



CORWIN'S STORY

DEN *of* CHAOS

## New fiction by Amber Scott



**A** twig crunched beneath Schael Corwin's boots as she took another careful step. Every nerve jangled with the certainty that something waited close ahead. She crouched down, adjusting her dun cloak to cover the bright red epaulets on her shoulder. The Flaming Fist weren't noted for their subtlety.

"Oof!" A rustle in a nearby bush announced the emergence of Corwin's partner, Zeri. She was a half-elf, the tips of her ears barely pointed and her eyes large and bright like brown tourmalines. She had dark brown skin and the lithe form of her elven ancestors, but none of their grace. Zeri stepped on the edge of her cloak as she tried to extricate herself from the brambles and almost fell. Corwin caught her by the arm.

Speaking of subtlety, Corwin thought.

"Thanks," Zeri breathed. "Do you see them?"

"Not yet, but I can hear something up ahead. Stay here and I'll scout it."

Zeri flashed her a grin. "We're supposed to be working together."

Corwin tried to take offense at the words. Wanted to take offense. This assignment bored her and she wanted to be out of the forest and back to Baldur's Gate. But Zeri was so cheerfully pragmatic about the whole thing and it was hard for Corwin to stay grumpy in her company. And they *were* partners after all, for the time being.

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“Fine,” Corwin said. “I’ll take the lead, you follow. Keep a distance between us. I’m quieter than you.”

“You’re right about that. If I see trouble coming I’ll make myself invisible, but I’ll still be here.”

“Good plan. Ready?”

Zeri nodded. A brambled twig had caught in one of the thick, black braids pulled back from her face, and she reached up to free it. Her epaulet gleamed like a fallen autumn leaf among the greenery.

Corwin reached over and straightened Zeri’s cloak to hide the badge of office. “Let’s go.”

The brush offered good cover but also made movement difficult. She’d already discovered that twigs hid beneath the foliage, ready to crack under an unwary foot. Dense greenery trembled at every movement. Corwin was more used to cobblestones than packed earth under her boots, but she kept her movements slow and controlled, passing through the underbrush in near silence.

Not ten feet ahead, something moved in the forest. Corwin froze. She had her sword in hand, a long, light blade easier to fight with in the dense forest than her preferred longbow. She lowered her crouch, balancing on her toes, ready to spring up and attack if one of the bandits spotted her.

The figure moved away, little more than a shapeless shadow behind the underbrush and the thin saplings clustered ahead. Corwin eased forward again, half-listening for Zeri’s footsteps behind her. A soft cry caught her ear, a sound not quite pain, somehow familiar but she could not place it.

She knew every sound in Baldur’s Gate: drunken laughter, a footpad’s whispered threat, wood-heeled nobles’ shoes clacking on pavement, merchants hawking, shutters creaking, minstrels singing in taverns.

merchants hawking, shutters creaking, minstrels singing in taverns. Here in the forest, every sound took on a strange alien cast. Corwin felt as if she was learning a new language.

A screen of saplings stood between her and the bandits. She clearly heard them moving around now, rustling steps but no conversation. She glanced over her shoulder at Zeri and caught the half-elf's eye. Zeri nodded. Corwin lifted her sword and pushed through the saplings in a rush.

“By order of the Flaming Fist I—”

There were no bandits. The clearing in which she stood was small, too small for a campsite. A dead oak leaned back from its mass of withered roots, a shadowy hollow beneath it. Balls of grey fur wriggled within the hollow and now Corwin recognized the cry she'd heard earlier. The cry of a pup for its mother.

The she-wolf stood in the center of the clearing, amber eyes boring into Corwin. A snarl seemed to roll through the wolf's body, twisting her lips back, ridging the fur over her shoulders, and curling her tail. Her fangs were spears of yellowed bone, her claws hooked daggers of jet.

Zeri started chanting. Corwin held up a hand and made an anxious sound in her throat. It was enough to warn Zeri without provoking the wolf. The chanting stopped.

A low growl rolled out from the wolf's chest. She took a step toward Corwin, head dipping lower.

Corwin knew that behavior. The wolf prepared to charge, to bowl her over with a shoulder and then pounce on her prone form.

“Easy,” she whispered. She pitched her voice low and soothing and drew herself down to the ground, making her form small. “Easy, mama. Easy.”

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Ordinarily she'd make herself big and threatening, yell and shout to drive the wolf away. But the yawning, fluffy cub tumbling out of its den meant the wolf would never run. It might let Corwin go, though, if she backed off now.

Corwin took a slow step back, then another. She fixed her eyes on the wolf's front paws to keep from making accidental eye contact. All the time she whispered in a reassuring rhythm: "Easy, easy, easy. It's okay. I'm going, see? You're safe. It's okay. Easy."

She slipped back through the saplings. The wolf growled sharply and Corwin fought the urge to run. She'd only provoke a chase. "Back, back," she kept whispering, hoping Zeri could hear her.

After a minute of backtracking, the growling had ceased and there was no sign of the wolf. Zeri stood beside Corwin, staring anxiously into the woods. They stood shoulder to shoulder, breathing quickly and scanning the brush.

Finally Corwin relaxed. She let out a long sigh. "I think we're safe."

"You did really well." Zeri put a hand on Corwin's arm. "I'd almost think you've been working your whole career out of wilderness forts."

"Not likely," Corwin said, with a grimace that melted into a smile. She was too relieved to be grumpy. "This is a temporary assignment, remember?"

"You knew exactly what to do. Most recruits would have killed that wolf without hesitation."

"She did what came naturally. If she'd attacked of course I would have defended myself, but..." Corwin trailed off with a shrug.

Zeri nodded as if she understood. After a moment, Corwin said, "We should keep moving. Those bandits are still out here somewhere."

"Of course. Lady Teritha will be so disappointed if we're unable to recover her stolen mushrooms."

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Corwin snorted as the pair started through the underbrush once again. "I can't believe we're out here hunting for a noblewoman's missing fungus samples."

"Apparently she paid a lot for them. They came all the way from the Trollbark Forest. Bad luck the carriage ran into a pack of bandits."

"I'm sure they were thrilled when they saw their haul."

They pressed further into the Wood of Sharp Teeth, watching now for wolves as well as bandits. Once Corwin thought she heard something growl, but the sound was distant and did not repeat. The sun sank lower in the sky and swaths of golden light cut through the canopy.

"Can't you cast a spell and find the bandits?" Corwin muttered an hour later.

"You're here for the tracking. I'm just backing you up until we find the camp."

"If we don't find it soon we'll have to—hey, do you see that?"

Corwin pointed to a bush whose leaves hung sadly down from snapped branches. The pair approached the bush, silent now and tense with alertness. Corwin quickly pointed out more broken foliage and the scuffed imprint of a boot in the earth.

Zeri dropped behind, letting Corwin take the lead. Corwin followed the trail, stepping carefully to keep her progress silent. Shadows gathered at the bases of thick ash trees that grew in clumps, interspersed with enormous black-barked willows. Voices sounded in the darkness, something low followed by shouts of laughter. Corwin drew her sword quietly, feeling the comforting weight of the weapon as it rested in her hand.

She came to the edge of a clearing lit by the last glow of sunlight and the orange radiance of a crackling fire. Four figures sat around the fire, talking and laughing. Packs and bedrolls lay scattered on the ground around the firepit. A fifth figure stood slightly away from the group next

around the firepit. A fifth figure stood slightly away from the group next to a moss-covered boulder. Piled against the rock were small wooden crates and a heap of half-filled sacks. The figure, a human man judging by shape and size, held a small coffin-shaped box. Corwin's heart beat a little faster.

Then the figure turned, seeking the light of the campfire to better inspect the contents of the box. Corwin felt like her heart stopped entirely for a moment. Then she withdrew slowly, fading back into the forest like a wraith.

She met with Zeri a dozen yards back into the woods. "Is it them?" Zeri whispered.

Corwin nodded. "Five bandits, all human. Lightly armored, same as me. Swords and crossbows."

"Five's a lot but we'll be ready for them." Zeri frowned at Corwin. "I think. Do you agree?" When Corwin didn't answer, Zeri added, "Is something wrong?"

"No, no. It's only..."

Another silence stretched out. Zeri crossed her arms over her chest. "Look," she finally said, "I know this is temporary for you. When you're done your turn here you'll go back to Baldur's Gate. But this is permanent for me, and I can't let you mess up our assignment. I'll pay the consequences if you do."

"I know them," Corwin said, forcing the words out. Once the first sentence left her mouth she found it easier to speak. "Before I joined the Flaming Fist I...well...I made friends with the wrong people. I got out before they committed any serious crimes, but they'll remember me."

"Perhaps they'll surrender more readily, if they know you," Zeri said.

"Maybe." Corwin's doubt sounded in her voice. "Only one way to find out I suppose."

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Corwin sheathed her sword and readied her bow. Zeri cast her spell, chanting softly as she faded from sight. When the spell ended she touched Corwin's shoulder with invisible fingers. “Ready.”

Corwin blew out a breath. “Let's go.”

She stepped into the clearing, an arrow on the string. The conversation around the firepit died. The man by the mossy boulder turned, an oath on his lips. Then a smile broke across his face. “Schael!”

“Derrion.” He looked exactly as she remembered but a little older, a little thicker around the middle. He was Chondathan, like Corwin herself, with the same tawny-gold skin and clear brown eyes. His hair was a mop of unruly auburn; Corwin's black locks were wrapped in a conservative knot at her neck.

Corwin shrugged her shoulder loose of the cloak. The crimson fist on its yellow background caught the fading light. “By order of the Flaming Fist, I place you all under arrest.”

Laughter erupted in the clearing and Corwin's face flushed. The bandits on the ground got to their feet. Corwin trained her bow on the group, moving the arrow from one target to another. She settled on an Iluskan woman with short blonde hair and an impish grin. Corwin recognized her—Liina, she thought.

“We heard you'd joined the Fists,” Liina said, unable to keep a giggle from her voice. “Didn't think it was true.”

“It's true enough,” Corwin said. The grimness of her voice penetrated through the bandits' jollity. Hands dropped to weapons.

“Come, Schael, be reasonable,” Derrion said. He held his empty hands up, smiling, but his eyes were cold. “We haven't hurt anyone. Taken a bit of gold from a lady who had too much already, that's all.”

“It's my duty to bring you in.” Corwin said.

“Can't you look the other way? For old time's sake.”

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“Our ‘old times’ are precisely why I can't let you go.” Corwin lifted the bow, pulling the arrow back to her ear. “I know you all too well. You'll come with me now, or I'll see you dead.”

One of the bandits at the fire, a man in a green hooded cloak, moved first. A knife blade, thin and silver like a minnow, popped up between his fingers. He flung it at Corwin and she stepped to the side and let the bowstring go.

The knife flashed past her head. Corwin's arrow flew at Liina but the bandit dove to the ground. The arrow sank into the chest of the man behind her. His eyes rolled back as he sagged to his knees.

Corwin dashed left, running parallel to the camp as she drew another arrow. The knife-thrower had another blade out and tracked her around the camp. The last bandit at the fire, a woman with long red braids, had a crossbow out and pointed at her.

Zeri flickered into view in the trees across from Corwin. A crackle of blue energy formed at her fingertip, then streaked across the camp in a sizzle of forked lightning. The bolt roared over Liina, the knife-thrower, and the woman with the crossbow. The bandits tried to scatter, screaming in terror and pain. Corwin took a step back, blinking away the afterimage.

Derrion shouted, “Get her!” His own crossbow pointed at Corwin. She fired at him and he flinched to the side. Her arrow grazed his neck and blood spurted forth.

The man with the arrow in his chest was dead or dying, unmoving on the ground. The red-haired woman had also collapsed in the wake of the lightning bolt. The knife-thrower, singed but still on his feet, flung another blade at Corwin. She dodged—too slow. Sharp pain lanced through her face and blood dripped down her chin.

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Derrion's crossbow snapped and Corwin dropped to the ground. The bolt whistled overhead. Liina charged Zeri, but the wizard conjured an ethereal arrow dripping with acid. Liina broke off her charge to dodge the spell.

Corwin abandoned her bow and drew her sword as she rose to one knee. She waited, watching the knife-thrower. He had a wild look in his eyes and his hair stood on end. Another knife flew from his fingers. Corwin launched herself forward, slapping the knife away with her blade. The bandit turned and tried to flee. She cut him down with a single stroke.

“Put that down!” Zeri shouted.

Corwin turned and saw Zeri pointing one hand at Liina. Ugly red burns marred the side of Liina's face and her hair was scorched and blackened at the ends. She held the coffin-shaped box Corwin had seen earlier. Behind Liina, Derrion reloaded his crossbow with shaking hands.

“Even if you bring us in you'll fail,” Liina shouted. The words were taunting, but her face twisted in hate. She whirled around and threw the box at the rock.

The soft wooden sides of the box splintered with a crash of shattering glass the moment it hit.

“Damn!” Corwin spat. She stepped forward, ready to order Derrion and Liina to surrender. Then she saw the plumes of gas rising from the splintered box.

The bandits saw the effects of the mingled alchemical ingredients at the same time. Liina scrambled away. Derrion moved a hair slower. Even as Corwin started to shout a warning, Derrion inhaled a wisp of yellow smoke. He coughed and choked, his eyes welling up with tears.

“Derrion, get back!” called Liina, but it was far too late.

Derrion collapsed onto his knees, screaming. His voice sounded wet

Derrion collapsed onto his knees, screaming. His voice sounded wet and thick and yellow mucus dribbled from the corners of his mouth. He clutched at his throat. Corwin's stomach dropped as she saw the skin sloughing away from his fingers. His whole body sagged, as if his skeleton melted away inside. Folds of flesh hung in grotesque bags on his face.

"Gods above!" cried Zeri.

The thing that had been Derrion lurched forward, reaching for Liina. His arms sagged like melted wax. His legs and torso had fused together into a gelatinous pile that flowed over the forest floor. Liina gave a piercing scream and scrambled behind Zeri.

Corwin charged across the clearing. Zeri backed away from the horrible creature, chanting desperately. Another ethereal arrow streaked from her hand and slammed into the oozing creature. It slowed for a moment and then surged forward.

Corwin leaped over the body of a bandit and sprinted between Zeri and the creature. She swung her sword two-handed and sliced it into the creature's bulk.

The sword cut away a wide slice of fleshy orange ooze that fell to the ground, withering. The creature retreated a foot, moaning in a disturbingly human fashion. The vestiges of Derrion's features still showed near the top of the creature, a false mouth open in a silent scream.

"Move!" shouted Zeri. Corwin leaped to the side. Another lightning bolt cracked across the camp.

The electricity sank into the hideous creature and seemed to swell it. To Corwin's horror, the blob calved in half—or tried to. A section of orange ooze peeled off and bubbled on the ground. Its movements persisted only a few seconds before it melted away into a slimy puddle.

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A writhing pseudopod lashed out from the creature and struck Corwin on the wrist. She screamed as a sticky substance bubbled on her skin, eating away at the flesh. "Try fire!" she hollered.

Liina stumbled into view. She carried a flaming branch from the campfire. Pinning the monster between her and Corwin, she jammed the burning flames into the creature's side. A moan issued from the slimy mass and its pseudopods flailed as if in pain.

Corwin shook off her injury and stabbed deeply into the monster. Liina beat the creature with the makeshift torch.

Finally the creature that had been Derrion collapsed into a spreading, formless puddle. Corwin stood panting over the mess, her wrist a mess of red blisters and raw skin. Zeri stared at the remains of the slime monster, grimacing in disgust.

Liina tossed the burning branch, its flame almost extinguished with dripping slime, back into the fire. "Th-thank you," she said, her voice shaking.

Corwin turned on the bandit, fury building in her chest. She raised her sword and snapped, "I should cut you down where you stand."

Liina held up her hands, her eyes wide. "I surrender! I turn myself in, please!"

Corwin glared at the bandit a moment longer before lowering her sword. "You're lucky I'm a sworn servant of the Flaming Fists. Else I'd be tempted to dispense justice for Derrion."

"I didn't mean to—"

"Your careless, spiteful behavior caused this! All this!" Corwin swept her sword to indicate the clearing.

Liina said nothing, though a spark of anger flickered in her eyes. Zeri put a hand on Corwin's shoulder. "She panicked, Corwin. She didn't know what would happen."

what would happen.”

“That’s no excuse.” Corwin bit off the end of the sentence and swallowed hard. “Some things can’t be forgiven.”

Liina submitted to manacles and Zeri packed up what she could carry from the bandit’s loot. Most of Lady Teritha’s alchemical ingredients had been destroyed, but Zeri salvaged the remains.

Corwin lined up the bodies near the slimy residue of Derrion. She covered them as best she could with fallen leaves.

With Liina on a lead, Corwin and Zeri began the trek back to the Flaming Fist fortification. Night fell but no one suggested camping for the night. A few hours walk would take them to a wooden palisade, hot dinner, and cold air.

A waxing moon rose heavy and bright in the sky. Corwin led them by the straightest route back. Not until she broke into the clearing did she realize that, in her fatigue, she’d taken them back to the wolf’s den.

The wolf and her pups were gone. The hollow beneath the oak tree held nothing but a few scraps of bone and fur. Corwin spared only a moment examining the abandoned den before the weight of Zeri’s gaze grew too heavy, and they continued on.

