you.”

Tom said, “But if it worked, that would be something.”

Bram looked back and forth between his friends as they apparently were still considering the pros and cons. “Why would you want to work for him, anyway? He’s not so great.”

Drake looked alarmed “Shhh! He’ll hear you. He has spies all around, the owls in the trees, the rats in the walls! They all watch and listen and tell him *everything*.”

“Horse flops. How can you expect to be a magician’s apprentice when you believe fairy stories like that?”

Tom pinched his nose and spat on the ground for luck. "I'm not taking no chances, not me." He spoke a little louder, "Veniglius is a powerful wizard and a wise master, and it would be an honor to serve him."

Bram snorted again. "Why do you need to apprentice to him, anyway? Everyone around here does magic."

"Yeah, but who wants to be a magical goatherd or a wizardly window washer? I want to spend all day conjuring anything I want, telling the future, learning the hidden secrets of the other world," said Drake.

"Well if it's so flippin' great, why do all of his apprentices keep running away?"

"They're weaklings," said Tom. "I never saw a more pathetic, puny, pasty-faced little puke than that Wendell."

"Wardell. And he was a pretty good guy. I liked him." said Bram

"Whatever. But he didn't have what it takes to be a real sorcerer. I want to master the elements, bend reality, force the world to do my bidding!" Drake raised his arms like bat's wings and pretended to fly around the square. Tom followed suit. Bram laughed at them, then started to flap around, too.

The next couple of days were more serious. Bram went to visit Drake Miller, but his father said he was busy practicing for Sunday. So it went with all of his other friends. Bored, Bram went back to the tavern to see if he could help his father. Bram set him to work washing mugs and plates.

"Nobody's out today, papa."

"No?"

"No. They're all practicing to be the next mage apprentice."

“Are they now?”

“They are.” He worked in silence for a bit. “I’m not going to try.”

“Up to you.” Brendan wiped at the bar, trying to buff up a shine from the well worn wood.

“I want to work here, with you.”

“Oh, I’m glad to hear it boy. Only....”

“What?”

“Well, there’s not all that much to do around here. Not for two grown men. I’d love to have you and you’re welcome to stay, but I think you’ll be wantin’ somethin’ more when the time comes to take a wife and all.”

“Do you want me to try for the apprentice?”

“For Veniglius? Hell, no.” He laughed. “I never saw such an old windbag.”

“The other boys talk about him like he’s some kind of hero.”

“Oh, he’s just a little hedge wizard from a tiny little town. He does well enough around here, but he’s all smoke and no fire, so to speak.”

“Aren’t you afraid he’ll hear?”

“Pfft. I’m not afraid of a town wizard who isn’t even a member of the circle.”

“I heard him say once, right over there at the big table, that the Circle of Twelve doesn’t exist — just someone’s joke that got out of hand.”

“Well, he *would* say that, wouldn’t he?”

“I suppose.” Bram thought a minute. “Do you think I should apprentice with anyone else?”

“You’re young yet, there’s no rush. But you should look at your options. If you decide to stay here, I want you to do it because it’s the life you want to live.”

Just for fun, Bram set the clean dishes on the counter, then waved his hands over them in slow circles that went a little faster with every pass. He whipped up a small heat devil, the little twister of hot air dried the dishes in the blink of an eye.

“Now, Bram, what did I tell you about frivolous magic?”

“I was just seeing if I could do it.”

“Yes, I know, son, but substituting magic for honest work is a path to misfortune.”

“How am I supposed to learn?”

“You already know how to call magic. You have to learn *why* to call it *when* to stop it.”

“How do I learn that.”

“Well, don’t be learnin’ it on my dinner plates is all.” Brandon gave his son a hug.

“Good job, boy. You should go get some sun before supper time.”

Bram went out for a wander. Was it really true? he thought. Do I really already know all I need to know to be a magician? Sometimes it seemed that way. He could conjure up just about anything he set his mind to, but his parents had always told him to be careful, not to use it unless absolutely necessary. Did they know more magic than they showed? It never really occurred to him that anyone would choose to run a tavern over being a powerful mage.

Maybe *he* should be a full-time wizard. He figured he was better than the other kids he knew, and why should they have all the fun? He started circling his finger in the air and calling up bubbles, like he had when he was younger. He danced them around and caused

them to collide and combine in a kaleidoscope of colors. He did it lazily, almost without thinking...his mind was on other things for the next day or so.

When Apprentice Day arrived at last, the town woke early. It was the biggest market day of the year; fresh from the harvest, wagons groaning with produce rolled in to bring their potential apprentices and/or sell to the people who did. Master craftsmen came to size up the boys and sell to their parents. The streets were already crowded by sunrise.

Bram, Brice and Bracken Brewer were roaming about, caught up in the noise, reveling in the chaos. They hopped wagon rides as people streamed in, helped a bent old farmer unload his wagon and were rewarded with an apple to share, patted pack animals (Bracken was almost bitten by a camel), drooled over pastries and sweets till Robert Baker chased them away, found a brass button with a woman's picture engraved in it, looked for the woman, decided she wasn't there, sold the button to the tinker for a copper, bought a pickle and cheese, ate them, directed traffic with mixed success, then took a breather by central well.

"Apprentice Day is hard work," said Brice.

"Don't I know it!" said Bracken.

Bram was watching a group of boys gathered on a raised platform. He saw Drake and Tom, dressed in clean clothes and uncharacteristically quiet. He walked over and said hello.

"Hello Bram,' they muttered.

"What's with you two?" asked Bram.

"It's almost time. Aren't you going to talk to the wizard?" asked Tom.

"I'm not interested."

Drake and Tom looked at each other. Drake said, “We thought for sure you’d be the one.”

Bram said, “Nope. My papa says I don’t have to worry about apprenticing to anybody, yet.”

Drake was visibly relieved. “Then I have a chance.”

“Of course, you have a chance, you all do,” said Bram. “What about these other guys?”

“Not sure,” said Tom. “You know Flinty and Caleb. Some of these guys come from way out of town. I don’t know them.”

“I’ve seen the tall one before,” said Bram. “His father is a banker or some such.”

“He seems to think he’s going to win,” said Drake.

“That’s right, I do,” said the tall boy. Drake blushed.

Tom jerked a thumb at his friend. “He’s Drake, I’m Tom, this is our buddy, Bram.”

“I’m Evan.” The tall boy took the arm of the smaller boy next to him. “This is Frelly, my brother. I think the Veniglius will take both of us on.”

Frelly smiled up at his brother. “We’ve been working hard, haven’t we Evan.”

“Hard work and confidence are all there is to winning, my father says. Frelly and I are ready to win.”

“You make it sound like it’s some kind of carnival game,” said Bram.

“Well it is a contest, isn’t it?”

“Yes. Except the prize is years of slavery.”

“With that attitude, you’ll never get anywhere.”

“With this attitude, I may actually get where I want to go.”

Evan smiled and looked him over from head to toe. “Well, best of luck to you, then. I hope you get what you deserve.”

Bram smiled, and gave a deep bow. “And the same to you, good sir.”

Evan’s smile faded a bit, and he led his brother to the other side of the platform.

“Him, I like,” said Bram.

“I guess there’s no reason for me to even try,” said Tom.

“Oh, he’s just trying to rattle your cage. You might try thinking his way.” said Bram.

“Full of beans?” asked Drake.

“Sure of yourself. Show some backbone. Both of you have every bit as good a chance as anybody else.”

A wave of silence washed over them, and the crowd parted. Veniglius was striding rapidly toward the platform.

“Good luck!” hissed Bram, and he backed away toward his brothers.

Eleven boys stood shoulder to shoulder. They tried to look casual and avoided meeting the wizard’s eyes.

“Show me your hands.” said Veniglius. He walked down the line, inspecting them so closely that he might have been smelling the palms. He paused at the third boy and muttered, “You may go. You’re going to die too soon.”

The boy looked stricken, then collapsed against the boy next to him. The boy’s mother shrieked, leapt on the platform and hurried her child away.

Veniglius glared at the woman, then continued. He dismissed number 5 (“No magic in you”) and 6 (“Your father is a drunkard”). Caleb just walked away before the wizard got

to him. Veniglius sniffed, then continued. Flinty was deemed acceptable, as were Evan and Frelly. Veniglius waved away number 11 (“Too fat. Can’t afford to feed you”).

Veniglius strode up and down the line. He clapped his hands hard, then pulled them apart to reveal a coiled serpent.

He leaned into the frightened face of the first in line. “What is the source of power?”

“The sun and stars.” squeaked the boy.

“WRONG!” said Veniglius, and the serpent struck the boy with like a lash. The boy winced, but was unhurt. He stood frozen. Veniglius said “You are *excused*, boy.” He waved a hand and the boy was carried off the platform and into the crowd; a couple of onlookers caught him and set him down.

Veniglius clapped his hands. This time he pulled them apart and a large scorpion appeared. He took two strides and spun on Evan. “Where is the source of power?” he asked in a low voice.

Evan said steadily, “I am the source of power. It comes from my soul.”

Wrong, thought Bram.

Veniglius smiled. It was more frightening than his scowl. “Very goooood.” He stroked the scorpion casually as he strode back and forth in front of the remaining candidates.

Leaning into Drake Fletcher’s face, he said, “Why are *you* here?”

Drake looked as if he didn’t understand the question. “To do what you tell me to do?”

“Liar!” Veniglius cackled. “But you can stay. For now.”

Five boys remained. Veniglius pointed at Flinty. “Show me magic.”

Flinty took a step forward. He waved his arms in large circles, then gestured as if he were pulling a thick rope out of the stage beneath him. He was muttering under his breath, so low that Bram couldn't hear. A tiny sprout appeared in the stage, just a stem and a leaf, but it grew quickly to a thick vine, sprouted a large yellow flower. Flinty was gesturing wildly now, dancing round and round his creation, shouting "GROW! GROW!"; a bright green ball pushed its way out of the flower, grew too heavy for the vine and touched down at Flinty's feet, Flinty rolling his hands around the fruit as it grew larger, turned a deep orange.

When it was round enough to reach Flinty's waist, Veniglius said "Enough! Not bad, for a farm boy. You, at least, won't eat me out of hearth and home."

The crowd chuckled, but quieted after a sharp look from Veniglius.

Veniglius pointed at Drake. "Show me magic."

Drake stepped forward and drew a small crystal sphere from his jacket. He held it in his left hand and waved his right over it, as close as he dared without touching. He closed his eyes, and said "Let me see clearly, let me see clear through, through you, let me see clearly, let me see." He popped his eyes open and stared into the crystal.

Bram's jaw dropped. *Don't do it!* he thought.

Drake said, "I see...myself...following a man with long dark hair...Veniglius...I'm carrying a basket...and sacks...you tell me where to put them...in your shop...."

Bram closed his eyes and slapped his forehead. *What a dope!*

But Veniglius cocked an eyebrow and said, "so you already know how this ends?"

Drake swallowed. "I only know what I see."

"Well, we shall all see, shan't we?"

“Yes sir.”

Bram looked up. Perhaps his predictions weren't as accurate as Drake's after all.

Veniglius pointed at Frelly. “You.”

Frelly stepped forward, His chin quivered a bit. He took a deep breath and squeezed his eyes, tight. He threw his arms high, swooped them around behind him, then with a throwing motion said, “Dragon!”

At first, Bram thought he was seeing a hummingbird, but when the creature turned profile he would see its long tail and graceful neck. It buzzed around the crowd, breathing frosty clouds of ice.

“Impressive indeed, small one,” Veniglius allowed. “Can your brother do better?”

Evan stepped forward. Assuming the same posture as his brother, he closed his eyes, summoned all of his strength, through his arms around and outward, “Salamander!”

A creature that looked like a flaming bear or ape leapt into the crowd. The townsfolk scattered in panic as it ran between them, igniting beards and skirts, laughing in a high pitch that echoed around the square. The crowd had dispersed, but Bram saw Bracken standing in the open, frozen in fear. The salamander whirled on the small boy. Bram threw out his right fist, then popped his thumb straight up. A powerful stream of water suddenly burst forth between the daemon and Bracken. The salamander shrieked and turned toward Bram. Bram threw out his left fist and popped up another intervening jet of water. The salamander leapt to the left. Bram kept popping up new fonts, one after another, until the trapped creature howled in frustration.

Veniglius regained his composure and said, “Release it.”

Bram looked up in confusion.

Veniglius said, “Not you, you fool. Unsummon your creation,” he said, shaking Evan.

Evan crossed his hands and the creature vanished.

Bram stopped the flow from his impromptu fountain.

“You there, boy, come here,” said Veniglius.

Bram stood his ground and shook his head.

Veniglius made a beckoning gesture, “I said *come to me*.”

Bram felt the bonds of a geas begin to form around him. He hacked through the tendrils, using his hands as daggers to slice through the wizard's grasp.

Veniglius felt the bonds break, and staggered back a bit. He squinted at Bram.

“Oh, I know you. You're the Brewer's boy. You're no good to me.” and he turned back to the boys on the dais.

The last boy started to step forward, but Veniglius waved him back.

“I've seen enough.” He pointed to Frelly. “You'll do.”

Evan stammered, “But...but...”

“Too late for you. I don't have time to unteach you stupidity. Him, I can mold into something.”

Evan slumped to his knees. Bram stepped up on the platform and put his hand on his shoulder. Evan shook it off, fighting back tears. Drake came over and gave him a quick pat on the back.

Veniglius took Frelly's hand. “We'll need some things from the market. You, boy, carry our bundles and I'll give you a copper.”

Drake's face went white, then red, and he shook his head.

“But you want your divination to be true, don't you?” Veniglius grinned.

Drake was torn. Finally, he sighed and tagged along after the wizard and his new apprentice.

“What a tool,” said Bram.

“Yeah,” sniffed Evan.

The rest of the day was uneventful. He and his brothers each took a turn at the Marcus Smith’s bellows, sanded at a chair for Timothy Carpenter, and knitted a bit of net at Cam Boatwright’s shop. They even got a sweet bun sample from Robert Baker.

“I think I could get used to working in a sweet shop.” said Bracken.

“More like a sweat shop. It’s always deuced hot in there.” said Brice.

“But the smells...”

As the day wound down and people started to leave, the three brothers directed traffic again, and looked for dropped fruit or other valuables. Brice came up with a lady’s fan that could be fixed easily enough.

Drake Fletcher caught up with Bram. He was in good spirits, which surprised Bram.

“How did it go with old Veniglius?”

“All right. He’s a tool.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“But here’s the thing. After he made me follow him all over town buying his junk, I went back to his shop. Now I’ve never been in there, right?”

“I guess.”

“My divination was wrong in one detail. He didn’t tell me where things went. I already *knew*.”

“What did he say?”

“He didn’t say a word. I don’t think he paid any attention.”

“So you had an honest-to-goodness vision.”

“Clear as day.”

Bram clapped an arm around his friend’s shoulders and took him back to the Teakettle Tavern to celebrate with his mother’s good cooking.

The next morning, Bram walked into the common room to find his father having tea with his friend Epistomolus.

“Ah, here is himself,” said Brandon. “Decided to rise before supper, did ye?” He waved Bram over to him and put his arm around his shoulder. “It seems Epistomolus has some business with you, today.”

Epistomolus smiled a bit, and looked at Bram over the narrow rectangles of his spectacles. “That was quite a display yesterday, in the square.”

Bram wasn’t sure what he meant for a moment, then realized he was talking about the business with the salamander. “Uh, yes sir.”

“Powerful magic. And here, your father tells me that this was news to him.”

“I’m always tellin’ him not to use it too freely, ye see.” said Brandon.

“I’m sure that’s true. Sure that’s true.” said Epistomolus. “Tell me boy, what is the source of power?”

Bram hesitated. “I... I don’t know exactly. It’s... out there, waiting for me to use it...or someone to use it, anyway.”

Epistomolus arched an eyebrow. “Are you saying that magic *wants* to be used?”

Bram wasn’t sure what was going on. He wasn’t sure how he was supposed to answer. He settled on telling the truth. Or his version. “Yes. I think so.”

Epistomolus leaned toward him. “And should we let it have its way?”

“It...always has its way.”

“So how do you control it?”

“I can’t.”

“Then why does it work? You certainly knew how to control it yesterday.”

“I just think of what I want to do, in my head, and sort of bend the sticky stuff in the air, aim it. Like putting my hand in the river and pulling up a drink.”

“Well then.” Epistomolus smiled his half smile. “Brandon, your son and I are going to take a walk. Some matters to attend.”

“All right. Bram, you go with him and do what he tells you.”

“Yes, papa.”

Epistomolus picked up his walking staff and headed out into the cool morning air. Bram followed. It was a damp chill that met his bare feet; it whispered of the frost and snows to come all too soon.

They walked toward the square. Epistomolus asked, “Aren’t you curious where we’re going?”

“Yes. But you’ll tell me soon enough.”

“Don’t be afraid to ask questions, boy. You can ask me anything you like.”

“All right, where are we going?”

“Here.” They stopped at the central well. “Look inside, boy, and tell me what you see.”

Bram peered down the well. “I don’t see anything.”

“Interesting, that’s exactly what I saw.”

“The water’s low. But there were a lot of people and animals here yesterday.”

“Yes, true. But the water’s not just low, it’s gone.”

Bram cranked down the bucket, and it was true: the bucket never struck water. He cranked the bucket up again.

“I just told you there was no water, and you didn’t believe me.”

Bram blushed.

“Very good. Don’t believe a word I say, boy. Trust your instincts, trust your mind. You’ve got a good one, and don’t hesitate to use it.”

“Yes sir. I’m sorry, sir...thank you, sir.”

“Where did the water go, boy?”

“I don’t know, sir.”

“Did you notice anyone using an unusual quantity yesterday?”

Bram looked up. “I...?”

“Aye. You did. It doesn’t spring up from nowhere. When you called up that wall of water, the flow of the water changed underground. You moved the well over there, now, except there is no well over there, is there?”

“No.” Bram looked sheepish. “I was trying to help my brother.”

“Of course you were. I’m not saying you did wrong. But you do have to set it right. Magic always has a price. You never get something for nothing. And magic is capricious. If something can go wrong, it often will. So you did the right thing and saved your brother, but now you have to do the right thing and fix the well. It’s not as hard as you might think.”

Epistomolus walked over to the exact spot where the salamander had been caged.

“Come stand here, and feel the flow.”

Bram wasn't sure what he meant. He stood next to the old man, and closed his eyes. He could sense the magic flowing...and a ripple...a bump, something in the way.

“You feel it, then. Yes. The tension. You just have to smooth out the flow.”

To Bram, it felt like casting a spell in reverse. Not an undoing, but the opposite of doing. He felt an easing, the earth beneath him settled, the world relaxed; balance, order; things felt right.

“There is more at stake than a town well, my boy, when the flow of the world is disturbed. *You* are not powerful. The power is something you tap *into*, always with respect, always with humility, always with an eye toward putting things right.”

“Yes sir.”

“Now, the next task is a little more daunting. We have to track down a baby dragon. It's mother is very upset.”

“I need to ask my papa.”

“No, not anymore. You're my apprentice, now.”

“Apprentice? But....”

“But?”

“Excuse me sir, but...what do you do?”

Epistomolus smiled. “A little of this, a little of that. Sort of a tinker.”

Bram pondered that for a moment. “I don't know if I want to be a tinker.”

“It's your decision, of course. But you shouldn't decide until you see some of the things we get to tinker with.”

He pulled a brass cylinder out of a hidden pocket, and blew into it. It made no sound, but Epistomolus cocked an ear and pointed south. “This way.”

And the pair set off in search of the wayward dragonet.

The Story of Frellius

In Which a Great Wizard Teaches an Important Lesson

Apprenticeship is a hard life. Part of the process is determining if the apprentice has what it takes to stick with the job for the long haul. No one wants to waste years training a boy, only to have him change his mind and abandon the trade. No one wants to waste time teaching lazy or stupid students, either.

Veniglius wasn't going to let another pupil steal his ideas and run off. This time would be different....

The rain was coming down in sheets, but the tavern was packed with patrons. Some had come before the storm proper and were waiting for it to abate. Others were tired of being cooped up by the on-again, off-again showers. Some people drank every night, regardless.

No one paid much attention when yet another cloaked figure let the gale blast in, then fought the door closed again. When he pulled back his hood, though, there was a hush. It wasn't that Veniglius never came to the tavern; but it was no common occurrence, either.

"Well, 'tis himself!" said Brendan. "What can I get you, Veniglius?"

"Ale."

"Ale it is." Brendan began tapping a large mug. "Quite the downpour out there. I'm glad you found your way here."

Veniglius glowered down at the bar.

"How is young Frellius working out for ye, then?" Brendan said, as he set the mug and spun the handle toward Veniglius.

"He hasn't run off, yet, if that's what you mean."

“No, I meant nothin’ at all. I’m glad things are working out so well for you, then.”

Veniglius dropped a copper on the bar, took his mug to the darkest corner and stood next to a small table. The two men sitting there looked up with a start, then quickly relinquished the table to the newcomer. Veniglius sat down and sipped his drink. He flicked his hand in a careless gesture, producing a lighted pipe; he took a long drag, then exhaled a plume of smoke that smelled of hickory and mint. The other patrons shrank back a bit from the acrid cloud.

He drained his mug, levitated it, and slowly sent it weaving through the crowd back to the taps. Brendan caught it without looking, swung it under the tap and held it up for Veniglius to retrieve it. It bobbed and dipped, feinted and dodged, landing back in front of Veniglius without spilling a drop.

Patrick Fletcher burst in, dragging a small boy behind him. The boy was fighting furiously to get away.

“Here now, Brendan, did you tell this boy he couldn’t come into your tavern on a night such as this?”

“I did no such thing.” He recognized Frellius at once. “Veniglius, do you mean to tell me you left this boy standing in the rain while you sat there swilling my ale?”

“Leave him.” Veniglius spoke softly, but his voice carried to every ear in the room.

Patrick let the boy go. Frellius immediately opened the door to leave.

“Wait there, boy,” said Brendan. “You don’t have to go.”

“It’s all right. I won’t have to bathe for a week at this rate.” said Frellius, with a wide grin.

“You’ll catch your death. Veniglius, are you going to send this boy out into the rain while you enjoy the warmth of my tavern and my good ale?”

“Leave him.” said Veniglius.

“I won’t interfere with you or your apprentice, but I’ll be damned if you’ll teach your lessons at my hearth. You can join your apprentice outside, sir.”

Veniglius raised a cautionary finger. Brendan raised a cautionary fist. Their eyes locked for a moment longer. No one made a sound. Veniglius continued to glare at the tavern keeper as he drank the entire mug in ten large swallows. He slammed the mug on the table. He smiled. “I was finished, anyway.”

He swept up from his seat and glided swiftly between the patrons, who parted and closed behind him like corn stalks.

Frellius smiled up at his master as he opened the door wider. He gave the tavern keeper a cheery wave, and said “Thank you for your hospitality,” before Veniglius yanked him from behind.

Frellius said, “You sure showed him who’s the boss, master.”

“Shut up, boy.” Veniglius produced a wan blue light that floated ahead to light their way. He pulled his cloak tighter around his head in a vain attempt to keep the water from running down his neck to his ankles.

“No, you were wonderful. Who does he think he is, talking to the most powerful wizard in a hundred miles.”

“Shut up, boy.”

“He’s lucky you didn’t turn his leaky old tavern on its head. That would be a sight! All the tea running out the spout, and the cookies getting soaked, and the queen saying, ‘Oh, the tea has spilt! And the cookies are ruined! Cook! Cook!’” He started to laugh.

Veniglius spun and put his nose half an inch away from Frellius’s. “Will you *shut up!*”

Frellius smiled, “Of course, master.”

Veniglius glared at him a moment longer. He could only see the pale little face smiling sweetly up at him. He turned and moved on toward home. *This apprentice is the worst yet.* But even as the thought came, he knew it was far from the truth.

When they reached the home and workshop, Frellius paused at the door. “Do you want me to stand out here and finish the lesson, master?”

Veniglius considered that, then said, “No, I wanted you to see how to handle insolent tradesmen when they get above themselves.”

“Ohhhhh. What a good lesson!” Frellius clapped his hands loudly. “Thank you, master.”

“Get some sleep. You’ll have much to do tomorrow.”

Frellius rolled out his mat, changed into a dry robe, and immediately fell asleep, still smiling.

Veniglius watched him sleep for several minutes. Talented or no, the boy has to learn that life is a struggle, not a romp in the woods. He’d need to teach some discipline. It was his duty as the boy’s master to awaken him to the way of the world. He began to create some lesson plans in his head as he lay in his featherbed and waited for sleep.

He awoke to find a steaming mug of tea on his sidetable, and Frellius sitting patiently on a stool, watching him sleep.

“Good morning, master.”

Veniglius rubbed his face with both hands. He smelled the spiced tea and winced. “I want coffee this morning.”

“Yes sir.” Frellius pointed at the cup. “That’s what I’ve brought you, sir.”

Veniglius shook his head. He sniffed again. It wasn’t spice he was smelling, but coffee.

“Fine. Go and fetch the water, then.”

“I’ve already fetched the water, sir.”

“Then cook breakfast.”

“Porridge and toast are ready, sir.”

“I want...eggs and sausages.”

“Yes, eggs and sausages are ready.”

“Scrambled eggs.”

“Yes sir.”

Veniglius sighed. “Get out.”

Frellius smiled, “Yes sir.”

Veniglius buried himself under the covers and fumed. *This one is worse than the others. So smug...so...full of himself. He cooked some eggs, so what? I could conjure them myself, if I wanted to. That boy needs to learn discipline.*

He roused himself, went down to the kitchen, where Frellius was cleaning up. Breakfast was warm, the tea hot, the setting on a clean white cloth, accented with a fresh daisy in a small vial. Veniglius crushed the flower and tossed it aside.

“I told you, no flowers.”

“Yes sir.”

Veniglius grumbled to himself as he ate the eggs, sausage, porridge, and toasted bread with marmalade. Then he was angry, having been so caught up in eating the food he'd forgotten to criticize it.

Veniglius belched with a resonance that shook the pots hanging over the hearth.

“Today, you will have some additional duties.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Veniglius paused, frowned harder, then continued. “There are some storage vaults in the cellar that haven't been cleaned in years. You will need to tidy and catalogue them “

Frellius was all but dancing in place.

“What are you so happy about?”

“I'm sure there's lots to learn down there.” said Frellius.

“Yes. You'll learn a great deal.” A hint of a smile formed at the corners of Veniglius's mouth. *You'll learn fear, and respect, and...*

“Master, may I start now?”

“By all means. Be my guest. I'll show you the way.” He took a large ring of keys off a hook on the wall, summoned a bluish ball of light, and started down the cellar stairs.

Frellius had been in the cellar, of course, but had never opened any of doors. He watched with eager anticipation as Veniglius fumbled with the lock on a smallish door toward the back wall of the cellar. He pulled hard, then pushed, but the door apparently hadn't been opened in a while. He pulled his wand from his robes and struck the door with a flash of greenish lightning. The door swung inward. Veniglius stooped to get through the door, and Frellius followed, walking down a narrow, winding staircase.

They emerged into an open space with a high ceiling. Frellius couldn't see to the end of the hall, but the echoes told him that it was long. In the dim light, he could see evenly spaced doors on either side.

“I inherited these vaults from my master, and he from his. These rooms haven't been entered or cleaned in years, certainly not since I became the master. You will need a ledger to record what is in each room, and the quantity. Then you will clean them and make these spaces useable. You will do this without neglecting your other duties. You will show me a report of your progress every night before you are permitted to sleep. Don't open anything, don't touch anything, don't take anything, don't smell anything, except what is strictly necessary to remove any dust or grime.”

“Yes master.”

Veniglius thought a moment. “If you find any brass lamps, don't rub them. Just leave them alone.”

“Yes sir.”

Veniglius swung open the first door on the right. A smell of rot and mildew wafted out. He smiled as he surveyed the mossy ceiling. The floor was either dusty or sludgy or a little of both wherever you looked. The walls were a mystery, because the view was blocked by floor to ceiling shelves, piled with jumbles of scrolls, jars, and strange artifacts. Here and there, some of the items glowed with their own sickly green light. Veniglius smiled as he crushed a cockroach underfoot, a creature so large that its head and hind legs were visible as he pressed down hard for a satisfying crunch.

“Well, don't stand there boy, get to work. I want to know what's in here, and I want to be able to find it.

Frellius stepped in and looked all around. Veniglius closed the door and headed back for the stairs. *Good. That room alone will keep him out of my hair for a week or two.*

Or so he thought.

As Veniglius was sitting down to an afternoon cup of tea, the boy appeared at the door.

“Excuse me, master.”

“Given up already, have you?”

“Oh, no sir. I just wanted to know if it was all right to move on to the next vault.”

“The first one is too much work? You’re a lazy, good for nothing....”

“But the first vault is finished, sir.”

“What? Never.”

“No, truly.”

Veniglius grabbed the boy by the triceps and dragged him roughly down the stairs. He threw open the door to find....

“Master?”

Veniglius was speechless. The vault was clean and orderly. The sconces were clean and glowing softly. The essence of wildflowers and incense hung in the air. Vellum scrolls that had been cracked and dirty were stacked neatly on racks. It was cleaner than Veniglius’s own bed chamber. Much cleaner.

Frellius removed a scroll from a box near the door. “I didn’t know the names of all the items, so I described them as clearly as I could. I figure that you’ll know what they are.”

Veniglius slowly turned to Frellius. “How...?” He completed the question with his eyes. Words failed him.

“Oh, it wasn’t so bad once I got started. Knock down a few cobwebs and add some light, and it was downright cheerful.”

Veniglius frowned. “It’s not supposed to be cheerful, it’s supposed to be work.”

Frellius looked puzzled.

“I’m trying to make you a sorcerer, boy. Do you think magic is naught but fun and games?”

“No. I mean, yes. I mean... I don’t understand.”

“To be a great sorcerer, you must learn discipline. You have to learn to focus your mind through pain, to labor on when your breath is spent and your muscles crumble to dust, you have to steel yourself to the struggles and disappointments of failure. I’m trying to build your character, boy.”

“Yes sir. I’m sorry, master.”

“I don’t know what I’m going to do with you.”

“Oh, don’t send me away. I’ll try harder.”

Veniglius crossed his arms and looked away. “Well, do the rest of your duties and you can continue tomorrow.”

“Yes sir. But...”

“But? But what?” Veniglius frowned so deeply that his forehead was throbbing.

“I did my other chores before I came to you. I mean, I know better than to come to you half done, I would never waste your time. I know you like things a certain way, and far be it from me to, I mean, I would never...”

“Stop babbling boy!” Veniglius grabbed Frellius by the hair, dragged him to the next chamber, threw open the door, thrust the boy inside and slammed the door behind him.

“All right, clever Dick,” he shouted through the door. “Clean that vault or there will be no supper for you. I don’t want to see or hear the smallest glance or peep of you until I come back for you. And even then, you’d better not say a word.”

Veniglius stormed out of the cellar, out of the house and down to the Teakettle Tavern.

“Yer not leavin’ that prentice of yer’n out in the cold, I trust.”

Veniglius paused in the doorway, and considered turning right around. But he didn’t want to go home, and there was nowhere else he could sit and not be bothered. And he wanted a drink. Needed one. He opened the door wider and gestured for Brendan to see that there was no one outside. Brendan squinted, frowned, but waved him in. Veniglius sat at his dim little table, and a tankard followed in short order.

He took a long draught off the heady ale, then sat glowering. *I can’t teach that stupid boy anything! He just goes about with that idiotic grin, doing what he’s told. How can he understand anything if he does it without question? How will he learn discipline? How will he learn to muster and release his inner power if he has no constraints on his soul? Conflict is the source of power - straining against the bonds of the natural world, then breaking free and releasing the pent up energies; the struggle is the key; a tormented soul is a vessel of strength. That imbecile will never understand. I must be rid of him.*

Veniglius consumed four tankards as he mulled over the many ways he could encourage his pupil to seek wisdom elsewhere, perhaps in the afterlife.....

It was full dark when Veniglius staggered out of the tavern. He summoned his blue guide light, then had to follow its lead in order to successfully navigate the short distance to his home.

When he woke the next morning, his head felt like it was filled to bursting with soggy towels. He sat up, untwisted his robes, which had tangled around him during his uneasy rest. “Boy. Bring me tea.”

There was no answer. No tea. *Strange. He’s stupid, but he’s never disobeyed me. Not in all this time.*

He rose, scratching himself absent-mindedly. He stumbled through the house, acquired a mug in the kitchen and conjured strong tea, no sign of the boy. *The cellar.*

Veniglius went down the stairs, across to the tiny door, and down the stairs. He emerged into a clean, brightly lighted corridor. There was a flurry of activity. Scrolls and codices were flying every which way; vials and flasks marching from one chamber to the next; broomsticks carrying objects here and there, sweeping away cobwebs and dust bunnies as they went; mechanical devices doing things they were meant to do, and never meant to do. Veniglius gaped. He sidled along the wall, careful not to step on vials of unknown content, ducking to avoid being clocked by a flying clock, twitching left and right as items flew past.

The objects flowed together from one chamber to another, like meeting like. Scrolls were wedging in between others already on the shelves. Vials of potions were clustering by color or viscosity, then jostling into cabinets. A helm, breastplate, gauntlets and greaves strode by, laden with a shining arsenal of pointy objects; the hardware warrior spun smartly on an unseen heel and into a room now full of similar objects.

Reaching the end of the hall, he peered around the corner. This room was still dirty and cluttered. He could see a flurry of activity in one corner, objects spinning out in a steady stream. Hunched over, intent on his work, Frellius was taking an item in each

hand, holding it to his ear, and sending it on its way. Twelve quills were scratching scrolls, cataloging contents.

“What in the seven hells are you doing, boy?”

All activity came to a sudden halt. Frellius jerked his head, then spun around.

“I’m sorry, master.”

“I told you to clean a chamber, and I find you sitting and playing back here?”

“I know, sir. I’m sorry, sir. I won’t be done for at least another hour or two.”

“You? You’re doing *nothing!*”

“Yes sir. It’s just....”

“What? What is it? How can you explain yourself? What possible excuse can you offer, you lazy, stupid, worthless boy.”

“I...I was putting things away, but...they know what they are, where they go...I just have to listen....”

“Ridiculous!”

Frellius looked at him in a confused way. “You don’t listen to them? Then how...I’m sorry...how do you use them?”

“It takes years of research. It takes discipline, stamina, long hours of study to pry their secrets from them. You don’t understand these things because you haven’t learned anything. I don’t believe you’re capable.”

“I’m sorry. I just...putting things in order, it’s what I do. What *they* do. What things want to do.”

“You’re babbling, boy.”

“No sir. This is truth.” Frellius had a serious expression. “I know where things belong, and where they don’t. When I put things right, I know it, and they know it. When they don’t fit, they know it, and I know it.”

“The only thing that doesn’t fit around here, is you, boy.”

“No, I don’t so. I do belong here. I know that’s true, master.”

“Not if I don’t want you here.”

“You can throw me out, if you like, but that doesn’t mean I don’t belong here.”

“How can you say you belong here, when your very presence makes my skin crawl? I can’t stand the sight of you! I can’t stand to spend another second with you.”

“Yes sir. I’m going.”

He stood and headed for the door. He gave Veniglius a wide berth, then stepped out into the corridor. Veniglius frowned and turned to assess the damage. *It will take years to get things back in order. I suppose I can look to see what he’s done. Perhaps I can work around it....*

He reached for the nearest scroll. It coiled up and backed away from his grasp. He lunged at it, but it flew up into the air, then straight for the door. The other scrolls and quills followed. Then the other items in the room began to follow. Veniglius ducked under the floating caravan and rushed to close the door to the cellar. When he got to it, he found he couldn’t budge it. He pushed with all his strength; not only would it not shut, it opened wider when he released his grip. The stream of objects thickened as items from all of the chambers joined the flow.

Veniglius conjured a wall of ice to block the door, but it shattered instantly. He summoned all of his strength and conjured a solid block of stone. The swarm of

enchanted items overwhelmed it, then with a grating, cacophonous shriek, shoved the monolith clear through the doorway.

Exhausted, Veniglius slid to the floor. He could only watch in bewilderment as the contents of his vaults marched inexorably through the door. Priceless artifacts streamed by him, items he had never had an opportunity to study, to subdue, to unlock their secrets.

Again, everything stopped all at once. All was silent. He could hear his ragged breath. He could hear his heartbeat. He could hear...footsteps, coming down the stairs. Frellius appeared at the door, and peeked in.

“They followed me.” He said.

Veniglius just stared at him.

“I didn’t mean to do it. I mean, I didn’t do anything.”

Veniglius said nothing.

Frellius waved his arms toward the vaults. “Go back...things.” Nothing happened. “I said GO BACK!!” His voice echoed in the corridor. Not a movement. Not a sound.

He took Veniglius by the elbow and helped him to his feet.

“What do I do, master?”

Veniglius recoiled, snatched his arm away, then raised his fist to backhand the boy. Frellius shrunk away. Veniglius swung a hard blow, but halfway down, a broomstick swung in with an audible “crack.” Veniglius howled in pain. A swirl of objects encircled him in a maelstrom of magical debris. The broom swung around and swept violently at his feet, so that he had to keep raising them to avoid a smack on the shin. Other objects poked him in the back. More brooms came to prod him forward, jabbing him in the back, sweeping at his feet. Veniglius could see clearly straight ahead, but nothing side to side.

He took a step toward the door. The items quickly filled in the space behind, poking and jabbing. He felt little electric charges on his calves and thighs. He took another step, and the items prodded him onward. Seven broomsticks in concert swept him forward, keeping him moving. The stream of objects moved aside, and began to flow backward toward the vaults. Veniglius hurried across the floor, unharried now that he understood what was required of him. He bolted up the stairs as the reverse flow increased its speed, Splitting to either side to allow Veniglius to leave without interference. An escort of brooms and tiny electric mosquito prods needled him across the town square.

“Help me! My - OW! - apprentice has bewitched me!” he pleaded.

The townsfolk looked up in a mixture of fear and wonder. But no one present knew how they could help the most powerful wizard in town against a magical foe. That, and, no one liked him all that much to begin with.

Frellius watched the stream of objects return to their vaults, swirling around him in a vibrant parade before finding their proper places once again. As things fell back into place, he relaxed and enjoyed the process once more.

Two hours later, he went up the stairs to the empty house and looked around. No sign of Veniglius. He went out the front door and looked around. A figure in wizard’s robes came toward him across the square. As he approached, Frellius recognized one of the boys from Apprentice Day.

“Hello, young Frellius. I understand you’ve had some trouble here today.” said Epistomolus.

“Yes. I...have you seen my master?”

“Veniglius?” Epistomolus chuckled softly. “I don’t think we’ll be seeing him any time soon.”

“But...what do I do?” asked Frellius.

“I guess you’re the new town wizard, my lad.”

“Me...? But, I’m an apprentice.”

“An apprentice who just taught his master a thing or two about magic. Assuming Veniglius has the potential to learn anything from this experience.”

“How can I...?”

“You listen, and you put things right. That’s what you do, isn’t it?”

“Yes....”

“Then listen to your heart. How does this feel?”

“It feels....right.”

“That’s what I thought.”

“And don’t go conjuring any more dragonets,” said the boy with Epistomolus.

Epistomolus smiled slightly. “But you enjoyed our little adventure, didn’t you young Bramius?”

Bramius said, “If you consider it enjoyable to go walking across half the county, practically break my neck climbing a cliff, then get seared to a crisp over my face and hands, then yes, what a treat.”

“You see, master Frellius, you’ve already set things right for a townsman. Bramius has agreed to be my newest apprentice, thanks to you.”

Bramius may have blushed, but Frellius couldn’t tell under the lobster-pink marks from the dragonet’s flame.

“Now,” said Epistomolus, “ We should celebrate your new position. Will you join us for dinner at the Teakettle Tavern?”

“Thank you, sir,” said Frellius, “I would like that very much, and soon. But now, I think I need to set this house in order. I won’t be able to rest until things are in order.”

And that is how the town of Teakettle Crossroads acquired the youngest, and most talented, town wizard in the kingdom.

The Story of Malcourt Piker
In Which an Old Man Prepares For a Picnic

Out of the blackness. Riding on thunder. Pelted by rain. Pounding toward the quarry.
Sure-footed steed. Vengeance.

Years of planning. Hours of preparation. Perfect escape. Jailers repaid. Vengeance.

A world asleep. Without a thought. Without a worry. Ignorant until dawn. Ignorant
until death. Soon. Vengeance.

Cleansed by the rain. Quickened by lightning. Onward into the blackness. Vengeance.

Bramius sipped his tea, savoring the flowery sweetness and the peppery bite. The old man hadn't come to collect him after breakfast, which was unusual, but not unheard of. He couldn't really say that the old man was getting strange in his dotage, since he had always been strange. Some days the old man insisted on strict adherence to a routine, the next day he didn't seem to care, the next he introduced a new daily routine. So Bramius was happy for any break he could get. When things were the same, work was hard, and when they changed it never got any easier. he swirled the leaves around his mug and watched as they settled into place. Then he froze.

That can't be right. He swirled the leaves again. He knew he shouldn't, but if things were that bad, it wouldn't make much difference. And when they settled, the news was even worse. If I shake them one more time, I might kill him outright! He chuckled at his own thought, but there was no mirth in it - the fates are capricious, and enjoy punishing

those who refuse to believe their own eyes. It was time to find the old man and let him figure out what it meant.

Drakus consulted the chart once again, double-checked his computations. This was serious. If he was right, and he suspected he was, this was very bad indeed. This time, I have to be sure. The old man was okay, but the rest of the hall had ripped him from head to toe for his last dire prediction (which was, in fact, the result of a misplaced decimal).

But there was no doubt - he could see it plain as day. The alignment as so close to completion he had seen it with his own eyes before the storm hid the skies. The charts clearly foretold a convergence, and not a beneficent one. I don't want to do the wrong thing, but I'd rather be loud and wrong than silent and right. It wouldn't do any good to check the figures again - the results weren't going to change any more than the heavens were going to spin backward in their spheres. Even if the result was more humiliation, it was time to get on with it. Rolling up his latest charts and supporting calculations, he set off to find the old man.

Androsius roused himself from a sleep troubled with the sound of hooves, the taste of mud and iron. He had been riding, riding hard...searching for...a hated thing. He could still feel the rage. He wanted to destroy...something. To cause ten times the suffering he had known...in bondage. He wanted...to kill...the old man!

The deed is already done. A thousand times. In dreams.

Years in chains. Planning. Preparing.

The spells the old man would use. Feint and dodge. Thrust and counter-thrust.

Hours, days, years pass.

Waiting for a chance. The plan was ready. The time came.

Now, all will pay. The old man. Everyone who knew him. Everything he loved.

The tree.

Riding into destiny. The moment of triumph. Ready. Vengeance.

They knew where to find him, of course. He was by his favorite apple tree, a little ways outside the gate. He had planted it with his own hands, watered it from a bucket, conducted classes beneath it, slept there on warm days, protected it from the frost. His love for the tree was a little odd, but there was little about the old man that wasn't odd. They converged on the tree from three different directions.

"Fall, you insufferable sphere!" The old man poked his staff at the apple until it thumped to the ground. He picked up his prize, oblivious to the boys' approach.

They all spoke at once.

"Master there is danger."

"We must go, now!"

"I have seen its approach!"

He smiled at them, cocked his head, then moved his piece of fruit slowly in front of their faces.

"Have you ever stopped to look at an apple?" His joy was childlike, his manner soothing; usually they found it engaging, but given the circumstances, it was frighteningly inappropriate. The three looked at one another, not knowing what to say.

"Such a beautiful color," he continued, "so tart and sweet. So fragrant. A delight for all the senses."

Bramius gently took the old man's arm. "Master, please return to the safety of the compound."

"Yes, master," said Drakus, "we, each of us, have had a vision."

"Vision? How wonderful - a vision of what? I had a vision myself. A vision of reddish yellow fruit. A shared bit of sweet apple. And here you are to share it. But I don't think I expected you, yet."

"Master, someone is coming to harm you. He'll cut you down where you stand. Look, I have my charts...."

"And you, Androsius, what dreams did you conjure up? What was the seed at the core of your vision." The old man's eyes twinkled in a pleasant but incongruous way.

"Master, please! Don't make jokes! There is great danger for you in this place."

"Yes, you said that. What danger was that again?"

"A dark rider, coming here, now, seeking vengeance. He wants to destroy you!"

"And what about the apples...?"

Bramius couldn't contain himself any longer. "Forget the apples you old...master, please. We've come to rescue you, but we must hurry!"

The old man smiled in a patronizing way. "That was very thoughtful of you, and of course, you will all receive recognition for your fine and accurate divination."

"This is not the time to discuss our marks!"

"You're right. We were discussing apples."

"Would you please leave off the stupid apples! Master, please, I don't want to see you harmed."

"Now, boys, you've all predicted the arrival of a dangerous man. But what will happen when he gets here?"

Drakus furrowed his brow. "I saw the danger, and set off to find you immediately."

"As did we all..." Bramius offered.

"Yes, we came right away."

The old man smiled his crinkly smile. "You're good boys, and, as you said, you don't want to see me harmed. But it was the fear of what may be that prevented you from seeing what will be. If you want to know the truth, you have to be prepared to accept it. And the truth is, I'm going to eat an apple."

The thunder of hoof beats filled their ears as a lone rider crested the opposite hill.

"He comes!" yelled Androsius. "Run, old man. We'll hold him here."

The barbarian's war cry split the air, sending a cold shock of terror through the startled boys, yet they stood their ground between the rider and their ancient teacher.

"Brave, brave boys. But you came without your staves. How are you going to fight a sword-bearing berserker?"

The old man was right. They were facing down the fearsome rider with nothing in hand (save Drakus, who was holding his parchment scrolls).

"Get behind me, all of you, and keep still."

The boys huddled behind the old man.

"Vengeance!" screamed the riding figure, his eyes bulging red as he swung his sword high above his head.

And just as he started his downward stroke, the old man lightly tossed the apple. The horse was a trained veteran of many battles, but tired from a long night of riding. The juicy red apple caught its eye. Just a minor distraction. Just enough to make the horse turn its head slightly to the left. Just enough to throw him a little bit off balance. Just enough to have the blade whicker over the top of the stooped old man. Enough that the barbarian's foot slipped and a jagged spur caught the horse hard in the belly. Despite years of training, the stallion reared, and the barbarian's head hit the solid branch above him, hard enough to crack both his skull and the limb. He tumbled heavily to the ground, the horse catching him a ringing kick in the forehead as it ran off into the woods.

"So you see, boys, I'm glad you're here to help me load Will Dairyman's cart."

A milk wagon, cowbells clanking, slowly approached from the opposite direction.

"Your divination skills are very good, but you failed to predict our picnic this afternoon. I'll see you back here when you've disposed of your charge."

Bramius looked from the bloody gash on the rider's crown, to the crinkled smile of his master.

The old man winked. "When I was about your age, I had a vision that I should eat an apple on the top of this bare hill and leave the core behind. My master wasn't impressed at the time."

Then he eased himself down with his back against the tree, looking off into the distance with a mild expression, as the puzzled boys helped the even more puzzled dairyman to bind Malcourt Piker and transport him to the town stockade.

