

THE STONE SEEKERS

an unofficial [Armello](#) short story
by [Danielle Williams](#)

One

The last of the stubborn soil crumbled away beneath the rabbit's paws. Faint blue light shone through the hole. Amber sighed in relief.

Finally!

She had the hole enlarged in a wink. A gust of new air puffed into her face, carrying with it the faint scent of spirit stones and ancient dirt.

On second whiff, the spirit-stone scent in the new cavern was fainter than it should have been given the intensity of blue glow. Frowning, she slipped off her digging gloves and bent to the hole, peering through.

Empty. Even without a torch, she could tell that. She wiggled her way through the hole until she could stand up.

Blue moss gleamed on the roof of the cavern, looking like a turquoise river of stars. But it was just moss. Not what she was seeking.

But it's Wyld-touched. Nothing glows that color without the Wyld. I'm getting close!

The cavern had three exits. Amber studied all three, trying to see if any one tunnel held more moss than the others. No luck; they all looked to have the same amount on their ceilings.

Her long ears angled left, right, straight ahead, listening for water. *Where there's Wyld, there's water.*

But there was only silence. She raised up on her toes, nose twitching. Maybe the scent would make a better lead. Instead, her nose caught something else in the air. Cold fear shot through her.

The Rot. Her paw went to her sword. She sniffed again. *No, not Rot, but something rotting...*

A sound echoed from the middle tunnel. Her ears turned towards it: something scrabbling, barely audible.

The rotting smell was coming from that tunnel, too. It mingled with the scent of the Wyld.

Is someone down here with me? Maybe someone had found the spirit stone before her. Maybe she could trade for it. Or maybe not—a single stone could cure the beginnings of Rot, but if the King were as bad off as the rumor said he was, it would take more than one stone to excise the soul-poison from him.

If this fellow had just contracted the Rot, it's likely he wouldn't part with it—and Amber wasn't in any shape to fight, nor did she have much on-paw to trade. After five days underground, her supplies were running low.

She stepped forward anyway. She had to try.

Two

The soil grew rockier the further in she went.

Treacherous, her cousin Elyssia would have said. *I'd rather build on carrot custard.*

Amber was loath to agree with her, but she had almost turned her ankle twice in twenty minutes.

And a lame rabbit is a dead rabbit.

She put on her gloves and went to all fours. She bobbed ahead slowly. The rocking motion of her gait turned into a trance. Her mind wandered as she continued forward. Then the scent hit her: a fully-formed spirit stone.

That's it! She broke into a wild run, zig-zagging towards it.

The treacherous soil turned sandy beneath her feet.

She scabbled, but it was too late. The bad ground pulled her down a steep slope, then she was falling through the air. She landed with a thud.

She groaned. Then:

Toes? She wiggled them. *Okay. Ankles?* She circled them. No pain. *That's good. Legs?*

After a full tail-to-ears check, she pushed herself upright.

She stood in a steep pit with walls too sheer to climb. The spirit stone scent floated tantalizingly above her, but down here, the rotting smell was overpowering.

Rasp-scrabble.

She froze at the sound, eyes searching the dark. She could only make out a silhouette—but she could tell it was close.

Amber pulled her sword out of its scabbard and held her steel parasol-shield before her.

“You’ll find no easy prey with me!” she shouted into the darkness.

The shadow froze. Then, the first voice she’d heard in a week:

“You wouldn’t hurt an old rat, would you?”

Three

Rat? He doesn't smell like a rat!

Maybe he was infected—come down here to get a stone, heal himself—until he fell into the pit.

She lowered her sword—a little.

“No,” she said. “I wouldn’t hurt an old rat. Not unless he gave me a reason to.”

“Rest assured, my dear, I bear you no ill will.”

Her hackles rose. Strange—the charm oozing out of him wasn’t anything she hadn’t encountered in a rat-run inn.

“I’d say, ‘rat’s honor,’ ” the voice continued, “but I’ve seen that doesn’t hold any weight with you.”

“Who are you, and what are you doing down here?”

“Sargon the Veil Gazer at your service. As to what I’m doing here...you don’t happen to have a rope, do you?”

“I do. But there’s nothing up there for it catch on, even if it were long enough to land up there.”

“Ah. Well then, do you have the makings of a torch?”

Amber sniffed. “Of course.”

“That will be useful for our protection, but it won’t help us escape. Hmm...I didn’t see quite that far back...”

“Protection? From what?”

“We’re not alone down here. Every day for the past four days a multi-legged...*something* has been trying to make a meal of me, heh!

“I’ve been fending it off with my torches, but I used up the last of my fuel...let’s call it yesterday. You came just in time, Amber.”

Amber bristled.

“How did you know my name?”

“Oh,” said the rat. “That’s right. You didn’t introduce yourself yet. I’m afraid I get a little confused...”

“Confused about what? How do you know—”

A distant scratching turned Amber’s ear. The scratching turned into a hiss like rain. Whatever it was, it was big, and approaching quickly.

“Would you be a dear and light a torch now, please?”

Amber dumped her pack and felt for a stave. Using her teeth, she snipped a length of cloth from its roll and began unscrewing the lid to her fuel.

The scrabbling was getting louder. It sounded like the movement of an army.

“I know you’re going to hurry, but I can’t help but ask that you hurry a bit more.”

“Working, here!”

The lid popped off her fuel, spun away into the dark. She ran the cloth through the fuel, coating it in the flammable jelly. She wrapped the cloth around the stave, dashed her paws

against the floor to get the jelly off, then grabbed her flint and steel from her pockets. She struck them together. Orange sparks popped in the air, died on the ground.

The chittering filled her ears. It was in there now, with them. The rotting smell was suffocating.

She smashed the steel again. The torch caught fire. The instant it did, the rat swept it up. Amber followed the motion of the light, saw the horror towering over them.

It was a giant centipede, big enough to fill a warren tunnel. Its segments were spirit-stone blue, and venom dripped from its giant pincer-mouth, hissing when it hit the ground.

Its mandibles clattered and it recoiled from the light of the torch. But Amber wasn't quite within the circle of light.

The creature lunged for her. She threw herself out of reach and ran. The clicking of its hundreds of legs sounded like daggers hitting the ground. At least the torchlight kept her from running into the side of the pit. She rebounded off the walls instead and went into a tight turn. The monster ran up the wall, its legs chipping off bits of stone.

"Over here!" The rat waved his arms. The torchlight stretched his shadow crazily. "You're too far from the light!"

The beast had formed a circle around her. Its head—or at least, she thought it was its head—was making its approach. Amber rushed towards it, then gave a mighty leap. She touched a paw down on the top of its hard carapace. Before the creature could change direction, she had vaulted over it and was next to the rat, in the firelight.

"You'll be wanting your sword," said the rat, tapping his foot where she had thrown it down to make the torch. As she took it up, the centipede made another circle around them.

Behind them: legs. To either side, legs. In front of them: the armored head of the monster.

"Hm," said the rat. "I did not foresee this part. Before you arrived, I was keeping my back to the wall."

She lifted her sword and steel parasol. Where she could strike was not clear: when she had vaulted it, the carapace had felt as hard as a crab's shell.

"Don't you have a weapon?" she asked. "A dagger, a stick—anything?"

"Well, they do say forewarned is forearmed..."

The centipede reared up, revealing its pale yellow underbelly.

A smile lit the rat's face. "Ah! This, I foresaw!" He grabbed Amber's arm. The rabbit jolted. Her fur began to glow blue. A heartening warmth spread up her arms, down her chest and through her legs. Suddenly, Amber felt like she could dig a thousand tunnels with one paw tied behind her back. The rat let her go.

"Run. And keep your sword up. It will work."

"Got it!"

Sword raised, Amber charged under the beast.

Its legs closed in on her. She parried them with her shield, left-right-left. The legs' sharp tips slid off the metal curve of her parasol easily, *clang-tssp, clang tssp!*

She ran the length of the creature, the tip of her sword splitting the creature from below. As she ran, fewer legs were attacking her.

"Yes!" The rat clenched his fist. "Glorious!"

The legs stopped moving. Amber dashed out from beneath it. The creature teetered, then collapsed on its side and was still.

Amber rejoined the rat in the circle of torchlight. She wasn't even winded.

Four

They pushed the monster's remains to the nearest wall and used it to climb back up onto the main level. They both began walking towards the scent of the spirit stones.

Amber carried the torch. Its wavering light let her study her rat companion in detail: he wore a red mask and robe. But unlike all the members of rat clan she'd met in her travels, he had no fur. Dark spots blotched his pallid shining hide.

She sniffed, trying to make out the disease which had caused this, only to realize that *he had no scent*. The awful stench that had caught her nose earlier had belonged to the monster.

It wasn't just eerie for him to have no scent; it was *wrong*. Her fur prickled. She was glad he was leading the way. No way she wanted him behind her.

"You still haven't told me how you knew my name," said Amber.

The rat halted so suddenly that she almost ran into him.

"Master Rat?"

He didn't reply.

"Sir? Sargon?"

More silence. Then he shook himself.

"My apologies. What was it you were asking?"

She repeated her question.

"Ah, yes. I know your name because I can see the future."

Amber wrinkled her nose. *Liar*.

"I saw myself talking to you. I spoke your name in vision... Therefore, I knew it when I saw you. *Déjà vu!*" He laughed, sounding delighted. Then he stopped again, turning towards her.

"You don't believe me, of course. But I invite you to examine me closely. Do you notice anything different about me?"

It wouldn't be polite to speak of his lack of scent—and Amber wouldn't have mentioned his skin disease for all the gold in the mountains.

"You have me at a disadvantage, my good rat."

"Don't be shy! Go on. Have a good look."

He's crazier than a moon-bitten hare. Better humor him. She glanced around his face—then gasped.

"What happened to your eyes?!"

They hadn't been gouged out; rather, there was only white where she expected a beady gaze.

Her paw flew to her mouth. *Blurting something like that out!* Amber, you have no idea what will set him off! "Oh—please, good rat, I beg your pardon!"

But the rat smiled and waved her off. "No need for that, my dear. I only wanted to show you the price I paid to see through the veil."

Amber didn't speak until she was certain her voice wouldn't waver. "What veil?"

“The veil of time—which is neither Wyld nor Rot. Anybody can do it, if they’re willing to pay.”

“But...if you’re blind, how are you walking around down here?”

“I get by on my nose.” He wiggled his snout. “And my ears.” He clenched his teeth, making his ears wiggle.

Amber wanted to be sick. Instead, she smiled. “How...fortunate for you.”

“You have no idea.” He turned away and began walking again.

“They used to be brown, you know.”

Amber’s paw had gone to her sword again. “What did?”

“My eyes. You were going to ask that, weren’t you?”

A breath of laughter escaped her. She hoped he couldn’t detect the nerves in it.

Five

A half-hour later, they found the spirit stone chamber. Amber took a deep breath. The Wyld magic smelled like pine and water and blue sky, entirely different than the stale, humid cave air around them. Amber's ears twitched in rhythm to the Wyld-touched water, dripping somewhere in this cavern, feeding power into the stones.

The stones themselves lay scattered around them, looking like eggs laid by a very large, very confused bird. Some were even starting to glow.

The rat bent down and sniffed. "One of these is ready. I can smell it."

But he'll have to see the glow to know for certain. Even his nose couldn't sniff that out.

Amber looked over the clutch of stones before her. If she found it first—and surely she would—should she lie? But if he caught her in a lie, he might use his powers against her. Whatever spell he'd put on her to help her fight the monster was long gone. Worse, he might put that spell on himself.

She threw back her shoulders. What did it matter if she had to fight? She couldn't let a spirit stone fall into the paws of that scentless, ghoulish rat!

She could pretend to leave empty-pawed, but stash it in her things. But if he thought they were both empty-pawed, mightn't he want to travel back with her? He might discover it then—and make off with it through the caverns.

Rabscuttle!

She began picking the egg-shaped stones up one by one.

He had picked a bed of stones on the opposite side of the cave. The cavern echoed with clicks and sniffs as the rat pawed his way through his patch of stone.

Amber lowered the torch to see better.

Most of the stones weren't glowing at all—just plain rocks. Others were almost ready, but the etched lines of power upon them glowed reddish or violet, not the true Wyld blue. Amber searched as quickly as she could, turning over the more bluish ones, ignoring the rest. She had finished searching her third clutch of stones when the rat stood up.

"Aha! Found you, you little morsel."

No!

Amber hurried over the stones, splashed through a puddle of water to the rat's side. Spots of wet darkened the rat's robe, but his nose was fixed upwards, towards a high ledge of rock in the middle of the cavern. A blue light shone from it, but she couldn't see the stone itself.

Amber joined him in sniffing.

"Does it smell ready to you?" asked the rat. "Tell me it does!"

It did. Amber lifted the torch. She still couldn't see the finished spirit stone, but the light cast shadows over the rock tower, revealing pawholds. She could climb it.

But he doesn't have to know that.

"I don't know. I'd have to look at it to be sure. but it's too high up for me to see—and the ledge is too sheer to climb." He'd have to turn back now. She could come back for it later. Without him.

His whiskers quivered. The bare flesh around his whiskers grew ruddy. Then he flung himself forward, flattening his body against the stone.

“Maybe too sheer for a rabbit to climb!”

Pressing his body to the stone, he arced his arms, feeling its surface in a half-circle. He was too short to feel the first pawhold right now, but once he got on his toes, he’d find it. Then it’d be all over. Blind or sighted, what mattered was that he was a rat, and undoubtedly a great climber.

He rose up on his toes. His claws felt the ledge, clamped on. The nails of his feet scraped the stone.

“No! Stop!”

The rat turned on her. His teeth flashed in a snarl for an instant, but as quick as that fierce expression had come, it vanished, replaced by an oily smile.

He let go of the pawhold. “You’re right.”

“I-I’m right?” *What’s his trick?*

The rat dusted his robe off. “Yes. It’s sweet of you to be concerned. I’m a little too...” there was a long, long pause, “*senior* to go clambering up walls the way I used to. You should be the one to climb. With your strong legs, you’ll be up there in no time! And when you bring it back down, we can both examine it!”

“Master Rat—”

“Sargon, if you please.”

“Sir, I’m afraid I cannot grant your request.”

“Hmmm? Why not?” He folded his fingers together and rested his hands on his belly.

Thoughts ran helter-skelter through Amber’s mind—but the best excuse that fell out of her mouth was: “I...I haven’t got my gloves on.”

“Oh, yes, that’s right. You highborn rabbits put all kinds of stock in cleanliness. Not that that’s a bad thing! Anyway, if that’s what you require to climb, by all means! I shall wait here to mark the spot.”

He held his paw out for the torch. Amber recoiled. “I need the torch to search my pack—I need light to see.”

He took his paw back, placed it over his heart. “Of course. Excuse me, I forget myself.”

She moved off to the side, shoved aside the plain stones to make a flat place, then opened her satchel—to the wrong flap. Using one paw, he pretended to rifle through her things, planning her next move. If she ran towards him, would he sense her coming, or would she be able to knock him down? Could she go up, then bring him back a false stone? But there may not be any other stones up there. Did he have enough connection to the Wyld to be able to sense if the stone was ready by feel, or could she lie about the way it looked?

She waggled the lid on her cooking pot so it clunked.

Maybe if I get up there, I could throw it at him, knock him out with it.

Her stomach turned at the thought. That could just as easily kill him.

But it’s for a good cause. Isn’t it?

Her ears twitched again. The sound of clanking armor on the march, coming this way fast.

The rat was at her side in the wag of a whisker. “Put the torch out!” he hissed.

“What?”

He grabbed for it. Amber jerked it out reach. “No!”

“Put it out, you stupid doe! They’re coming!”

“Who is?”

“The King’s guard!”

Amber’s heart leapt. *The King’s guard!* “But why would they—”

The rat grabbed the sleeve of her blouse and yanked her away from her satchel. She stumbled to her feet as he pulled her further into the cave.

“I don’t have to see to hide us, but if they see your light, we’ll be caught!” There was more fear in his voice now than there ever had been facing the centipede. Amber stopped struggling and looked around.

Torchlight sparkled off a leg-deep stream of water she hadn’t seen before. It pooled in the middle of the cave, then followed the cave walls to wrap around the back of the chamber.

“Here!” she whispered, veering towards it.

Their feet splashed in the water. She doused the torch. It hissed like an angry snake.

The rat’s nose was going crazy. “Water! Marvelous, perfect!” He splashed forward in the steam’s path. “It will hide your scent.”

She followed him through the water, around to the back of the cavern. Voices hummed at the entrance.

Amber lifted her sodden traveling skirts and knelt with the rat behind a tall outcropping of stone. There was just enough space between the formations for her to see the rock tower they’d just abandoned.

Metal clanked. The King’s guard filled the chamber. The stoneglow turned their golden armor strange colors. Amber couldn’t see any of their faces. She frowned.

Maybe...just to be safe...

She threw as much of her ranger’s cloak as she could over the rat. He pulled the forest-green fabric over his ears and ducked down. The enchantment worked better in the forest, but it was dark enough in color that they might be overlooked, if the guards didn’t search too closely.

Why are we hiding?

She sneaked a glance at the rat beside her. Was he a fugitive? She had enough gold back home that she didn’t need to turn him in, but if he was notorious enough...well, she could always use another feather in her cap.

The sniffing of the dogs echoed in the cave. What were they scenting for? Amber glanced over. It couldn’t be the rat. Even as the guards drew nearer, no scent of alarm or fear arose from the rat. He held very still. No smell, no sound, no movement—he might as well have disappeared.

The guards’ tails were held stiffly as they searched the cave.

Stones? Could they be looking for spirit stones to save the King?

A guard with a spotted tail wuffed. Another guard, whose helmet bore a white feather plume, hurried over to him.

The first guard held up Amber’s satchel. “Sir, rabbit clan. And recent, too.”

Amber jerked forward. All her gear was in that pack! If she lost it, she might not make it back to the surface!

The rat put his paw on her shoulder. He shook his head *no*, mouthing something.

White Plume took Amber’s satchel from Spotted-tail. He opened the flap and stuck his snout inside. Then, pulling his face out, he rummaged around inside with his paw. “The doe doesn’t have—”

One of the other guards whined. “Sir! Up here!”

White Plume dropped Amber's satchel and joined the other dogs. One of the soldiers had climbed the tower of rock. He held in his paw a finished spirit stone. Wyld power ran through the etchings around the stone, shining brighter than the moon. It was perfect. A better cure for Rot you'd never find.

All at once, Amber knew. How silly of her to be hiding here, like a common criminal!

The guard handed the spirit stone down to White Plume. Amber stood. She should march up to them right now and offer to help track down more stones.

The rat yanked her back down. "*I saw this!*" he whispered in her ear.

She threw him off. What could a blind rat see? The King's Rot-sickness was only a rumor when Amber heard of it, but if his personal guard were seeking a cure, then it must be true, and Amber had to help them!

She stood again.

The rat pulled her back down. She opened her mouth to shout—*there must be a bounty on him*—when an enormous *CLACK* rang off the cave walls.

The sound of the second blow covered Amber's gasp of horror as she watched White Plume smash the perfect Spirit Stone to pieces.

One of the shards flew up into the air, still glowing. A blue flash, a spark like lightning, then it fell to the ground, nothing more than dead grey stone.

"Good nose, soldier," said White Plume, shouldering the rock hammer. "The King will be pleased."

All the dogs' tails were wagging.

For a moment, Amber had no words.

Wyld help us.

Six

On their way out, the guards smashed every blue stone they saw. The clanking of their armor faded as they marched into the distant chambers. The glow of the remaining stones turned the cavern red.

Amber stared at the shards of the once-perfect spirit stone. She shook her head over and over.

That could have cured the King.

She turned on the rat. “I thought you said you could see the future!”

“I most certainly can, my dear. I just can’t tell you when—or where—it will arrive. I foresaw those gentleclaws destroying a stone—but I didn’t know if it would happen in this cavern or another; a year from now, or ten minutes from now!”

Amber scoffed. “Then what good—”

“—is my power? Perhaps not as much as you’d like, my dear. But good enough.”

Amber dove into the half-formed stones. She began digging. They might have missed one, near-formed, just under the dirt, worth waiting for...

Sargon limped to a rock, sat down, and drank out of the canteen on his belt. While she dug, he slowly bent and stretched his leg until his knee cracked.

“Ah!” he sighed.

Amber came up twenty minutes later, empty-pawed.

“The King should be seeking these stones, not destroying them!”

“The King is very ill,” said the rat.

She looked at him. “You knew?”

“Rats and rumors go together like rabbits and hay.” He took another sip from his canteen.

She shook her head. “I’m not going to find another stone here.” She went to her satchel, opened it, and began preparing another torch. “The bears will know,” she said. The bears knew all about the spirit stones. Legend said they could even conjure them from time to time.

“You’ll be going back to your warren, then?”

“I have to!” It would take time to collect a diplomatic party, gather gifts for trade...then Amber would have to go seeking again, this time for a clan that was often on the move, hidden in the forests of Armello. She shook her head. She had to leave *now*.

“Hm. Yes,” said the rat. “Well, then this is where we part ways, my dear.”

Amber slumped in relief—but only for a moment. “But don’t you want to get out?”

“I’d be a poor rat indeed if I couldn’t get out of the places I took myself in to. Besides, the spirit stone wasn’t the only thing I wanted that’s down here. I must go deeper.”

He lifted his canteen in a toast, water sloshing. “But it was a certain pleasure meeti—”

He stopped speaking. Amber waited for him to go on, but when his eyelids began to flutter, she bolted over.

She bent down. “Master Rat?”

His face had gone slack, but the canteen trembled in his grasp. She waved her paw in front of his face. Nothing.

“Master Rat, are you—”

One hard blink.

“—all right?”

The rat’s head swiveled, nose twitching until he found Amber. He grinned up at her, all yellow incisors. “I’m fine, my dear,” he said. His white eyes narrowed to delighted slits. “In fact, I bring good news from beyond the veil.”

Hope stole into Amber’s heart. Could it be about the King? Her mission to the bear clan? She forced her voice to soften. “Do tell, Master Rat.”

The rat’s smile changed. Now he looked like he had a nasty secret.

“You and I will be working together again.”

He’d seen more than that—but this was all he was going to tell her. She could see it on his face.

The day flashed before her: killing the horrid centipede monster, finding the spirit stone, the betrayal of the King’s guard. But the worst memory was the rat’s snarl of rage when Amber had tried to stop him from getting what he wanted.

Dread filled her. *What else has he foreseen?*

The rat grabbed her paw. Clammy flesh. Amber shuddered.

“See you then.”

THE END

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A NOTE FROM DANIELLE

Hi, Reader!

Thank you so much for reading my short story. I'm honored that you took the time to read and support me, an independent author.

I would deeply appreciate it if you'd leave an honest review on the website where you downloaded *The Stone Seekers*. Your opinion matters—to me and to other readers looking to discover new stories.

Thanks again!

Your humble writer,

Danielle Williams

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Danielle Williams has always loved talking animal stories. Some of her favorites include *Watership Down*, the *Ratha* series, and the tales of Rick Raccoon and Scarlett Fox in *Ranger Rick* magazine.

She graduated from Brigham Young University in 2006 and currently resides in Las Vegas, Nevada with her husband and his cat, who listen to all her *Armello* war stories!

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