

## **Into the Sorcerer's Lair**

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*“If the sorcerer is defeated in single combat, all that he has made shall be unmade.”*

Ember recalled the ancient prophesy with a sigh. “Tonight,” she thought. Tonight would be the night that she ran away.

When she was seven, Ember Yates’ parents were captured by an evil sorcerer in a raid. Although her peasant aunts had been forced by the law to adopt her, being the nearest biological relatives that she had, they had done so reluctantly, treating it as a tedious duty. Often she had gazed longingly out her window at the lair of the sorcerer, the Black Mountain (although strictly speaking it was a plateau), where she knew her parents were imprisoned. She had frequently tried to convince her aunts to let her try to rescue her parents, but they had always refused.

“What would you know about fighting? You’re just a peasant girl!” they would say.

“Maybe you are, but I’m not,” she would reply. In her mind, she would always be the daughter of her father, the daughter of a soldier.

Twice, she had tried to run away, once when she was nine, and once when she was twelve; twice, she had been caught and punished. This time—the third time—she was more determined than ever to succeed.

In the darkness of the pre-dawn morning, while her aunts were still sleeping, Ember crept past the room where her aunts slept. Entering the kitchen, she took out her bag and packed some food and a few canteens of water. As her aunts, being peasants, had no weapons, she instead took a small cooking pot in place of a helmet, a frying pan for a shield, and a wooden ladle in her left hand (for she was left-handed) as a sword.

The main village lay in the route to the sorcerer’s prison, so Ember had no choice but to stop by. As she drew nearer and the sun broke the horizon, she heard the clash of steel on steel; not the sound of merchants haggling over prices, or the clamor of animals in pens bleating, but the sound of combat. Over in the center square, where precious stones and jewelry were normally sold, three armed bandits had looted the stalls, stuffing what they could carry into a small canvas bag, and scattering what they could not. A lone soldier stood in the middle of the chaos, surrounded by two sword-wielding bandits, while on a nearby rooftop, an arbalist was loading a bolt into his crossbow. Although he fought bravely, he was sure to be overwhelmed.

Without pausing, Ember charged, silently but swiftly, across the deserted streets and towards the swordsmen. Since the arbalist was busy loading his weapon, and the swordsmen were fighting the solider, none of them noticed her at first as she rushed towards them. Raising her frying pan, she prepared to strike. Just as the first swordsman heard her footsteps and turned around, Ember hit him directly on the skull. His eyes glazed over, and his weapon and body dropped to the ground.

While the solider forced the second bandit back, Ember turned to face the arbalist; as he fired at this new threat, she raised her frying pan shield to block the projectile. The crossbow bolt hit the iron pan with a *clang*; the projectile fell to the ground, its tip dented from the impact. With a flick of her wrist, Ember sent her heavy ladle spinning through the air to collide with the arbalist's head, knocking him out. Seeing that he was now outnumbered, the last bandit surrendered. While the solider was busy binding the bandits' wrists, Ember retrieved her ladle and slipped away.

Walking along the dusty dirt road under the mid-morning sun, Ember came to the river that marked the boundary of the sorcerer's dominion. The river carried powerful undercurrents fueled by snowmelt that frequently dragged swimmers under, forcefully smashing them on the rocks below. As the sorcerer controlled the river and surrounding territory, there was, not surprisingly, no bridge. Signs reading "Danger! Do not enter!" were posted every few meters along the river banks.

Ignoring the signs, Ember put her ladle, frying pan, and cooking pot in her bag, then threw the bag over the water to the other side.

"You're not thinking about swimming the river, are you?" a voice asked from above.

Ember looked upwards towards the speaker, who happened to be a raven.

"How else would I get across?" she asked. "It's the only way that I can rescue my parents."

"Ah, another upstart adventurer. Well, girl, you're not the first. I've seen over a hundred would-be heroes enter these waters; less than a third made it to the other shore without drowning, freezing, or turning back. Of those that did make it out, perhaps half a dozen actually made it inside his lair, none of whom has ever returned."

Tuning out the talkative raven and taking a deep breath, Ember dove into the frigid water.

The current was even stronger than it had appeared from the land. Swirling in the water, Ember barely managed to avoid hitting a thick tree branch as it spun

past her. Suddenly, the current changed, pulling her downwards. She nearly inhaled a mouthful of water as she was dragged under; only by vigorously fighting the current was she able to prevent herself from being battered on the rocks below. She was spun around and around, violently pushed to and fro by the merciless, icy river. As Ember, her lungs burning for air, her skin freezing with cold, struggled forwards, she felt her fingertips brush the riverbank. Gasping for air, she managed to pull herself up onto the shore.

As she lay there, resting after the exhausting swim a few minutes before, she recalled again the ancient prophecy.

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Ember retrieved her bag, and resumed her journey under the midday sun.

After a few miles, Ember reached the sheer rock face that formed the Black Mountain, on top of which the sorcerer’s lair was built. Since it was impossible to build a path up a vertical rock face, Ember realized that she would have to climb the mountain by hand. Knowing full well that if she fell, she fell to her death, she began to climb, wedging her ladle into handholds. As the day wore on and the shadows began to lengthen again, she reached a ledge midway up that jutted out from the rest of the mountain. From the outcropping, far below her, she could see the smoke rising from the village; far above her, the sorcerer’s lair loomed over her, casting a shadow that enveloped the rocks in darkness.

Finally, Ember reached the top of the rock face. As she scrambled onto the flat ground, she took a few seconds to catch her breath, inhaling the thin air on top of the plateau. Surveying the deserted landscape around her, she realized how empty it was, devoid of even the slightest sign of life. Without birds filling the sky with their songs, or cows lowing mournfully, or rabbits bounding across the ground, the terrain seemed barren as an alien planet. And in the middle of the plateau, towering over the surrounding landscape, casting a shadow like a sundial, a shadow as black as itself, stood the sorcerer’s lair.

Without hesitation, without faltering, Ember walked to the entrance of the lair. A sphinx, half-human and half-lion, barred her path.

“Halt! State your name and the nature of your business!” the sphinx ordered.

“I’m Ember Yates, and I’m to see the sorcerer,” Ember replied.

“Anyone wishing to enter must answer my riddle,” the sphinx said, leaning back on its paws. “The riddle is this: ‘The first brother huffs, the second brother grumbles, the third brother weeps, and the fourth brother shines, yet all are born of one. Who are they?’”

“They are wind, thunder, rain, and lightning; all born of a storm,” Ember answered confidently.

“You may pass.”

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Outlined in red against the dying sun, Ember strode confidently into the hall of the sorcerer. The octagonal room, made completely of obsidian, was as black as a nightmare, with blood-red torches that cast the room into an eerie light. In the exact center of the room, seated on an iron throne, was the sorcerer. His right hand held an ornately jeweled staff, which glowed purple with magic. Ember raised her weapons for battle.

“I challenge you to single combat!” Ember shouted; her voice reverberated around the room.

When the sorcerer saw Ember, outfitted with weapons from her aunts’ kitchen, he began to laugh. He laughed so hard, in fact, that tears filled his eyes, and he bent over double with laughter. Wiping the tears from his eyes, the sorcerer raised his staff to blast Ember to dust—but she was gone. He turned around, just in time to receive Ember’s frying pan directly on his forehead. He fell; Ember snatched his staff out of the air, then slammed it on the pedestal of the iron throne. With a sound like rushing wind, the base fragmented into iron filings. Then, in an expanding wave of destruction and a noise like a rumbling earthquake, the entire lair of the sorcerer began to disintegrate. And through the rubble and clouds of dust, as the walls crumbled around her, Ember could see two figures, vague at first but growing clearer and clearer by the second—her parents.

For Ember, it was a day of beginnings, but her adventure had finally reached the end.