

THE AWAKENING OF THE CANDARA GEMS

by Jasper Cooper



This story happened in 102 Stellen (see the timeline in The Silver Well). At this time The Kingdom of Gems was called The Kingdom of Sanseem and the town of Candara was called Liddlehem. The Gem Falls were called The Chima Falls.

Night covered The Kingdom of Sanseem underneath a thick blanket of clouds. Rain pattered the muddy road and not far away, the roar of the cascading water of the Gem Falls could be heard clearly. Two shadowy figures moved quickly through the darkness with the cold rain falling upon them. It was Wizard Candara and his greyhound dog.

They crossed North Bridge in a southwards direction, the wizard striding along Charin Road with Blue Lake on his left and a wood to his right. The dog trotted faithfully

beside her master, moving her sleek body with ease. Rain dripped off their faces. The dog was alert, her nose twitching, but all she could smell was the sweet earthy scent that filled the air as the rain washed and refreshed the kingdom.

Behind them, back across the bridge, some bushes rustled and a voice whispered sharply, "Follow them. You must find out what they're up to, understand? And then, kill them... and bring back anything of value. Now, go!"

The bushes rustled again and out came a huge komodo dragon. Venemous saliva dripped from its mouth as its forked tongue slipped in and out like a snake. Then another rustle and a second komodo appeared, and then a third. By nature they were ferocious, cunning and devious. Their minds were intent upon the special task they had been given.

They moved off side by side. All their senses were alert, as they followed as stealthily as hunting leopards, their powerful legs carrying their heavy bulks quickly until they slowed at the bridge. They walked onto it, forced into single file now between the walls of the narrow wooden bridge. Their long razor-sharp claws clicked on the wooden boards. Half way across the bridge, the one in the front, who was the leader, spoke in a low growl.

"Stop," it said softly. They all stopped. "We mustn't be heard."

They could just see the wizard and his dog a little way ahead, so they waited until they had disappeared into the darkness. The leader's eyes flashed with hateful disgust.

"We follow this skum. When we know what they're up to, then we kill them."

The other two nodded and growled eagerly and one of them snarled and bared its teeth. "I love killing wizards... I done it before."

The three komodos began walking again. They were skilled at staying concealed in the shadows as they kept their distance. The dark, wet night worked for them. Ahead, Wizard Candara and his dog were totally unaware that they were being followed. They moved with haste, passed Charin and Blue Lake until they approached Liddlehem



Yersen Harber was bending intently over his work. His white hair was long, and unkempt, tied back into a ponytail, and a bristly moustache hung over his mouth. He was a small man, sitting on a tall stool, with his well-worn shoes, laces still tied, lying on the floor where he had kicked them off in his eagerness to begin his work.

His mouth tightened momentarily with concentration as his hands made a delicate movement, gripping a diamond-tipped, wooden-handled tool and working it with the fine skill of a craftsman.

It was night and three oil lamps rested around him on the table and blazed at full strength, illuminating his hands as they moved with precision. He squinted through a brass eyepiece, held there by the skin around his right eye. Every so often, as he worked, he made soft grunts of approval and delight.

Also on the table, lay a variety of tools and instruments, as well as a row of small glass bottles. The liquids inside,

and the blue and green glass of the bottles, glinted in the lamplight. A copper dish had been used for mixing an abrasive paste and another smaller one lay empty beside it.

Yersen's focus was intense. The task he was working on demanded all his powers of concentration, all his knowledge and all his skill. He was cutting a gem, a ruby of extraordinary brilliance. As he worked, fashioning the ruby into an oval shape, its luminance grew until his face was bathed in a beautiful deep red.

He lived in a house in Liddlehem. A large shed at the end of his garden, which he had built himself, was his workshop. It was dingy and dusty, with shelves packed with tools, tins and other bits and pieces, but now it began to be transformed by the ruby's growing glow. It was like a crimson sunrise painting a dull town with colour. Even the dust looked beautiful.

Yersen was a good natured man and his workshop was his personal heaven where he found contentment. Through choice, he worked there most days, taking an occasional day off when he felt he needed it. If there was no paid work to be done, he would usually be there, working at a project of his own. His wife, Ruzelle, resented the amount of time he spent there and felt he should work the regular four days a week and then have the three week-end days off like everybody else. She complained and grumbled at him but he refused to change his ways.

This clash had become a constant source of conflict between them and neither of them would budge, but while Yersen kept his cheerful countenance, Ruzelle became bitter and mean. He would spend most days working happily in his workshop and she would grumble and complain at him at every opportunity.

Yersen was an excellent craftsman. He had trained as an apprentice with the Great Jeliam, a Master Jeweller from the Persunno tradition who had the reputation of being the very best jeweller of his day. Yersen had worked hard to learn his trade and become a jeweller of the very highest order. By the time he was twenty-five he had become a Master Jeweller himself, a rare achievement for one so young. He was the best in the Kingdom Of Sanseem.

Yersen's childhood love for gems, as well as his knowledge of them, had deepened as the years passed. He could cut a gem with fine precision and when he had finished they were always stunningly beautiful. Now he was old but his skills remained as sharp as ever.

When he was working on an important job, time would lose all meaning for him. He would not notice or care how long he was spending, or whether it was day or night. These things made no difference to him; he would keep working until the job was done.

It was deep into the night and rain tapped on the wooden roof. Yersen was absorbed in his task. The latch on the door rattled and he looked up, his eyepiece still in position. Ruzelle entered. Yersen gazed at her with surprise and his heart dropped. He had given up being nice to her and he never liked her coming into his workshop.

"I'm working," he snapped, and looked down again at the ruby, "I would rather not be disturbed."

"Yes, dear," she responded kindly, "But I thought you might like a nice drink or something."

Yersen looked up in surprise at Ruzelle's loving tone.

"Since when have you brought me a drink?" he asked gruffly, his expression turning from surprise to suspicion, "What do you want?"

"Nothing," she replied innocently, "I just wondered if you wanted..."

"Is it money?" he interrupted, "There's some over there." He pointed to a shelf. "Take what you want and let me get on with my work."

Ruzelle walked over to the shelf and looked at the money lying there. There were two six dib notes and a few coins of various sizes, including one with a hole in it. She guessed it would add up to about fifteen dibs. She quickly swept it up and slipped it into her pocket. She turned and gazed at Yersen who immediately looked down again at the glowing gem.

"Thank you, dear," she began, "I was just thinking, dear..."

She stopped abruptly because she realised he was not listening, his head bowed over the ruby as he continued to work intently at it. She pursed her lips in irritation and then walked over to the table and sat down on a stool opposite him.

"Yersen..." she said.

He ignored her. She waited.

"Yersen!" she snapped, raising her voice.

Yersen jumped in shock and his eyepiece fell onto the table. He tried to catch it but it bounced onto the floor and rolled away. The ruby flared brightly. He stood up and glared at her.

"Woman!" he barked at her crossly as the ruby faded back, "I hope it's not ruined! If you've spoilt my work...or broken my eyepiece..." He looked down at the ruby and then up at her again. "I think it's alright but you can see I'm working. I have to concentrate. Now... go away!"

He took a few steps to retrieve his eyepiece and then walked back to the table and sat down again. He inspected the eyepiece carefully.

"I just wanted to talk," she said, putting on her most charming voice and spreading her hands innocently, "That's all. What's wrong with that?"

"It's wrong because I'm working. You know how important this is..." he nodded at the ruby.

"I do know," she said, "If Wizard Candara wants gems cut it means they must be important... very important. And he's chosen you to do it. That gem is precious and... it must be very valuable. Look how it shines..."

Yersen looked down at it and smiled as he watched it sparkling with rich colour in the flickering lamplight. It was the most beautiful gem he had ever worked on and he felt a spring of joy in his heart.

"Yersen," continued Ruzelle. "Yersen, I was just wondering... what's he paying you?"

Yersen looked up again and opened his mouth. He nearly shouted at her but restrained his anger and when he spoke to her it was with a kind tone.

"Ruzelle," he said slowly, as if explaining something to a child, "Not everything worth doing is paid. When you love something, then money doesn't matter... not at all. When you married me it wasn't for money, was it?"

She ignored the question.

"But surely..." she said shaking her head, "Surely you're being paid! Yersen... if you're doing all this work for nothing... no, you wouldn't... would you?"

"I would," Yersen stated, "And I am. I would not dream of charging Wizard Candara. The honour is enough. All you think of is money!"

She took a deep breath and sighed.

"When's Wizard Candara coming back anyway?" she demanded.

"I don't know," replied Yersen calmly, "But he'll probably send his dog again. Why?"

Ruzelle was still shaking her head. She looked up at the ceiling, closed her eyes in despair and sighed in frustration. Then anger rose in her.

"You're mad!" she shouted, "Mad!"

She slammed a fist onto the table making everything shake. The gem flared up again.

"Stop it!" snapped Yersen, picking up the ruby, "Stop it, now!"

He sat the ruby on the palm of his hand. It tinted his face and highlighted in his eyes. He closed his fingers around it slowly, carefully, as if it was as fragile as a butterfly, and the red glow faded.

"If I am mad," he said calmly, "At least I'm happy. You are a misery to yourself and everyone you meet."

Ruzelle's jaw dropped. She stood up and looked for a moment as if she was going to reach across the table and hit him. He had never talked to her like this before.

"I... I..." she began. She was lost for words, then she blurted out, "I have never been so insulted... never... not by you or anyone... I..."

He interrupted her with a voice as calm as a still lake.

"You spread misery like a disease."

The statement hit Ruzelle as if she had been slapped around the face. Time stopped. His own words surprised himself as he heard his voice, clear and decisive. He felt strong. For the first time in years he was standing up to her. He felt the gem tingle in his hand.

"What you need to do," he continued, "Is to sit down and have a good, long look at your life... and then make some big changes."

She stepped back as if the shock of his words had knocked her there. For a brief moment, Ruzelle understood. Her expression softened, her lower lip quivered and she almost melted into tears. She was poised, as if at a crossroads, and she knew she could turn either way. Then the choice was made. Her face hardened again and an ugly scowl appeared.

"It is you who needs to change," she barked, "And the sooner the better!"

She turned quickly before he could reply, to make sure that she had had the last word. Her feet rapped angrily on the wooden floor as she left the room, slamming the hut door behind her.

Yersen opened his hand, releasing rays of red light, and colour returned to the room. He wondered if the strength he had felt had come from the ruby. The way it had tingled made it feel alive. This was no ordinary gem.

"You..." he said to the ruby, "Are beautiful. And now... to bring out that beauty even more."

With great care he placed the ruby on the table again and put his eyepiece back on his eye. Then he picked up the tool and resumed his work.



Yersen worked through the night. As dawn broke gently upon the Kingdom of Sanseem, he finished cutting the

ruby. He put his tool down on the table with the others, stood up and looked down at his handiwork. The ruby shone with a sparking brilliance that he had never seen before. He had cut many gems over the years but this one was special. Not only was it stunningly beautiful but it made him feel calm and strong inside. In its presence he felt he was somehow protected from the worst evil and that nothing could harm him.

He walked to the window and looked out through the dim light. A path ran from his hut to his house, cutting a straight line through his overgrown garden and there was a light on in the kitchen downstairs. Ruzelle was silhouetted as she moved across the light, and then she was gone. He smiled, and in his smile he knew he still loved her. A flash of memory lit his mind and he saw her as a young woman, her face smiling as she greeted him. In those early days, when they first met, she was happy, and he wondered how things had gone so wrong since those times in his youth. He decided he would try his best to help her, to sort out the friction between them and make her happy once again.

He turned and walked back to the table where the three lamps still blazed. He sat down on the high stool and picked up a fine mesh cloth to complete the final polishing of the gem. One hour later the ruby was finished, he put his tools away on the shelves and then turned off the lamps. He sat down in a comfortable chair in the corner and quickly drifted off to sleep.



Yersen woke when a firm knock on the door made him jump. He pulled himself up, walked to the door and opened it.

"Wizard Candara!" exclaimed Yersen, "I didn't expect you. Not you yourself, sir... I thought you'd send Nex..."

"Oh, she's here too," said the wizard.

He turned and whistled, and a sleek greyhound dog came out of the tangle of undergrowth and walked towards them.

"Yersen," said Nex, wagging her tail, "It's good to see you again."

Yersen reached down and stroked her head, feeling her short grey hair. She was good natured, gentle and patient, but when necessary she could run like the wind and fight as fiercely as any dog. There were two objects hanging around her neck on a blue and green material collar. Firstly, a small, lustrous gem, a mystic fire topaz. It flashed with many colours and matched the much larger one that crowned the wizard's staff. The second object was a small pouch, in the same blue and green colours.

"It's great to see you... both of you," said Yersen. He stepped back from the doorway and into his shed, giving a welcoming sweep with his hand. "Come in, please."

"Thank you," replied the wizard and Nex together.

The tall, bearded wizard stepped into the shed first. He spotted the shining ruby straight away and as he walked towards it, his staff tapped on the wooden floor. Nex followed. Yersen closed the door and looked anxiously at Candara.

"Is it alright, sir?" he asked nervously.

"Yes, yes," the wizard replied, "It's good."

Yersen relaxed and smiled. Nex moved over to Wizard Candara and lifted her front paws off the ground and placed them on the table so that she could see the ruby as well. The

wizard was stooping over the shining gem and studying it intently. He picked it up with great care, placed it in the palm of his hand and tenderly touched it with a finger, feeling the finely cut edges. Its red glow intensified and strengthened.

"Yes, it's very, very good," he commented, "It's excellent. I wasn't sure that it could be done. I was hoping. But, yes... this is superb... it's perfect."

Yersen shrugged his shoulders and beamed.

"It was a pleasure, sir," he said enthusiastically, "It's been a real joy to work on it. It's the finest ruby I've ever seen... the very finest. The colour is so intense... and so clear. And the tone, sir!"

Nex pushed her head forwards to look more closely.

"It's beautiful," she said, "I love the pattern that you've cut."

Candara looked up at Yersen. "It's your fine work that's brought out the colour and tone. Did you have to heat it?" he asked.

"No," Yersen replied, "With this gem there was no need. And anyway, I only heat my gems if it's really necessary."

"Good. As I thought," the wizard nodded, looking back at the ruby, "It's better not to heat them, of course. But how did you achieve such brilliance?"

"Simple. I cut the gem and then polished it. And half way through the cutting I gave it just a little special... er... influence to help it along."

Candara looked up again with interest. "And what's that, my friend?"

"The Hidden Cave, sir," Yersen answered, "That's what I call it because it's hidden behind trees... with a thin crack in the rock for its entrance... I found the cave by squeezing through. There's many gem caves along the Vale of Gems,

but this one is special. It's in the mountains where the valley begins, and there's a wealth of gems in there... embedded in the rock walls and floor and ceiling. I haven't told anyone about it... except you, now, of course. The gems in there glow... even before being cut, and that glowing effects other gems if they are in there. I put this gem of yours in the cave for a week when it was half cut and when it came out it shone with more brilliance. The colour was purified. It had an extra beauty about it."

Wizard Candara nodded.

"I see," he said thoughtfully, "You're wise to keep it secret. Even here, in this wonderful kingdom, not everyone is honest. But the work you're doing... this work..." he held up the ruby, " This will help with that."

Yersen looked quizzical.

"Help with the dishonesty?" he asked.

The great wizard nodded. "Exactly. I'll explain it all in due course. But you understand, I hope, how the work you are doing for me is extremely important?"

Yersen nodded.

"Good," Candara said, putting the ruby down on the table, "And now for your next task."

"Another gem, sir?" asked Yersen, with a hopeful ring in his voice.

"Better than that," said the wizard, "Two more!"

Yersen smiled and rubbed his hands together in anticipation.

Candara reached down and patted Nex on the side. Then he opened the small pouch hanging on the greyhound's collar and took out two rough, uncut gems and placed them on the table next to the ruby. One was purple and the other blue.

"There," he said, "Can you do the same with these?"

"Yes, of course," replied Yersen, looking as eager as a hungry dog being offered a bone, "I'll start today."

Yersen moved to the table and picked up the purple one.

"Hmm... amethyst..." he mumbled, picking up his eyepiece and putting it in position, "Beautiful. A very good weight... tone and saturation of colour... excellent. This is a gem of the very highest quality."

He put it down and picked up the other.

"Ah... sapphire... one of my favourites. Weight, again, is very good. The clarity is amazing... even before cutting." He put his eyepiece down and looked up at Candara. "These gems are the best I've ever seen. Where are they from?"

"The north," replied the wizard, "The far north... deep in Kome Surren where the sun never shines."

"Oh yes," acknowledged Yersen, "I've heard rumours about that place and the precious metals and gems that are supposed to be there. But I've never seen any evidence at all... until now."

"The rumours are true," continued the wizard, "But it's extremely cold there... cold enough to freeze your eyes in their sockets! This makes the gems very difficult to mine. But as well as this, there are creatures living there who are very possessive about the gems and metals, which aren't even theirs. There are Snow Ghoulbats, as pale as ghosts, a great gathering of Somons, some Wilts and others. But, as you can see, it's well worth the effort."

"Definitely," confirmed Yersen.

"You can cut these?"

"Yes," said Yersen.

"Good," said the wizard, "And you'll use the Hidden Cave again?"

"Of course."

"How long will it take?" Candara asked.

Yersen looked up at the ceiling. "Some preliminary cutting first... then to put them in The Hidden Cave for a week... then the final cutting and polishing. It's hard to say exactly... about three weeks I should think."

"That's fine."

Candara carefully picked up the shining ruby and put it into the pouch around Nex's neck. Nex wagged her tail.

"We must go," said Candara, patting Nex, "We have work to do. First, we need to speak to someone who knows the kingdom well... really well."

"Ah..." began Yersen, "Heemer. Heemer's the one you need. He's a cat who lives in Charin with the Metin family. He's travelled all over this land and you'll not find a wiser cat in the whole kingdom. Then there's another who could help you. Another cat... called Florie who lives in Whitten... the most beautiful white cat you'll ever see."

"But is she wise?" the wizard asked, "Does she know her way about the kingdom?"

"Yes, she does," Yersen nodded, "There's none better than those two. And they've both helped the king in the past, so take your pick."

"Can they keep a secret?" asked Candara, "Are they completely trustworthy?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good." The wizard looked down at Nex and patted her on the side. "And thank you. We'll go and speak to both of them."

"I'm sure they'll help you," confirmed Yersen.

The wizard stepped towards the door and then paused.

"Thank you for the ruby..." he said, "It's wonderful. I will return for the others and will pay you then..."

"There's no need..." began Yersen.

Wizard Candara held up his hand.

"I insist," he said firmly, "You must be paid well for your work."

"I can't accept..." began Yersen, but before he was able to object further the wizard interrupted.

"Now, we must go."

Candara walked to the door, lifted the latch, and stepped outside. Nex followed.

"We'll be back to collect the gems," said Candara, "But I'll send a sparrow messenger first to make sure you've finished."

"Right," nodded Yersen, as the two visitors started walking down the path towards the house, "Good Bye."

"Good bye," said Candara and Nex together.

In one of the upstairs window's of Yersen's house two eyes glinted in the early morning light. The tall figure of the wizard turned right just before the house and then was gone. Nex followed a second later.

Yersen closed the door and turned his attention to the two new gems resting on his table. He smiled in anticipation, put his bronze eyepiece in place and sat down to study them more carefully.

Outside, beside his hut, something rustled the bushes as it moved away from the hut and towards the house.

In the upstairs bedroom in the house, a heavy atmosphere filled the air. Ruzelle stood by the closed door feeling a mixture of excitement and fear. The komodo in charge, called Dripe, slipped his clawed feet off the window ledge, dropped with a heavy thud and turned his head to look at Ruzelle behind him. Then he turned his massive body and his tail crunched into a small dressing table, breaking one of the legs and sending everything clattering onto the floor.

Ruzelle jumped with fear at the powerful creature facing her.

Another komodo moved beside Dripe and glared at her in a hostile way. Together they stepped towards Ruzelle who was terrified and backed away, bumping into the door.

"Get away!" she exclaimed.

Dripe growled and bared his teeth at her. Footsteps pounded up the stairs and Dripe tilted his head to listen.

"Open the door," he ordered.

Ruzelle was on the verge of panic but she managed to grope for the handle without turning around and pulled the door open behind her. The third komodo entered, squeezing past her with its great tail dragging and its claws clicking on the floor boards. It stopped in the middle of the room in front of Dripe.

"Well, Hambas?" asked Dripe.

Ruzelle edged towards the open door, hoping she would not be seen.

"Stop!" snapped Dripe at her, and then turning to the other komodo, "Guard her."

The komodo moved into the doorway and Ruzelle stepped back.

"If she moves, Ratnor," snarled Dripe, poisonous saliva dripping from his mouth, "Then use that strong bite of yours to teach her to obey. But don't kill her... she could be useful."

Ruzelle stood absolutely still and Ratnor fixed her eyes on her.

"I'm hungry," growled Ratnor.

"Hmm..." said Dripe, "Yes, I am too. Perhaps we'll have one of her legs later. Depends how she behaves. Now..." he continued, turning back to Hambas. "Tell me what you heard."

"It's gems," Hambas began, "Special gems. The man cut an amazing gem and the wizard took it and it's hanging around the dog's neck. Then he gave the man two more to work on."

"Why?" asked Dripe.

Hambas shook his head. "They didn't say."

Dripe narrowed his eyes thoughtfully. "I wonder why. Gems are valuable when they are given power... they can be used... even used as weapons, I've heard. He's preparing them for something. We must get them. We must watch and listen, and wait until the two gems are cut... then we'll kill them and get the gems. What else did you find out, Hambas?"

Hambas turned his scaly head on one side and looked up to think. His yellow, forked tongue slipped in and out of his mouth. "The gems came from the north, from a place called... I think it was Komesurrin..."

"Kome Surren!?" Dripe's growling voice sounded surprised, "You sure?"

"Yeah, and he said he'd pay the man for the gem work."

Ruzelle gasped and tensed in anger. Then she muttered through her teeth, "The deceiving little man..."

Dripe turned on her.

"What did you say?" he snapped aggressively.

"Nothing," replied Ruzelle, her voice tremored with nerves.

"Ratnor!" commanded Dripe, "Make her speak."

Ratnor opened his mouth and poisonous saliva stretched between his teeth. Terror filled Ruzelle's eyes as he stepped towards her.

"It was nothing," she blurted out quickly.

Ratnor growled, and took another step. Opening his mouth again and shaping up to bite her on the leg. Ruzelle held up her hand.

"Stop! Stop!" she panicked, "It was nothing that matters. He deceived me... that's Yersen, my husband." She glared at Ratnor. "Get back and I'll tell you... not that it means anything to you."

"Back!" commanded Dripe.

Ratnor took a step back and Ruzelle continued.

"He told me, that's Yersen, that the wizard wasn't paying him. That's all. At last we get some money and he keeps it all for himself. He's deceiving me..."

"Maybe..." said Dripe thoughtfully, "Just... maybe..." Then his voice softened. "Back, Ratnor, give the lady some room." Ratnor stepped back. "We want the gems and you want the money. Work for us, help us get the gems, and you can have your money..."

Ruzelle stared at him. Her mind was spinning. In a flash, in her mind's eye, she saw the money, a roll of 10 dib notes, in her clutched hand. Then she saw Yersen lying dead on the floor of his hut. This scene shocked her, but at the same time, it appealed. It would be good to get rid of him and gain the money. No one would ever guess that she had been involved in her husband's death; poor Yersen would be the unfortunate victim of a komodo attack. She would be showered with sympathy.

"You help us," said Dripe, "And we'll help you. All you have to do is watch and tell us when he's finished the gems... the two he's just been given to work on. When Candara and his dog return to collect them then we'll kill them... and you get the money and we get the gems. Fillias is waiting for us."

"What about Yersen?" Ruzelle asked, "Will you kill him too?"

"No, no!" Gripe growled, "Of course not. Anyway, that would attract too much attention. So... will you do it?"

Ruzelle wanted the money but she wanted Yersen dead as well. She would think about this.

"I'll do it," she stated, "But how do I know you'll give me the money?"

"Look at me," ordered Gripe, stepping forwards and looking up at her intently.

Their eyes met, his as black as coal and hers icy green. As she stared, she suddenly felt a completely new feeling. She felt she knew what it was like to be a komodo. She knew how Gripe thought and felt. She knew what it was like to run on four legs, to growl, to hunt and to kill. The power was wonderful. She blinked and made herself look away.

Then she noticed something even more extraordinary. She had scales on her hands, komodo scales. A bitter taste filled her mouth and she coughed and spat onto the floor. Her saliva sizzled and released a wisp of smoke. She lifted her hand up to her face and touched the same hard scales. Scales against scales. Then the bitter taste began to fade. She moved her hand over her face; her skin was smooth again. She looked at her hands to make sure. They were back to normal.

"So..." said Gripe, "Did you like that?"

Ruzelle looked at him again.

"Yes," she replied, "Yes, I did. I felt so powerful. I was strong... yes, it was wonderful."

"Stay with us, stay on our side and you can have that again... and the money. Do we have a deal then?"

Excitement and desire filled Ruzelle. Life had suddenly presented her with something unexpected. This was thrilling. She had already decided.

"Yes," she confirmed, "We have a deal."



Yersen poured all his enthusiasm and energy into working on the two gems. Before two weeks had passed, the gems were already shining with extraordinary brilliance. Yersen had carried out the initial cutting before placing them in the Hidden Cave for seven days and when he collected them, the sight had brought tears of joy to his eyes. He had carried them back to his workshop with a happy spring in his walk and had started the final cutting and polishing straight away. Through the next few days he worked long hours, only stopping when he needed to sleep or eat, until the job was done.

He finished early one morning just as it was dawning. He placed his brass eyepiece on the table, slipped off his stool and took one step back. From there he surveyed his handiwork in awe.

The two gems shone exquisitely. The purple of the amethyst was deep and pure, glowing like the morning sun. Next to it, the brilliant light of the blue sapphire was a radiant companion. He felt he had done the very best job he could.

Wizard Candara had sent a pair of sparrow messengers to him on two occasions and on their last visit Yersen had sent them back with the prediction that he would finish

today. He flopped back into a chair with a contented smile on his face and went to sleep.

In the upstairs bedroom in his house, just across the wild garden, the atmosphere was not so contented or relaxed. Ruzelle was sitting in a chair and gazing out of the half-open window, but she was not alone. The three komodos were there too; Ratnor was lying on the bed with his tail extending off the end and onto the floor. His loud snoring filled the room. Hambas was dozing along one wall and Gripe was near the window and looking out. He turned to Ruzelle.

"Make yourself useful," he growled at her gruffly, "We want food!"

"Of course," she replied, getting up, "I'll go now and..."

"Wait!" snapped Gripe, "Ratnor! Wake up, you useless beast..." Ratnor stirred. "Escort the good lady to the kitchen and make sure she doesn't try anything... and as before, if she does, you have my permission to begin your meal with half a human leg - nice and juicy."

Ruzelle looked down at Gripe and spread her hands. "Why should I 'try anything'... I'm on your side, remember?"

Gripe ignored her.

"Go with her, and don't be long."

Ruzelle took a step towards the door and Ratnor slid off the bed, landing on the floor with a thump that shook the room. A raven swooped through the window and landed on the back of the chair. Gripe looked at it eagerly.

"What news?" he demanded.

The raven nodded. "They're close..."

"Who?"

"Wizard Candara and the dog."

"How far?"

The raven nodded. "They're close, very close. A few minutes... that's all."

Gripe spoke with urgency. "That means the gems are ready... this is it then. We must kill them and steal the gems and the wizard's payment for the gems... that's for you." He nodded at Ruzelle. "Then we feast on the bodies and depart with Fillias to Gugeol where they will pay us well. Just two little coloured stones and we'll be rich... very rich!"

Ratnor and Hambas, who was now wide awake and on his feet, growled with pleasure at the thought. Fear flashed into Hambas' eyes.

"How do you kill a wizard?" he rumbled, "Wizards are dangerous."

"I killed 'em before," said Ratnor proudly, "Go for the staff... that's how. Disarm 'em first else you've got no chance. But get the staff, then kill 'em... that's what I done."

"Wise words, Ratnor," said Gripe, "For once your speakin' wise words." Then he turned to Ruzelle. "You ready?"

She nodded.

Their eyes met. Ruzelle felt the same feeling of power growing in her. She did not look down at her hands, but this time kept her eyes fixed on Gripe's and she could feel her skin hardening into scales. The power grew until, for a moment, her body was racked with pain. She heard her clothes ripping and she fell forwards landing on four clawed feet. Excitement rippled through her being; she was a komodo.

"Let's go!" commanded Gripe.

The huge creatures scabbled down the stairs and out through a side door so that Yersen would not see them. They moved carefully towards the back garden.

"Into the bushes," ordered Gripe, "Me and Ratnor on one side, and you two on the other. When they arrive, we attack together. Remember... go for the staff. Now, quick, hide!"

The raven had opened the window latch with its beak and flown out. It was now watching from a tree, a black silhouette against the summer sky.

The komodos stayed completely still, waiting. After a minute, they heard approaching footsteps, walking beside the house and then into the back garden and along the path. Nex, the sleek greyhound, trotted ahead to the door of the shed, nudged it open with his head and then went in. Wizard Candara strode up the path behind him and then paused, sensing danger.

The komodos sprang out of the bushes, pushing powerfully off the ground with their hind legs. For such large creatures they moved with remarkable speed. The wizard spun around just as Gripe powered into his staff, hitting it with his head and sending it flying through the air. RaRatnoretnor caught it in his jaws and gripped it with all his strength, trying to bite through it in vain. The mystic topaz on the top flared red and sizzled as Ratnor hung on and dragged it along the path away from the shed and towards the house.

Candara had been taken by surprise. He turned towards the shed but he was surrounded by three Komodos. Gripe stared aggressively at Candara as he spoke to Hambas and Ruzelle.

"You two," he snapped, "It's dinner time. Kill the scum-wizard... I'll deal with the dog."

He turned towards the hut. Meanwhile, Ratnor had dragged the staff further away, and was near the house now but had found that it was pulling back harder. She had slumped down with her front legs holding it on the ground

and was chewing on it like a dog with a bone, but making no impression.

Hambas and Ruzelle were circling around the wizard with their forked tongues sliding in and out of their mouths and making menacing hissing noises. Candara watched them intently, crouching slightly, ready for action. Hambas lunged at him and he stepped backwards sharply, kicking Ruzelle hard on the snout. She was not used to being such a powerful creature, and she recoiled before realising that she was not hurt at all. Hambas attacked again, snapping with his powerful jaws at the wizard's leg. Candara sidestepped and the komodo's bite ripped through his cloak. Ruzelle was behind the wizard and stepped confidently forwards, her cavernous mouth closing around his leg.

Suddenly, bright, coloured light blazed through the door of the hut. The light grew brighter and a second later, Nex was there, with the two gems in his open mouth, the amethyst and the sapphire resting on his tongue and pouring forth light like little suns. The four komodos, their scaly skins tinted with blue and purple from the gems' light, seemed frozen, unable to move, groaning in pain. Wizard Candara pulled his leg free and stepped back, limping. He looked for his staff along the path and it slipped out of Ratnor's mouth and started floating through the air towards its owner.

Yersen appeared at the door to see what was happening. Gripe began to move, slowly at first, moving past Candara who was watching his staff.

"Come on," he growled at the others as he broke into a run.

Ratnor ran after him, followed by Hambas and then Ruzelle, with a few shreds of her clothes hanging off her

new body. They disappeared around the side of the house. The raven jumped off the branch and glided after them.

Wizard Candara caught his staff. He began down the path after them but pulled up, clutching his injured leg. Nex was beside him. With her speed she could easily catch them.

"Shall I go?" she asked, as she began to accelerate away.

"No," answered Candara, "Not by yourself. We'll have to let them go. But well done, Nex," said Candara, "You acted well."

Nex skidded to a halt and turned back. Candara limped back to the hut with Nex joining him by the door and he patted her fondly. She wagged her long tail.

"Are the gems still in your mouth?" he smiled.

"Safe and sound," she replied and put out her tongue.

The gems were now glowing gently and Candara took them. Yersen was smiling and shaking his head in amazement.

"That was really something!" he commented, "Are the gems to your satisfaction, sir?"

Candara laughed. "I think they've proved their worth! Don't you Nex?"

Nex wagged her tail.



THANKS FOR READING!

If you enjoyed this story, please leave a comment
on the blog here:

[www.thekingdomofgems.com/blog/56/the-
awakening-of-the-candara-gems](http://www.thekingdomofgems.com/blog/56/the-awakening-of-the-candara-gems)

Look out for the release of the second book in
The Kingdom Of Gems trilogy very soon!

Jasper