

The Great Mage

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When he heard visitors approach, Alan returned from the backyard garden to the cottage. He wiped his boots and washed his hands, knowing he'd probably be needed soon.

He heard Rebecca, the gray-haired housekeeper, raise her voice so that Alan could hear. "If you're dying, you see the Great Mage. If you have a broken ankle, you see his apprentice."

That was his cue. He threw his brown apprentice robe over his work clothes and emerged from the kitchen to the anteroom, where a group of pilgrims waited. He rubbed a healing salve on the damaged ankle, muttered the correct incantation, and held the ankle until the bone knit properly.

The grateful group offered a donation of ten silver coins. Rebecca accepted only five, while Alan accepted the profuse thanks of the healed man. He wished them well as they left to continue their pilgrimage.

As they rounded a bend in the path, Alan's pleasant smile faded back to his now-normal expression of stoic resignation. He turned to face the older woman, who had dropped her own smile and let her worry lines show.

Rebecca sat down heavily. "How long can we continue this way?"

"As long as we must," Alan replied, and went to the bedroom to check on his master.

The living legend, christened Alistair by his mother but better known as the Great Mage for more than half a century, had not left his bed in over a fortnight. He seemed to be dozing, but the wrinkled eyelids fluttered open when Alan gently cleared his throat.

A weak voice came from the pillow. "Boy? How goes your work?"

Alan had been chosen as the Great Mage's apprentice at the age of seven, from fifty boys who sought the coveted position. That had been seventeen years ago, and in all that time he had never called the Great Mage anything but "Master" or been called anything but "Boy."

"It goes well, Master," Alan said. "How are you this morning?"

“I am well, thank you. I’ll be up and about soon.”

“Of course, Master. Is there anything I can do for you?”

“You concentrate on your work. Let me know if you require my assistance, or if people in need arrive.”

“Yes, Master.” Alan began to withdraw, but the great man spoke again.

“Boy? Why are you still here?”

“Master?”

“You’ve been doing journeyman’s work for years. I would have given you your papers any time you asked, but you never have. Why?”

“I believe I have more to learn from you, Master.” It was true, although not in the usual sense. The Great Mage had not taught all that he knew of magic, because that was impossible, but he had taught all the magic that any other mage could learn. Alan now learned other things.

“I see.” The great man looked as if he were about to speak again, but closed his eyes instead. Alan withdrew.

A nobleman’s daughter arrived with her escort. They had ridden for a week to see the Great Mage. The young woman sought a beauty charm — she was not ill-favored, but sought an advantage to help her marry above her father’s station into the higher nobility.

The lady complained about seeing a mere apprentice, after one of her rank had traveled so far. Rebecca sternly informed her that the apprentice of the Great Mage knew far more than many others deemed masters of the magical arts.

Alan created the beauty charm she wished, and presented it to her as a jar of cream. She haughtily announced that she would give no donation for the clumsy services of a mere apprentice. Alan nodded and wished her well.

An embarrassed guard tried to slip Alan a gold piece, but Alan refused. He thought it wrong for a guard to pay for services his mistress received.

After the party left, Rebecca chuckled. “How long do you think the match will last after she runs out of cream?”

“I don’t know, but it’s fun to wonder.” He grinned back at her, and the pall over the cottage lifted for a few moments.

Then Rebecca touched Alan’s arm. “I was telling her the truth, you know. You could have your own practice, in your own name.”

“I know.”

She cocked her head. “Then why are you still sleeping in a shut-bed off of the kitchen?”

He shrugged. “Why are you still cleaning someone else’s cottage in the woods, when you could have married Bertram and had a family of your own?”

“That was years ago. I’m too old for a family now.”

“Perhaps. Or perhaps something else keeps us both here.”

Rebecca prepared lunch while Alan chopped wood. The Great Mage slept.

The afternoon brought a tearful local girl and her frightened father. The girl’s doll was broken, her brother had told her to take it to the Great Mage, and nothing else would do but that her father take her to the famed woodland cottage at once. Rebecca offered tea, and told the trembling man that there was no need to meet the Great Mage. His apprentice could handle this task.

Alan mended the doll while Rebecca mended its torn dress. When the father offered a copper piece he clearly could not spare, Alan suggested that perhaps the little girl might sing for them instead. Rebecca eagerly agreed that it would be a rare treat to hear a child’s voice in the woodland stillness.

The happy girl sang a children's song about the Great Mage—how he had cured an entire village of the plague, cleared a dangerous road of bandits by strolling it in the guise of a helpless old man, quelled a violent rebellion and then championed that same rebellion's cause to the oppressive lord.

Alan had sung that song himself, as a small boy. His smile faltered as he realized that his master's erstwhile disguise of a feeble graybeard had been made real by time, but he quickly refocused on the delighted child. He thanked her for her lovely singing, and wished them well as they left.

Rebecca went to check on the Great Mage. She reemerged a few minutes later to tell Alan that the great man had passed on.

They stared at each other in silence for several moments. "It was to be expected," said Rebecca. "He was almost a century old."

"Even the greatest of us must falter and fail eventually." Alan spoke the words numbly, knowing them true but still feeling them empty.

Alan dug a grave. They buried the Great Mage as the sun set. Neither thought to call a priest; the Great Mage was beyond such quotidian rites.

Rebecca made a cold supper, and they ate it beside the kitchen fire. "I suppose you'll be leaving now," she said.

"I hadn't thought about it," he replied. "You?"

"I've lived here since I was a girl. I have nowhere to go. You're still a young man; you could make your own name in the world."

Alan set his mug down and gazed into the fire. "What name is more important to the people of this land? Alan, or the Great Mage?"

They sat in silence for a while, until a knock at the door broke the stillness. Rebecca went to answer it, while Alan watched through the crack of the kitchen door. It was a husband and wife, looking as if they had traveled far. They asked to see the Great Mage, for help in conceiving a child, for surely only the Great Mage could help a couple who had been barren for five years.

Rebecca glanced at Alan, watching from the kitchen. “If you’re dying, you see the Great Mage. If you wish to conceive a child, you see his apprentice.”

Alan threw on his brown apprentice robe and entered the anteroom.