

A Sip...



A Torquere Press Short

The Right Kind of Help
By KC Warwick

“I think I can say, without fear of contradiction, that we are lost.” Valiance stared through the slanting rain that blew into his face, and pulled the hood of his cloak farther down.

Rowan frowned down into the valley that, though filled with rain clouds and rivulets of water, did not appear to contain a castle. His fair hair was soaking wet, as were most of his clothes, but

he scarcely noticed this. Something was wrong, because his magic told him that he was in the right place, whatever his companion maintained, and the castle *ought* to be there.

Why wasn't it? He favored Valiance with a frown that was entirely wasted on the elf. "We are not lost," Rowan said. "We are exactly where we should be."

"Then perhaps you'd tell me why I can't see the castle of Great Cowarne lying below us in the valley, its numerous inhabitants going about their busy lives with enthusiasm and enjoyment?"

"I don't know," Rowan admitted. "All I can tell you is that *we're* in the right place --Great Cowarne isn't."

Valiance rolled his eyes. "Of course, why didn't I think of that? They probably got tired of being here and decided to move the entire castle somewhere else. Yeah, right."

"Oh, shut up!" Rowan had had enough of the elf's wit, the sharp edge of which always seemed to be directed at him. "Just let me think, will you?"

"Perhaps we ought to get into shelter before you start such a lengthy process," Valiance suggested. "Otherwise, we could end up completely soaked to the skin, instead of just partially."

They had set out four days ago from the College of Enchanters, in answer to a request for help from the resident wizard at Great Cowarne. *I need a powerful enchanter*, the message had said. No clue as to why, or what said enchanter was expected to do -- which, Rowan suspected, was why he had been handed the job.

It will be good experience for a young enchanter like you, his chief had told him. *You're inclined to be a bit erratic. Something like this might steady you down. It's probably their wizard panicking over nothing, as usual.*

Erratic, Rowan thought with irritation. It was his magic that was erratic, because he got flustered and worried. He knew perfectly well that, behind his back, he was called *the one whose magic goes wrong*, so what good was this supposed to do him? Then, to give him Valiance as a bodyguard was a sure way to guarantee disaster. As far as he could tell, the elf hated him.

He became aware that Valiance was tapping irritably on his saddle with his fingers -- not a good sign. Perhaps his companion was right and they should look for shelter.

He glanced behind them at the rocky track they had just descended. "Maybe there's a cave. Or something."

"Well, there certainly isn't an inn with its doors thrown hospitably wide to welcome us." Valiance's temper was deteriorating. "Come on. We need to go back up toward the pass."

It took them some considerable time to locate a cave. Rowan tried a searching spell, but it simply rebounded off the rocks.

“Fine enchanter you are,” Valiance snapped. “It’s probably just as well that we can’t find the castle, because I don’t see you being a lot of use to them if we do.”

“You know nothing about magic,” Rowan snapped back. Valiance made him nervous, because he was so capable and Rowan wasn’t. It just made things worse.

“I know enough to recognize incompetence when I see it,” was the cutting reply. “Powerful you may be, but that’s no good if you can’t control it.”

Rowan knew that, but having Valiance put it into words didn’t help. “Why don’t you shut up and concentrate on finding us somewhere dry for the night? That’s supposed to be your job, isn’t it?”

“It’s more like a punishment than a job. I wish I knew what I’d done to piss the commander off so much that he landed me with this.”

Rowan was about to say something angry in reply when the elf pointed at the mountainside. “Cave.”

“At last,” Rowan muttered, guiding his mount off the track after Valiance’s.

The elf dismounted and peered into the dimness. “Hold my horse while I look inside.” He tossed the reins to Rowan, drew his knife, and vanished into the cave. Rowan scarcely had time to imagine all the unpleasant things that could be lurking there before the elf was back. “Seems safe enough. The horses can stand out here under the trees.” He glanced up at Rowan. “Leave them to me. You go inside. I don’t suppose there’s any point in asking you to get a fire going? No, I thought not.”

The cave was partially sheltered by a grove of pine trees where the horses seemed content to stand. Valiance found sufficient dry wood for a fire and lit it quickly and competently while Rowan stood and shivered.

“Take your wet things off,” the elf ordered, rummaging in their baggage. Before Rowan quite realized what was happening, he found himself sitting by a blazing fire, clad in warm woolen garments that Valiance had produced from somewhere, sipping a hot drink. Their wet cloaks steamed on the rocks opposite, and a pan of stew simmered on the flames. Although Rowan generally found the elf’s efficiency extremely irritating, tonight it was more than welcome.

Rowan was still struggling with the problem of what best to do. He was convinced that he had not made a mistake, but he was totally at a loss as to why the castle had disappeared. Perhaps things would look different in the morning. Maybe the castle would reappear? That was about as likely, he had to admit, as Valiance deciding that he adored Rowan... He found himself gazing at the elf. Unaffected by the cold, Valiance knelt by the fire and stirred the stew, his long black hair brushing over the well-defined muscles of his bare chest as he bent forward.

Rowan sighed. He'd been pleased when Valiance had been assigned as his bodyguard, but that was before he had felt the lash of the elf's scorn. Valiance was beautiful, a good fighter, and able to cope with anything, so he made Rowan feel even more inadequate than usual.

He was brought from these unhappy thoughts by the aroma of stew, as a bowl was thrust into his hands. "Eat it while it's hot," he was instructed. "You'll probably catch cold anyway, but let's not help matters along."

"I'm not a child," Rowan muttered rebelliously, before taking a mouthful of stew. It was delicious. Cookery was obviously amongst Valiance's many talents.

"You look far too young to me to be sent out on a mission like this," Valiance said severely. "And you're obviously totally incapable of looking after yourself."

Unfortunately, that was quite true, and Rowan bit back the sharp retort he had been framing. Instead, he ate in silence, wishing Valiance was a bit more friendly.

"I don't think there's any point in trying to do much more until morning," Valiance said when they had finished. "I'll check on the horses, then I suggest we get an early night."

Rowan just nodded in agreement. The sky outside the cave mouth was darkening and there was still a steady trickle of rain. He felt tired and depressed. Maybe a good night's sleep would help.

Having seen to their mounts, Valiance set about organizing their sleeping arrangements. On the journey, they had slept decorously wrapped in their separate blankets, one each side of the campfire. This, it seemed, was to change.

"We'll share blankets," Valiance said briskly, folding a couple of them up to soften the hard floor of the cave. Rowan blinked at him, and he carried on with irritation, "You're cold and wet. It's better if we share body heat, since I don't want you freezing to death. It would be a hell of a job getting the body home."

Too dazed to argue, Rowan lay down as he was instructed and felt the elf tucking blankets round them both. "Put your back against mine -- and don't fidget!"

Despite the blankets, the ground was still hard, though there was certainly plenty of heat in the body that lay next to his own. How nice it would be to cuddle up to it and to be cuddled in return, but that was never going to happen. He sighed, and then on impulse said softly, "I'm sorry to cause you so many problems."

He felt his companion make a sudden movement, as though he had wanted to roll over and look at Rowan, but had changed his mind. After a moment, Valiance said over his shoulder. "I should never have taken the job."

Now it was Rowan's turn to be surprised. "You mean, you had a choice?"

“Of course I did. Elves are much sought after as bodyguards. I don’t have to do work I don’t want.”

“I thought you said that you must have pissed off the commander to get landed with me?”

He heard a sound which might have been a suppressed snort of laughter. “I could have said no.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“Because you’re very pretty, and I think with my dick too much.”

This was the last answer Rowan had expected, and he wasn’t sure whether to take it seriously. “Um--”

“I think you’d better go to sleep. We’ll almost certainly have a hard day tomorrow, unless you develop a hitherto undiscovered streak of brilliance.”

Rowan sighed again. Just for a moment there, he’d thought that Valiance was beginning to treat him like -- well, like someone who wasn’t a complete idiot. He should have known better. He tried to find a comfortable position to sleep in, but decided it wasn’t possible. To make matters worse, he was starting to feel cold again, despite the blankets and Valiance. His worries assumed monstrous proportions now that he had nothing better to do than lie there and think about them.

What was he going to do if he couldn’t find the castle tomorrow? Would they have to ride back in ignominy and confess failure? Perhaps he could find someone to ask where it was, though as they hadn’t encountered another human being for the last day and a half, this seemed unlikely.

Valiance’s voice came out of the dark. “Are you cold?”

“No,” he said, trying to stop his teeth chattering.

“Your shivering is keeping me awake.” The elf sat up and started to unravel the blankets. “Come here. No, right *here*.” One strong warm arm pinned him against the elf’s naked chest. “Don’t get any ideas,” the voice in his ear warned. “This is purely a practical measure. If you so much as move, I shall kick you out into the rain.”

Rowan scarcely dared even to breathe. Part of him was terrified, lest he upset the elf, and part was enjoying the warm, safe feeling of being held by Valiance. If only he could sleep like this every night -- not with Valiance, of course, but with someone who really liked him and would take care of him. He smothered a yawn and heard Valiance sigh softly.

“Good night, Rowan,” the elf said. “Stop worrying. Go to sleep.”

To Rowan’s surprise, that was exactly what he did.

Rowan was woken in the morning by his companion getting up to light the fire. By the time he had emerged from his blankets, Valiance had heated up the remains of the stew and made some toast for breakfast. He'd have liked a wash, but knew there was no chance of that.

"So, what next?" Valiance asked when they had eaten.

"We'll go back and take another look." Rowan tried to sound confident, but knew that he was failing miserably. Valiance gave a long-suffering sigh, but thankfully forbore to comment.

At least it had stopped raining. They led the horses back down the track and tethered them to some bushes, then gazed down into the valley again.

"No castle." Valiance's tone was carefully neutral. "I don't suppose you'd reconsider the possibility that we're in the wrong place?"

"This is where my magic led me to," Rowan said. "It must be here!"

"Your magic couldn't possibly be wrong?"

"No! Anyway, I'll check!" He performed the spell again, hastily and angrily. After one or two false starts, it gave him the same result.

Valiance leaned against a rock and folded his arms. "Perhaps they knew you were coming and they've hidden themselves," he said sarcastically. "Your reputation could have proceeded you."

Rowan opened his mouth to say something furious, then paused, thinking over the elf's words. "You know, I think you've got something there," he said at last.

"What, you mean they really have hidden from you?" Valiance began to laugh.

"They've hidden from something," Rowan said excitedly. "I just need to do a revealing spell..."

"I dread to think what that is going to result in."

"Shut up and let me concentrate!"

Concentration had always been Rowan's weakness. He performed the spell and got, in quick succession, a thunderstorm right overhead, a flock of sheep, and a rainbow. "Very impressive!" Valiance shouted over the noise of the thunder. "But still no castle."

Mercifully, the thunderstorm moved off quickly, as did the sheep. Rowan frowned at the rainbow and repeated the spell, slowly and carefully. There was a shimmering in the valley below them, and they found themselves looking at a castle, with a moat and a drawbridge, and four round towers topped by flags.

The elf straightened up and whistled disbelievingly. "Well, bugger me!"

"Not now. Possibly later." Rowan was so elated by his success that, for once, he wasn't paying any attention to Valiance. "I knew it was there! You see, I was right!"

"You were indeed," Valiance said thoughtfully. "There's one thing that bothers me though."

"Oh? What's that?" Surely nothing could be wrong this time?

"Let's assume that they were not hiding from you, which I have to admit isn't all that likely. So, who *are* they hiding from?"

No sooner had he spoken than there was a great roaring, crashing noise, and a piece of the mountainside seemed to detach itself and rise up on the peak behind them. It was roughly man-shaped, but nearly as big as the castle, with huge claws and what appeared to be an immense pair of horns sprouting from its forehead. The horses reared up, broke their halter ropes and galloped off down the track towards the castle. Rowan wished he could follow them.

"Shit!" said Valiance. "What the hell is that?"

"It's a rock ogre." Rowan tried to keep his voice steady. "And I don't think it's in a good mood."

As if to underline this, a large boulder whistled past their heads and smashed to pieces on the track. Valiance pulled Rowan into the relative shelter of an overhang and glanced up the mountain. "I can see why they might want to hide. What are you going to do?"

Rowan felt a great wave of panic sweep over him. His legs felt as if they wouldn't support him and his brain refused to function. "Fighting is your department."

"And mythical monsters are yours." Valiance sounded quite composed, considering that another rock had just bounced past them. "Come on, do your stuff."

Rowan took a quick sideways look at the ogre. "I can't." This time he couldn't keep the tremor out of his voice.

"What do you mean, you can't?" Valiance stared at him. "You're an enchanter. Enchanters deal with this kind of thing all the time. You must know how."

"I know how. In theory. I just--" He was having trouble breathing. "I -- I'm too scared to look at it." If he'd had the strength, then he would have run, but he couldn't even do that. "You're right about me. I'm no good. Even if I did manage to do something, it would go wrong. They should never have sent me."

The ground began to shudder as the thing made its way down the mountainside toward them. Valiance took him by the shoulders and Rowan braced himself for a tongue-lashing. Instead the elf gave him a little shake and spoke in a tone Rowan had never heard him use before.

“Look, calm down, Rowan. You’re easily powerful enough to get rid of this -- whatever it is. You could do it with your eyes closed. In fact --” and here he turned Rowan round so that he couldn’t see the monster “ -- I think you’d be much better off if you did close your eyes.”

He sounded calm and confident, but Rowan protested. “It’s too dangerous. What if I do it wrong?”

“You won’t do it wrong. All you need to do is think of a spell. I’ll make sure you get time to use it.”

Valiance pulled Rowan towards him, one arm sliding round Rowan just as it had done during the night. “I’ve got you. You’re safe.” It never occurred to Rowan to doubt him, even though the thing threatening them was the size of a small mountain itself.

Rowan looked up at him and, for the first time, Valiance smiled. Suddenly the ogre and the castle and everything else seemed a long way away. All Rowan was conscious of was the elf’s warm, strong body against his, and the way he was leaning down towards Rowan, and the feel of his mouth on Rowan’s and -- his eyes closed of their own volition.

Valiance spoke in a whisper against his lips. “Just concentrate, and take it nice and slow. You can do it, sweetheart.”

To his amazement, he found that he could. He felt safe and protected, even though the ogre was very close now. He knew exactly which spell to use, and how to use it. Valiance’s lips brushed his again, in the gentlest of kisses, and Rowan felt power leaving him and focusing relentlessly on the monster approaching them. He gathered all his strength, and there was a spectacular bang, accompanied, he was told afterwards, by a blinding flash of light. As Rowan still had his eyes closed at this point, he missed the latter.

“Well, he seems to have gone,” Valiance said with satisfaction. “What did you do?”

“Turned him back into rock.” Rowan was starting to feel drained, which he knew was the aftermath of using so much magic. He really ought to think about getting down to the castle, but on the other hand, Valiance was still holding him close and it would be a shame to waste the opportunity, in case it all turned out to be a ploy on the elf’s part. He had an uneasy feeling that, now it was all over, Valiance was going to slap him down pretty hard. Still, it was worth a try.

He raised his face to the elf and Valiance, without hesitation, leaned down and kissed him again. This time, it wasn’t as gentle as before, and Rowan didn’t want it to be. He enjoyed the feeling of all that strength holding him captive, and the way that Valiance’s lean, hard body aligned with his own. He could feel something else hard, too, which made him hope that perhaps this relationship might not be doomed to failure.

After far too short a time, Valiance broke the kiss and said, a little breathlessly, “We ought to get down to the castle, and we haven’t got horses. How are you off for magic?”

“I can do it.” Rowan glanced up at him anxiously. “Are you sure you trust me to? We might end up on the moon or somewhere.”

Valiance smiled, and Rowan’s heart speeded up again. “I trust you. Just take your time, okay?”

Valiance kept his arm around Rowan while he performed the spell, and Rowan marveled at how much easier it was with Valiance there beside him, keeping an eye on things. Twenty-four hours ago, the elf’s presence would have had the opposite effect.

When they appeared in the courtyard of the castle, a crowd of people descended on them, headed by an imperious-looking man who appeared to be Lord Cowarne and a pale, ineffective-looking individual who was apparently their wizard. Rowan, to his dismay, found himself the object of a stream of complaints because he had removed their hiding spell and exposed them to danger. The fact that he had also saved them from the rock ogre seemed to escape them. It must have been because he looked so young, he reflected wearily.

Rowan listened to the angry voices, too tired even to argue. All he wanted to do now was sleep, and he was tempted to curl up on the courtyard floor and let it all go over his head. He certainly wasn’t up to standing his ground.

Valiance, it appeared, was. After listening for about two minutes, his fingers tapping irritably on his belt, the elf stepped forward and held up his hand. Silence fell. “Now, listen to me, because I’m not going to say this twice. The enchanter Rowan has saved you all from a very nasty fate. Of course he had to take off the hiding spell, otherwise the ogre would not have revealed himself. Don’t you people know anything about magic?”

Oh, was that why I did it? Rowan was fuzzy on that point, but he had the good sense to stay quiet.

“If you object to it so much, then we’ll go right back up there and reverse the spell, and you can deal with the problem yourselves. Is that what you want?” Valiance glared at the lord and the wizard, and then at everyone else within sight. “I thought not. Right then, the enchanter needs rest and quiet -- and he needs it now. You can thank him profusely later on. I’m waiting to be told where your best rooms are.”

The elves did arrogance so well, Rowan mused. Up until then, it had annoyed the hell out of him, but now he just watched Valiance with admiration. It made a great deal of difference to have that biting tongue on his side for a change.

Lord Cowarne cleared his throat. “Of course, of course,” he said hastily. “Only too glad to assist the enchanter. All our facilities at his disposal.”

“They’d better be,” the elf said grimly. “And we want a room with a bath, by the way.”

The suite they were shown to was far grander than anything Rowan had seen before. He wanted to lie down on the sumptuous bed as he was, but Valiance insisted that he take his clothes off first. He was conscious of the elf tucking him in amongst the pillows and quilts, then he fell asleep like a light going out.

When Rowan awoke, it was late afternoon, to judge by the sun, and for a moment he could not think where he was. Then he remembered being kissed by Valiance -- oh, and he remembered the rock ogre, of course. The kiss certainly had priority in his memory. He really hoped that the elf was not going to revert to being nasty to him now.

He raised himself up on one elbow and saw that Valiance was sitting in an armchair beside the bed, his eyes fixed on Rowan. His face was unreadable, and Rowan said, rather shyly, "Hello. I hope you've had some rest, too."

"I've been dozing. How do you feel now?" That seemed promising, an enquiry after his health.

"Hungry." Now he was awake, he realized this, and his stomach rumbled alarmingly.

"Why don't you have a bath," Valiance suggested, "and I'll get them to send in some food?" He stood up and stretched. "Go on, there's plenty of hot water. I had one myself earlier on and we ought to make use of the facilities now I've made such a fuss over them."

Rowan agreed and got up cautiously. He felt stiff, so a bath was probably a good idea, though when he saw the size of the bathroom, he began to feel somewhat overawed. Obviously his status had gone up.

As he lay in the steaming water, he wondered if he was going to be able to control his magic in the future, in the way he had done up on the mountain side. It very much depended, he decided, on whether Valiance was with him. It had been the elf's presence that had given him the confidence to deal with the rock ogre, and for the first time ever, he had felt that he was in command of his own powers. Up until then, it had mostly been hit or miss.

But perhaps it would be asking too much of Valiance to expect him to follow Rowan around all the time. Valiance probably didn't want to. After all, Rowan knew that he was a bit of a liability. It was just that he also knew that he was going to be a failure on his own. He needed help, and he very much wanted that help to come from Valiance.

So it was with mixed feelings that Rowan returned to the bedroom. His future happiness, and possibly his career as an enchanter, hung on how Valiance treated him in the next few minutes. The elf certainly hadn't seemed as hostile as he used to be, but that didn't mean that he wanted to take their relationship any farther. He might already be regretting that kiss.

Valiance was sipping a glass of what appeared to be wine, and studying a cold buffet arranged on the table by the window. He looked up as Rowan came in, but his face gave away nothing.

Rowan felt very vulnerable, especially since he was only wrapped in a towel. "I -- do I have any clean clothes?" he asked cautiously.

Valiance put down the glass and stood up, but instead of going over to the chest where their packs lay, he strode across to Rowan and slid his arms round him, pulling him into a close embrace. "What do you want clothes for?" he asked, and Rowan felt a weight of anxiety slide from his heart.

He opened his mouth to reply, but Valiance bent down and kissed him, and he forgot what he was going to say. He could feel the heat of Valiance's body against his bare skin, and Valiance's strong, warm fingers caressed his back. The kiss was much better without his clothes on, and would have been better still if Valiance had discarded his. Rowan plastered himself against the elf as closely as he could, still not quite able to believe that this was happening.

"We could take this into bed," Valiance murmured and Rowan agreed enthusiastically. At this point, his stomach started to protest again and the elf's grip loosened at once. "You're hungry. Let's see to that first."

"No." Rowan was definite on this point. "I'd rather we got into bed."

Valiance regarded him dubiously, a frown of concern on his face. "Are you sure about that?"

"I want to do it before you change your mind."

"There's no danger of that," Valiance assured him, sweeping him up and placing him carefully on the bed.

Rowan was not entirely inexperienced when it came to kissing, but he didn't have much idea of what went on between the sheets. Fortunately, Valiance did. "I don't know how you've managed to remain this innocent, with your looks," the elf told him, sliding on top of him. "You're beautiful."

"I bet you say that to all the enchanters."

Valiance snorted. "I haven't got time for most of them, but I can't understand why you haven't been snapped up by someone."

"People think I'm crazy, because my magic goes wrong." Rowan tried not to sound bitter. "They don't want to have anything to do with a crazy enchanter."

"That's their loss." Valiance studied Rowan for a moment, then said with tact, "Let's keep things simple to start with."

Strangely, it didn't seem odd to have the elf's hands on him, doing things to him that no one else had ever done. It was more like relearning something that he had forgotten, or as though he had

been waiting for this for a long time. He didn't mind either that Valiance was very much in control. It didn't occur to him to question this, because he discovered that this was how he liked things.

Valiance's smooth touch slid over his body, making him squirm and arch up against the strong, muscular body pinning him down. Whatever Valiance was doing, it felt wonderful. Rowan clutched the elf tightly, thrusting into the firm grip that held them both and gasping with unaccustomed pleasure when the climax came. Valiance took a little longer, but seemed well satisfied when, at length, they both lay panting together.

A while later, Rowan said awkwardly, "Thank you for defending me to Lord Whatever-his-name-is."

The elf shook his head. "You know, you really shouldn't be allowed out on your own."

His tone held affectionate tolerance instead of scorn, and Rowan smiled. "I can't help it."

"Don't let people walk all over you. Remember, you're a powerful enchanter. You need to be more assertive."

"It would help if I could manage my magic like I did today." Rowan suppressed a sigh and glanced at Valiance longingly.

"We'll work on that." Valiance sounded confident. "You just need the right kind of help." He added casually, "I think I'll have to stick around and see that you get it."

Rowan tried not to feel too hopeful. "Are you sure you want to be tied to a failure like me?"

Valiance gave him a look of mingled amusement and exasperation. "Yes, I'm sure -- and you're not a failure."

"You've changed your mind about me then? A little while ago you didn't seem to have much of an opinion of me at all." Maybe Rowan was pushing his luck by saying this, but he needed to get things straight between them.

Valiance reached out and stroked his cheek. "I'm sorry." He sounded embarrassed. "I've always prided myself on keeping my feelings in hand. I'm not used to falling for someone quite so hard."

"You fell for me?" Rowan stared at him.

"Well, I don't see anyone else in bed with us."

"And you're sure you're not thinking with your dick?"

Valiance looked ashamed. “Not just with my dick -- although I have to admit it gets a say in this.” He wound his fingers in Rowan’s hair. “I apologize for being such a bastard. I’ll make it up to you, I promise.”

Rowan settled against him with a smile, one arm draped over the elf’s rock-hard torso. “I think you already have,” he said.

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