

Ambrose was born in a rather small village called Homplet, located at the border with the barren wilderness. Second of three brothers, he was thinking of making out his living working as cooper. His father, a farmer, pushed him in that direction. The small field of rye the family owned was surely going to be only for the elder brother, so it was advisable for him to find a decent profession.

Everything was going smoothly, when the bad luck struck. The barn, where the crop of the whole village was usually stored, caught fire. The food supply of the whole hamlet was suddenly gone in large clouds of black smoke.

Surely, it was not his fault. It was that dumb elf, Magellan, who insisted to go there during the night. He swore he saw a weird light appearing into the barn every night. "Maybe it is the ghost of old Jenkins," Said Magellan. The young falconer had a vivid imagination and, due to his elven heritage, was probably "sensitive" to this kind of supernatural events. In Ambrose opinion, the possibility that Old Jenkins, the blind beggar, was haunting the barn sounded silly to say the least; but it would have provided a good distraction. It was autumn but still the weather was fine, so why not enjoy the "ghost haunt"?

That night, they met not far from the small mill, which was located a bit out the village and close to barn. "Hey human, you are late! I think I have already seen a small light let's get in!" said the elf.

The two moved quietly and approached the wooden building. The massive door was not locked. The two youngsters walked in, looking around suspiciously. "Better make some light," said Ambrose. There was a lantern near the entrance. Ambrose took out of the barn the lantern, grabbing some spark in the process. There, with the flint and steel he had in his pocket, he set the spark on fire and then lighted the lantern. When he returned into the barn, Magellan was not there anymore. "Magellan?" said with a low voice Ambrose. "Where are you?" The question went unanswered. A weird feeling started creeping along his back. Maybe the elf was right. There was something weird in the barn. He sneaked forward. The light casted weird shadows around him and the sacks were not really helping. Suddenly, something moved. Something in the upper floor. "Magellan, you fool!" whispered. He decided to go and check. Clutching the lamp, he started climbing the stairs. Having reached the top of it, he started looking behind all the sacks. Suddenly, he noticed a shadow creeping toward him. He turned around quickly, just to find Magellan that was trying to sneak on him. "You jerk!" shouted. "Calm down dude," said Magellan amicably. "It was just a joke..." started again Magellan "an idiot joke" Cut short Ambrose. "I guess there is not even a ghost...why did you take me here?" "To have some fun..." simply said Magellan, who was staring at him. The way he was looking at him was weird and made him feel extremely uncomfortable. He clearly remembered the weird voice that were running around the Elf "preferences". Of course, for him this would not be generally his concern, but in that situation, the possibility was kind of bothering him. "Well," started the elf "I apologize for the bad joke..."

suddenly, the elf screamed. "Something's there!" said pointing at the far corner of the room. Ambrose turned quickly, all the previous thought erased from his mind. A small squirrel appeared. "You stupid elf! It is just a squirrel," shouted while turning around again "...wait. Where is the lamp?" In the fast turning, he did not immediately realized that he actually dropped it on the floor. He looked down. The oil was spread all over the ground. It was already catching fire. They look into each other eyes. A word emerged from their mouth in the same very moment "crap". At first, they tried to stop the flames, but lamp oil is a nasty thing. They quickly realized that everything was lost. Ambrose stopped trying to fight the fire. It was completely pointless. He rushed downstairs, followed by the scared Magellan. In few moments they were out of the building. They ran as fast as they could. "What will we say?" started saying Magellan "we say nothing!" replied Ambrose. "What if they find out that it is our fault? They will hang us...or worse!" Magellan was almost crying. "Shut up, stupid elf! If we say anything they will accuse us immediately. We will take advantage of the situation. Soon somebody will realize that the barn is on fire. We will start helping the people without saying nothing so they will assume that we got

awaken up like the others. Now hush! And so it was. Soon cries of alarm sounded in the village. When the burgomaster blew the horn for summoning the help of the citizens, they were among the first to appear. At the end of the night, the fire was finally tamed. Nothing of the barn was left. The whole village was in dire straits. It was on the crop that the village was relying for surviving the winter. Without it, an horrible dead by starvation was awaiting all of them.

Ambrose was in the grip of fear. After just a week, the angry mob dragged to the gallows two random citizens already. A beggar was beat to death with the accusation of having brought bad luck on the village. The idea that the elf might loose his lips was slowly killing him. He was actually grateful that his fellow villagers have found some scape-goats. "It could be worse, it could be me" commented once among himself.

Suddenly, the situation seemed to calm down. It was as if the whole village has accepted the impending doom. Walking around Homplet was really a depressing experience. Even in the Cooper's workshop, a gloomy atmosphere was hanging over the place. It used to be a cheerful place, especially because of Marigold, the other cooper apprentice. She was a delightful person, and more than once Ambrose found himself thinking about her. In his mind, Ambrose thought that he would really like to be more than an acquaintance to her. Now she looked like the shadow of the person she was before.

On the way back from the workshop, he met with Magellan. His face was gray as the ashes left by the fire that destroyed the barn. "Have you heard?" began Magellan "there will be a town council tonight" "what for?" replied Ambrose. "I don't know...I hope they won't hang more people..." "I don't think that they will hang anyone. We shall see". There was a moment of silence between them. Ambrose stared Magellan in the eyes "see you tonight," added. He than strode away. "That damn elf. He will soon break".

Almost the whole village showed up at the council. Among the crowd, Ambrose saw the faces of Magellan and Marigold. There was also that freaking artist-wanna-be, Gildorel. He loathed him deeply. He was always trying to impress girls with small and rather mediocre, in Ambrose's eyes self-made sculptures. He definitely won his antipathy when he tried to approach Marigold. Luckily, she ignored him.

After few minutes, the Burgomaster began his speech. "Dear fellow villagers, I summoned you because a tough decision must be taken. The recent fire that destroyed the barn left us with nothing for surviving the next winter. If things stay in this way, we are doomed." Ambrose give a look at Magellan. He seemed whiter than usual. "However, we still have a chance. As you all know, not far from the village, there is the ancient tomb of the forgotten chieftain." a shout came from the audience "That place is haunted! The last time people tried to explore it, nobody came back". "Very true my fellow villager," replied the burgomaster "however, that is the only thing we can do now." "Who will we send?" shouted another voice. "Well..." went on the burgomaster, "we need young and capable people. Of course we will accept volunteer first." Ambrose had a bad feeling; this thing was taking the wrong direction. At the end of the council, he was standing among the selected one, as his kind fellow villagers, have decided to send the second horn first in this crazy mission. "Lesser evil", they said. The only good thing is that also Marigold was selected. Instead, Magellan was among the first one to volunteer, seeing probably a chance for redemption.

After one year, Ambrose still recall the event that took place in the mysterious tomb with a mix of horror and wonder. The slithering sound of the thing that was hunting the tunnel in which they lost Magellan for good, haunted is dark dreams. He was in true quite happy of the elf final demise. He called for that when he volunteered. Beside this, he was sure that Magellan, eventually, would have told to someone of their little secret. He clearly remember crossing the

archway. A new world opened to his eyes in that moment. He finally saw the futility of the human life. The eldritch power that struck him, gave him visions of legions of demons controlled by a caped figure, mountain of gold that were waiting to be conquered. A voice spoke to him about the wizard Emirikol, whose powers were capable to bend the reality to his will. He was told about the great wizard Sezrekan, who discovered all the 716 spells before ascending from the mortal world. He deeply wished to have all that power for himself. The voice laughed at him. "Very well, mortal, here is the first test, survive." He was funneled back into his body. He was standing in front of Marigold, unable to speak. She desperately drew the crowbar and tried to hit him. Rage grew in his soul. Why was she trying to kill him? Did she found out his secret? He drew the crowbar as well. After two clumsy hit, the improvised weapon finally met the skull of the poor Marigold, crushing the life out of her. "A very nice sacrifice, mortal" laughed the voice. He was once again siphoned out of his body.

He saw his body fighting against his other companions. Finally, they were able to subdue him. When he dropped on the ground, his conscience was reunited with the body. Everything faded, like in a dream. He woke up in the shaman's tend. For days, he was not sure if what happened was actually real. Even if many of his companions were "possessed". Nobody mentioned having his same experience. But they could have very well lied. Wasn't he doing the same? For a period, he almost convinced himself that everything was a dream. The day before leaving with the other for the big town, where they were planning to sell the gold they found, he had a weird dream. Once again, he heard the voice. "Go to the town, it is time to start to learn something, mortal". Once in town, he enrolled immediately as apprentice of the mage. The quest has just begun.

To be continued