

The Quest

The Sons Set Out on a Quest

The Boffin's three sons came to her one day and announced that they wanted to go on a quest.

"Fine," she said, "and could you pick up some tomatoes from the shop on your way back?"

"Mum!!!" said the oldest brother disgustedly.

"What sort of quest were you thinking of?" asked their father, the Mage.

"Oh, I don't know. Something involving brave deeds and solving riddles. That sort of thing," said the eldest.

"So nothing involving tomatoes, then," said their Dad.

"Dad!!!"

"OK, OK."

He thought for a bit. "How about you go out and find the thing that you need the most?"

"What would that be?"

"That would be part of the quest," said the Boffin.

The three brothers looked at each other. That certainly had the air of a quest.

"OK," said the youngest son. "We'll do it!"

"I have one condition," said the Mage. "You have to wear these amulets. They will allow you to call us if you find yourselves in a situation that you can't handle or where you need our help. Don't be stupidly heroic, please. Your mother has crafted them, and I have put a charm on them so that you can't lose them. To make it a real quest, we won't be able to call you. You'll have to call us. OK?"

The three sons agreed to the condition and set off down the road. They walked through the town passing the shop as they went.

"Tomatoes!" said the oldest, disgustedly.

They soon reached open country and, like all siblings, started to bicker. Eventually they reached a crossroads and couldn't agree which way they should go, so they all started off in different directions. The youngest son went left, the oldest son went right, and, well, the middle son took the middle way.

The youngest son passed through some woods, then through a deep cutting and then through farmland. The eldest son passed through a deep cutting, then farmlands, and then some woods. The middle son passed through farmlands, then some woods and finally a deep cutting.

All three approached a cross roads and saw figures coming from two other directions. The three brothers met at the crossroads.

"Odd," said the oldest son. "Do you think that this is Mum and Dad's doing?"

The middle son waved his hand and a ball appeared on his palm. He studied it.

“No magic,” he said, “so far as I can tell.”

The youngest son produced a box with buttons on it. He pulled out an extending antenna and pressed a button.

“No science,” he said, scanning the area, “so far as I can tell.”

Back home the Boffin was laughing. The Mage came over to look. In her glass globe the boys were discussing the strange situation and in the end concluded that it was pure chance.

“Stop teasing them, dear. If they want to split up, let them.”

“They’re so easy to fool, and they don’t know we’re watching,” said the Boffin.

At that moment the youngest son turned away from his brothers and looked straight at the Boffin and the Mage and winked.

“Well I never,” said the Boffin.

The Mage laughed. “So much for not knowing that we are watching,” he said. “Put away the globe, dear, and let them get on with it.”

The Boffin sighed and put it away, but from time to time over the next few days she glanced longingly at the cupboard.

The boys walked down the road for a mile or two and came across another crossroad. They stopped and looked at it suspiciously. Finally, the oldest brother came to a decision.

“Luck!” he said, and the other two said the same, and they all bumped fists. Then once again the youngest son took the left-hand road, the oldest son took the right-hand road, and well, the middle son took the middle road.

The Quest of the Oldest Son

The oldest son found that he was getting hungry and tired. He was approaching a small town and decided to stay there the night. He thought of stopping off at the local Mystics chapel, but no one was around. Across the road lights had come on in the pastor’s house, but he decided not to trouble her.

He had a little money, so he pressed on into the local town. He had a meal at the small pub, and then wondered where he was going to stay.

“No rooms,” said the pub landlord. “It’s market day today, and all accommodation will be full. You could try the castle. The baron often lets people sleep in the stables. Are you on a Quest?”

The oldest son admitted that he was. He reflected that going on a quest seemed so grown up at home, but here it seemed a little silly.

“If so,” continued the landlord, “the baron is looking for someone to get rid of a dragon. It’s killed three people already and eaten two horses and some cows.”

The oldest son thought that this was a bit odd. Dragons didn’t usually hang around human space. His Mum and Dad had taken them to dragon space for a holiday a few times, and the dragons had been courteous, if a little standoffish. Dragon space had lighter gravity and many small moons.

Their sun was surrounded by a pink halo, and the beaches were amazing rainbows of sands washed by the slow falling waves.

Something must be holding the dragon in human space, and he wondered what it was. No wonder the poor thing had been chomping on a few cows and horses. He wondered about the people. No doubt they had charged the dragon with raised swords to try to drive it off or something, so it was likely that the dragon killed them in self-defence.

He went up to the castle, which was a modest affair, surrounded by a wooden wall. All the doors in the wall were open, so times were peaceful, he supposed. He followed the smell of horses and the stable boy showed him a stall in which he could sleep. The stable boy gave him a bale of straw to make a bed.

“Are you here to kill the dragon?” asked the stable boy. “Have you got a sword?”

“No, I don’t have a sword. But I might see if I can get rid of the dragon for the baron.”

The stable boy snorted. “It’ll eat you up,” he said. “Anyway, come up to the house tomorrow morning and get some breakfast. Dad will be there and you can talk to him about the dragon.”

“Your Dad is the baron?” he asked the stable boy.

“Yep, we’re not like rich folks with lots of money,” the boy laughed. “I hope you’re not looking for a big reward! Because we’re broke practically all the time.”

The oldest son slept well and made his way up to the castle or house as the baron’s son had called it. He went round the back and was invited into the kitchen and the baron’s wife cooked him a big breakfast. The baron was a short cheerful looking man with wispy hair on the sides of his head.

“So you want to take on the dragon, or so my son tells me?” said the baron. “I’m a bit worried about sending you up there, to be honest. So we’ve lost a few sheep and cows, but they aren’t worth a single life. But if you insist, my son will show you the way. How much do you want?”

“How much do I want?” repeated the oldest son, confused.

“If you get rid of the dragon. We don’t have much money.”

“Oh, if I can get rid of it for you, I don’t want anything. I’ll go up today and have a look, and see what the situation is.” He didn’t mention what he knew about dragons.

The baron nodded. “That’s wise,” he said. “The others who tried just went rushing in. Fools! I couldn’t stop them.”

The baron’s son gave him directions. “I’d show you the way, but Dad needs me to do some stuff. I’ve been up there and the dragon pretty much keeps in the cave. If you are just going to have a look, it’s pretty safe.”

The oldest son thanked the baron and his son, and made his way towards a gate in the wooden wall.

“Just a minute,” someone called.

He turned around and saw the most beautiful girl he had ever seen. She looked beautiful from the top of her auburn hair which was pulled back in a ponytail, down to her muddy gumboots. He found

her oval face, her freckles, her work jacket with frayed sleeves and her well-worn blue jeans deeply attractive.

“Are you going to kill the dragon?” she said angrily.

“Not if I can help it,” he said. “Dragons aren’t usually vicious, and they don’t usually stay around for long. They’re noble animals.”

“Oh.” She relaxed. “Only, she’s got eggs.”

“She? Eggs? Really? Have you been in her cave?”

“Yes, though no one will believe me. She’s got about half a dozen eggs. She showed me. And she sort of flickered.”

“Like she was there one instant and not the next?”

“Yes!” The baron’s daughter impulsively grabbed his hand. Her hands were as smooth as silk to his touch, though to honest, they would have felt silky to him if they were rough as sandpaper. They were white as snow against his darker skin. She took her hands back.

“I’m going up there to have a look today. Do you want to come too?” he asked.

She looked over her shoulder at the house.

“Come on then,” she said, and they hurried through the gate.

“Dad won’t mind. Mum might be a bit grumpy,” she said.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“Sian,” she replied.

“Really? So’s mine. S-H-A-U-N.” He laughed.

“Mine is spelled S-I-A-N,” she said. “If you get rid of the dragon, Dad won’t be able to pay you much. We’re not very rich, even though Dad is a baron, and we live in a ‘castle’.”

“I’m not going to ‘get rid’ of the dragon. I’m going to see what is wrong, and I’m doing it for nothing. I feel sorry for the dragon.”

“I’m glad. We’ve all got other jobs apart from the ‘estate’. Mum works in the Mayor’s office, and my brother and I work at the stables in town. I do the books for Dad, and we manage, but we can’t afford a dragon removal bounty.”

They climbed into the hills behind the castle and the town. Big boulders jutted from the grass and scree slopes fanned out from high above. They rounded a huge rock and turned into a grassy valley, and the cave was before them. They crept hand in hand up to the entrance, then Shaun clicked on a torch, and they walked slowly into the darkness.

The red light of the torch showed the dragon sitting on a few sticks and twigs which were a poor excuse for a nest. She saw them and rumbled a little. She moved aside to let them see her eggs.

“How did you see them before?” asked Shaun.

She clicked on her own torch and Shaun laughed gently.

“Sorry,” he said.

The dragon stirred and disappeared and then came back again several times. It was like the flickering of an old movie or television screen. She appeared to be waiting.

“I think I know what’s wrong. Don’t be scared, I’m just going to see where she is going. OK?”

“OK, but don’t be long.”

Shaun stepped through to the dragon space. He quickly swung the light around. He was in a huge cavern with a pile of branches and sticks filling the bottom of it. That was more like it. The dragon popped in and popped out again. He stepped back.

Sian grabbed him and clung on.

“How did you do that? Where did you go?” she said.

She loosed her grip on him, but continued to hold his hand.

“Sorry,” said Shaun. “It’s just that there are other places, just like here. My Mum calls them ‘spaces’. There’s one where the dragons come from and that’s where the mother dragon belongs. She must have stepped to here, and then had to lay her eggs here, and now she can’t leave them. Poor thing. She can’t carry them back. No hands.”

“‘Stepped’?”

“Any living thing can step between spaces, but some, like humans, don’t instinctively know how to. We can carry her eggs back for her. Do you want to try?”

“Oh, yes, but I don’t know how.”

“Hold my hands. Step forward.”

Suddenly they were in the dragon space next to the nest. Sian gasped.

“I feel different. Lighter.”

“That’s the gravity. It’s different here. Can you take us back?”

“I think so,” said Sian. “Ready, step!”

They were back with the mother dragon.

“I did it! But I don’t know how! We can help her. We can carry her eggs back for her!”

They approached the first egg. They crouched down and linked hands at the bottom of the egg and stood up.

“To me, three, two, one, step,” said Shaun.

They were next to the nest. They carefully climbed up the nest, balancing the egg between them, and carefully tipped it into the nest. The egg rolled down to the bottom of the nest.

“Hmm, that’s not so good. The next egg will crash into the first.”

They moved the first egg to one side, so that the next egg would roll past it, then they climbed down from the nest to the place where they had stepped over. Then they stepped back. The mother dragon was flickering back and forth between the dragon space and the human space.

“Next one,” said Sian. “We can do this.”

She was shaking and Shaun held her for a minute until she calmed down.

“OK,” she said. “I’m OK. Let’s do it.”

They picked up the next egg and stepped to the dragon space. They carefully climbed up to the edge of the nest and tipped the egg over. It rolled down the slope and then took a kick off a stray twig and rolled off at an angle.

“Oh no, it’s going to hit the other egg!” said Sian in horror.

The mother dragon flashed into the nest and stopped the rolling egg with her claw. She wagged her head and hissed.

“I think she’s laughing,” said Shaun, “but I’m not sure.”

Sian and Shaun returned to the human space and slowly manhandled the rest of the eggs one by one to the dragon space and into the nest. Each time the mother dragon was there to catch the egg and guide it into a safe position. When the last egg was in place the dragon did a wriggling dance around the nest and trumpeted. It was deafening in the enclosed cave. Then she crouched down and lowered her head in front of the two humans, and finally settled down on the eggs, fussing them into place.

Shaun turned to Sian. “She’s pleased. Do you want to see a little of this space? Dragon nests are usually high up, so it should be a good view.”

They walked towards the opening of the cavern, and emerged onto a wide ledge high in a mountain range. In front of them smaller mountains marched steeply away in a way that would be impossible back in human space, down to a deep green sea. Foaming streams and creeks poured in leisurely fashion down the mountains to the broad valleys and into rivers that meandered slowly to the sea. The sun, as yellow as the human space sun, was high in the sky, surrounded by a pink halo. Ponderous clouds travelled slowly through the sky.

“It’s wonderful!” said Sian. “Oh, look, there are other dragons! Did you know it would be like this?”

He nodded. “I’ve not seen it from so high up myself, as my Mum and Dad only took us to the beaches here. There were small dragons down there, bird sized ones. We called them ‘seagulls’. We could see the big dragons flying high up between the mountains. So I had an idea that it would look like this.”

“If humans can come here, why don’t they? It’s so beautiful.”

“Not many people find it easy. Many have to practise for decades to do it even once. The first time I brought us across, I did all the work. When I asked you to take us back, I was surprised that you managed it right away. You are a special person.”

“And you and your family? Are you special people too?”

Shaun looked at her. “My Mum and Dad are very special. My brothers and I are special. Sian, I like you a lot and hope to get to know you better, but my parents can scare people. Oh they’re really nice, and I love them very much, but they are, as I said, very special, and that scares some people.”

Sian slipped her arm round him. “I want to get to know you better too. I want to meet your family. Let’s see if they scare me. Is it too soon to kiss?”

Shaun showed her that it wasn’t too soon.

They walked back into the cave to the spot where they had stepped over. The mother dragon was asleep but opened one huge golden eye, sighed and closed it again. They stepped back together to the human space.

“We’ve vanquished the dragon,” said Shaun ironically. “But what do we tell people?”

“You used a charm to scare it off? You burnt a chemical that it disliked and it flew off? You threw water on it and it crumbled to dust?” she joked.

“I like the chemical one. I’ll use that. People like physical solutions these days.”

A few days later he walked in the door at home. The Boffin was pleased to see her oldest son back from his quest.

He kissed her and said “Mum, I’m going to be working for a baron about a day west of here.”

“I think I know him,” said the Mage from his chair. “His ‘castle’ is more like a fortified house, and the ‘estate’ has shrunk quite a bit from what it was. A nice bloke though. He refuses to charge his tenants market rates, and has helped a few of them to buy the farms that their families have farmed for generations.”

“That’s the one,” agreed Shaun.

“So, did you find what you needed on your quest?” asked the Boffin.

Shaun nodded. “I think so, Mum. But part of finding what you need is to realise that what you need is not fixed, and changes from time to time. I think I’ve found what I need at the moment, though.”

The Boffin asked “Can you tell us her name, then?”

Her oldest son said “Mum!!!” and blushed furiously.

“My dear,” said the Mage reprovingly. “Don’t tease.”

“Just a lucky guess,” said the Boffin lightly.

The Middle Son Finds His Way

The middle son’s name was Drew. He didn’t much like his name as he had to keep explaining to people that it was just “Drew” and not a shortened form of “Andrew”. He walked along the road until he came to the city, and was amazed at vibrancy of it, and all the bright people who lived there.

He soon got a job, plastering up advertisements on panels and billboards all over the city, though he had to pretend to be older than his fifteen years to get it. He shared a flat with three other boys who were a bit older than him, and set about enjoying the city. He made friends, he went to shows, and visited all the good restaurants, and the bad ones. He tried drinking, but didn't like it much and something in him prevented him from experimenting with drugs.

One day he was passing the theatre and saw a "help wanted" sign, and went in. At first, he saw no one, and then through an open door he saw a boy of about seventeen or eighteen sitting at a mirror removing make-up. The boy was wearing trousers with a thick black and white stripe, and a dark blue jacket with gold buttons.

Drew watched the boy taking off his make-up, fascinated by the process. Suddenly the boy stopped and spun round.

"What are you doing, matey, spying on me like that?"

"Sorry, there's a notice outside about a job. I wasn't spying. I was just interested."

"Norm!" the boy suddenly yelled. "Norm, where are you? We have an intruder."

An older man came into the room.

"What's all the shouting about? Oh, hullo. What can we do for you, son?"

"He's here for a job," said the boy with the make-up.

The older man, Drew judged him to be thirty or more, took him into another office.

"Welcome, sit down, please. Now what attracts you to this madhouse?" said Norm. "All we can offer is backbreaking work for little pay. What's your name? How old are you?"

"My name's Drew. I'm seventeen. I like the idea of working in the theatre. Is it really a madhouse?"

"Crazy, my dear Drew," said Norm. "How old are you again? You look fifteen tops. Have you run away from somewhere?"

Drew admitted he was really fifteen. "I've not run away. I'm on a quest to find the thing that I need the most."

It sounded silly immediately he said it, but Norm merely sniffed and said "Quests? Over-rated".

"OK, Drew, the job is to help out at the theatre, pretty much doing what needs doing. Sweeping, tidying, finding things. We're always losing things. Help with wardrobe, help with the stage wrangling, help with lighting. Help with make-up., help with anything. You can call yourself 'Backstage Manager' if you like. We'll pay you...."

Norm mentioned an incredibly low sum of money. "Well, that doesn't seem to have put you off," he commented when Drew didn't react.

"Can you start tomorrow? I don't open the theatre up until 11 in the morning, but I'll give you a key if you want."

Norm waved a key in the air, then he rummaged in a drawer. After retrieving several keys and comparing them and tossing them back he found a key that matched and handed it over.

“Are you the boss, sir?” asked Drew.

Norm looked at him. “Yes, but don’t call me ‘boss’. Or ‘sir’. I own this heap of rotting timber and bricks. For my sins. Jason!”

The boy with the make-up stuck his head in the door. “What now?”

Norm sighed. “Show Drew where the brooms and things are,” he said. “Please?”

“Come on then,” said Jason, and disappeared.

He showed Drew a cupboard with a few battered brooms, mops and buckets. A stack of rat traps was tumbled at the back. Bottles of cleaning materials sat on the shelves and everything was covered with a thick layer of dust.

“It’s about time we had someone to do the tidying up,” said Jason.

He picked up a toilet plunger and fenced with an invisible enemy.

“What do I have to clean?” asked Drew.

“Everything,” said Jason over his retreating shoulder.

The next day, Drew did a survey of the theatre. From the front of house, to the auditorium to the back of the stage, to the flies high in the roof, to the dressing rooms and offices and facilities. He considered. Apart from the front of house and the auditorium, everything was messy. The only areas backstage which were relatively clear were the passages to and from the dressing rooms, and the offices, swept relatively clean by the movement of people.

He thought for a bit and consulted his mental map. He’d do the areas that took the most traffic first and expand on that. He started sweeping the main passages, taking pains over the corners which had received no care for a long time. He was about two-thirds the way through when he found a chocolate wrapper for a brand which he knew hadn’t existed for years. He was staring at it bemusedly when Norm came along.

“Oh, you’ve started. Good. I was afraid that you’d done a runner. Carry on. The cast will be arriving soon.”

“Who looks after the front of house and the auditorium?” he asked.

“A couple of old ladies who’ve done it for years. I have nightmares where one of them dies. I’d have to get someone in at market rates!”

He absent-mindedly kissed Drew on the cheek and dashed off. Drew was surprised for a minute, but discovered that Norm did this with all the males working in the theatre. There was no doubt that Norm preferred boys to girls, but the kisses didn’t seem to mean anything much. Drew decided to ignore it if it happened again, like everyone else.

The cast started to arrive. The aggressively male leading man shared a dressing room with Jason. They seemed to hate each other, but late one night Drew came across them sharing a bottle of wine quite amicably, so he wasn’t sure what was going on there.

The leading girl was an ethereal blonde who shared her room with the other main female cast member who was a brunette with strong glasses. The blonde didn't so much walk from place to place but waft. Once she got on stage, though, she could act anything from the hero's sweetheart to a tough gangster's moll with ease. The brunette couldn't see without her glasses and had to be directed to the stage. The other actors helped her to move from place to place once she was on it. But she too could take any role and make it her own.

Norm was the only one who didn't share a dressing room, and that was because he used his office. On the other hand, the chorus, an assorted group of six girls who were both singers and dancers shared a dressing room the size of a cupboard and Drew got used to ignoring glimpses of various inadvertently displayed body parts.

The chorus consisted of girls of different body shapes from skinny to not so skinny. Their heights varied from tiny to willowy. They were used to performing as swans, policemen, showgirls, or even a Greek chorus. Their voices harmonised reasonably well, and they filled in odd roles such as "a maid" or "a passer-by" or even "a bear in the forest". They were the backbone of the company, and they were treated really badly. They didn't seem to mind.

When there was a performance Drew set up the properties table, and retrieved the properties when they were carried off-stage or at the end of a performance. Sometimes he had to hunt for them, as the cast tended to leave them almost anywhere.

He looked after the costume department too, washing them when they started to whiff, and mending them when they got torn. His mother would have been surprised. No, astounded! Now and then he stood in on stage if the company was short of a messenger, or a centurion, or a farmer. If the prompt boy was sick he sat in a little box under the front of the stage, with the script, feeding the lines if anyone forgot them.

He loved the life, and moved to an apartment closer to the theatre. He completely cleaned up and tidied up the theatre. His props were immaculate, over time his costumes were impressive. He started to dress like his fellows at the theatre. His clothes became brighter and more outgoing, unlike his previously more usual anonymous browns, greens and greys.

One day he was leaving the theatre early in the morning after tidying up after a performance. He locked the theatre door, and walked down the alleyway to the main road. Several lads were loitering around the entrance to the alleyway.

"There's one," said one of them. They were all close-cropped, while Drew had let his hair grow long. The lads all wore t-shirts, short legged blue jeans with large black boots. They were all tattooed on arms, legs and faces.

They closed in around Drew as he walked down the alleyway.

"Where do you think are you going?"

"Home. Let me through, guys."

Someone punched him on the ear and as he turned they hit him in the mouth, splitting his lip. Someone tripped him and he fell onto his back. He was kicked in the head, and then someone kicked him in the stomach and in the back.

“Hey! What’s going on?” someone shouted.

He rolled up in a ball, and they stopped kicking him. He heard various cries and thumps as a fight went on above him. A face appeared in front of him as he lay there. One of the punks. He was bleeding from the nose. Someone pulled the punk up out of his line of sight.

“Let’s get out of here!” said someone in a panic.

Everything went quiet. Then Norm’s face appeared in front of him.

“Let’s get you back inside, chook,” he said.

Norm half carried him back inside the theatre and settled him on the couch in his office.

“I saw those guys earlier, so I hung around. Sorry I didn’t get there quick enough. Let’s get you to hospital.”

“No!” said Drew jerking upright before sinking back. He pulled his amulet from around his neck and pressed the jewel.

Instantly the Boffin appeared in the room.

“Holy ghost!” said Norm.

“Not quite,” said the Boffin. “I’ll explain later. What’s been going on here?”

She checked out her son, and ran one of her instruments up and down him.

“Hmm, mostly superficial. Kidney is bruised. You’ll be pissing blood for a day or so, but that’s all, fortunately. Mild brain contusion. It’ll fix itself. Cut above the eyebrow. I’ll stitch that. Split lip. Some bruises.”

“Mum, can we go home? I’d like to see Dad. I want to come back here, but I think my quest is over.”

“Sure. Want to come?” she asked Norm.

Norm nodded, and suddenly they were home, in the Boffin and the Mage’s kitchen.

Norm sat down heavily on a chair.

“Wow!” he said. “I was expecting you to call a cab. How did you do that? Am I dreaming?”

“Sorry, I’ll explain later, but you’re going to forget all this when we take you back,” said the Boffin.

Norm nodded. “That’s fine by me. It’s pretty scary. Who are you people?”

The Mage, who was looking a little startled himself, said “You’re actually taking it really well. What’s happened here?”

“Oh, I noticed some punks hanging around, so I stayed nearby. Drew came out, and they jumped him, and I wasn’t quick enough to stop them. Sorry, Drew.”

“S’OK, Norm” said Drew, drowsily, “How did you manage to handle them? There were, what, four of them?”

“My big secret, lovely boy. I was in the Army. Special Services. Those punks didn’t stand a chance, really.”

“Thanks, pal,” said Drew. “Stitch me up, Mum. I need to sleep I think.”

When Drew had been patched up and sent to bed, the Boffin said “We’re really grateful to you, Norm, for what you did. We could have patched up pretty much any injury, but if they’d killed him...”

Norm said “No worries. I love the little so-and-so. He’s like the son I can never have.”

The Mage laughed and clapped him on the shoulder. He felt Norm’s future.

“You know, Norm, I can see that you are lonely, but I think that there’s someone out there for you, somewhere,” said the Mage.

Norm laughed. “Better late than never I suppose. Do you want to take me back now? I’ll leave Drew in your capable hands for now. I hope he comes back to the theatre.”

The next day Drew woke up.

“Where’s Norm?”

“We took him back, dear. He hopes you’ll go back when you are better. What do you think?”

“Yeah, definitely, I’ll go back. I was so happy there. But I think that my quest is over. ‘What I need the most?’ It changes all the time. One minute I need friends. Then I need a job. Then I need something that I enjoy. And all the time I need family. There’s never any one thing.”

He coughed. “Ouch! Why didn’t my amulet protect me?” he wondered.

“Oh, it did. It got Norm to hang around.”

“Hmm, that’ll do as a working hypothesis,” he said thoughtfully, teasing his mother with one of her favourite sayings.

The Youngest Son meets a Gremlin

None of the Mage and the Boffin’s sons were unintelligent. In fact, they were brighter than most, but the youngest son was the brightest of the three. He’d deduced that they were being watched well before his brothers did, and what is more he’d worked out how.

When they reached the second crossroads and met up again, his scan did indeed show no science, just as his brother’s scan showed no magic. But he knew how his parents had done that too, and showed them that he knew it with a wink.

As he wasn’t a silly lad he left the Mage and Boffin’s protection stuff in place. After all, he might be in dire need of the protection at some time. He was only twelve years old, and he knew that there were plenty of things that he would not be able to handle by himself.

However, he was happy as he walked along his branch of the road. It was nice to get out by himself. He loved his brothers but sometimes felt overshadowed by them. He was passed by a few cars steaming down the road and wondered if he should thumb a lift. No, he’d do it the hard way. He continued walking.

The sun sank lower in the sky, and he thought about stopping for the night. In the end he just hopped over a hedge and picked a grassy spot away from the crops in the field. He opened a flap of his backpack and removed a silver pearl. He held it in the palm of his hand and passed the other hand over it, and he was holding a lightweight tent.

He set up the tent and then cooked his meal over a small stove that he also popped out of a silver pearl. He wondered whether his brothers had packed any camping gear, and smiled. Probably not. He sat and watched the stars wheeling slowly in the sky until the moon came up and blotted most of them out. An owl sat in a nearby tree and regarded him curiously, then flew silently away. A hedgehog snuffled past. The youngest son popped out his sleeping bag and slept soundly in his small tent.

In the morning he cooked an oatmeal porridge. He was just halfway through eating it when he realised that he was being watched. A young girl was seated cross-legged on the other side of the stove. He'd not noticed her arrive.

"I hate oatmeal, me," she said. "Got any bacon?"

"No!" he said surprised. "Where did you come from?"

"Farm," she said gesturing over her shoulder. "I get out early, or they give me work to do."

She was smaller than him, but probably around his age, he decided. She had dark ebony skin, darker even than his own dark skin, and had curly black hair much like his. When she grinned, which was most of the time, her teeth showed bright white. She wore a t-shirt which was meant for someone much larger and which was printed with a cartoon of a stylised rodent, and jeans cut off to shorts. Her shoes were sneakers that had seen better days.

"What's your name?" she asked. "I'm Susan, but they always call me Gremlin."

She flashed him what she intended to be an evil grin.

"Hullo, Gremlin. I'm Cam. What do you do, Gremlin, when you aren't bumming breakfast off strangers."

She shrugged. "Stuff. Farm work if I can't get away from Uncle. Cooking with Auntie if I'm lucky. School sometimes, but they are nasty to me there. Just stuff."

"Stuff that doesn't involve washing it seems."

She jumped up. "You're mean! Just like the rest of them."

Tears streamed down her dirty face.

He jumped up too. "I'm sorry. That **was** mean of me. I apologise. I'm used to fighting with my big brothers."

She sat down again. "OK."

"The waterworks switched off pretty quickly."

"Yeah, it's a trick. I was annoyed though. On the farm we don't have tap water and washing in the trough is pretty stink."

“Really?”

“No, I just made that up.”

“Are you naturally annoying or is it a lifestyle choice, Gremlin?”

She grinned at him. “Come and meet my family. They’ll give you a job, even if you are a tramp.”

“A tramp? At least I shower now and then.”

“So do I. Fell in the pigpen on the way here.”

“Is that true?”

She just laughed. Cam packed up his camp, which wasn’t made easy by Gremlin who wanted to look at everything. He had to use misdirection to shrink his stuff down to pearls. He slung his backpack on and followed her to the farm.

“How’d you do that pearl thing?” she asked.

“You spotted that? Rats!”

“Can’t trick a trickster.”

“Sorry, I can’t tell you that.”

“OK. I’ll find out eventually.”

“No you won’t.”

“Yes I will,” she said confidently.

They arrived at the farm. Cam wouldn’t have been surprised if Gremlin had introduced her parents, but no, he was introduced to her aunt and uncle. The farmhouse was clean and relatively tidy, and her aunt and uncle both had the same dark skin and curly hair as Gremlin. When her aunt saw how dirty she was, she sent Gremlin off to the shower.

“And put some decent clothes on,” her aunt called after her.

“We buy her good clothes, but she insists on wearing that t-shirt and those awful shoes, most of the time.”

“So you want a job on the farm, do you? You’re a bit young. What are you, twelve?” asked the uncle.

“That was Gremlin’s idea, but yes, it’s a good one. I’ll do anything, well, anything I can manage. Perhaps you’d like to look at this letter from my parents, sir.”

He passed over the paper, but the uncle shoved it over to his wife.

“Sorry son, I can’t read. Something up here won’t let me learn, the doctors said.” He tapped his head. He didn’t seem worried.

“Your mother has given us contact information if we need it. She says it’s OK for you to travel by yourself. You’re on a quest. Well I never!” said Gremlin’s auntie. “We can put him in Jim’s room.”

Cam came to call them Uncle and Auntie just like Gremlin. Uncle and Auntie had five sons and Jim, the middle son was away at university. The farm was a moderate size and with four sons and Uncle, and with Cam's help and Gremlin's help no one was too overworked.

Gremlin's help was often worse than no help at all, though. Her main chore was the pigs and Cam was assigned to help her, most days. Mucking them out often ended with them both covered in pig poo. Or Cam drenched by the hose. He watched Gremlin closely and was fairly sure she wasn't doing it on purpose. But he wasn't certain.

Gremlin found out about the quest.

"What's that all about?" she asked. They had taken a break from the pig poo and Gremlin was about three or four metres up an oak tree. Cam was sitting at the bottom praying that she didn't slip or break a branch. There was a sudden crack.

"Oops. Good job I didn't put my weight on that branch."

She shinned down the tree.

"Well?"

"It was my brothers' idea. I thought it was a bit silly actually, but it sounded fun."

"Is it? I bet they're rescuing princesses and becoming famous. And you're mucking out pigs."

"Yeah," he said, chewing on a bit of grass. "I don't mind. I like it. But I might be going home soon. School is starting soon. Was it true about you being bullied at school?"

"Sort of," she said. "They teased me at first. Then they didn't."

She looked at a beetle crawling up a grass stem.

"Hmmm?" Cam said.

"Nothing like that!" protested Gremlin, though Cam wondered what she was denying. "I think that Auntie had a word with the teacher. When Auntie 'has a word', things happen".

"Gremlin, can I ask, what happened to your Mum and Dad? You don't have to answer."

"No, it's all right. I don't remember them much. I was too small. Mum was Auntie's sister, and Dad was from a farm down the road. When Mum and Dad got married he came to live with Auntie and Uncle. Something about his parents not approving."

"Mum had me and then caught the flu and died. Medicines didn't help. Dad went crazy for a while, I think, but then he was getting better. I just remember him playing with me on the big carpet."

She paused and thought.

"Then me Dad was found in the river, tangled with some roots. He'd been clearing the bank and cutting back the willows. He'd slipped and fallen in and got caught by the roots. Some people said he'd killed himself, but it didn't make sense. Why do it that way? And there were marks on the bank. Auntie 'had a word' and the rumours stopped."

Cam was silent for a bit.

"You're wondering if the story was true," said Gremlin. "Or if it was another of my tall stories."

She seemed hurt. Cam looked at her.

"I don't think it was a story. I wasn't wondering that. I was wondering how losing my Dad and Mum would have affected me."

Gremlin burst into tears. "Thanks for believing me," she said. Gremlin crying for real was a lot different from Gremlin putting it on. He didn't know what to do, so he patted her shoulder.

"I have a cry like that every once in a while," she said. "Then I'm all right. Anyway, let's go and see if there are conkers on the Horse Chestnut tree!"

"Wrong season," said Cam, but she was off and running. He sighed, and got up and followed her.

That evening after the evening meal he was helping Auntie with the washing up.

"I have to go home," he said. "It's been a while."

"Noooo! Not so sooooo!" said Gremlin. "We've been having fun! You can't go!"

She ran up and started pummelling him.

"That's enough!" said Auntie, quite mildly. Gremlin stopped, but she was still crying.

"It's not fair," she said. About nothing in particular.

"In the morning?" asked Auntie.

"Yes, I think so. It will take me all day to get home, so I'd better start early."

Gremlin rushed off crying. Cam went to follow her, but Auntie gestured for him to stay there.

"Thanks for your help, son," said Uncle. "You've been a great help."

"With the pigs?" asked Cam, puzzled. He hadn't done an awful lot, if he thought about it.

"With Gremlin. She gets a bit bored, and if she gets bored, she gets silly, and if she gets silly, accidents sometimes happen."

"Remember when she fell through the roof of the chicken shed?" reminisced Auntie. "Of course we should have spotted that it was going rotten. Chickens and straw and bits of roof everywhere! No eggs for two days."

She turned to Cam. "Don't worry, Cam. I'll talk to her later. I'll make you some sandwiches for your journey."

The next morning, Cam woke up early. He went downstairs and Auntie made him breakfast.

"Gremlin's already gone out," said Auntie. "She's calmed down a bit. If you go out by the pig sty she might be there."

"Thanks Auntie. Thanks for everything," said Cam and gave her a hug, picked up his backpack and left.

He went out by the sty. Gremlin wasn't there, but the sty was as spotlessly clean as a sty could be. The pigs had been fed and were lying contentedly on the straw. He looked around a bit and then

decided that he needed to get a move on. As he walked towards the road, Gremlin slid down from the roof unseen and watched him go. She sniffed. Then she sniffed again.

Cam walked along the road towards home in two minds. He had enjoyed living with Gremlin's family. True, Gremlin was annoying and irritating, but she was also interesting and fun to be with. He was still looking forward to getting home, telling his parents about his 'quest', and finding out how his brothers had done. He was happy with what he had achieved, even though it didn't amount to much, really.

He got to the point where the brothers had parted, and because his mother had been teasing them on the way out, he wasn't sure of the way home. He pulled an instrument from his backpack and scanned all three roads and started down the one that his instrument had told him was the correct one. Then he frowned and paused. He pulled out his instrument again and looked at it. At extreme range it showed someone behind him, just behind the dry stone wall around a field.

He walked a little further down the road and the person behind him followed him behind the wall. He turned and looked back. No one. Uh-oh. He carried on at the speed that he had been travelling before, until he reached a point where there was a gate, set back a little from the road. The stone walls and the gate formed a small rectangle. He ducked into the space and waited. Someone came crashing along on the field side, detouring further into the field to pass the gate.

"Gremlin!" he cried. "I knew it was you." She shrieked and then swore.

"That's not very nice," he said. "What are you doing, following me? What about your Auntie and Uncle?"

Gremlin started sobbing as she climbed over the gate.

"You're angry! It was such fun having you there, I wanted to come with you. I left a note for Auntie. She won't mind."

"Of course she'll mind! What were you thinking?"

"Auntie and Uncle are nice and so are my cousins, but I'm the odd one out."

"Oh, Gremlin, you're not the odd one out! They love you. All of them."

"What am I going to do?" she wailed. "They're going to h-h-hate me!"

"I doubt that!" he said, giving her a hug. "Anyway, let's carry on to our house. It's not far. Then we can see what we can do to sort out this mess. Mum's good at that sort of thing. Oh, Gremlin!"

"I know, I know, I'm stupid, aren't I?"

They walked up the road towards Cam's home, with Gremlin criticising herself at every step. Eventually Cam stopped dead.

"Gremlin, will you stop! We'll sort this out. What's the worst that could happen?"

"Your Mum could throw me out. My Auntie and Uncle could throw me out. I'd not have a h-h-h-home!"

“Gremlin! Now you are being ridiculous. Firstly my Mum wouldn’t throw you out and secondly your Auntie and Uncle both love you. They’d definitely not throw you out.”

Gremlin blew her nose noisily. “I know. You are right of course. I’m silly, aren’t I? I’m behaving like I’m five or something.”

“Irritating, maybe. Annoying, maybe. But silly? No. If I know my Mum, I’m going to get blamed.”

They wandered on and eventually reached Cam’s home. Cam practically had to pull Gremlin through the door.

“Mum, I’m home,” he called. “And I’ve got a surprise.”

The Boffin came in from the kitchen closely followed by the Mage. The Boffin rushed up to her son and kissed him.

“Who’s this?” she asked.

“Some urchin I found on the road, Mum.”

“Cam,” wailed Gremlin.

“Mum, this is Gremlin. I’ve been working on her Uncle’s farm for the last few weeks. She followed me home.”

“Cam,” wailed Gremlin again.

“Stop teasing her, Cam. It’s not funny.”

“Well, you did!” said Cam to Gremlin.

“No I didn’t. Well, yes, I did.”

“You’re welcome here, my dear, but I sense that there’s some problem. Did you run away from your Auntie and Uncle, dear?”

Gremlin gulped. “Yes, sort of. I was just following Cam.”

“I can’t imagine why. He’s nothing to write home about.”

Cam snorted.

“We had such fun. I didn’t want it to stop. Am I silly?”

“No dear,” said the Mage. “Just a little impetuous. Like others that I know,” he said looking at the Boffin.

“Yes, well,” said the Boffin, elbowing her spouse gently in the midriff, “Anyway, you’re welcome, Gremlin, dear. We can sort this out.”

She hugged the girl and gave her a handkerchief to blow her nose.

“Thanks,” said Gremlin. “Thank you.”

She hugged the Boffin back.

Later the Mage came up behind the Boffin and put his arm around her. She turned her face up for a kiss. He obliged.

“You’re thinking of us, many years ago,” he stated.

The Boffin listened to Cam and Gremlin bickering in the sitting room. She sighed.

“Yes. It’s been so long. And we were a lot older when we met.”

“Do you regret it?”

“No, not an instant of it.”

“Same here. Why do they remind you of us? We never argued, did we?”

“No, my love, we never have. But there’s something. Can we hand the baton on, perhaps?”

“Cam’s the ultimate Boffin, but he understands that magic has a power. Do you see her as the Mage? She’s certainly all feeling and emotion. A little raw perhaps. No control.”

“Maybe. Just maybe. Early days yet. Anyway, she’s one of yours. Definitely.”

“I wonder what it is like to grow old?” he said. “You know, we have this discussion every hundred years or so, don’t we?”

“We’ll find out some time. Maybe this time, maybe not.”

The next day the Mage and the Boffin, with Cam and Gremlin, took a trip to Gremlin’s home. Their car took only a couple of hours to complete the journey even with a stop to top up the water and to burn some more wood to build up the steam pressure.

Gremlin’s Auntie and Uncle hugged Gremlin until she was short of breath.

“You’ve given us such a fright,” said Auntie, kissing her. “What have you been up to?”

“Oh Auntie, I’m sorry. I was silly. I was having so much fun with Cam that I wanted it to carry on.”

“Silly girl!” said Auntie.

“Well,” said the Boffin, “we don’t mind having her with us for a while, if that’s OK with you. She could go to school with Cam, since she’s the same age, more or less. How about we send them back to you in the holidays?”

Auntie looked at her. “Let’s take a walk, just the two of us,” she suggested.

The Boffin and Auntie took a walk outside. They looked at each other.

“Don’t I know you from somewhere?” asked Auntie.

The Boffin considered. Should she suggest Auntie look in the mirror? True, they had different skin colours, different hair and even different body shapes, but Auntie might have the eyes to see.

“I don’t think so,” said the Boffin eventually. “But I’ve got relatives over this way.”

Auntie returned to the topic of Cam and Gremlin.

“Me and Uncle have been together since we were kids. We weren’t a couple until we were fifteen, sixteen. We got married at eighteen. You think that Gremlin and Cam are the same? I’ve been wondering myself.”

“Yes, we think that they may be. I’m almost certain. We were older when I met my husband, but we married as soon as we could, and have rarely been apart.”

Auntie nodded. “OK. You have her for the term, and we’ll have her back in the holidays. Send Cam too, of course. Agreed?”

“Of course. Agreed.”

So Gremlin came to live with the Mage and the Boffin and Auntie and Uncle watched them all go off in the car. She said to Uncle “I’m sure I know her. I’m certain. But where....?”

One day Cam came in and saw the Mage teaching Gremlin how to compress things to a pearl.

She smirked and said “Told you so!”

Cam was both annoyed at her and pleased for her, which confused him. He went in search of his mother, and asked her why.

“How did your Quest go?” asked the Boffin.

“Quest? What’s that to do with anything? What did I need the most? Well, that changes all the time, of course. There’s not one single thing.”

He thought a bit. “Well, I’ve been the youngest brother all my life. My brothers have always looked after me. Gremlin’s sort of like a younger sister to me. I’m always looking out for her. Maybe that’s what I need at the moment?”

The Boffin nodded, a bit sadly. Soon her baby was going to grow up. When she touched Gremlin or Cam she could feel the bond between them so strongly that she knew that it was for life. It was a bitter-sweet sensation for her. One that she’d had many times in her life.

The End of the Quest

The three brothers were gathered round the table at home. Sian happened to be visiting, and she and Gremlin were out walking somewhere. The Mage and the Boffin had gone to the market shopping.

“I hear that you ‘slew a dragon’, Shaun,” said Drew.

“Yeah, that’s what people say. It’s silly really. You’ve heard the real story of course?”

“Sian told us,” said Cam. “She’s nice.”

Shaun nodded. “Yeah, I know.”

He turned to his brother. “I like Gremlin. She’s funny.”

“I know,” said Cam. “She’s a great kid.”

His older brothers looked at each other and Shaun raised his eyebrows. Drew nearly laughed but suppressed it.

“What about you, Drew? Got any girl friends?” said Shaun.

“One or two,” said Drew. He wasn’t going to give anything away. As second brother he was always looking for an advantage over his big brother.

Shaun was disappointed. “What about the Quest?” he said.

“‘The thing that you need the most.’ That’s what we were looking for, wasn’t it?”

“It changes all time, doesn’t it. It can be more than one thing,” said Shaun. “I’d say Sian at the moment. If we stay together, as I think we will, then what? A home? A career? A family? All three? At this point I don’t know. But when the time comes, I’ll know, I think.”

“I’d say Gremlin,” said Cam.

His brothers looked at him and he blushed.

“What? She’s just a pal!”

His brothers just smiled.

Drew said “At the moment, I’d say the theatre. I get so much joy out of it. I’ve not met the girl yet who means more to me than the theatre, but I think that I probably will. I’ll always love the theatre though. Does that sound silly?”

Shaun and Cam shook their heads.

“Quest over?” asked Shaun.

“Quest over,” agreed Cam and Drew.

“You know,” said Cam. “I realised when I was coming back home that we’d rarely been away from Mum and Dad before. I was pleased that I’d managed OK by myself.”

“Me too,” said Shaun. “I’m glad I was able to help out that dragon. And the baron.”

“I’m the odd one out again,” said Drew. “I had to call Mum in, and I didn’t bring back a girl, like you two lover boys.”

The Boffin had just returned home and heard the last bit.

“You all did really well,” she said. “Drew, it wasn’t your fault that you got jumped by a bunch of punks. Norm was raving about the brilliant job you were doing at the theatre.”

“Actually, guys, Dad and I were wondering when you were going to stretch your wings a little. We thought of forcing the issue, but decided to let things happen naturally, and they did. One thing though — you didn’t bring back any tomatoes.”
