

The Soulforge

by Margaret Weis

Chapter 1

He never wore his white robes while traveling.

Few mages did, in those days, the days before the great and terrible War of the Lance spilled out of its caldron like boiling oil and scalded the countryside. In those days, just fifteen or so years before the war, the fire beneath the pot had been lit, the Dark Queen and her minions had struck the sparks that would start the blaze. The oil was cool, black, and sluggish in the caldron. But at the bottom, the oil was beginning to simmer.

Most people on Ansalon would never see the caldron, much less the bubbling oil inside, until it was poured on their heads, along with dragonfire and the countless other horrors of war. At this time of relative peace, the majority of people living on Ansalon never looked up, never from side to side to see what was going on in the world around them. Instead, they gazed at their own feet, plodding through the dusty day, and if they ever lifted their heads, it was usually to see if it was likely to rain and spoil their picnic.

A few felt the heat of the newly kindled fire. A few had been watching closely the turgid black liquid in the caldron. Now they could see that it was starting to simmer. These few were uneasy. These few began to make plans.

The wizard's name was Antimodes. He was human, of good middle-class merchant stock, hailing from Port Balifor. The youngest of three, he had been raised in the family business, which was tailoring. To this day, he still displayed with pride the scars left by the pinpricks on the middle finger of his right hand. His early experience left him with a canny business sense and a taste for, and knowledge of, fine clothing, one reason he rarely wore his white robes. Some mages were afraid to wear their robes, which were a symbol of their calling, because that calling was not well loved in Ansalon.

Antimodes was not afraid. He did not wear his white robes because white showed the dirt. He detested arriving at his destination mud-splattered, the stains of the road upon him.

He traveled alone, which in those uneasy days meant that he was either a fool, a kender, or an extremely powerful person. Antimodes was not a fool, nor was he a kender. He traveled alone because he preferred his own company and that of his donkey, Jenny, to that of almost all others of his acquaintance. Hired bodyguards were generally loutish and dull, not to mention expensive. Antimodes could adequately and handily defend himself, should need arise.

The need had rarely arisen, in all his fifty-plus years. Thieves look for prey that is timid, cowering, drunk, or heedless. Though his finely made dark blue woolen cloak with its silver clasps showed him to be a man of wealth, Antimodes wore that cloak with an air of confidence, riding with his back straight on his daintily stepping donkey, his head held high, his sharp-eyed gaze taking notice of every squirrel in the trees, every toad in the ruts.

He displayed no weapon, but his long sleeves and tall leather boots could easily conceal a poignard; the bags that dangled from his hand-tooled leather belt almost certainly contained spell components. Every thief worth his lock-picking tools recognized that the ivory case Antimodes wore on a leather thong looped around his chest probably contained magical scrolls. Shadowy figures lurking in the hedgerows slunk out of his way and waited for likelier victims.

Antimodes was journeying to the Tower of High Sorcery in Wayreth. He was taking the long way around, for he could have easily walked the corridors of magic in order to reach the tower from his home in Port Balifor. He had been requested to make the journey overland. The request had come from Par-Salian, head of the Order of White Robes and head of the Wizards' Conclave, and therefore, strictly speaking, Antimodes's master. The two were fast friends, however, their friendship dating back to the day when both were young and had arrived at the Tower at the same time to take the exacting, grueling, and occasionally lethal test. Both had been kept waiting in the same antechamber in the tower, each had shared his trepidation and fear with the other, each had found much-needed comfort, consolation, and support. The two White Robes had been firm friends every since.

Thus Par-Salian "requested" that Antimodes take this long and tiresome journey. The head of the conclave did not order it, as he might have done with another.

Antimodes was to accomplish two goals during his journey. First, he was to peer into every dark corner, eavesdrop on every whispered conversation, peep through the shutters of every window that was locked and bolted. Second, he was to look for new talent. The first was a bit dangerous; people do not take kindly to snoops, especially if said people have something to hide. The second was tedious and boring, for it generally meant dealing with children, and Antimodes had an aversion to children. All in all, Antimodes preferred the spying.

He had written his report in his neat and precise tailor's handwriting in a journal, which he would turn over to Par-Salian. Antimodes reread in his mind every word in that journal as he trotted along on his white donkey, a present from his eldest brother, who had taken over the family business and was now a prosperous tailor in Port Balifor. Antimodes spent his time on the road pondering all he had seen and heard—nothing significant, everything portentous.

"Par-Salian will find this interesting reading," Antimodes told Jenny, who gave her head a shake and pricked her ears to indicate her agreement. "I look forward to handing the journal over," her master continued. "He will read it and ask questions, and I will explain what I have seen and heard, all the while drinking his most excellent elven wine. And you, my dear, will have oats for dinner."

Jenny indicated her hearty approval. In some places in which they'd stayed, she'd been forced to eat damp, moldy hay or worse. Once she'd actually been offered potato peelings.

The two had nearly reached their journey's end. Within a month, Antimodes would arrive at the Tower of High Sorcery in Wayreth. Or, rather, the tower would arrive at Antimodes. Onenever found the magical Tower of Wayreth. It found you, or not, as its master chose.

This night Antimodes would spend in the town of Solace. He might have pushed on, for the season was late spring, and it was only noon, with plenty of daylight left for

travel. But he was fond of Solace, fond of its famous inn, the Inn of the Last Home, fond of Otik Sandeth, the inn's owner, and especially fond of the inn's ale. Antimodes had been tasting that chilled dark ale with its creamy head in his imagination ever since he had swallowed his first mouthful of road dust.

His arrival in Solace went unnoticed, unlike his arrival in other towns in Ansalon, where every stranger was taken to be a thief or plague-carrier, a murderer or kidnapper of children. Solace was a different town than most on Ansalon. It was a town of refugees, who had fled for their lives during the Cataclysm and had only stopped running when they came to this location. Having once been strangers on the road themselves, the founders of Solace took a more kindly view toward other strangers, and this attitude had been passed down to their descendants. Solace had become known as a haven for outcasts, loners, the restless, the adventuresome.

The inhabitants were friendly and tolerant—up to a point. Lawlessness was known to be bad for business, and Solace was a town with a sharp eye for business.

Being located on a bustling road that was the major route from northern Ansalon to all points south, Solace was accustomed to entertaining travelers, but that was not the reason few noticed the arrival of Antimodes. The main reason was that most of the people of Solace never saw him, due to the fact that they were high above him. The major portion of the town of Solace was built in the vast, spreading, gigantic branches of the immense and wondrous vallenwood trees.

The early inhabitants of Solace had literally taken to the trees to escape their enemies. They had found living among the treetops to be safe and secure. They had built their homes among the leaves, and their descendants and those who came after them had continued the tradition.

Craning his neck, Antimodes looked up from the donkey's back to the wooden plank bridges that extended from tree to tree, watching the bridges swing and sway as the villagers hastened across on various errands. Antimodes was a dapper man, with an eye for the ladies, and though the women of Solace kept their flowing skirts firmly in hand when crossing the bridges, there was always the possibility of catching a glimpse of a shapely ankle or a well-turned leg.

Antimodes's attention to this pleasant occupation was interrupted when he heard sounds of shrill yelling. He lowered his gaze to find that he and Jenny had been overtaken by a brigade of bare-legged, sunburned boys armed with wooden swords and tree-branch spears and giving battle to an army of imaginary foes.

The boys had not meant to run down Antimodes. The swirl of battle had carried them in his direction; the invisible goblins or ogres or whatever enemy the boys chased were in full retreat toward Crystalmir Lake. Caught up in the shouting, yelling, sword-thwacking melee, Antimodes's donkey, Jenny, shied and danced, wild-eyed with fright.

A mage's mount is not a war-horse. A mage's mount is not trained to gallop into the noise and blood and confusion of battle or to face spears without flinching. At most, a mage's mount must accustom herself to a few foul-smelling spell components and an occasional lightning show. Jenny was a placid donkey, strong and hale, with an uncanny knack for avoiding ruts and loose stones, providing her rider with a smooth and comfortable journey. Jenny considered that she'd put up with a great deal on this trip: bad

food, leaky accommodations, dubious stablemates. An army of stick-wielding boys was simply too much to bear.

By the twitch of her long ears and the baring of her yellow teeth, Jenny was obviously prepared to strike back by bucking and kicking at the boys, which would have probably not damaged the boys much but would certainly dislodge her rider. Antimodes endeavored to control the donkey, but he was not having any luck. The younger of the boys, maddened with battle lust, did not see the man's distress. They swirled about him, lashing out with their swords, shrieking and crowing in shrill triumph. Antimodes might well have entered Solace on his posterior, when, out of the dust and noise, an older youth—perhaps about twelve—appeared, caught hold of Jenny's reins, and, with a gentle touch and forceful presence, calmed the terrified donkey.

"Go around!" the youth ordered, waving his sword, which he had shifted to his left hand. "Clear out, fellows! You're frightening the donkey."

The younger boys, ranging in age from six upward, good-naturedly obeyed the youth and continued on their rowdy way. Their shouts and laughter echoed among the enormous trunks of the vallenwood trees.

The older youth paused and, with an accent that was definitely not of this part of Ansalon, spoke his apology as he soothingly stroked the donkey's soft nose. "Forgive us, good sir. We were caught up in our play and did not notice your arrival. I trust you have taken no harm."

The young man had straight, thick blond hair, which he wore bowl-cropped around his ears in a style that was popular in Solamnia, but nowhere else on Kryn. His eyes were gray-blue, and he had a stern and serious demeanor that belied his years, a noble bearing of which he was extremely conscious. His speech was polished and educated. This was no country bumpkin, no laborer's son.

"Thank you, young sir," Antimodes replied. He carefully took stock of his spell components, checking to make certain that the buffeting he had taken had not loosened any of his pouches he wore on his belt. He was about to ask the young man's name, for he found himself interested in this youth, but, on looking up, he found the young man's blue eyes fixed upon the pouches. The expression on the youthful face was one of disdain, disapproval.

"If you are certain you are well, Sir Mage, and have taken no harm from our play, I will take my leave." The youth made a stiff and rigid bow and, letting loose the donkey's halter, turned to run after the other boys. "Coming, Kit?" he called brusquely to another boy nearly his own age, who had halted to study the stranger with interest.

"In a minute, Sturm," said the other youth, and it was only when she spoke that Antimodes realized this curly-haired boy, wearing pants and a leather vest, was actually a girl.

She was an attractive girl—now that he studied her closely—or perhaps he should say "young lady," for though only in her early teens, her figure was well defined, her movements were graceful, and her gaze was bold and unwavering. She studied Antimodes in her turn, regarding him with an intense, thoughtful interest that he found difficult to understand. He was accustomed to meeting with disdain and dislike, but the young woman's interest was not idle curiosity. Her gaze held no antipathy. It seemed as if she were making up her mind about something.

Antimodes was old-fashioned in his attitude toward women. He liked them soft and perfumed, loving and gentle, with blushing cheeks and properly downcast eyes. He realized that in this day of powerful female wizards and strong female warriors his attitude was backward, but he was comfortable with it. He frowned slightly to indicate his own disapproval of this young hoyden and clucked at Jenny, urging her in the direction of the public stables, located near the blacksmith's shop. The stables, the blacksmith's, and the baker's shop, with its immense ovens, were three of the few buildings in Solace situated on the ground.

Even as Antimodes passed by the young woman, he could feel her brown-eyed gaze focused on him, wondering, considering.

Antimodes saw to it that Jenny was comfortably established, with an extra measure of feed and a promise from the stableboy to provide the donkey with extra attention, all paid for, of course, in good Krynn steel, which he laid out with a lavish hand.

This done, the archmage took the nearest staircase leading up to the bridge walks. The stairs were many, and he was hot and out of breath by the time he finished the climb. The shadows of the vallenwoods' thick foliage cooled him, however, providing a shady canopy under which to walk. After a moment's pause to catch his breath, Antimodes followed the suspended walkway that led toward the Inn of the Last Home.

On his way, he passed numerous small houses perched high in the tree branches. House designshe tree branches. House designs varied in Solace, for each had to conform to the tree in which it stood. By law, no part of the living vallenwood could be cut or burned or in any other way molested. Every house used the broad trunk for at least one wall, while the branches formed the ceiling beams. The floors were not level, and there was a noticeable rocking motion to the houses during windstorms. Such irregularities were considered charming by the inhabitants of Solace. They would have driven Antimodes crazy.

The Inn of the Last Home was the largest structure in Solace. Standing some forty feet above ground level, it was built around the bole of a massive vallenwood, which formed part of the Inn's interior. A veritable thicket of timbers supported the inn from beneath. The common room and the kitchen were on the lowest level. Sleeping rooms were perched above and could be reached by a separate entrance; those requiring privacy were not forced to traipse through the common room.

The inn's windows were made of multicolored stained glass, which, according to local legend, had been shipped all the way from Palanthas. The stained glass was an excellent advertisement for the business; the colors glinting in the shadows of the leaves caused the eye to turn in that direction, when otherwise the inn might have been hidden among the leaves.

Antimodes had eaten a light breakfast, and he was therefore hungry enough to do full justice to the proprietor's renowned cooking. The climb up the stairs had further sharpened Antimodes's appetite, as did the smells wafting from the kitchen. Upon entering, the archmage was greeted by Otik himself, a rotund, cheerful middle-aged man, who immediately remembered Antimodes, though the mage had not been a guest in perhaps two years or more.

"Welcome, friend, welcome," Otik said, bowing and bobbing his head as he did to all customers, gentry or peasant. His apron was snow-white, not grease-stained as with some innkeepers. The inn itself was as clean as Otik's apron. When the barmaids weren't serving customers, they were sweeping or scouring or polishing the lovely wooden bar, which was actually part of the living vallenwood.

Antimodes expressed his pleasure in returning to the inn. Otik proved he remembered his guest by taking Antimodes to his favorite table near one of the windows, a table that provided an excellent view, through green-colored glass, of Crystalmir Lake.

Without being asked, Otik brought a mug of chilled dark ale and placed it before Antimodes.

"I recall how you said you enjoyed my dark ale last time you were here, sir," Otik remarked.

"Indeed, Innkeep, I have never tasted its like," Antimodes replied. He also noted the way Otik carefully kept from making any reference to the fact that Antimodes was a user of magic, a delicacy Antimodes appreciated, though he himself scorned to hide who or what he was from anyone.

"I will take a room for the night, with luncheon and dinner," said Antimodes, bringing out his purse, which was well stocked but not indecently full.

Otik replied that rooms were available, Antimodes should have his pick, they would be honored by his presence. Luncheon today was a casserole of thirteen different types of beans simmered with herbs and ham. Dinner was pounded beef and the spiced potatoes for which the inn was famous.

Otik waited anxiously to hear his guest say that the bill of fare was perfectly satisfactory. Then, beaming, the barkeep bustled fussily off to deal with the myriad chores involved in running the inn.

Antimodes relaxed and glanced about at the other customers. It being rather past the usual luncheon hour, the inn was relatively empty. Travelers were upstairs in their rooms, sleeping off the good meal. Laborers had returned to their jobs, business owners were drowsing over their account books, mothers were putting children down for afternoon naps. A dwarf—a hill dwarf, by the looks of him—was the inn's only other customer.

A hill dwarf who was no longer living in the hills, a hill dwarf living among humans in Solace. Doing quite well, to judge by his clothes, which consisted of a fine homespun shirt, good leather breeches, and the leather apron of his trade. He was not more than middle-aged; there were only a streak or two of gray in his nut-brown beard. The lines on his face were uncommonly deep and dark for a dwarf of his years. His life had been a hard one and had left its mark. His brown eyes were warmer than the eyes of those of his brethren who did not live among humans and who seemed to constantly be peering out from behind high barricades.

Catching the dwarf's bright eye, Antimodes raised his ale mug. "I note by your tools that you are a metal worker. May Reorx guide your hammer, sir," he said, speaking in dwarven.

The dwarf gave a nod of gratification and, raising his own mug, said, speaking in Common, "A straight road and a dry one, traveler," in gruff return.

Antimodes did not offer to share his table with the dwarf, nor did the dwarf seem inclined to have company. Antimodes looked out the window, admiring the view and enjoying the pleasant warmth seeping through his body, a refreshing contrast to the cool ale that was soothing his dust-parched throat. Antimodes's assigned duty was to eavesdrop on any and all conversation, and so he listened idly to the conversations of the dwarf and the barmaid, though it did not appear to him that they were discussing anything sinister or out of the ordinary.

"Here you go, Flint," said the barmaid, plunking down a steaming bowl of beans. "Extra portion, and the bread's included. We have to get you fattened up. I take it you'll be leaving us soon?"

"Aye, lass. The roads are opening up. I'm behind time as it is, but I am waiting for Tanis to return from visiting his kin in Qualinesti. He was supposed to be back a fortnight ago, but still no sign of his ugly face."

"I hope he's all right," the barmaid said fondly. "I don't trust them elves, and that's a fact. I hear he doesn't get on with his kin."

"He's like a man with a bad tooth," the dwarf grumbled, though Antimodes could detect a note of anxiety in the dwarf's gruff tone. "He has to keep wiggling it to make sure it still hurts. Tanis goes home knowing that his fine elf relatives can't stand the sight of him, but he keeps hoping maybe this time matters will be different. But no. The blasted tooth's just as rotten as it was the first time he touched it, and it's not going to get better till he yanks it out and has done with it."

The dwarf had worked himself up into red-faced indignation by this time, topping off his harangue with the somewhat incongruous statement of, "And us with customers waiting." He took a swig of ale.

"You've no call to call him ugly," said the barmaid with a simper. "Tanis looks like a human. You can't hardly see any elf in him at all. I'll be glad to see him again. Let him know I asked about him, will you, Flint?"

"Yes, yes. You and every other female in town," the dwarf returned, but he muttered the words into his beard, and the barmaid, who was heading back to the kitchen, did not hear him.

A dwarf and a half-elf who were business partners, Antimodes noted, making deductions about what he'd heard. A half-elf who had been banished from Qualinesti. No, that wasn't right. A banished half-elf could not go back home. This one had done so. He'd left his elven homeland voluntarily, then. Not surprising. The Qualinesti were more liberal-minded about racial purity than their cousins, the Silvanesti, but a half-elf was half-human in their eyes and, as such, tainted goods.

So the half-elf had left his home, come to Solace, and joined up with a hill dwarf, who had himself probably either left his thane and his clan or had been cast out. Antimodes wondered how the two had met, guessed it must be an interesting story.

It was a story he was not likely to hear. The dwarf had settled down to shoveling beans into his mouth. Antimodes's own plate arrived, and he gave the meal his full attention, which it well deserved.

He had just finished and was sopping up the last bit of gravy with his last bite of bread when the door to the inn opened. Otik was there to greet the new guest. The innkeeper appeared nonplused to find a young woman, the same curly-haired young woman Antimodes had met earlier on the road.

"Kitiara!" Otik exclaimed. "Whatever are you doing here, child? Running an errand for your mother?"

The young woman cast him a glance from her dark eyes that might have sizzled his flesh.

Tossing her mass of curly hair, the young woman snorted. "Your potatoes have more brains than you do, Otik. I run errands for no one."

She shoved past him. Her glance swept the common room and fixed on Antimodes, much to his astonishment and annoyance.

"I've come to speak to one of your guests," the young woman announced.

She ignored Otik's fluttering hands. "Now, now, Kitiara. I'm not sure you should be bothering the gentleman." Kit strode up to Antimodes, stood beside his table, gazed down on him.

"You're a wizard, aren't you?" she asked.

He indicated his displeasure by not rising to greet her as he would have done to any other female. Expecting either to be made sport of or perhaps propositioned by this ill-mannered hoyden, he set his face in stern lines of disapproval.

"What I am is my own affair, young lady," he said with sardonic emphasis on the last word. He shifted his gaze deliberately out the window, indicating that the conversation was ended.

"Kitiara . . ." Otik hovered anxiously. "This gentleman is my guest. And this is really not the time or the place to . . ."

The young woman put her brown hands on the table and leaned over it. Antimodes was now starting to be truly angered by this intrusion. He shifted his attention back to her, noting as he did so—he would have been less than human if he had not noticed—the curve of her full breasts beneath the leather vest.

"I know someone who wants to become a wizard," she said. Her voice was serious and intense. "I want to help him, but I don't know how. I don't know what to do." Her hand lifted in a gesture of frustration. "Where do I go? Who do I talk to? You can tell me."

If the inn had suddenly shifted in its branches and dumped Antimodes out the window, he could not have been more astonished. This was highly irregular! This simply wasn't done! There were proper channels. . . .

"My dear young woman," he began.

"Please." Kitiara leaned nearer.

Her eyes were liquid brown, framed by long, black, thick lashes. Her eyebrows were dark and delicately arched to frame the eyes. Her skin was tanned by the sun; she'd led an outdoor life. She was well muscled, lithe, and had grown through the awkwardness of girlhood to attain the grace, not of a woman, but of a stalking cat. She drew him to her, and he went willingly, though he was old enough and experienced enough to know that she would not permit him to come too close. She would allow few men to warm themselves at her inner fire, and the gods help those who did.

"Kitiara, leave the gentleman to his dinner." Otik touched the girl's arm.

Kitiara rounded on him. She did not speak, she merely looked at him. Otik shrank back.

"It is all right, Master Sandeth." Antimodes was quick to intervene. He was fond of Otik and did not want to cause the innkeeper trouble. The dwarf, who had finished his dinner, was now taking an interest, as were two of the barmaids. "The young . . . um . . . lady and I have some business to transact. Please, be seated, mistress."

He rose slightly and made a bow. The young woman slid into the chair opposite. The barmaid whisked over to clear the plates—and to try to satisfy her curiosity.

"Will there be anything else?" she asked Antimodes.

He looked politely at his young guest. "Will you have something?"

"No, thanks," said Kitiara shortly. "Be about your business, Rita. If we need anything, we'll call."

The barmaid, offended, flounced off. Otik cast Antimodes a helpless, apologizing glance. Antimodes smiled, to indicate he wasn't the least concerned, and Otik, with a shrug of his fat shoulders and a flutter of his pudgy hands, walked distractedly away. Fortunately the arrival of additional guests gave the innkeeper something to do.

Kitiara clasped her hands before her, settling down to business with a serious intensity that drew Antimodes's approval.

"Who is this person?" he asked.

"My little brother. Half-brother," she amended as an afterthought.

Antimodes recalled the scathing look she'd given Otik when he mentioned her mother. No love lost there, the archmage guessed.

"How old is the child?"

"Six."

"And how do you know he wants to study magic?" Antimodes asked. He thought he knew the answer. He'd heard it often.

He loves to dress up and play wizard. He's so cute. You should see him toss dust into the air and pretend he's casting a spell. Of course, we assume it's a stage he's going through. We don't really approve. No offense, sir, but it's not the sort of life we had in mind for our boy. Now, if you could talk to him and tell him how difficult . . .

"He does tricks," said the girl.

"Tricks?" Antimodes frowned. "What sort of tricks?"

"You know. Tricks. He can pull a coin out of your nose. He can throw a rock into the air and make it disappear. He can cut a scarf in two with a knife and give it back good as new."

"Sleight-of-hand," said Antimodes. "You realize, of course, that this is not magic."

"Of course!" Kitiara scoffed. "What do you think I am? Some yokel? My father—my real father—took me to see a battle once, and there was a wizard who did some true magic. War magic. My father's a Solamnic knight," she added with naive pride that made her suddenly seem a little girl.

Antimodes didn't believe her, at least the part about her father being a Solamnic knight. What would the daughter of a Solamnic knight be doing running around like a street urchin in Solace? He could well believe that this tomboy was interested in military matters. More than once, her right hand had rested on her left hip, as if she were either accustomed to wearing a sword or accustomed to pretending that she wore one.

Her gaze went past Antimodes, out the window, and kept going. In that gaze was yearning, longing for distant lands, for adventure, for an end to the boredom that was probably about to stifle her. He was not surprised when she said, "Look, sir, I'm going to be leaving here sometime soon, and my little brothers will have to fend for themselves when I'm gone."

"Caramon will be all right," Kitiara continued, still gazing out at the smoky hills and the distant blue water. "He's got the makings of a true warrior. I've taught him all I know, and the rest he'll pick up as he goes along."

She might have been a grizzled veteran, speaking of a new recruit, rather than a thirteen-year-old girl talking of a little snot-nosed kid. Antimodes almost laughed, but she was so serious, so intense, that instead he found himself watching and listening to her with fascination.

"But I worry about Raistlin," Kitiara said, her brows drawing together in puzzlement. "He's not like the others. He's not like me. I don't understand him. I've tried to teach him to fight, but he's sickly. He can't keep up with the other children. He gets tired easily and he runs out of breath."

Her gaze shifted to Antimodes. "I have to leave," she said for the second time. "But before I go, I want to know that Raistlin is going to be able to take care of himself, that he'll have some way to earn his living. I've been thinking that if he could study to be a wizard, then I wouldn't have to worry."

"How old . . . how old did you say this boy was?" Antimodes asked.

"Six," said Kitiara.

"But . . . what about his parents? Your parents? Surely they . . ."

He stopped because the young woman was no longer listening to him. She was wearing that look of extreme patience young people put on when their elders are being particularly tedious and boring. Before Antimodes could finish, she had twisted to her feet.

"I'll go find him. You should meet him."

"My dear . . ." Antimodes started to protest. He had enjoyed his conversation with this interesting and attractive young person, but the thought of entertaining a six-year-old was extremely unwelcome.

The girl ignored his protests. She was out the door of the inn before he could stop her. He saw her running lightly down the stairs, rudely shoving or bumping into anyone who stood in her way.

Antimodes was in a quandary. He didn't want to have this child thrust upon him. Now that she was gone, he didn't want to have anything more to do with the young woman. She had unsettled him, given him an uneasy feeling, like the aftereffects of too much wine. It had been fine going down, but now he had a headache.

Antimodes called for his bill. He would beat a hasty retreat to his room, realizing with annoyance that he would be held a virtual prisoner there during the rest of his stay. Looking up, he saw the dwarf, whose name he recalled was Flint, looking back.

The dwarf had a smile on his face.

Most likely Flint was not thinking at all about Antimodes. The dwarf may have been smiling to himself over the delicious meal he had just enjoyed, or he may have been smiling at the taste of the ale, or just smiling over the pleasantness of the world in general. But Antimodes, with his customary self-importance, decided that Flint was smirking at him and the fact that he, a powerful wizard, was going to run away from two children.

Antimodes determined then and there that he would not give the dwarf any such satisfaction. The archmage would not be driven out of this pleasant common room. He would remain, rid himself of the girl, deal quickly with the child, and that would be an end of it.

"Perhaps you would care to join me, sir," Antimodes said to the dwarf.

Flint glowered and flushed red and ducked his head into his ale. He muttered something about rather having his beard boiled before he'd share a table with a wizard.

Antimodes smiled coldly to himself. Dwarves were notorious for their distrust and dislike of wielders of magic. The archmage was now certain that the dwarf would leave

him alone. Indeed, Flint quaffed his ale in a hurry and, tossing a coin on the table, gave Antimodes a curt nod and stumped out of the inn.

And here, on the dwarf's heels, came the girl, hauling along not one child but two.

Antimodes sighed and ordered a glass of Otik's finest two-year old mead. He had a feeling he was going to need something potent.

