

The Great Reunion Mountain Hike

by Hacker



It all started going downhill one week before the Great Reunion Trip, over lunch at the Salamander Arms, when Kayce said to Brock, “I think you’d better tell her.” Beside her, Alegi nodded, and folded his massive arms gravely.

Another dwarf would have grumbled about being thrust on the spot to, so to speak, brave the dragon-flame. But not for nothing was Brock known as the most charming dwarf this side of the Windermere Mountains, and the unofficial leader of the group. He merely nodded, and turned to the human sitting beside him.

“Tamara,” Brock said kindly, “Kayce, Alegi and I would love to, but... we wanted to tell you that we can’t come with you on the trip next week. Our families have all made sudden demands on us. Maybe we can go next season, is that alright, m’dear?”

Tamara reacted with none of her legendary temper. Instead, she merely put down the spoon she had been chasing the remnants of her rhubarb crumble with, and looked forlorn and miserable. It cut them all deeper than if she had lashed out as usual, and they hurried to fill the deepening silence with explanations.

“The movers had to reschedule, so now Sigi and I have to move to our new home that very week,” said Brock.

“My mother broke her leg, and no-one else in the family can help,” said Alegi. “She cannot do even the simplest tasks, let alone feed all the farm animals.”

“My family has requested my presence at the Midwinter Ball,” said Kayce, “I think they will be formally announcing my sister’s betrothal. I can’t skip out, I’d risk offending the whole clan – *both* clans.”

Tamara said, with a hint of the old fire, “B-but... we’d been planning this for ages... this was our tenth anniversary... it was going to be one last adventure...”

Brock reached over and took her hand and patted it gently, “Lassie, we had our last adventure years ago. We’re all just civilians now. Farmers and shopkeepers, with family to consider.” He looked across the table to the fifth member of the party. “Right, Jared?”

Jared smiled sadly. “Kayce, you’re now a full Ranger-Captain of the Clan Greenleaf, commanding sixty Elven bows. Brock has a wife, children, and a fine workshop of his very own. Alegi and I have thriving farms on good land; and you, Tamara, have your apothecary.” He shook his head. “We’ve become respectable. We’ve become *responsible*.”

“I miss the old days too,” said Kayce. “But we’ll always have the memories.”

“So we will.” Alegi raised his flagon of strong orc-beer. “To us.”

“To us,” everyone chorused, including Tamara, sadly.

They spent the rest of the evening talking about the good old days. Everyone did their best to be specially nice to Tamara, retelling the old stories where she had been the hero, when she had saved the dwarf twins from drowning, when she had unlocked the Puzzle Box of the Qing Warriors, when she had cured them and the whole village of spring pox. But Jared couldn’t stop thinking how wistful she looked throughout. He thought about his own plans for the midwinter – to slaughter his hogs himself and save a couple of extra hams; to build a new chicken coop; to clear out a small new field for beans. He thought about how pretty Tamara looked even when she was sad, and how much prettier she would look if she would smile. He thought about getting another beer.

So after three more beers and a round of elven apple brandy, and another beer for the road, when Kayce and Brock were busy loading an extremely cheerful orc into a haycart while themselves three sheets to the wind, Jared took her aside. “I’ll go with you,” he said.

“Whuh...?”

“You, me, the high country trail... I’ll go with you. Two weeks. We won’t go anywhere really dangerous, but let’s just go see what the slopes of the Windermers looks like these days. Something like a, a, a mountain hike.”

Tamara’s face lit up, then she said, “What about your farm?”

“I’ll get Gwen to see to the animals, maybe send her boy Davey over every couple of days. She won’t mind, and neither will the stock. What are sisters for anyway?”

Tamara threw her arms around him and squeezed tight. “Oh, sweet gods, Jared, you’re the best!”

Yes, she did look positively radiant when she was happy, thought Jared. He wished he could keep his friend this happy forever.

* * *

And four days later they were on the trail again. That is to say, the Meduwang-Snawaholt Road, or what everyone called the “high country trail”, a scenic path that led up the side of the Windermere mountain range, through the imaginatively-named Gap Pass, over Haven Peak, and down the other side. But Jared and Tamara had agreed to turn back upon reaching the Gap, as they had no intention of descending down the wilder, more untamed side of the Windermere. It would just be a nice country walk.

They walked, because the trail in winter was hardly more than a footpath barely navigable by mules and goats. They wore thick woolen shirts and pants under hooded travelling cloaks – Tamara added a fashionable tartan skirt to her ensemble – and heavy walking boots. They both also wore light tunics of fine dwarven mail; Jared had a hand-and-half strapped to his back, and Tamara her belt of charms and throwing knives.

Tamara took in deep breaths of the fresh mountain air, and laughed from sheer delight. “Dear Moon Goddess, it’s great to be out of that poky old town!” she exclaimed.

“Don’t you like it there?” asked Jared.

“The people are there, and my work is tending to the people. But if not for them, I’d much rather live in the country, like you and Alegi do.”

“So move to the country.”

Tamara laughed at the idea. “Where would I go? What would I do? I’d hate to be just a farmer’s wife.”

“Nobody said you had to be farmer’s wife.”

“Have you ever seen any lady in the countryside who’s not a farmer’s wife, or farmer’s daughter? No, don’t answer that. Look at those majestic junipers!”

When they weren’t exploring the country around them, they talked, mostly about people. In ten years of adventuring they had met hundreds of friends, enemies and comrades, and Tamara loved gossip – as did Jared, only he called it “keeping informed”. Who was alive, who was dead, what was who doing now, remember the time when who did what to whom. They talked about Alegi’s and Brock’s families, Kayce’s elven intrigues, Tamara’s city life and apothecary shop-talk, Jared’s never-ending work on the farm, and admired the beautiful late-autumn countryside.

They stopped in the evening at a lonely but cosy little inn, the last inn on the road for the next forty miles before the Gap. The innkeep was a large and jolly orc who served them spicy beef stew heaped with chunks of carrots, leeks and mushrooms; a basket piled with thick slices of seed-bread; and generous wedges of fruit cake drenched in custard.

“An’ will sir and de missus be wantin’ a room for de night?” asked the orc.

Tamara glanced at Jared, and flushed slightly as she replied, “Two rooms, please,” she said. “Two single rooms.”

"If you two be goin' through the Pass, dey's word of goblin raids near de Platform Ridge," said the orc. "And bad weather's comin'. Might be we get de first snows of de year, soon."

"Are the goblin bands out in force?" asked Jared.

"Oh no, nothin' like de last Goblin War. Jus' goblin keeds gon' the bad way, robbing farmers and traders travellin' alone."

"Well, I think we can take care of ourselves," said Tamara, smiling at Jared. "We fought in the last war against the goblins, under Sir Leodegrance's Free Banner. I'm a herb-mage, and Jared here is a skilled swordsman."

"A herb-mage?" The innkeeper's face lit up. "Might be you can see to my children? Dey's havin' de sniffle-nose, an' tis no passin', not for all de chicken soup and warm blankets we be givin' dem."

"I'd be happy to."

The sniffle-nose proved to be no match for Tamara's potions; within the hour the innkeeper's children were feeling much their rambunctious selves again, and the innkeeper and his wife thanked Tamara gratefully and bade them not to dream of paying for their food and rooms for the night.

"That's a great start to the trip," remarked Jared, as they climbed the stairs to the second floor of the inn where the guest-rooms were located. "Our host seems like he could worship the ground beneath your feet."

"It's just what I do," said Tamara. "All in a day's work at the apothecary, but not quite the same amount of gratitude."

"Town folk and country folk are different that way."

Their rooms were across from each other. Tamara stopped outside hers, and so did Jared. "Well, uh, good night," she said.

"Good night," said Jared. He hesitated, then patted her shoulder awkwardly, before they went into their respective rooms.

Tamara closed her door, and rubbed her shoulder thoughtfully, and smiled.

* * *

The next day the track led them higher up the side of the Windermere. The trees grew shorter, the animals and birds scarcer, the air ever colder. Tamara found and collected a dozen different types of alpine grasses and flowers and seeds, and explained to Jared their unique properties and characteristics – sugar-star, a small white flower with a surprising amount of sweet nectar; red amancay, an ingredient in wound-staunching potions; dwarf pine, squat and thick and barely three feet tall; and so on.

In the evening they stopped beside a mountain-stream, the water shockingly cold, but fresh and pure and delicious like no water from a brook or well down in the lowlands could ever hope to match. Tamara set up the two small tents while Jared pulled together a

screen of fallen branches, more as an intruder alert than as a barricade. They fried thick slices of bacon, then toasted some more of the innkeep's seed-bread in the bacon-fat and ate that with a few handfuls of some peppery ferns that Tamara had plucked by the stream, sitting close to the fire for warmth. A real camp meal, that brought many reminiscences back to the both of them.

"This is the life," sighed Tamara happily. "I wish I could do this forever."

Jared grinned. "You'll think otherwise when you're forty and can't get over one of these hills without cramps and joint-aches and sprains."

"By the time I'm forty, I'll be married to a prince, and you'll have to call me Princess Tamara," she said loftily.

"Well then. You've, what, nine, ten years to look for one," said Jared. He regretted his attempt at a joke instantly, as Tamara's smile dimmed a little.

"We're all getting on in years, aren't we," she said. "I can't believe I'm thirty, gods."

"It doesn't matter how old you are, Tamara, so long as you're happy." Jared looked up. "You *are* happy, aren't you?"

Tamara shrugged helplessly. "I should be, shouldn't I? I'm healthy, I'm sane, I have a good job, friends, family. I should be grateful. But I wish there was more. My heart feels like I should have something more."

"You're, uh, looking for someone special?"

"I suppose so. Like Alegi and Brock have their own families now, and even Kayce is betrothed now. To her dashing elven ranger-captain, isn't that boring? It feels like everyone's been married off, all those years I was away adventuring. I feel like I missed the boat." Tamara looked up. Jared was staring at her with an odd expression on his face. "Oh gods, I'm sorry, I forgot you're looking for a wife too, aren't you? I guess you know what I mean, huh."

Jared smiled ruefully. "Yeah. So yeah... same boat, you and I. The boat we missed, that is." He paused for a moment, then asked, "Is that what you think will make you happy? Finding a good husband?"

"Maybe? I don't know," Tamara said, throwing up her hands in the air. "I'm just tired, godsdamnit, tired of coming home to an empty house and a single bed and looking forward to nothing else the rest of my life. Blink of an eye and twenty more years are gone and I'm going to be *'that crazy ol' cat lady wot runs the apothecary'* in the village."

"Getting married isn't a solution to finding happiness, you know that right? There's more to life than that... more to joy, and more to sorrow. You hold a dream in your head, but you have to work at it, to make it come true. It's like a," Jared patted the air in front of him, "like a tree, you start with a seedling, and you have to water it, nurture it, prune it..."

Tamara giggled. "Oh, Jared, you're a damn farmer through and through. You think of everything like you're planting beans. Not a romantic bone in your body!" She cupped her chin and made a 'thinking' face at him. "What must it be like, to be your wife?"

The moment she said it, she wished she hadn't. *That was too flirty, wasn't it?* Tamara felt her face grow hot, and she looked away, but from the corner of her eye she saw Jared too was flushed and staring at the fire.

He tried to joke the awkward moment away. "Well, uh, could be pretty boring I guess, doing nothing but ploughing and sowing all day and all night," he said. Then he flushed even more as Tamara laughed meaningfully at the double entendre. "I didn't mean it that way!"

"You're such a lady killer, Jared The Farmer... not!"

"Well, it's a good life," he said defensively. "That's all I always wanted. To make a safe place for me and my family, stable, protected, with plenty of food, to have something we own ourselves, and not having to risk life and limb in service to someone else..."

"I understand," said Tamara seriously, reaching out and patting Jared's arm. "I really do. It *is* a good life. It's just... a girl might want something more than *stability*. I want to be swept off my feet, just once in my life. I do deserve to be swept off my feet, don't you think?"

Jared never took his eyes off hers as he reached up and covered her hand with his. "Yes, you do." He squeezed her hand – it was warm and solid and comforting. "Don't worry. I'm sure you'll find your prince."

Tamara smiled. "Good night."

"Good night."

And he let go.

* * *

The next morning, the sky was leaden and grey and there was no sign of the sun. The forest of stunted pine around them was shrouded in mist, the air clinging and cold and drenched. Jared stared up the mountainside warily at a head of cloud gathering ominously around the peaks, as they finished their breakfast of oat porridge and dried apples. "I don't like the looks of that."

"It's gotten really cold," said Tamara, rubbing her arms. "We'd better bundle up."

It got progressively colder, and then it started to rain – the type of rain the dwarves called "elven-mist", light, insistent, and incessant. The lunch-break found them huddled in the lee of a rock mound to which a few stubborn gorse shrubs clung, eating sandwiches of oaty waybread, cold ham and onion pickle under their cloaks and hats. Tamara wandered around for a bit and came back with a handful of small round black fruit.

"Look, I found blackberries," she said.

"I'm glad you're enjoying yourself," grumbled Jared good-naturedly. "This weather is perfect weather... for sitting at home in front of the fireplace drinking coffee."

"Mmm, mint tea and honey for me."

The rain did not let up, and in the evening the wind picked up, blasting streamers of cloud across the scree-strewn hillside. This high up the shrubs barely grew over two feet in height, and their campsite for the night was a wind-blasted spur of rock aptly called Knuckle Ridge. There was nowhere else to camp; any lower ground which might have afforded some shelter against the wind was completely waterlogged. Jared and Tamara struggled to put up the first tent, the wind snatching the fabric out of their hands and threatening to carry away the whole thing entirely. The ropes strained against the wind and the pegs struggled to find purchase in the shale-heavy ground.

“We’re going to have to share a tent!” yelled Jared in Tamara’s ear against the howling wind.

They had to use the second tent as an anchor, painstakingly filling the cloth with rocks and tethering the first tent to it. And the bare couple inches of lee created by the anchor provided something of a windbreak against which to huddle up inside the sleeping-tent, raising the temperature inside one or two precious degrees. Exhausted, Jared and Tamara crawled gratefully inside as darkness fell.

The tent was made of leather and oilcloth, waterproof and tall enough to kneel upright in. There was a small vestibule area where they could hang up their clothes to dry, separate from the large inner room of the tent. A candle in a jar hanging from the top of the tent bathed the inside with a cheery yellow glow, even if it did barely give off any heat. They were both soaked through, the wind had driven the rain right through every seam of their cloaks; and they hurried to get out of their cold wet clothes.

Jared turned his back as Tamara dropped her sopping shirt on the tent floor. He took off his own shirt, and bent to get his dry clothes out of his pack.

“My pack’s over on your side, pass it over,” said Tamara.

Jared lifted her pack and turned around. He looked up; Tamara sat facing away from him, one arm stretched towards him and the other arm clamped over her breasts. Well, most of them anyhow. He couldn’t help but take note of the soft flesh overflowing the slim arm, or the smooth back curved in the warm candle-light.

Tamara turned her head and grabbed her pack from him. Then she looked up, and caught his eye, and laughed. “Quit peeking, and mind your own shirt!”

Jared blushed and turned around again.

Tamara rummaged in her pack and pulled a shirt over her head. She hesitated, then looked around slowly, overcome by sudden curiosity. Jared’s back was to her, and across it...

Jared was about to roll his shirt down when he felt the small cold hand trace a straight line from the top of his left shoulder down to his right hip, rubbing over the raised weal of healed flesh. “Yeah?”

“This scar... it’s from when that goblin champion slashed open your back, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Gods, I remember that one now. I didn’t actually see the wound. Alegi was the one who put you back together. I just handed him the potions and the herbs he was pouring into you, and helped Kayce and Brock hold off the other goblins. We thought you were done for sure that time, and I was crying so hard.”

“Yeah.” Jared pulled down the hem of his shirt. “Come on, I’m starving.”

Tamara whispered a word, and lit a small fire charm in the middle of the tent, one that allowed them to heat food while not burning anything else. The little seashell within which the fire magic was imbued glowed prettily in its glass jar and sent out a great amount of heat for a few short minutes, but didn’t give off any smoke. They fried up ham and toasted waybread, seasoned with chilli peppers and chunks of cheese. They devoured the food in minutes. When the fire magic had been consumed, Tamara threw the charred seashell away.

They lay down side by side in the narrow tent, rolled up in their thick wool-and-leather travel blankets, which would keep them warm as the heat in the tent slowly bled away. Jared scrunched up against the side of the tent, trying his best not to crowd into Tamara, who did the same on her side. After a while, she turned her head towards him.

“Is that wound why you decided to take up farming?” asked Tamara.

“Not really. I’d always wanted to be a farmer since I was a boy. It’s just that I found I was good at fighting. And fighting paid enough for me to get a good piece of land, and a farmhouse, and tools, and livestock. And I met you and Alegi and Brock and Kayce. We had good times together.”

“We had *great* times together.”

Jared nodded. “We did. And I’d got what I wanted, by the time the last goblin war ended. And,” he admitted, “I did think I’d risked enough. That cut did scare me a little, I guess.”

“You made the right choice.” Tamara sighed. “I know life isn’t a fairytale. People die. Good doesn’t always win. And princes don’t appear from nowhere and fall for village herb-mage girls. I’m just... still dreaming, I guess. And I don’t want to wake up.”

Jared hesitated, then reached across and stroked Tamara’s head, brushing her wavy chestnut hair back. She let him, watching him with wide solemn eyes, and didn’t pull away. “Tam, the dream is what we make of it. Good is what we fight for. And princes, well, princes are what we crown the ones we love. Princesses, too. And people live forever, if they lived well during their time alive. In our hearts and in our memories.”

Tamara smiled. “I like it.”

“What?”

“You said ‘Tam’. I think I like it.”

Jared smiled. “Alright.”

Lying down and looking over at Jared, Tamara reflected about how this was the closest they had ever been in all their years of friendship. She thought about her question of last night: *what must it be like, to be Jared's wife? This would be something like it, of course; sharing a room, a bed.* She suddenly thought it wouldn't be too bad, would it? Jared was nice, and far from ugly. Yes, quite far indeed...

Jared turned his head and caught her eye. "What?"

"Oh, nothing. Good night." And Tamara sat up and blew out the candle.

"Good night, Tam."

Sometime in the night, Jared's outflung arm came to rest over Tamara's shoulders as he snored softly and shifted in his sleep. Half-awake, she snuggled instinctively into the warmth and thought drowsily how nice it felt.

* * *

The next day, they were halfway to the Gap Pass, looking forward to the Wagon And Wolf, the famous inn at the pass, and all the comforts it provided, when the blizzard crested the peak, plunged down the side of the Windermere and slammed into them like the fist of an angry winter god. Within minutes the rain pouring down on them turned into snow and visibility dropped to mere feet. The blizzard caught them at their lunch stop, which was a small mercy for at least they had the hollow of a large moss-covered rock and a few foot-tall shrubs to shelter them from the worst of the wind.

Jared had been putting out the fire and packing up the cooking things. But Tamara had gone to fill their waterskins from a nearby rock pool a little way down the hillside... too far away to be sure of her way back in the sudden whiteout.

"Tam!" he shouted into the wind. "TAM!"

Thinking quickly, he got out the coil of spare tent-rope, and knotted it around the thickest nearby root he could find. Paying it out behind him, he tried to feel around for the track that led to the watering-hole. He didn't need the rope for support, he needed it to find his way back.

It took Jared far too many minutes to find the rock pool in the snowstorm, and the tiny heap cowering on the exposed hillside behind her pack. She barely had the energy to look up, but Jared thought he saw a flash of a smile. He reached down to pull Tamara up, and was shocked by how cold and wet her hand was.

Tamara shook uncontrollably. "F-f-fell... in... st-st-storm... w-w-wind..." The ground around her was littered with consumed heating charms, the seashells black and spent and empty of magic. Her clothes, once soaked, had gone icy stiff.

Jared swore. She must have been taken unawares by the sudden flurry of wind, and fallen into the watering-hole, pack and all. The rock pool was barely the size of a hip-bath but it would have sufficed to soak her to the bone instantly. "Get on my back. We have to get you under shelter, fast."

When they reached the rock, Jared stuffed Tamara into its very base, and piled both packs around her. Then he put up the tent, forcing himself to work methodically, not to hurry and make mistakes that would doom them both for sure, not to let the wind have the slightest purchase on the tent even as it howled and threatened to rip the tent out of his gloved fingers at any moment. As before, he anchored one tent with the other, filled with rocks.

“Come on, Tam, get in!”

“Th-th-thanks...”

Inside the tent Jared searched Tamara’s belt-pouches, and pulled out one of the last few heating-charms. He put her chilly hands around the shell. “Say the words, work your magic.”

“*P-p-panasan...*”

Jared dropped the shell in a jar and poured water into a tin mug, balanced the mug carefully on the jar, and put it in a corner of the tent. While he waited for the water, he searched Tamara’s pack. Every single article of clothing was sodden.

“Fuck me with a fucking spear,” muttered Jared. He knelt down in front of Tamara, and looked her in the eye.

She gazed back blearily, and the corner of her lips quirked up in an attempt at a smile. “J-J-Ja...” Her breathing was fast, almost like she was gasping for air.

“Tam, I’m sorry about this.”

“Wh-wh-wha...”

Jared piled all his spare clothes on the floor to make a bed, took a deep breath, and stripped the frozen shirt, pants, undervest and short breeches off Tamara’s unresisting body, then took off everything he had other than his own breeches. He laid Tamara down on his dry spares, lay down on his side, and pulled his thick woolen blanket over them both. Jared rested her head on his left arm, and, wincing a little at the touch of her chill skin, hugged her close to him, covering her slim legs with his, ensuring as much of their bodies were touching as was possible. He started to shiver himself as his body reacted to her cold flesh, but Tamara was almost past that stage. That was *dangerous*.

He stretched out an arm, grabbed the mug, and pulled the blanket over their heads. “Here, Tam, drink this. Slowly.”

Tamara obeyed without a word. She smiled a little more fully when she handed him back the empty mug. “Th-thanks... warm... ‘m g-good...”

“Hey, no sleeping, Tam, not yet,” said Jared. “I can’t let you sleep yet.”

“S’okay...”

“No, it’s not. You’re going to listen to me, and not sleep, alright?”

“Yeah...”

"I like my farm. My farm is like one giant never-ending adventure for me. I like the fact that I can plant my beans, and feed my chickens, and milk the cow, for days on end and see nobody else. I like how I can just live out there alone with the animals and the woods and not even have to come to market if I don't want to."

"Uhuh..."

Jared looked down. Tamara looked back up at him sleepily through half-closed eyes and a vague smile. For the first time he saw that she had a very light dusting of freckles across her chest, just across the tops of her... *no, not there. Don't go there.* He gulped, looked away, and pulled her closer to him, and turned his eyes on nothing, over the top of her chestnut locks. But he had to keep talking, so he talked about the only thing he could think of at this moment.

"It's also too lonely out there. Just a little too quiet. I need a partner, someone to share the work with. Someone to share the nights with, and the laughter, and the tears, and the fears. I'm going insane out there on my own."

"Huhhh..."

Slowly his breath warmed the little space inside the blankets. Jared rubbed Tamara's back vigorously, kept her body tight against his.

"There's not much I can give a girl. No riches, no servants. But I can give her safety, and shelter. I can give her the vegetable garden, and raise more chickens, and fatten a pig. I could plant oats if I had more time. We could keep bees so we can get our own honey. I could build a pipe from the river so the farmhouse gets fresh flowing water. I could dam off a swimming pool for the children to play in. I... I don't have a kingdom to give anyone. But I can give this much: an opportunity to build a place of our own, with our own hands..."

He looked down. Tamara's eyes were closed, but her breathing was even, her skin had a touch of colour again, and he felt they were both getting warmer at last under the blanket.

"And I thought once you could be that girl. I still do, sometimes. That you could be the one by my side, that I could give all that to, and maybe I could make you happy. But maybe... maybe that's just *me* still dreaming."

Outside, the blizzard howled around them, the temperature dropped, and despite his best efforts, Jared fell asleep.

* * *

Sometime later in the night the wind stopped blowing, but the snow continued to fall.

"Jared?"

"Hmwsfzt?"

"I don't know how to say this, but, uh... you're poking me."

“Hm... oh!” Jared disentangled himself, and scrambled out of the blanket, then swore under his breath as the chilly air struck his naked skin. He sat down at the edge of the blanket, his knees pulled up to his chin, and tried not to look at her.

Under the blanket, Tamara laughed. “It was almost worth nearly dying to see that.”

Jared rubbed his arms and breathed into his hands. “We just might still, unless you can dry out your clothes and your blanket. It’s still storming outside, and these things can last days.”

“Not to worry,” said Tamara. She sat up, keeping the blanket wrapped around herself, and rummaged for her belt-pouch. “I have a drying-out spell somewhere. It should sort out our clothes and things out in a couple of hours, then we can get dressed again. Yes, there we go.” She found the spell – a combination of fire and wind magic, imbued in a peacock feather – and set it going over their wet clothes stacked in a corner of the tent.

“A couple of hours!” Jared couldn’t keep the whine out of his voice. “But I’m freezing *now!*”

“While you’re freezing, could you get us some food? I’m starving. I’ll get the heating charm.”

Grumbling good-naturedly, Jared dug out waybread, ham, and dried fruit, and set to frying. He ate hunched over the heat charm in its jar, as if trying to soak up every bit of heat it gave off; Tamara stayed under the blanket but polished off her fair share of dinner as well. The activity helped drive the cold from his mind, but his chest and limbs ached, and trembled every now and then.

Tamara dug out a small flask from her pack. “Some more of that elven apple-brandy,” she said. “I was saving it for when we reached the Gap, but this ought to warm us up.” She poured a generous tot for both of them. “Jared?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks for saving my life,” Tamara said seriously.

Jared smiled, and shrugged. “How could I not? Here’s to us.”

“To us.”

The apple-brandy brought a rosy glow to their cheeks. But within minutes, Jared was beginning to shiver, though he tried to give no sign of it for as long as he could. He looked up to see Tamara watching him. “What is it?”

“You’re shivering.”

“Yeah.”

“Any ideas?”

“No. There’s nothing we can do but wait out the storm, and hope it stops soon.”

Tamara pretended to think for a moment. "Well, I suppose it *is* the least I could do, after you saved my life and all. Get in here."

Jared stared. "What?" He felt himself flushing again.

"I said, get in here." Tamara lifted the corner of her blanket. "Oh come on, it's not like you haven't seen it all by now."

"This, uh..." Jared thought for a moment, then sighed. "Beats turning into an ice-troll." Carefully looking away, he eased under the blanket, grunting gratefully with the warmth. He turned his back to her, curled up, and tried to sleep.

A few minutes passed.

"Jared..."

"What?"

"Turn around."

"What?!"

"I said: Turn. Around."

Jared closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and turned his head. "What is it?" He kept his eyes closed.

Tamara hesitated, then put her hand on his cheek. "I heard everything you said, before you fell asleep."

"Oh."

"Did you really mean what you said... about me?"

Jared flushed. "What do you mean?"

"Did you think about me, in... in that way?"

"Yes, I did."

"Well, I just want you to know I thought about you sometimes, as well. And I saw the way you looked at me, too. But I couldn't find the right time to say anything. And then the adventures ended and it was too late and we all went our separate ways."

Jared opened his eyes and stared into her own. "It's not too late."

Tamara's heart pounded. "It's not?"

"No."

And she knew that she had won, that he was there, he was hers for the taking. If she wanted. Jared looked at her; the question all over his face. So she made her mind up, and gave him the answer, and smiled, leaned in and kissed him.

Jared turned and cupped her cheek and showered her with kisses like a dam had broken somewhere inside. Tamara ran her hand down to his shoulder and tugged him closer, her chilled body suddenly awakened and craving the heat and love that she knew was lying right there beside her, hers for the taking.

He tensed and pulled back a fraction. "Tam, what are... what are we doing?"

"Getting warm in the storm."

"Is... is this what you want?"

"Jared," said Tamara seriously, "Shut up and put your arms around me."

Carefully, Jared wormed one arm underneath her smooth back. His other hand ran over her breasts, under her arm and pulled her waist in, an unconscious parody of the technique he had used to warm her body earlier. Tamara's breath hitched as she felt the hard bar of his cock nudging her belly again and she gasped as her nipples rubbed against his chest. "Take off your pants," she whispered.

Jared did, and then pulled her close again. Now he could feel the soft, sparse curls around her quim; she was growing damp with desire. "Oh, Tam," he muttered. "I've... I've..."

"Shhh," she said, and kissed him, deeply, savouring the taste of his mouth. "Don't speak. Let me just..." She reached down and stroked him once or twice, then guided his cock into her. "Oh, gods!"

Slowly but surely, he thrust inside her, Tamara gasping with every motion as he rocked back and forth, until he was sunk all the way in. It had been *such* a long time, she was unused to the feel of hard warm flesh filling her up, raking that most sensitive flesh inside that had not been touched for *years*... Jared brought his arms up under her body, one hand embracing as much of her back as possible, the other tenderly cupping her head and thick mass of chestnut locks, resting all his weight on his elbows and knees. Tamara snuggled into his arms, ran her hands over the warm flesh blanketing her, twined her legs around his, and caressed the smiling face looking down at her tenderly. "Oh Jared, I... *ohhh!!*"

"You were saying?" Jared grinned, pulled out slowly, oh so slowly, and then thrust again, slow and steady. He took the time to let himself admire Tamara's breasts. They were youthful, pointy, slightly larger than he'd have thought on her slim frame, tipped with small pink nipples and comfortably filling one hand with exciting bulk. He brushed a thumb over one little nipple in teasing circles as he thrust again.

"Jared, you... *ahhh!*" Tamara writhed, tried to form the words she sought from the storm of sensations all over, from the sparks that leaped everywhere their bodies touched, from her hypersensitive nipples as they rubbed against Jared's chest, to the hot hard pole of flesh that raked her insides slowly, in and out, in and out... "I... I want... *ahhh!!*" She arched her back, pressing herself into his deliciously strong hands and squeezing her thighs around Jared's waist.

Jared's grin lost some of its teasing quality, and his arms tensed. He plunged his mouth down on hers, now with urgency, and thrust harder, more frenetically.

"Oh gods, yes, yes, I, *mmph... UUMMPH!*"

"A-are you close?" ground out Jared. "Oh, *Tam...*"

"Yes, yes," gasped Tamara, "Yes, come with me, come... with... *me!*" Then she cried out as Jared crushed her body to his, and drove down into her in a series of final, ragged, jerking thrusts...

Afterwards, Tamara snuggled into the crook of Jared's arm, her head on his shoulder, and pressed her sweat-slicked body to his comforting solid bulk as they lay there gasping and gulping for air on their way back down to earth, every tingling nerve slowly fading back down from heightened super-sensitivity. A few minutes later, Jared turned his head; they lay there, foreheads touching, staring into each other's bright eyes and flushed faces. Tenderly, he kissed Tamara's smiling mouth.

"Well," Tamara said, "that's one novel way to warm up. Tell me, this farm of yours..."

"Yes?"

"Is there any room for a herb-mage?"

"Probably."

END