

The Adventurer and the Toad

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1

Lalira Revyne felt a rising elation. *I faced my fear. I freed the little thing, even though I was afraid of it. And I fought off a gigantic spinesnarl to do it! Mom will have to listen now!*

The relief—not just of having triumphed over danger, but over herself—buoyed her up, and she found herself skipping down the path. Steam drifted around her as she passed near the Burning Waters; the pathway here was more heavily marked and, she was pretty sure, enchanted to keep it safe. Even so, it was even warmer than normal here, with bubbling and hissing sounds surrounding her on all sides. *Just a little farther...*

The greenery of the Forest Sea rose about her again, and she quickened her pace. The numbness of the spinesnarl scratches had faded, and she rounded the final curve.

The house her mother had built shone white and blue in the lowering sunlight of the clearing. But as Lalira Revyne started to run forward, something told the fourteen-year-old girl *caution!*

At first she couldn't figure out what it was. The jungle sounds were normal, the faint scuttling of forest animals, the drowsy hum of insects, the occasional call of bird or least-dragon. The gardens were undisturbed. The house sat in the middle of the clearing, as it always had, surrounded by its warded fence—

The fence. The Wanderer had once said “it is the detail that matters, the single anomaly amidst the ordinary, that is the clue.”

The gate was *open*. Looking carefully, so was the door of the house. Mom *never* left the gate open—that left a gap in the verminwards for all sorts of pests to get in. And leaving both that *and* the house door open? Never.

Her forest knife seemed suddenly tiny and inadequate. She had no idea what she was facing. *But none of the Heroes know when they start, either*, she reminded herself. *Can't be so scared for Mom that I rush in.*

The Forest Sea was filled with unknown danger. She had been raised with that knowledge, but living so near it for so long, with the wards keeping them safe... she'd forgotten. Now she had to be careful. Maybe Mom was fine, maybe Lalira was panicking over nothing... but being careful wouldn't hurt.

Not going in by the regular path. Lalira tied her night-black hair back, then eased off the path, circling the clearing—and keeping an eye on the Forest Sea, just in case—until she was about a quarter way around. Then she vaulted over the fence, the verminwards stinging slightly, and—

—snagged her left foot on the topmost post. Her hands flew wide, the forest knife sparkling high in the sun and coming down somewhere out of sight, as Lalira fell splat into the soft, dark earth behind the thick tangle of pod vines.

“*WHOOOF!*” she grunted, the impact driving the breath from her. Oh, Chromaias, that was brilliant, Lalira! Such stealth and grace! You might as well have charged straight in!

But still, maybe she hadn't been heard. Or seen. Maybe. And maybe she could recover her weapon without being seen. She crawled as carefully as she could between the rows, looking, until she finally found her knife, standing half-embedded in the ground. Small as it was, she still felt better with the polished hilt in her hand.

Check the house. The vines obscured any view of her from the house, but she could peer between them.

Nothing obvious. Can't see inside. Unfortunately she had no seeing-glass, no scrying magic, and not really much magic at all. A few simple homekeeping spells like cleaning, spicing food, and such, that she knew how to cast, a verminwand in her pack, the forest knife... that was it.

“Waiting doesn't get us farther along!” she murmured, quoting the great warrior Tarl Tarlsson. “Right.”

She figured staying low was the best choice, so she crawled slowly towards the house. Nothing happened, so she sprinted the last few steps to it, shoving the door wide and crouched in a combat stance with the knife held out.

Silence. Her mother wasn't visible in the front room, even though all her notes were spread—

—all over the floor. The big hardwood desk was shoved askew, the chairs knocked to the floor, a scorchmark—flare spell? shock bolt?—on the near wall, and one of the cabinets was shattered, as though something very heavy had fallen or been thrown into it.

Mommy's gone? What happened? It was obvious Mom had fought—and fought hard. Lalira found herself unable to move, frozen with horror. *What can I do? What? There's no one around here, nowhere I can go. Who could help me?*

And in that moment she saw the answer. Across the room the books's spines shone in the setting sunlight: *Darkwood Tales, Singer of Names, Legends of the Wanderer, Silverstar, Beneath the City, Three Against Shadows*, dozens more. *You are the only one who can help yourself*, her conscience reminded her coldly, with both encouragement and guilt beneath the chill. *This was what you told your mother you wanted, to make your name in the books, to follow that path. That path lies before you now. Walk it, or go hide in your room waiting for help that cannot come. For you know the only place that could offer help is the one place you cannot go.*

That last was so true she could not argue. *Think. Mother's only chance is if I think. That's what all the stories tell me. Even the least-smart heroes have to stop and consider.*

Her hands were shaking, but she was able to move finally. Turning, thinking, looking, trying to keep panic at bay, the thought of her mother hurt or... or worse had to be kept out of her head.

The desk. Sitting on the desk was the recorder, a beautiful crystal and metal foldable sculpture which was also one of her mother's best tools. *The recorder was out! Maybe it recorded what happened!*

Lalira pulled up one of the chairs, sat down, and touched the device's right side.

Her mother—dark-brown haired, skin slightly darker, smiled out of the air before her, relaxing in the same chair Lalira was sitting in. “Notes for seven-fifteen, year of Arlavala, Cycle Seven Hundred Six. Work progressing pretty much the same as last week. Negotiations with Pondsparkle are going well; if I don't make some terrible mistake they'll probably be willing to help in the next excavation.” Mom seemed to glance out the window. “Lalira's getting restless. She really seems *serious* about this Adventurer business, but I don't know if she really *understands* what it will mean; I've tried to tell her but I just don't know. And her problem with the Toads...” She shook her head. “I hope I made the right decisions. I can't keep her home forever, but—”

From out of sight came a knocking sound. Her mother glanced up. “Come in!”

Sounds of the door opening and someone—or *something*—coming in. Mom stood up suddenly. “Oh, no,” she said quietly, with what sounded like a *resigned* tone in her voice, her fingers absently making the simple cutoff gesture.

“*Hells,*” Lalira cursed. “Why couldn't you have left it on, Mom?” But she knew the answer; Mom made a habit of shutting it off whenever she left the desk.

“Stop wishing for what isn't,” she answered herself, quoting Willowind Forestfist. “Instead, look to understand what is.” The quotes, the thoughts of other heroes, comforted her, let her pretend to be one of them instead of a terrified fourteen-year-old girl.

Search for clues. Whoever did this, they came in the door. Mom fought them. I see smears of dirt from outside—from feet or boots I can't tell, it's just wide and spread everywhere.

The dirt gave her an idea; the soil was always damp, and the smears showed at least one of the invaders had stepped in it.

She went to the door, looking down, and almost instantly she saw the footprint.

A huge, webbed footprint.

The footprint of a *Toad*.

2

Lalira became aware that she had been standing there, trembling with terror and fury, for long, long minutes; the sun had set, darkness was starting to settle over the Forest Sea.

I even helped one of them! I fought myself and helped that little Toad out of the spinesnarl!

The anger at the betrayal—that she had managed to overcome her unreasoning fear of the bulging-eyed, wide-mouthed creatures, and now found there was *reason* to fear and hate them—galvanized her to action. *Cold reason and focus will guide you to justice and vengeance*, she remembered from *Three Against Shadows*.

Kneeling by the print, she touched the earth. Not merely damp, but still crumbling spontaneously around the edge. Very fresh. They might have been here the same time she was rescuing their miniature relative. *No blood, or not much. No body. They took Mom, but they didn't kill her. I've got a chance to rescue her!*

She forced herself to stop two strides down the path. “No,” she said. “Even a spinesnarl cut me a little while ago. I can't go after things that can move around like Toads without defenses.”

There was really only one possible place to look. Her mother hadn't let her get armor or real weapons yet, and Mom's must have been on her—or the Toads had taken them as a precaution.

But Dad's old equipment might still be here.

Her father had been lost years ago—probably, Lalira admitted to herself, one of the reasons Mom didn't want her daughter following the Adventurer's path, even if she went to the Academy first. His best stuff had disappeared with him. But the trunk was still there, in her mother's room, under the bed.

It was locked. And she knew her mother had the only key.

“Hells and Hells again!” She kicked the steel-bound wood. This proved futile, and she spent the next minute hopping around the room cursing at the agony in her toe before she decided it wasn't *quite* broken after all.

“Okay, Lalira, think!” she said. “Mithras Silverstar wouldn't let this stop her.”

Mithras was, however, favored of Terian, so that gave her a bit of an advantage Lalira lacked. “Got to get this open.”

She smacked her forehead. “Stupid!”

The forest knife was long and keen, slightly enchanted. She forced it into the narrow crack that separated the top of the chest from the bottom. *The lock's the weak point; the hinges are thick and strong and there's no way I'm taking them off.*

She worked the blade down until it stopped, presumably against the catch of the lock, then started wriggling and prying. *Come on, come on!* She strained upward, pulling, levering—

SNAP!

For an instant she felt rising triumph—and then she realized that it had not been the lock, but her *blade* snapping.

“Gods, *no!*” She barely restrained another kick of sheer disbelief. *The knife was enchanted. How could the lock have...*

“Must be a magical seal,” a little voice said from behind her.

Lalira whirled, the stump of the forestknife held out, pointing with shaking fury and fear at...

A small Toad, sitting on the windowsill.

As soon as that registered, she lunged. “Monsters! Traitors! Where’s my mommy?!”

“Hey! Whoa! Aaaaaa!” the little Toad said, the last a tiny scream as he plummeted off the second floor windowsill.

Lalira stuck her head out, to see the small animal shaking off the dirt into which it had fallen. “What’s *wrong* with you?” it demanded, pointing up.

“You! You took my mommy! I mean, not *you*, but... you! Them!”

It tilted its head, which was close to tilting most of its body. “I don’t know what you mean! You *rescued* me, and now I come to say thank-you and you start hacky-slashy on me!”

Lying little thing, Lalira thought. She was sure it had been spying on her, watching what she did now that she’d gotten home.

But the inner voice answered calmly, *Then why did it speak at all? Why call attention to itself?*

Slowly she lowered the broken blade. “You... don’t know what happened?”

“No,” the little Toad said. “I got here a few minutes ago and heard noises coming from that room, so I climbed up to see if it was you.”

Even a monster can be an ally, if you treat it as one, Cillerion Somari’s imagined voice reminded her.

Lalira forced herself to put the knife down. “Then... I’m sorry. I... my mother is gone. It looks... like Toads took her.”

“*What?*” There was no mistaking the disbelief in the creature’s voice.

“Look at the entrance! Look in my house, then you tell *me!*” She knew that she wasn’t sounding apologetic, but...

“Okay, okay, don’t bounce on my head. I’ll look. You still need to get that chest open?”

She looked over her shoulder. “Yes... but if that’s a warded lock—”

“—then the weak point is the rest of the chest,” the little Toad said. “Try an axe, unless the stuff inside’s fragile.”

She found herself staring openmouthed after the creature for a few seconds before she recovered. “How stupid can I be?” she asked herself. “No, I don’t want to answer that.”

The chopping axe was in the lean-to outside the main house. She ran downstairs and out the back door, grabbed it, and pelted up the stairs—snagging her *right* foot on the steps. The axe flew gracefully into the air, spinning with the

slow deliberation of a falling tree in her fear-heightened perceptions as she smacked into the stairs, and it finished a second full rotation as the blade *thunked* down bare inches in front of her face.

Lalira waited for her heart to slow and the throbbing ache of her face where it had hit the stairs faded slightly. Then—much more carefully—she yanked the axe out of the wood and finished going upstairs. *You've just started growing again. You're clumsy because of that. Remember!*

She swung the axe up and aimed for the wooden sections between the iron bindings. If the chest *itself* were enchanted, well...

But it wasn't, and the shining blade bit deep. Another stroke and another, and suddenly she was through. A glint of blued steel was visible.

"You're right," said the subdued voice of the small Toad.

She managed not to jump, but the next stroke of the axe bounced uselessly from one of the iron straps. "About...?" she asked, then almost wanted to slap herself for the inane question.

"Toads. I don't understand why, but you read the tracks right. Four, five big Toads came, dragged her off—after a fight."

"I... see." She finished chopping, getting herself under control; finally the shattered top broke off.

She lost no time getting into the shimmering chain shirt with the bridge-and-sword worked into the chest and the long, long arms with the clever slap-and-catch arrangement on the sleeves, the one Father had shown her, and her mother had let her practice with since she had been very small. It was still awfully large on her and, until she managed to get the sleeves to catch properly, they brushed the floor. The helm was way too big and she had to find cloth she could pad it with, but when she was done it at least sat on her head well. The Crystal Breath was there, with the glittering blue-violet of the *Vor-nahal* in the center; it fit snugly around her throat.

The weapons and the other pieces of armor... She shook her head. She could manage the combat-dance well enough, but Father's weapons were too heavy and she couldn't fit the other pieces at all. As it was...

The grunting cheeping noise was suddenly, obviously *laughter*. "Will you stop that!"

The little Toad *tried*, but still swelled like it was going to explode. "You... look like—"

"Don't even, you... hey, what's your name?"

The question at least distracted the Toad. "What? Oh, I'm Mudswimmer. No choice-name yet."

Giving a name to the Toad made him, somehow, marginally less frightening. And he *was* awfully small. "Okay. I'm Lalira Revyne."

"I know. Everyone knows about your mom and you in Pondsparkle."

She didn't even want to *think* about Pondsparkle. Instead, she remembered Tarl Larsson's famous quote about preparing for battle against uncounted legions of evil: "Uncounted? In that case, have lunch *now*, *then* go conquer evil; this could take *all day*."

She looked at Mudswimmer as he followed, finding it a little easier to look at him. "I have to grab something to eat quick, and some other supplies, then figure

out where I'm going." He bounced his understanding and followed her into the kitchen. "So... you have *no* idea why a bunch of Toads would come take my mom?"

"No, not a..." Mudswimmer froze. "Oh. She was digging in the fallen ruins. And..."

"And? Don't stop!"

"There's been a rumor of a few of us that *don't* follow Blackwart the Great, but one of the Demons. The Demon of Water, Balgoltha."

3

Her head hurt and her eyes were closed and she felt dizzy, shaky, and someone was asking her if she was all right. She opened her eyes slowly.

A huge wide-mouthed face loomed over her. She screamed in horror and rolled feebly away, into a rack of pots and pans that cascaded down on her with multiple echoing crashes, one bouncing off the helmet and almost hitting Mudswimmer, who ducked and then hid underneath the largest pot, peering out warily.

What... oh. I must have fainted? Embarrassment warred with confusion. Then slowly memory rose back, and she knew what horror had felled her, and she was no longer embarrassed. She wanted to curl into a tiny ball and hide, wait until the memory went away.

But her mother was still gone, and her heroes would not lie on the kitchen floor hiding. Lalira was still sick and frightened, but she forced herself to sit up, ignoring the dizziness that assailed her. "Sorry, Mudswimmer," she said quietly, then managed to get to her feet. "It was... that name."

She remembered the water coalescing before her, rising upward in a black mass, opening great, bulging eyes and smiling a horrific, hungry smile wide enough to swallow the world, and she swayed, catching hold of the edge of the table.

"You... met him, then." Mudswimmer's voice held shock and dawning understanding. "In the form he takes in fresh waters. That's why..."

"Yes," she forced out. "That's why. Father... we weren't alone. Father, Mother, and their friends saved me, drove him back, but it almost..."

"Your mother and father had some... impressive friends," he said with awe. "Then you know enough. Most of us wouldn't do anything like that, but any creatures that can choose..."

"... can choose evil. These rumors," she forced herself to go on, not thinking about the meaning, "do they say where these people might hide themselves?"

"Has to be not far from Pondsparkle. Hidden from eyesight, hard to sense by magic or other methods."

Lalira frowned in thought. *He's right. Has to be near. They dragged Mommy off; even four or five of them couldn't hop very far carrying her—she's not small, and they're not built to carry people.*

But it *couldn't* be right near her house. Her mother had surveyed everything nearby, and Lalira had gone with her most places, quite a way into the Forest Sea and all the way along the—

She paused, the piece of bread she'd cut halfway to her mouth. Oh. "They could be anywhere along the shore, though."

Mudswimmer made a rude noise. "Oh, I'm stupid! Of course. Dragged her to the lake, then wherever they had to go."

Still... even the Toads had a fair amount of magic, and their priests would have support from their god. How could something like that be hidden so nearby, unless...

"Mudswimmer," she said slowly, "the Rainbow Mountain... It's made of prismglitter, isn't it?"

"Well, not *all* made of it, but it's got a lot of *sheeratilna*, as the Saurans call it. Whole ridge that comes up from—" His jaw suddenly hung open. "Oh. Ohhhh, yes, that makes *sense!*"

"A cave *under* the mountain!" The Rainbow Mountain was really more a big hill—a few hundred feet high—but it sparkled like a gem because it was mostly a mass of prismglitter, a very magical stone that could drastically interfere with magic if you weren't attuned to it. *A perfect hiding place for a secret cult.*

"That's bad," Mudswimmer said as she tore into the bread and devoured some leftover hopclaw from the coldbox. "I mean, the entrance will be across the lake, and underwater. You can't—"

She smiled, and started to feel a tiny trickle of hope as she tapped the gem at her throat. "The Crystal Breath," she said. "Let's me breathe anywhere—even deep underwater."

Mudswimmer hopped up on the table to look; while he still made her nervous, the motion didn't make her flinch. "But in armor you'll have to walk on the bottom. I can't stay down that long—and it's up to a hundred, hundred fifty feet deep. Plus, the Burning Waters..."

He might make her nervous, but she needed all the help she could get. "If you stay on my shoulder, you'll be in the air-bubble, too."

"And finding our way across? In the *dark* underwater?"

She bit her lip. The thought was terrifying... but she still had to do it. She remembered the Wanderer, diving to the Troll-caves though he was afraid of the water itself. "That ridge of prismglitter—it's the boundary between the Burning Water and the rest of the lake. If we follow it..."

Mudswimmer bounced slightly. "I... guess that would work. If we don't boil, or get eaten by something that likes the deeper water."

"I can't go *around* the lake," she said. "One way goes through the Forest Sea for miles, and the other—"

"Through our city. I know." He took a deep breath, swelling slightly, and then deflating again. "Well, get what you need. I guess we're going for a very soggy walk."

4

She strode through the black water, the glow of the lightglobe showing her the path, a glittering rainbow in the darkness.

Well, that was how she'd *imagined* it, anyway.

“Ow!”

“What did you *expect*? Little boats, pieces of trees, dead fish and armorfangs, they all end up on the bottom! And where are we? On the bottom!”

“This is a *fishing line*!”

“Oh, *drought*. You’re tangled in it.” Mudswimmer took a deep breath and dove into the water to help detach the hook.

“People should *clean up* after themselves!” she shouted into the black around her.

Black was an understatement for the water. She’d thought the forest was dark at night? It was practically daylight compared to this. And *murky*! The lightglobe barely gave her ten feet of vision, and it was as bright as she could make it.

This deep—seventy or more feet down—the water was cooler, except when swirls of hot, even murkier water jetted around her from the Burning Waters on the other side of the ridge, filling her nostrils with the scent of sulfur and death. She shuddered; they’d once slid down the wrong side of the ridge and heard the squeals and moans and rumbling of the boiling springs coming closer, the heat of the water rising; she’d barely stopped their descent in time, close enough to one vent to feel it vibrating the water around them.

She felt the snag suddenly let go and Mudswimmer emerged back onto her shoulder; to her surprise she found it almost comforting. “Hook’s out.”

She carefully unwound herself, then continued. The *good* thing about walking this close to the Burning Waters was that even the predators—the giant water-beetles called armorfangs, the great reptilian *nerestis*, and others—avoided the area. They’d seen a few shadows in the water at a couple of points, but nothing had tried to close the distance.

She ducked under a bare, rotting tree-branch and carefully edged her way over the trunk. Her ears popped as she moved on—but this felt different. “I think we’re going up!”

“I think you’re right.” The little Toad squinted. “Hold on, let me scout ahead.”

She leaned against the rotting trunk and waited, trying not to look in all directions at once. As long as she was moving, as long as she was focused on a task, she could keep the fear at bay, but alone in this murky void, her imagination became all too adept at translating every shift in current, every drifting cloud, as an approaching monster.

She almost screamed when something moved in front of her, before she realized it was Mudswimmer.

“Definitely coming to the shore. We’re almost to the Rainbow Mountain, so if you’re right about the caves, they should be somewhere off to our left. Not too far down, either.”

“What about my light?”

“Better dim it once we get to the surface. We’ll go along the shore carefully and I’ll check below for caves.”

“Won’t they notice you?”

He shrugged. “I’m tiny. Me and my cousin Duckweed are about the smallest Toads anyone’s seen in centuries. They don’t even notice us when we’re in the city. In the dark, underwater? No.”

“Well, you just be careful.” She realized she might be afraid of Toads in general, but she didn’t want anything to happen to Mudswimmer. *Maybe that’s one good thing coming out of this. If we live through it.* “Are you... well, you know I’ll probably have to fight some of...”

“If they’re following Bal...” He halted before pronouncing the name. “Er, that Demon, they’re bad people. It’s okay.”

As she emerged from the water, she dimmed the globe and put it away. Weight dragged at her, and the armor seemed three times as heavy. *But I’ll need it.*

It suddenly struck her how crazy this was. One lone girl and a tiny toad trying to find—and then, what, invade and conquer?—a whole nest of demon-worshipping cultists. But she couldn’t wait—who knew what was happening to Mommy now—and the only source of help...

She bit off a curse at her weakness and moved on, trying to make as little noise as possible.

Mudswimmer suddenly popped back up. “You were right! Cave entrance just below that big boulder up ahead. And I see a faint light farther in, so you should be able to just drop down and go in. No guard in the water.”

“This is it.” She looked at the boulder, then down, taking a deep breath of her own. “Look, Mudswimmer—you don’t have to come any farther.”

“Yes, I do,” he said quietly. “I know I’m small, but I’m the only help you’ve got.”

She swallowed. “O-okay. Thanks.”

She dropped through the clearer water here below the Rainbow Mountain. At ten feet, she felt the rock wall bend inward, and a dim, dim light was visible, rippling slightly, showing there was air not far away.

And then, moving against the dim light, a massive, lumpy shadow whose outline made her shiver. *Mudswimmer’s one thing, but that... that Toad’s... probably five feet long. Outweighs me too, I’m sure.*

Mudswimmer tugged on her collar.

“Yes, I see.” She could tell by the outline that the big creature was watching the entrance. *If I try to come up right in front of him, he’ll be able to attack, or sound the alarm, before I’m all the way out of the water. I have to hit him hard before he can... but how?*

Your companions are your greatest weapons, she remembered Mithras Silverstar saying. Lalira didn’t want to risk her only ally... but if she wasn’t willing to let him do anything, why have him come along at all?

“Mudswimmer, can you distract him somehow? Get him looking away from the pool long enough for me to at least get all the way out of the water?”

The little Toad scrunched his face up in a comical expression that managed to get a tiny smile on her face. “Well... I think so. But won’t you be all waterlogged?”

She tapped the chain shirt. “Adventurer’s gear—my father’s. Keeps you as dry and comfortable as possible.”

“Ooh. Good. Okay, here I go!”

Mudswimmer darted to one side and practically vanished in the shadows at the edge of the tunnel, moving up. Even though she *knew* where he was, she could barely make him out, and realized that he meant to try to go *around* the guard.

When the large shadow suddenly shifted and turned, she knew it was her turn. For an instant she couldn't move; the shadowy shape was too close, too close to memory and fear.

But Mudswimmer's up there!

The thought of someone *depending* on her broke the paralysis, and she lunged from the water, getting her feet under her and dropping the sleeves to their full length.

The huge Toad spun, eyes narrowing—and then widened, snorting in mirth.

She felt her face burn; she knew what he saw: a dripping-wet, skinny girl with sleeves scraping the floor like a toddler in her father's clothes, a huge helmet three sizes too big, padded with whatever could fit, and no weapons to be seen.

But at the same time that gave her the chance. She leapt and spun.

The weighted sleeve *smashed* into the Toad, bludgeoning it as effectively as a small mace, sending it staggering back; a second step of the combat dance and the other sleeve traced a graceful arc up and an implacable path downward, hammering the creature so hard that its flat, broad chin was driven to the stone beneath.

"Blackwart's *Breath!*" Mudswimmer stared in horrified disbelief as the big Toad went limp, unconscious, maybe dead.

She pointed to the long, black-edged spear that had fallen from the thing's hand. "It would have done worse to us."

Mudswimmer shook himself, then bounced in a subdued way. "Yes...yes, I guess you're right." He looked closer at the big Toad. "He's still alive." He glanced at her, an obvious question in his eyes.

If he wakes up before we get the rest of the way... but I can't just kill something helpless. Even a Toad. She shook her head.

Mudswimmer looked relieved. "What now?"

"Now?" She pointed a shaking finger down the passageway. "No choice."

Mudswimmer stayed on the floor and off to the side as they made their way along. For several minutes they moved—mostly noiselessly—along the corridor, and she began to hear something that sounded like the intonation of a chant or ritual.

"I think we—"

Three Toads suddenly leapt into view, spears leveled. "Far enough!"

She froze—both from the sudden confrontation and the realization that three-to-one, prepared, was beyond her ability to defeat, even if the center one was only the size of a bushel basket.

Mudswimmer was immobile, hidden in the shadows.

"No weapons?" one said disbelievingly.

"Maybe hidden. Search her, Stickrider. We'll keep her still."

What can I do? I can't do this by myself, I—

She saw, from the corner of her eye, Mudswimmer still edging along the wall. *If he can distract one...* She suddenly remembered one of the few spells she *did* know. *Maybe...*

Stickrider was roughly patting her down, pulling and tugging on her clothes. "Here, a dagger hidden behind her. Otherwise, nothing."

“Courageous... and a fool to enter here without weapons.” The smaller one was clearly the leader. “An additional sacrifice will be wel—”

Mudswimmer bounded onto the smaller one’s head, shoving his flat helm forward and over the bulging eyes.

At that moment, she whipped her hand towards the other Toad in front of her. He was out of range of even her long sleeves—but a faint reddish jet flickered from her hand, bridging the few additional feet, and he *bellowed* in agony as firespice materialized over his huge, golden eyes. At the same time she whirled her other sleeve backward; it only grazed Stickrider but separated her from him.

A few more seconds of desperate combat later, all three toads were also unconscious on the floor.

“We’ve got to move! Someone might have heard that!”

She ran forward now towards the chanting. *Maybe I don’t have any chance, but I have no choice...and I’m not giving up.*

She slammed into a pair of heavy doors, and they ground open.

Before her was a great room with a dozen or more Toads positioned around it... and in the center a gargantuan Toad, so huge and black that she almost fainted from looking, and below that Toad...

Her mother, seated on a carven-stone chair.

“Lalira Revyne,” the gigantic Toad said calmly. “Welcome. We have been waiting for you.”

5

As she stood gaping, the great golden gaze shifted. “Mudswimmer? Your report?”

“We worked really well together,” the little toad said in a matter-of-fact tone. “She deduced our involvement, armed herself, and figured out many of the key clues on her own.”

“What... I don’t understand!” Lalira burst out. “Mother—”

“I’m sorry, Lalira,” her mother said, her voice filled with genuine regret. “But you *did* insist on what you wanted, and I didn’t want you to go unless I could be *sure*. And your problem with the Toads...”

“So we tested you,” said the great Toad.

“I almost *killed* some of your own people!” she said, so confused and angry she didn’t know who to take it out on, but knowing that *this* was wrong.

“Oh, mudbubbles! Do you think I didn’t expect that? The important word was ‘*almost*.’ And all those involved I promised to heal, or even bring back if the worst happened.”

“To bring back—*who are you?!?*”

“I have a few names here and there, but most often simply Blackwart the Great.”

She stared openmouthed at the towering figure—so like, yet now that she could *feel* the power radiating from it, so utterly *unlike*, the one that had terrified her years ago. “You...the God of the Toads?”

“You wanted an Adventure. So did little Mudswimmer. I wanted a new emissary among you two-legged types. And here was a mother with a problem, asking for help.”

She glared in disbelief at her mother. “You—”

“I knew I couldn’t stop you, Lali,” her mother said softly. “Not unless I could *prove* to you that you weren’t Adventurer material. But after what happened to your father...and some of our other friends...I had to be sure you *were*. I’ve seen people with the dream but not the real heart die—or worse. The Great Toad offered me a chance to find out, and maybe not lose you in the process.”

Lalira was still shaking; the combat, facing so many Toads at once, her mother’s willingness to *participate* in this... “And did we find out?”

“We did,” Blackwart said, his voice so deep it shook the ground. “First, you intervened to save a helpless creature—though it was one you feared and were repelled by.”

“That was a *trick*?” she said, turning furiously on Mudswimmer.

“Well, yes and no. I really *was* trapped by the spinesnarl, and if you hadn’t helped me, I might have been killed.”

“Once you showed compassion,” Blackwart continued, “your mother’s kidnapping was staged. You were watched, and showed keen observation skills, a bit of clumsiness—” a chuckle ran around the room “—not out of place for either a toad or a young human, and, despite obvious fear, a determination to seek out and rescue your mother. You overcame your revulsion of my people and worked with Mudswimmer; you found weapons, and an interesting way to come to this hidden place. You further overcame your fear by daring to face us here, when you knew the danger. When given the chance to kill or not, you chose mercy. And, perhaps most importantly for a would-be Adventurer, when in danger you showed quick and inspired thinking. Tipstone will not forget staring into a fountain of spices soon, I think!”

Another ripple of laughter ran around the room, echoed even by Tipstone, who was entering from the passage, his huge eyes still swollen and watery. Lalira felt the shakes fading, replaced by wonder. *I really did do all those things... and they were very real for me, even if it was a trick, sort of.*

“At the same time, Mudswimmer showed he could withstand great pain and danger for the sake of another cause, could play a part with skill, and could find ways to assist others despite his small stature. He’s earned the right to a choice-name.” The Toad-God gave a broad smile that somehow did not seem at all the same as that of the Demonlord. “And you both endured a bit of looking ridiculous without allowing it to impair you, something which is more important than you might think.”

Lalira finally managed to smile up at Blackwart. “All right... I think I’m still a little mad at both of you... no, all *three* of you,” she said, looking at both her mother and Mudswimmer “But... I guess I understand.”

“Then it is settled,” Blackwart said, and with that disappeared. His voice, however, continued to speak. “If it meets with your mother’s approval, that is.”

“What?”

Her mother came forward and embraced her, and—after a second—Lalira hugged back. “It means I won’t be seeing you for a while... because Blackwart himself is sponsoring you.”

“Sponsoring me...?” she felt a rising triumph warring with disbelief.

“And Mudswimmer—”

“Spinesnarl,” he said proudly, announcing a choice-name. “Spinesnarl Mudswimmer. Because that’s where it all started, for us, right?”

“Right,” she said, and suddenly it all burst in on her and she caught up the little Toad. “The Academy, Spinesnarl!” She tossed him up and caught him, laughing.

“We’re going to the *Academy!*”

