**The Bittersweet Road**

A Tale of the Lands of Hope from the Fourth Age

By Celiryan’s nineteenth summer her future was completely in order. Not that anything had changed from two years ago, or five. She would marry Jonton, the boy from the village near her age, and move from caring for her parents to the farm south of Clespin, to care for his. And Jonton was fine, and his parents and house were all fine; it was simply a matter of when she decided to go, or how much longer she wished to hear folks asking her how much longer.

Even Celiryan, if honest with herself, knew she was getting too old. Not to marry, for she wasn’t at all sure one ever felt ready for that. But certainly too old to be minding children, such as her younger sister and her friends often playing in the fallow fields. The village parents always thanked her for keeping an eye on them, though the area had not seen so much as a roving wolf in living memory. But the children did roam far at times, needing guidance and reassurance when caught out after a summer sunset, yet always knowing Celiryan would be there to see them each home.

And it was too late, by perhaps ten years, for a grown woman to be climbing trees. Celiryan’s favorite was an ancient oak standing tall and alone by the very shores of Shimmer Lake, in the rock-strewn promontory that pointed to the dragons’ castle on the island a league of waves away. She would nestle in the highest crook she could safely sit—now several branches lower than before—and watch the lake and wonder about the frightful men of Despair who used to live in that fortress, barely visible by day at this distance. Some nights when the children did not need watching and all her chores were done, her parents would find her missing and know, she was in the tall oak, watching the night sky and looking sharp to the island, where once or twice she might catch the sight of an extra star, burning low near the water and made by a dragon’s breath through the castle gate.

Nothing particularly sweet in life, and nothing bitter either.

When the great mage from Araluntir arrived, everyone’s future was turned upside-down.

Senetear wore richly decorated crimson robes with sash sleeves covering his long arms and making him look even shorter than he was. Stepping off the coach from distant Trainertown, he announced to the gathered curious crowd that he was here to destroy the dragons plaguing the lake, as several knights over the past century had completely failed to do.

“We don’t find much trouble from them, sir,” her father put in. “It’s true, they’ve woken up a bit from what my great-grandfolks would have said. But we leave a sheep tied to the promontory once a month…”

“Aye, or a calf!” someone else called out.

“Or even once, the people of Semdon, they sent a cask of coins, back in ’35 I think it was…”

“It was ’36!”

“Thirty-six then. And they don’t attack us, sir, that’s the point.”

“Dragonkind are the kin of Despair,” Senetear responded, “evil in all its forms must be resisted and defeated. I am sent from Araluntir, the City of Glass, to dispatch these foul beasts. Your coin and kine shall remain your own forever; the tribute ends today.”

This brought a cheer from the young, shaken heads from the elderly, but the matter was settled. Senetear asked to rent a large space for the summer, and Celiryan’s father told her to show him the second barn. Clawing through her blackstraw hair, Celiryan bobbed a curtsy; she loomed several inches above the wizard and felt like a country clod as she led him to the barn. He looked around at one enormous room below and two lofts above, nodded and began to arrange matters to his liking. Celiryan tied her stiff long hair and dove in to help.

By the next day, the town of Semdon had sent in the mage’s equipment, and the only stalks of hay left on the entire floor of the barn were swept into one corner-sack for the mage to sleep on. Senetear posted a sign warning all never to enter, then spoke to Celiryan’s father about hiring her.

“She is a good worker, and I sense she would be an excellent granary for my researches.”

“What, do you mean, sir, a granary?”

“An acolyte of sorts,” Senetear said, and Celiryan felt the room tip to one side. “I shall defeat these dragons by means of an artefact crafted for the express purpose, created here and endowed with magical energy.” The mage looked to her and said with purpose, “Mine and hers.”

“Celiryan is set to marry,” her father said.

“I’ll do it,” she cried, and no one in her family spoke for the rest of the day.

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Very few in the village so much as saw her either, over the next three months. Senetear was driven to his task, and only slept to recover his strength for more casting rituals. Celiryan listened as the small man described the methods they would use, and felt a kind of common sense to the procedures, almost as if she had learned it before as a baby, and mostly forgotten.

The first time Senetear told her about the spell of Aid, she felt stricken with fear.

“As I expend my energies to cast the spells I need, you will extend the amount I can use and the time I may use it by adding your own life-force to the stream.” He noted her alarm and smiled. “Never fear, young lady, it is as temporary as the strength you use in running or lifting heavy things. You rest, and eat, and the energy comes back to you, do you see?”

“And then, we use it again?”

The mage nodded seriously, saying “Hundreds of times. Hundreds.”

Turning her to face away from him, Senetear placed a hand on her shoulder from behind, speaking three syllables that meant nothing. At once, Celiryan felt a tingle both warm and cool infusing her, like a marvelous drink with no taste.

“You see?” Senetear said. “Now, try with me. Say that word, it’s a bit of Sorceror’s Tongue, and picture a flow of water from yourself to me. Don’t be afraid.”

He turned away and she placed her hand on his shoulder after rubbing it on her dress to dry the sudden sweat. She spoke the sounds and imagined Senetear gaining strength, or getting taller. At first she thought nothing had happened, and panicked that he might dismiss her. Then she felt again how her right toe still hurt where she had stubbed it yesterday, and realized her breath was coming quickly.

Senetear stepped away, nodded and said, “Excellent, the first try. Here, sit down girl, it takes time to become accustomed.” Producing a small leather bag, he handed her a lump of hard, nearly clear sugar-candy and put two more into his own mouth. It was by far the sweetest thing she had ever tasted, feeling almost dangerous, lavish, perhaps even sinful: but Senetear grinned and winked in pleasure.

The mage told her many things as she rested, how the daily ritual would proceed, the nature of the great spells he would lay into the weapon, how long each would take. Mostly, he fretted about the item that would serve them for the object of the enchantments.

“The Circle of Five—leaders of the magely order where I come from—are of the opinion that any vessel can serve to receive the spells I have in mind. But I have been studying the lore of the rustics.”

“The rustics?” Celiryan only knew that word as a great insult, levied on someone who had acted stupidly or rudely.

“The races who occupied this land in deep history,” Senetear responded, “before Hope or even Despair came here.” Celiryan felt dizzier than before the spell of Aid, to hear such an amazing claim. “They knew much about the magic of the earth, and air, and other elements. Dragons, too are very old, so I must establish the anchor of this artefact in sympathy. Else I would have created it before setting out. I must have something from the area, to better receive the enchantments, and fight fire with fire so to speak.”

Again Celiryan knew instantly what he meant, without knowing how. She stood, too tongue-tied to speak, but gestured and walked out of the barn. Senetear asked no questions and they moved past plowed fields by the one road that led to the lake, near the rocky jut of land that held her oak tree. All the way she had the exact spot in mind; arriving there she leaped up to catch a bough and climbed halfway, stopping on a straight limb whose outer branch was starting to go hard and leafless. She gestured to a section that was especially straight and smooth, like an arrow pointing directly across the lake at the dragon’s castle-island. It had pointed that way for two hundred years, at least.

Senetear’s face lit. Following the line of the limb and staring at the far-off fortress, he nodded repeatedly and struggled to swallow his candies in time. “It is perfect. The Heroes led me to you. Take it down without the use of metal.”

Celiryan contemplated the job for a moment, then stepped to the edge of the limb just above the hardened, dying section, reached down as it swayed under her weight and pulled up to snap it off against her boot. It cracked clean and came free in her hand, needing only a little trimming to appear an excellent short staff or walking stick, just thinner than her wrist.

Senetear’s eyes were shining with emotion as she handed him the staff from her perch in the tree. “We will begin this evening.” Celiryan had never seen anyone so pleased with her before: her mouth tasted sweet though it was long since the candy had been there.

The mage wove past the rocks to the end of the promontory by the deep water, and held the stick overhead before shouting something in a sibilant, foreign tongue across the lake. The echoes died and still he stood there.

Suddenly a small puff of pitch-black smoke popped from the sole remaining tower of the castle. Celiryan felt a slash across her heart, but Senetear chuckled long and loud, turning back for the barn. Celiryan looked around at the tall ancient oak, and thought she might never get over the guilt of breaking off that half-dead branch. Trailing home after the mage, she felt something bitter in her mouth now, as if a wisp of dragon-smoke had crept between her teeth.

The following days and weeks almost disappeared. Each morning early, Celiryan stumbled out to the barn to find Senetear already at work. There were at least a thousand stages he had in mind to infuse this stick with power, and Senetear could recite them from memory. Assisting him all day with just short breaks to eat, and then late hours into the evening, was Celiryan’s routine. Her mind started filling with lore, with expanded vocabulary and emptying strength. This was harder than the labor of haying time, more tense than the search for a lost child.

He buffed the staff to smooth planes and incised symbols of power into the wood, filling some with molten silver. More shipments arrived by post from Semdon, and took letters back nearly every time with still further requirements. The mage paid in silver coin, and sometimes gold, so everyone in the village treated him like the local knight (who never came to pay a visit or inquire). He constructed a casting circle of several interlocking metal pieces on the center of the barn floor, and for two days cast spells only at it, until it glowed on command with a word of Sorceror’s Tongue. The staff lay to one side, with metal cooling or varnish drying, until everything else was ready.

Three times a day, Celiryan stood by a metal tripod with a large, rough-sphere quartz resting in its top, and pressed her Aid into the stone until she was exhausted. It was like puffing all her air into a sheep bladder, and took about as long. Afterwards she had to lie down; sometimes Senetear would do the same and then sit with her, sharing candy and telling her of mage lore. It was hard to stay awake, but impossible to fall asleep while the wizard spoke of other worlds. The room could be lit at night by the glow of the crystal. But it was always dead of energy by morning.

Soon, morning and evening ceased to make much impression on Celiryan. Assisting the great mage became the only rhythm of her life, and her spirit quickened to it as the days rolled past. The work was harder on the mind than the body; though she understood only a tenth of what he told her, she could see enough to know that here was a great work underway, and she wanted to be a part of it. She gave her Aid to Senetear as often as she could, draining more and more of herself as her skill grew and the fear diminished. Sometimes she nearly fainted with the effort, and Senetear reproved her, but then they shared a candy and rested, talking of magery and tales of past heroes.

The first time Celiryan woke up in the barn it was Jonton who found her. Coming by to spark before his morning chores, he feared the worst and broke in, ignoring the sign and Senetear’s anger. The mage had thrown a blanket over her by the brazier where she had given too much of her strength late the night before. Jonton stared, and Celiryan sat there tongue-tied again until he turned and left without a word. The next time the mail wagon arrived with a package for Senetear, Celiyran saw Jonton board up next to the courier, headed back for Semdon, which meant at least an overnight stay. The shipment included delicate glass beakers, and she focused on carrying it carefully as the wagon pulled out behind her. She felt scared, though nothing broke.

Now she could infuse the quartz crystal for the time it took to fill two sheep bladders. Her head felt light more often than not; forgetting to eat was surely part of the problem; once she fell asleep standing up with her hand resting on Senetear’s shoulder, still giving him Aid while dreaming of giving more.

Senetear taught Celiryan how to cast simple spells for herself, such as the light for dark places and an ability to detect magic. She mastered the words and gestures he taught her, but seldom wasted her strength on them, saving every bit for the casting. They layered in different forms of enchantment over the long weeks of summer; fire spells using a white-hot flame beneath the staff, protection wards given together with small pinches of a dark metal ore sprinkled during the casting. After the second week, the mage warned his acolyte not to touch the staff again.

“It is becoming attuned to me now, a true staff of power. With lesser staves, there is a violent explosion of force when anyone other than the owner lays hands upon it, but the staff itself always breaks. This,” he said, patting the darkened wood, “will obey only my hand, unless one with greater lore should come and wrest it away. Many might try! This is already a useful tool and powerful weapon. But the explosion would be even greater, mortal to all but the strongest. And if he survived, it would then belong to him.”

His eyes glittered with appreciation. “I of course would already be dead.”

He sighed then, for once acting as if he had all the time in the world. “But first, after the dragons are slain, this staff will see the Crystal City. And the Circle of Five will know, at long last, that I am worthy to join their number.” He looked to her a moment. “You should come with me, Celiryan; you show great promise and could be an acolyte there in a matter of a year or so.”

She could never speak when it was important, and only shook her head with a smile. They returned to casting then, using a white powder and many light spells to imbue the staff with the ability to warn its wielder of an enemy’s approach.

At the midsummer’s feast, Senetear left the laboratory for the evening, and Celiryan stood with her family as he lit the enormous bonfire with just a gesture. Everyone cheered madly at the sudden conflagration, and by its light Celiyran could see Jonton across the way, standing with a rather pretty red-headed girl from the town. Her heart surged a beat, and she couldn’t decide how this tasted in her soul.

The hottest days bore in, and the barn could not have been any less comfortable or the routine more monotonous. These latter enchantments Senetear crafted were far beyond her ability to understand. At times he briefly described their effect—“conjures a creature of stone”, “creates a patch of fire as wide as this casting circle”, or things even more strange. But as he explained, the more enchantments one attempted upon the same item, the harder the effort needed, which meant of course greater stores of life-energy required. Senetear never leaned on his granary more than himself: he gave of his own strength first and foremost, and at times the two staggered against each other before slumping to the floor.

Celiryan saw spots before her eyes whether in the sunlight or shadow. She hardly dared run for fear her feet would betray her. And her raven-black, stiff-feathered hair now lay slicked upon her head as if each day began with a ritual dunking. Day, night, nothing mattered but the next attempt. These came less frequently now, both Senetear and Celiryan infusing the quartz crystal a half-dozen times between each attempt. It glowed like the sun before they began, and drank in the light like a lump of coal before they finished.

She awoke once by moonlight, to a gentle shaking on her shoulder. Senetear stood over her, and when she started to rise for another round, he gently pushed her back down and pointed to the casting circle.

The staff stood gleaming in the argent slant of stars, floating slightly above the floor of the casting circle and slowly turning to show its silver symbols and dark bronze retention rings. Celiryan could not have spoken for love or money, lacking breath for one thing.

“It is done at last.” Senetear said. “Tomorrow, I will slay the dragons.”

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They slept a little late, and Celiryan brought her master an enormous meal just after noon. Word scurried through the village like a fire downwind, and a crowd gathered before Senetear emerged from the barn. They cheered and followed him down the lake road, slowing traffic for several carriages of wealthier visitors, come from as far as Conar’s Helm to take in the lovely lake and early foliage. Celiryan was swept away from her master, and circled to the side of the human column to run for the ancient oak. It accepted her back, and she mastered bouts of dizziness to get up high and sit before the procession came in sight.

Using the staff like a walking cane, Senetear jauntily led hundreds of excited citizens to the shore just to one side of the promontory oak. Fishing boats were beached and Senetear borrowed one without asking. A score of hands helped him shove off, and he stood in the bow bowing to the cheering crowd and speaking brave words of their impending freedom from evil and terror. Then the mage settled in with a paddle, and the boat slowly grew too small to be easily seen, and still only halfway across the lake.

The carriage-crowd jostled through, to cabins further along the shore and many followed speaking excitedly of a vantage where one could see directly north and into the open gate of the ruined castle. Scores more remained near the promontory but not a single one looked up at Celiryan. She sat and prayed for his good fortune, feeling something sharp and almost dusty on the edges of her tongue. The long autumn evening drew in, then full dark, a night studded with stars. Some few went home, but many more remained to watch though the evening was a shade too cool. Opinions were expressed all around, as to whether the fighting could be seen from so far, or perhaps heard, and expert notions about how to tell when the mage had won. Since every third speaker was younger than Celiryan, she tended to doubt their words. But she never took her eyes off the island, even after it became invisible. So Celiryan was the first to see the fight begin.

New stars birthed and died, four of them before anyone else so much as noticed. Then many counts later, the sounds of fire and explosion carrying all that way in the darkness. Celiryan saw portions of the fortress again in orange, then red almost to brown, and in between darkness like a curtain drawn. Then lightning bolts—Senetear’s staff, certainly there—and unearthly sounds echoing from ancient stone. The lights came at times from within the fortress, at others atop it, and still others from the island outside.

The first dragon’s roar heard in this land for centuries sent half the onlookers screaming for home. It was a grinding hot wail of fury, repeated not often but always with horrible effect. Celiryan saw two carriages rattle back past her at frantic speed, neither one with drivers or passengers. Her senses lied or even the tree she sat in vibrated slightly. But then another series of lightning-flashes from the island, the last two aimed straight up into the sky illuminating the enormous body of the dragon in flight that they struck.

Flaming, wounded, and roaring in agony, the distant flying form arced high, was struck again, peaked, and turned down and into the lake, where it threw up gouts of water and plunged beneath the surface never to rise again.

No one cheered, struck dumb by the incredible deed. That little man, about whom they had all whispered and pointed, whose money they gladly took and whose art they in no way understood, had destroyed one of a pair of giant wurms that could have gulped him down like a sugar candy had he not the lore unknown to any mortal they had ever met. And the fight continued.

The second dragon fought on, and while the roars were still frequent, the flashes of fire almost ceased. Wounded perhaps, Celiryan thought, her heart soaring and yet hardly beating in thoughts too large for her previous life. That great mage, that wondrous staff, she had known, worked, touched…

An hour passed with no sound or sight, and then a second. The remaining crowd at the promontory heard some of their fellows returning from the southern shore cabins, speaking nonstop and saying the same thing.

The second dragon was still there.

Eerie light of the moons shone through the ripped roof of the ancient fortress and there, crouching guard directly through the portcullis and all over the inner bailey, the dragon could be clearly seen. It did not move a muscle, but lay with head facing out across the lake, eyes open and alert, they swore to a man. Everyone was sure it could see them, and they were so frightened they dared not look back even across a league of water. Some claimed the view from the cabins was now ruined, and bet they would be boarded up by next summer. The other carriages returned too, overloaded with passengers and the sound of weeping.

No one had seen the wizard after the first dragon fell.

In the last hour before dawn, Celiryan was alone in the ancient oak. She shivered and wept, praying beyond words for an outcome she could not describe. As her tears finally dried, she fancied she heard weeping still. Peering hard onto the lake, she made out a darker blotch in the first glimmers before sunrise. She nearly fell from the tree and scrabbled past the rocks, stubbing her other toe on the way to the end of the promontory, where the breeze and waves were carrying the little boat. Down in the thwarts lay Senetear, clutching his staff and weeping like an infant.

Celiryan frantically checked his body for wounds, but aside from bruises, scuffs and a robe torn near to shreds, he was whole. She called to him, tried words of comfort, scolding, pleading. He wept on and on, yelling as a frightened babe. And when she tried to make him stand and debark, Senetear flopped like a fish against her body, fumbling his staff to the shore and needing to be half-dragged to the promontory. Clawing maniacally, he managed to recover the staff in both hands, using them almost like spades, and resumed his frantic screaming. By dawn’s light she looked into his eyes and saw the same intelligence, all the humor and pride and fierce desire Senetear had brought to her life. But the great mage could not mouth a single word, and by himself could only crawl.

Fumbling in his pouch Celiryan gave him a sweet candy, and at last his crying stopped. Gathering him up and careful not to bump the staff he clutched, she carried him all the way back to the barn.

What passed next might have been a day, or it might have been three. Celiryan cared for a full-grown baby in the casting barn, accepting plates of food and jugs of milk at the door from her astonished father, and letting no one else enter. Unprepared for motherhood, she did her best to comfort him, fed him milk, wiped his ends, helped him to crawl (always with the staff in one of his hands), and sometimes, possibly, slept. Just looking in his eyes for a moment always triggered another storm of tears from the mage. Once she awakened to the sound of tearing paper, and saw him with the spell book open, trying to turn pages, trying to point to letters, tearing the tome to shreds and throwing the wet words in all directions. The crystal on the tripod remained dark as pitch, and Celiryan felt just that exhausted.

She finally slept, long and hard and awakened with the aches of wood below and not a sound in the room. Jolted up, she saw the staff on the floor, the barn door open, Senetear gone.

Hastening down the lake road she spied him far ahead crawling under the ancient oak and onto the promontory. Screaming his name she ran as fast as she could, but there was too much ground to cover. Senetear reached the land’s end, muscled himself up against a rock the size of his chest. Looking back at her, he bawled again, seized the rock by both ends and heaved it up, hugging it to himself as he leaped into the deep water. Like the dragon he had slain, he never returned.

Celiryan stood at the water’s edge staring down long after every ripple cleared, and thought of Senetear. After so many days together, the world seemed silenced without the sound of his voice, his patient instructions, the tales, a quick wit and his confident harangues. The master mage had been so certain, his mind had climbed too high, perhaps, to stomach starting again.

Trudging aimlessly through the gorgeous bright morning, Celiryan found herself back in the barn. Life once again had no taste at all. She looked about at the trappings of a real mage; thinking about her future in the village outside, she felt again a bitter tang at the edge of her throat.

With a deep breath, she pushed back her blackstraw hair, took a wide stance, and laid both hands on the staff of Senetear.

The searing pain and air-ripping crack came together with a blinding flash. Blackness followed, and a timeless time after that. Celiryan came to on the floor of the barn, with the staff clenched tight in both hands, feeling as weak as a newborn babe. But rest could fix that. She sucked a candy and waited.

In the early afternoon, having packed some food, a few coins, the remains of the spell-tome and the bag of candy, Celiryan left the barn and walked out of the village. West was as good a direction as any other at first. But when she saw again the shores of the lake, she nearly turned back. Stiffening her spine, she marched beyond the ancient oak, past Senetear’s Point and beyond the lake shore cabins to a beach directly south of the island fortress. At the edge of the water she looked across at the unmoving dragon a league or more away, held up the staff overhead and yelled defiance as loud as she could.

She knew nothing of the tongue of dragons, but she knew how a mage was supposed to act in the face of evil. She stood there and waited several long moments. Then a puff of night-black smoke rose through the roof of the fortress, and Celiryan chuckled long and contented at this salute. Fishing out another candy, she turned south into the Percentalion, and took the bittersweet road for the City of Glass.