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First Edition



THE LAST MOTLEY



BY

DJ EDWARDSON

To my cousin Jacob, who was once a boy.

S.D.G.

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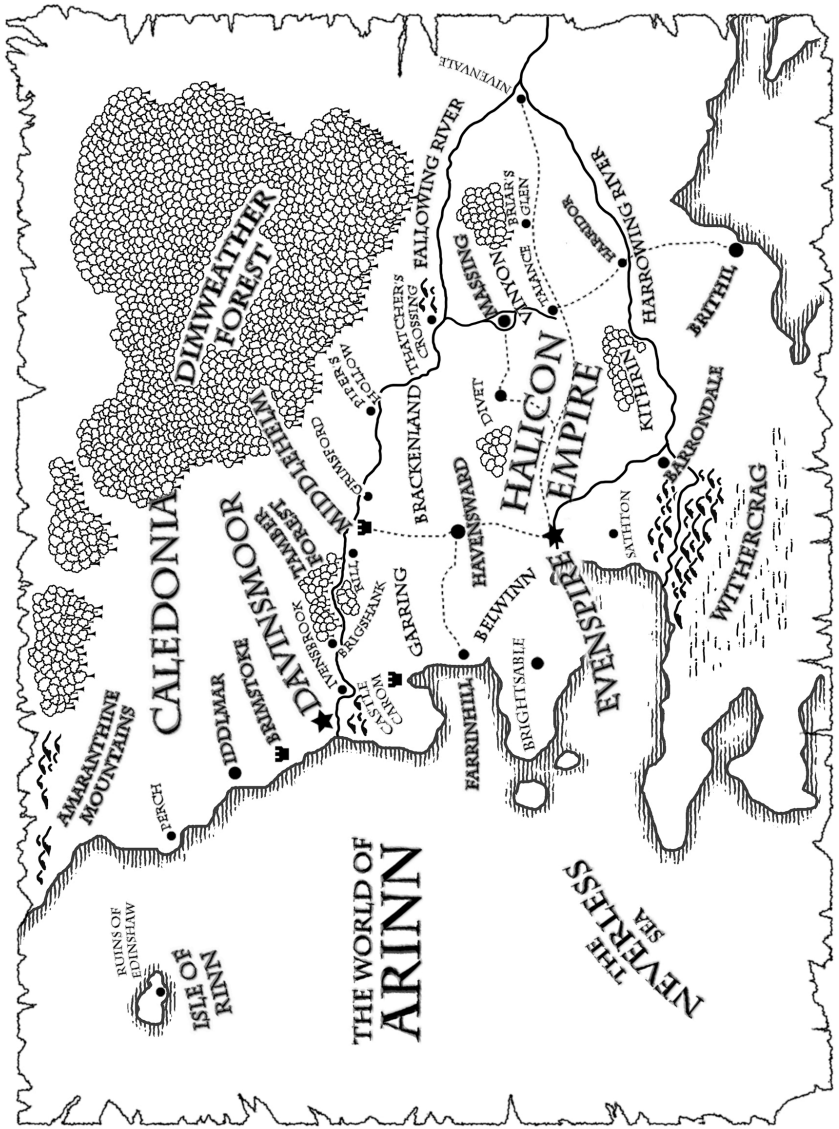
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To all the poets I have known
You built a kingdom out of sea and sand
You conquered armies with a marching band
You carved a galaxy in stone
You built an altar out of bread
And spent your soul to see the children fed
You wove your heart in every story read
Thank God for poets I have known

You turned your tears into a string of pearls
You held your sorrow high to light the world
When I thought I was alone
In every man you saw the boy
The hidden heart the dark could not destroy
Slipped past the dragons with a tale of joy
Thank God for poets I have known

—Andrew Peterson, *To All the Poets I Have Known*



WELCOME TO THE WORLD OF ARINN

OUR STORY BEGINS ON THE
8TH DAY OF AUTUMN'S DUSK,
YEAR 576 H.R. (HELM'S RECKONING)



I

THE FALLEN APPLE

The half-eaten apple hit the dirt and rolled under the cart.
“Eck! Rotten.” The well-dressed man who had tossed it squeezed his face into pleated wrinkles.

Standing across from him, Roderick the tailor could hardly believe his eyes. Rotten or not, apples had been scarce that season due to the late frosts and that piece of fruit cost half a day’s wages. This traveler must have been even richer than he looked.

“I should have known that hawker wouldn’t have anything fresh,” the man said with a huff.

Roderick nodded politely, hoping the man’s ill humor would not affect his buying habits when it came to clothing. The market would be closing soon and so far Roderick had only managed to sell a wool scarf for a handful of silver miras.

The late autumnal sun labored to warm the empty market square. Lined by mortared stalls with open roofs, thin patches of grass clung to the open ground like faded doilies set out for dinner guests who had failed to come. Though potential customers had begun trickling in over the past half hour, most passed by without so much as a glance, intent on making their way home or to one of the two inns which served the tiny village of Briar’s Glen.

The wealthy gentleman at Roderick’s stall fingered a pair of black trousers while dabbing the corners of his mouth with an embroidered kerchief. “To top it all off, I soiled my

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knickers. Ruined a perfectly good execution. How much for these?”

Roderick was tempted to overcharge him. A few extra miras would hardly be missed by someone of such obvious resources. The velvet doublet he sported was worth ten of Roderick's best pieces.

“Thirty,” Roderick said. He could almost hear his wife say, *a fair price is its own reward.*

The man guffawed, spewing flecks of apple onto Roderick's cart.

“Really? No wonder the people in this province live little better than paupers. Here—” The man slapped three ten-mira coins onto the counter. Then he swiped the knickers off the rack and trudged off through the commons.

Roderick picked up the coins and let them fall into his money box with a lonesome clink. It wasn't much, but it was honest coin. Besides, there was still that apple the man had tossed under the cart. If Roderick could cut out the rotten bits and wash it off, there might still be enough to bring home to his wife and daughter.

He knelt in the dirt and craned his neck under the cart. The apple was nowhere in sight.

“Oh, buttons,” he muttered.

He stood up to see if it had rolled to the side and caught a bit of movement out of the corner of his eye—a flash of color in the midst of the otherwise drab selection of cloaks.

Not another pinch-purse! Where could this one have come from? No matter. He knew how to deal with this sort. Quietly, he reached for the little knife he kept fastened underneath the counter.

The cloaks ruffled slightly. He was almost certain there was someone in there now. His hand shot out and he flung one of the cloaks off the rack and onto the counter.

“Ha!” he shouted, brandishing his knife at a small figure hiding amongst the apparel. From his size, he could not have been much more than seven or eight years old, but his hood was pulled down tightly over his face, obscuring his features

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in shadow, and making him look more dangerous than perhaps he was.

The figure bolted straight at him, dashing between Roderick's legs and racing past the cart. He would have gotten away, too, if he hadn't tripped and fallen headlong into the dirt.

Roderick was on him in a single stride, grabbing him by the arm and yanking him to his feet.

"Gotcha!" His quarry bagged, he took a step back. Within the hooded shadows, tears glistened on the boy's cheeks.

"I'm sorry, sir," came a little fluted voice, quivering with fear. "I didn't know you wanted it."

The child held out the remains of the apple in his small, gloved hand. The tips of his fingers poked through the threadbare cloth like tender shoots through spring ground.

He's just a boy, Roderick thought to himself. *And he looks to be freezing.*

The child's fingers were as blue as the bachelor's buttons in his wife's garden.

"You're not one of the lollygaggers I usually see running through the market. Where are your parents?" Roderick asked.

The child lowered his hooded head and said nothing.

Roderick bent down, trying to get a look at his face, but the boy turned away, whimpering softly.

"You can keep the apple. I'm sure you need it more than I do," Roderick said.

The child raised his head. His eyes flashed wide from within the shadows. He looked at Roderick as if he had just doubled in size or sprouted wings. "Thank you," he said between snuffles.

"Are you lost?"

The boy shrugged weakly and looked away again.

"It's quite chilly today. Let's see about getting you a better pair of gloves, shall we?"

The boy shot Roderick a look that was a mix of fear and desperate need.

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“It’s all right. I know you meant no harm. Come, I have some rather nice ones here in this basket. Made from good, Vinyon wool.”

The boy allowed himself to be led to the selection of gloves by the counter.

“Take any pair you like,” Roderick said.

The child was hesitant. After Roderick insisted several more times he relented and sheepishly picked out a black pair similar to the ones he had on, though much thicker and in much better condition. As he put them on, he turned his back towards Roderick. This rekindled Roderick’s suspicions. He peered over the boy’s shoulder as he slipped off his glove. The child’s hand was completely covered in motley patches of skin, diamond-shaped and brightly colored like the pattern on a bolt of cloth: alternating patches of blue, green, yellow, and red, each shape about the size of a thumb print. It didn’t look like paint or even a tattoo. It was so natural it had to be the actual color of his skin. The strange sight jogged something deep in the recesses of Roderick’s memory. Could it be...?

He gasped.

“Who are you?”

The boy bolted through a rack of shirts, sending clothes flying everywhere.

Roderick darted around the mess, but slipped and went crashing into a pile of his wares. Shirts and scarves flew everywhere. He recovered his wits just in time to see the boy’s foot slide over the seven foot high stone wall at the back of his stall. Roderick heard the lithe creature thump to the ground on the other side, followed by the pounding of his receding footfalls.

“He’s quick, that one.” A shudder danced through Roderick’s shoulders. “Unnaturally quick.”

A moment later, the only sign anyone had been there were the soiled clothes and the remains of the apple, fallen and bruised in the dirt.

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Roderick tapped his knuckles on the front door with his familiar seven beat rhythm. He could have simply opened it, but he relished the sound of the pattering footsteps of Aisha's approach. Seeing her face, he knew, would take his mind off his troubling encounter in the market.

"Daddy, you're back!" His little girl flung open the door, arms stretched wide. He swept her off her feet and buried his bearded face in her neck, giving her ticklish kisses. She squirmed and giggled in his arms, her dark curly hair bouncing in all directions.

"And how is my sweetness?" he asked.

"Good," Aisha said, drawing the word out, as if the longer she took to say it, the more goodness she would express. Then she launched into a breathless description of all the adventures she had experienced that day: chasing squirrels from the garden, building a house out of twigs, and the discovery of some rainbow-colored beetles under the stepping stones in the walk.

Roderick delighted in the music of her voice. He never grew tired of her endless energy and irrepressible spirit. The sun never stopped shining in her world. She was the happiest child he knew.

"Evening, my love," he said, porting his little girl into the cottage and over towards his wife who stooped over the hearth.

Rich smells of cabbages and leeks and fresh yams and spices from the garden clamored for his attention, as if radiating from Bethany herself, and not the pot she was stirring. He embraced his wife and planted a kiss on her rosy cheeks. Her skin, though naturally fair, was often ruddy. The cottage was only four rooms, three on the ground floor and one above, but cleaning, chopping and hauling wood, fixing leaks in the roof, and running after little Aisha kept Bethany

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busy enough for two people. And tending the massive garden out back might have been sufficient work for a third, but she wouldn't have had it any other way.

“So good to have you back, Derick. You're home early,” she said, her eyes smiling in lovely creases to the sides.

Roderick wrapped his arm around her shoulder. “Aye, there didn't seem to be much point in staying 'til dark today. Business was dead from dawn to dusk. Everyone was over at the execution. The few who did come by weren't buying.”

The motley-skinned child played back through his memory. Should he tell her? He didn't want to trouble her. Surely his eyes had been playing tricks on him. Between the failing light and the strain of another fruitless day at the market, he might have gotten it wrong.

He planted another kiss on top of Aisha's head and hung his hat on a hook by the hearth. Letting Aisha down to the floor, he eased into one of the rickety chairs at the table and sat for a moment, staring into the fire. The glow flickered along the cedar walls, looking for one of the many chinks between the boards through which to escape. Outside the wind rustled its way through the thatched roof, making a scratching sound.

“Is something wrong?” Bethany asked. “You look worried.”

“I don't know. It's just—”

Aisha leapt into his lap before he could finish and thrust a wilted daffodil into his face.

“Smell the pretty flower, Daddy,” she said, “I picked it just for you.”

“Why, thank you, honey-eyes.” He kissed her. “Oh, I almost forgot. I have something for you, too.” He pulled out a scrap of cloth from his pocket and unwrapped it. Aisha's face lit up when she laid eyes on the remains of the apple, cleaned and peeled. There was only enough for two small slices, but the pungent aroma filled the room.

“Oh, yummy!” Aisha bounced up and down with excitement.

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“Oh, Derick, you shouldn’t have,” Bethany said.

“Don’t worry, I didn’t pay for it. A customer left it. I almost didn’t bring it, though. There was a...” He had to tell her, he knew. Bethany would have a way of explaining it. “There was a boy who wanted it...a very strange boy.” Was it a boy...or something else? Oh, how he hoped he was wrong about that.

He motioned for Aisha to take one of the pieces to her mother. She plopped one slice in her pillowy cheek and skipped over to Bethany. She placed the other slice in her mother’s hand, all the while mashing her own tiny bit over and over again to get out all the sweetness out of it she could.

“A boy? What was so unusual about him?” Bethany bit into her slice. Both girls made pleasant noises as they munched on the unexpected treat. Aisha did a little dance, traipsing around the table, her last bit of apple held high and triumphant like a trophy.

“He had colors on his skin, in a motley, checkered pattern like a piece of cloth. He ran away when I asked about them.” He stared intently at her, wondering if she’d pick up on the words ‘motley, checkered pattern.’

“That is odd.” Bethany’s delicate eyebrows climbed with curiosity. “Perhaps he was playing with dyes.”

“No, the pattern was perfect—no child could have made it. It would have been quite beautiful if it had not been so...”

His eyes locked with Bethany’s. In an instant she knew.

“A motley, Roderick? That’s what you’re thinking, isn’t it? A motley in Briar’s Glen!” She wagged her head kindly at the musings of her impressionable husband. “Those are just stories, love. No one’s ever actually seen one. For all we know they don’t exist.”

“Well, he did look more like a boy than a monster, I’ll grant you that. Still, you didn’t see that skin. It wasn’t natural, Beth. I’m straight on that point.”

“A motley...” Beth chuckled softly. “Oh, Roderick, you ought to try your hand at story time with Aisha tonight. Would you like that Eesh? If Daddy tells you the story tonight?”

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“Umm...” Aisha’s eyes scanned the ceiling. She loved her daddy, but... “Can’t Mama do it?” she asked with a hopeful smile.

Now it was Roderick’s turn to chuckle. “Ah, don’t worry, Eesh. Mama will do it like always. My stories would probably only scare you.” He took Beth’s good natured ribbing with a sigh. He may have had the more active imagination when it came to listening to stories, but it did him no good when it came to telling them.

“I’m curious though,” Bethany said. “If he’s just a boy, I mean *since* he’s just a boy, where did he come from? Who are his parents?”

Roderick shook his head. “Didn’t have any. He was dressed like one of the street children, but I’ve never seen him before.”

“Well, if he’s lost we should tell the magistrate. His parents must be looking for him, especially if he’s not from Briar’s Glen.” Bethany brought out the bowls from the cupboard and set them on the table. The cottage had a single cupboard with two shelves above and two below and a drawer in between. Like the house itself and everything in it, it had been made by Roderick’s father, who was almost as fine a carpenter as he was a woodsman.

“What if he hasn’t got any?” Roderick asked. Was Bethany right? Had Roderick simply let his imagination get the better of him? “He did look awful lonely and sad.”

“Well, if you see him again, ask him,” Bethany said.

Maybe he *was* just a lonely child lost in the market. But all those stories about motleys Roderick had heard since he was young were not easy to shake. They lingered on the threshold of his imagination.

“And if he doesn’t have any, we could always take him in here.” Bethany watched Aisha slide the last bit of apple between her lips, oblivious to what her parents were saying. “And give him a nice good bath,” she added teasingly with a poke of her wooden spoon.

“Oh, Beth,” he said, his mind wandering and missing the

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joke. His eyes strayed to Aisha. “How could we possibly take in another...”

Aisha, still munching on the apple, ran off to grab her wooden ball in the corner. Adopting their daughter had been the best decision they had ever made. She was the fire in the hearth of their home, the warming light that chased away the shadows. He had no doubt his wife would take in another child in a heartbeat, even if the family’s coin had been tighter than a varlet’s vest of late.

“Children are a blessing. And Adonai has never failed to provide for us.” Bethany placed a hand on his shoulder.

“Aye, love. That is true. And maybe you’re right about the skin. It’s just that the pattern was so distinct.”

“Stories, my love, that’s all the motleys are, stories.” Bethany gave his shoulder a gentle squeeze. “Now let’s eat. Soup’s ready.”

Ah, how he loved that woman. He still found it hard to believe he’d ever worked up the courage to ask her to marry him, and even harder to believe that she’d said yes.

“Aisha,” Roderick called. “Come to the table, my sweet.”

Aisha leapt into the chair between her mother and father and placed her tiny hands in theirs. Bethany and Roderick held hands as well, completing the circle.

“All right, then,” Roderick said, leaning over the table as he held onto those precious hands. “Let us pray.”



2

CALLINGS AT THE COTTAGE

A jarring bang on the cottage door broke the stillness of the night. “Who could it be at this hour?” Bethany whispered in the dark. She and Roderick had just gotten into their nightgowns. Visitors were rare enough during the day. If someone was stopping by at this hour, they must have been lost or in some kind of trouble.

“I don't know. I'll go see,” Roderick said.

He left the bedroom, hurrying down the steps and over to the kitchen table. He fumbled around, trying to light the lantern. More knocking shook the door.

The lantern switch finally struck. The resulting glow bathed the walls in soft, ginger light. Roderick crossed the packed dirt floor, wincing as the chill from the ground shot up through his bare feet. In five quick steps he made it to the oasis which was the tired old rug by the front door.

He peeked through the window, but storm clouds had all but strangled the moon. Rain streaked the thick panes. He couldn't see a thing.

“Who is it?” he asked.

“The town watch!” shouted a voice from the other side.

The town watch?

Roderick's cabin was a mile outside of town. He had never been visited by the watch in all the years he'd lived in Briar's Glen. He gulped a spoonful of worry that was bitter all the way down. *Relax, Devinson. It's nothing.* Roderick had never so much as harmed a sparrow or stolen a blade of grass, but he

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couldn't shake the feeling that he was in some sort of trouble.

"Open up," the voice insisted. "We need to speak with the master of the house."

Snapping on his courage, he unbolted the door and undid the lock. With clammy palms he pulled the latch. Four men stood on the stoop wearing kettle helmets and the livery of the township: green and white checkered tunics which looked so faded they could have been sewn by Roderick's grandmother. One of them had a spear. This also was a bit out of the ordinary. The watch normally only used such weapons for parades.

Rain poured down relentlessly on the stoop and runnels of water collected in the grooves of the watchmen's helmets.

"Good evening, sirs. What brings you out at this hour?" Roderick asked, as politely and normally as he could.

"Begging your pardon, but are you Roderick Devinson, the tailor?" asked the man in front. Though Roderick knew most of the men who served on the watch, he didn't recognize the voice, nor any of the shadowed faces on his stoop.

"Yes, yes I am." Roderick said.

"We're on the lookout for a runaway—an orphan boy. Some folk at the market said they saw him around your stall. Do you know anything about him?"

Roderick faltered. *It had to be the one with the motley skin. Perhaps they're just pretending it's a boy to avoid sending the town into a panic.* More spoonfuls of worry slipped down inside him.

The man went on. "His parents died in the execution this morning and he was to be taken up to Massing and consigned to the orphanage, but when we went to the migrant fields he was not to be found."

Oh, how awful. So this was a boy after all? Were those really his parents that died? The fear churned into sadness in his gut. Roderick knew what it was like to lose your parents.

"His parents were migrants?" Roderick asked.

"Yes."

Hmm...migrants were not usually afforded public executions. They must have done something exceedingly

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horrible to have suffered such a punishment.

“Do you know what they were killed for?”

“All I know is that they got what they deserved. Now, if you please, do you have any information as to the whereabouts of the boy? The higher-ups have got their knickers all up in a wad over this, if you take my meaning.” The guard coughed and ruffled his tunic in a vain effort to keep his uniform from becoming even more soaked than it already was.

“Perhaps. Could you tell me what he looked like though— to make sure we’re talking about the same one?”

The guard snorted. “Well, baste my brisket, I plum forgot that part, didn’t I? The description they gave us was of a lad about yai high dressed head to toe in a cloak and gloves as if winter were coming on early.”

Still no mention of the skin. Were they hiding something?

“Ah, I see.” Whole dollops of dread and sadness mingled together inside Roderick, but he wasn’t sure which emotion he was supposed to feel. Either this was an orphan boy who’d just lost his parents in the most horrible way imaginable or it was one of the nightmarish motleys from the stories, a candy-colored creature with dark powers to drain the souls of men. “Yes, I did see him—briefly. I gave him a pair of gloves, but then he ran off.”

The two in the back mumbled something, but Roderick couldn’t make it out. The guard in front shot them a look over his shoulder and they promptly went silent.

“New gloves, eh?” The man rubbed his ear absentmindedly. “Did you see which way he went?”

“I’m sorry, but he slipped over the back wall and I honestly don’t know what happened to him after that.”

“Very well,” the guard said, sounding relieved. “Pardon the interruption. We’ll leave you to enjoy the rest of the evening, then.”

The guards turned to go, but Roderick spoke up.

“Sir, may I ask one last question before you go? You said that ‘higher-ups’ were involved. You mean the magistrate?”

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The man shook his head. He leaned in close and whispered in Roderick's ear.

"It's foreigners. Don't know where they're from, but some say the *Thaumaturge* is behind it." The last part of the sentence was barely audible above the clattering rain, but it went off like a thunderclap inside Roderick's brain. He almost gagged, but the man's expression was serious. First motleys and now thaumaturges? Would nothing stay put in stories where it belonged?

"But I thought the Thau—the Th—" his tongue refused to say the word, "—that he was just a legend. You haven't actually seen him, have you?" Roderick's throat tightened. He had grown up hearing tales of the Thaumaturge, all of them wild and terrible—almost as terrible as the ones about the motleys, but he had never met anyone who claimed the stories had any basis in fact. The prospect of one of these evil wizards meddling in the affairs of Briar's Glen had to be a terrible mistake.

"No, but they're recruiting extra jokers for the town watch just to find this boy. And everyone, including the magistrate himself, is running belfry to basement looking for him. Don't know why, but I've learned it's best not to ask questions." He pulled back, straightened himself, and said in a normal tone, "I'm sure you'll let us know if you find out anything. Just report it to the town hall if you do."

He tipped his helmet cordially. The gesture sent a waterfall of wetness onto Roderick's nightgown. Oblivious to the state of Roderick's sleepwear, the guard and his fellows stepped off the stoop and trudged back towards the road. Roderick was left standing in the doorway, damp robe and all, wondering what exactly was going on in the otherwise unremarkable little town of Briar's Glen.



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A few days later another knock rattled Roderick's front door. The sound caught him in mid-gulp as he was downing his evening soup. He, Bethany, and Aisha all looked up from the table to the door. The noise was such a surprise that a bean from the soup went down the wrong way and lodged in Roderick's throat.

He sputtered for a moment, breathless, and then chucked it loose. It launched straight into the hearth where it sizzled and died in the fire in dramatic fashion. As dramatic as a bean's death can be, at any rate.

"I'll see who it is," Roderick said, clearing his throat and getting up from the table.

He pulled open the door to the welcome sight of Farmer Tullum on the stoop.

"Good evening to you, Roderick," he said in his slow, country drawl. He was a short, broad man with a lifetime of weather etched across his features. He was twenty years Roderick's senior, but twice as strong.

"Good evening, Farmer Tullum," Roderick said, giving him a hearty nod and pounding his chest. His throat still tickled from the ill-fated bean.

"Sorry to disturb you. Didn't know you were eating." He held his straw hat in his hands respectfully. His grimy skin showed that he had come straight from the field.

"That's quite all right," Roderick said. "Would you like to join us? You look like you've had a long day."

"Well, that's awful kind of you, but Missy'll be expecting me." Tullum stared up into Roderick's eyes expectantly.

Roderick slapped his forehead. "Ah, you've come for the work clothes! How could I be so forgetful? I have them in the back room. Come in and wait if you like."

"Thank you, but I'll just stay on the stoop if you don't mind. I've yet to clean up and wouldn't want to sully Miss Bethany's fine swept floor."

"Nice to see you again, Mr. Tullum." Bethany rose from the kitchen table as Roderick ducked into his work room.

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“How’s Missy?”

“Oh, fine as flour,” Tullum said.

Roderick thumbed through a pile of brown shirts and jackets while Bethany and Tullum chatted on the stoop. At length he found the farmer’s work clothes and returned to the main room.

“That Aisha is looking pretty as a petunia,” Tullum remarked.

“And she’s growing about as fast as one too.” Roderick handed Tullum the clothing. “I can make more for you whenever you like. You gave me enough miras to make two or three shirts, you know.”

“That’s what neighbors are for,” Tullum said, donning his hat. “You do fine work. A craftsman should be rewarded for his efforts.”

“I’m sorry that you were made to come all this way. I ought to have brought them to you days ago.”

“No need to worry, son. You’ve got your family to think of. If I had children I’d have a hard time keeping my plow lines straight, too.”

“You’re a true friend, Mr. Tullum,” Roderick said, shaking the man’s large, calloused hand.

“You and Miss Bethany thinking of adding to the crop anytime soon?” Tullum asked. “If you don’t mind my asking.”

Roderick let out a little laugh and put his arm around his wife. Bethany grinned up at him.

“Well...perhaps,” Bethany said. “We’re thinking about it anyway.”

Roderick gave a start. Was Bethany serious? Was she talking about the motley? But that skin...What if the legends were true?

“You know what they say, children are a blessing from heaven,” Tullum said. “And I know any child raised in this cottage will be twice blessed at that.” He tipped his hat and turned to go.

“Thank you, Mr. Tullum.” Roderick flushed, not knowing how to respond to the compliment. Mr. Tullum was fine folk.

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He always spoke in that same respectful way.

“Give our regards to Mrs. Tullum,” Bethany said.

“That I will. And don’t you hesitate to let us know if you need anything. There’s plenty to go around.”

Roderick returned the man’s parting wave and closed the door.

“Such a kind man,” Bethany said as she and Roderick returned to the table.

“Are we going to start a farm, daddy?” Aisha asked.

“What?”

“Farmer Tullum said we’re going to get a crop, right?”

Roderick chuckled softly. “Well, I think Farmer Tullum was actually talking about something else.”

Bethany smiled at Aisha’s innocence. “There is another kind of crop, Aisha. And that is when children come to bless a home. I think that’s what Farmer Tullum meant.”

“Oh, boy,” Aisha said, her eyes dancing. “Will I get a brother or a sister crop?”

Roderick’s laughter shook down through his shoulders, melting away all his worries.

“I don’t know, Aisha,” he said. “We’ll just have to wait and see.”



3

KNUCKLES AND BONES

Old Tim the cobbler's stall was as dead as Roderick's. As often happened on such days (and all too frequently of late), the two forlorn craftsmen found themselves trading in conversation rather than clothes and shoes.

"You feel that, Derick? There's something in the air," Old Tim said.

Tim leaned against the front of the wall between their two stalls, staring out at the listless square. His thick gray hair hung down to his shoulders like a faded cloak. His hunched shoulders and skinny arms were unimpressive, but when it came to the making of shoes his nimble hands and sharp eye were more than sufficient to the task. What mattered most to Roderick wasn't Tim's outside though. Tim was as grounded as Farmer Tullum and even more learned. He trusted Old Tim's judgement on things almost as much as he trusted Bethany's.

"Well, winter does seem to be coming on a bit early again," Roderick said, eyeing the overcast sky. "I just hope we're not in for another long one like last year."

"It's not that, my friend." Tim turned back and spoke in husky, conspiratorial tones quite unlike his usual manner. "It's the Thaumaturge."

Roderick scooted forward on his stool and nearly fell off. "The what?" he said in the lightest tone he could muster. "Oh, Tim, you're not going in for those rumors, are you?"

"I know, I know. Until a few days ago, I would have

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laughed at the idea, too. Tom foolery and invention, that's what my wife says. 'Might as well believe in fairies or the man on the moon.' But I'm starting to think there's something to it."

Tim's face was the picture of solemnity. He wasn't talking slippers and socks, to use a saying popular in The Glen. This was boots and bare feet.

"But those are just tales," Roderick said. "There's no such thing as wizards. And no one lives out in the Withercrag. The whole land south of the Harrowing is one big desert."

"Or so they say. You and I have never been there, have we? All we've got is the word of the merchants to go by."

Roderick was surprised at Old Tim's tone. What could make a man as sober and no-nonsense as Tim go in for such things? It was usually Roderick taken in by wild yarns, not Old Tim. He was solid, he was sound. He'd lived through twice as many winters as Roderick and worse ones, too, but Roderick had never heard him talk like this.

"Now, Tim, listen. Do you really think a man has the power to disappear from one place and reappear in another, a dozen leagues away? Or to freeze men where they stand with a wave of his hand, or blind his enemies with a word, or wither forests with a look? They're just tales, nothing more."

Roderick crossed his arms conclusively, but, "*You're one to talk, Devinson!*" was what he was thinking. But the motley was different. He'd *seen* that.

Probably.

The look of certainty in Tim's eyes only deepened and his voice grew lower still. "I'm not saying he's all that, Derick. But that doesn't mean he's not real all the same. All tales start somewhere. Where are all these new watchmen coming from? And why are people keeping to their homes so much? No one goes out unless they have to. Have you ever seen the market this dead?"

He did have a point there. Besides the four guards posted at the two entrances—who had only been assigned there three days ago—there were less than two dozen people

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between the sixteen stalls. Of those who weren't selling their wares, most were just milling about in the common area, talking in low voices like Old Tim and Roderick. They had little interest in buying.

"And Roderick." Tim turned to face him. His clouded brow and wrinkled frown formed a muddy footprint on his face. "They say he's looking for that boy, the one that was in your stall a few days ago."

A stone sank in the superstitious well of Roderick's stomach. So Old Tim had heard about him too. It was one thing to hear about thaumaturges and motleys from some watchmen he'd never met before, but quite another to hear it from his friend's lips. Roderick wondered how many of the townsfolk in Briar's Glen knew about Roderick's little visitor.

At least Tim hadn't called him a motley.

"And why's that?" Roderick asked, attempting nonchalance. "What's so important about one child?"

"Now that I don't know. I'm only telling you what I've heard. Be careful, Roderick. That's all I'm saying. There's change in the wind."

Roderick's eyes gazed across the thatched roofs surrounding the market, a sea of brown blankets covering a town asleep in the middle of the day. The curling tendrils of smoke from the chimneys were the visible snores. Was the motley out there somewhere? Was he still as hungry as he'd been on the day they'd met? Where did he sleep at night? Could his touch really claim a man's soul? That at least would explain why the watch, and maybe the Thaumaturge—if he existed—were so keen on finding him.

Whatever the truth of it was, with each passing day Roderick felt in his heart that he wouldn't know any peace until he found out some answers. For now, though, all he could do was wait and see if the motley would reappear. In the meantime, he had his own worries. With so little coin to bring home for the week, he might have to borrow a little milk and flour from Farmer Tullum again. He hated to do it, but that late frost had crippled Bethany's garden and Roderick

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couldn't hunt in the forest for game like his father. He couldn't shoot an arrow into the river if he was drowning. Of course he could always promise to pay Tullum with more clothes, but Tullum already had all the coats, shirts, and knickers he would ever need.

Only half an hour remained before the market closed. Roderick's hopes of making a sale ran as low as the ruts in the market roads.

He nibbled on his fingernails. His worries over the motley, the Thaumaturge, and his family balled together inside him in a tangled knot.

"It'll be all right," he told Old Tim, though he scarcely believed the words. "Adonai will provide."

Old Tim drifted back into his stall. "That he will, my friend. And just in time. Looks like you've got a customer."

Sure enough, a newly arrived fellow was headed his way. The stranger was well dressed, which was not a good sign. His tastes might run above what Roderick could offer, but at least he came inside the stall. He began picking, albeit disinterestedly, through some of the cloaks hanging on the outer racks.

"May I help you, sir?" Roderick was not usually so forward, preferring to let his customers browse at their leisure, but he was desperate.

The man was slightly shorter than Roderick and had a cropped black beard sprinkled with gray. Though his cloak had seen heavy wear, it was made of good, undyed Haliconian linen and was thicker than anything Roderick had to offer. The man's dark brown pants and russet shirt were of equal quality. The strangest thing about his attire was the cloth skullcap he wore. It was forest green and embroidered with silver thread around the edges. Such hats were certainly not in style anywhere in Vinyon Province, which meant he must have traveled quite some distance. Overall, he definitely had the look of a scholar about him. Roderick sighed. A scholar was not likely to find anything of interest among the plain, simple patterns Roderick had to offer.

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“Do you have anything...*colorful?*” the man asked in a low voice.

The emphasis he put on that last word caught Roderick’s attention.

“What colors suit your fancy?” Roderick asked. “Blues and blacks are a fine choice with winter just around the corner, but brown is good for any season.” He tried his best to make it sound like his collection was more varied than it actually was, but dyes were terribly expensive and available only in the capital. He only ever made such items on special order and then only when the order was placed months or weeks in advance, since he could only afford to travel to the capital but once a year.

“I’m not sure,” the man said, stroking his bristly beard. “What about this coat? May I try it on?” The man pointed towards a beige one on the rack beside him. It had long, draped sleeves and clever gray stitching around the buttons. It was one of the more elegant (and expensive) items in Roderick’s stall. Though it did not really go with the man’s current apparel, who was to say what other items he possessed in his wardrobe?

“Yes, of course. Try on anything you like.” Roderick straightened like a soldier called to attention. A nervous thrill ran through him at the prospect of a desperately needed sale, especially an item of such value.

“Would you pull it off the rack for me?”

The rack was right next to him. Roderick wondered why he did not simply pull it off himself, but he stepped over and obliged the man. Anything to make a sale.

“You’re being watched,” the man whispered as Roderick handed him the coat. Then he added in a normal voice, “It’s certainly fine workmanship.”

He was being watched?

The man’s comment stole the breath right out of Roderick’s lungs.

“You do fine work here, master tailor,” the man added.

“Thank you,” Roderick mumbled mechanically, recovering

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his voice. He scanned the market furtively to see if he could tell who was watching him. None of the handful of people gathered in the commons appeared to be paying any undue attention to him and his stall. Was one of the guards looking his way? It was hard to tell with that helmet shading his eyes. Other than that, he saw nothing to back up what this stranger said.

“This is just what I was looking for. How much do you want for it?” the man asked.

“Um, one hundred,” Roderick stammered.

“Fair prices. I like that. I knew you were a man I could trust,” the stranger said with a twinkle in his eye.

Roderick was dying to know just who this mysterious person was, but if he was being watched, he dared not ask. Instead, he simply took the man’s money.

“Until we meet again, my friend,” the stranger said with a slight nod of his head. He folded the coat under his arm and marched towards the southern exit to the square.

Roderick looked down at the money he’d been given. He’d been so out of sorts, he hadn’t even bothered to check it before the man left. Instead of silver miras, a gold valin, a coin worth five hundred miras, shimmered in his hand like a desert mirage. But this was no illusion, it was real. Relief and joy surged through him. Oh, mercy! A week’s worth of coin in one day!

Roderick had little time to savor the unexpected blessing. The next moment his gaze fell upon a piece of paper tucked away under his money box. It most definitely had not been there before.

On thick vellum was a drawing of some sort, a hill or a mountain with an opening at the base. Below it were written words in fine, flowing script, words which Roderick unfortunately could not understand.

“Oh, buttons,” he mumbled. What did it say? He had no choice but to take it to Old Tim to find out. The cobbler was one of the few people in Briar’s Glen who could read, at least one of the few people who could read and be trusted to keep

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a secret. Given the mysterious warning of the stranger who'd left the note, Roderick had no intention of sharing its contents with the rest of The Glen.

Tim had already started tearing down his shop, but he stopped and gave Roderick a ready smile.

"So you sold something after all?" Tim asked brightly. "Or do you just need a new pair of clogs for the little one?"

"No, Tim, I mean yes—yes, I did make a sale!" Roderick checked his enthusiasm. Now it was his turn to look over his shoulder and speak in a low voice. "Tim, did you—did you overhear anything that man said?" Between the thick walls and Tim's weak hearing he doubted his friend had, but he wanted to check.

"No, Derick. Did he say something troubling? There was something odd about him," Tim said.

"Well, I suppose you could say that. He said—well, it's not so important what he said, it's just that he left me this note. Promise you won't tell anyone about it?" Roderick approached Tim and produced the parchment as surreptitiously as possible.

Old Tim raised his bushy eyebrows and his jovial expression faded. "Of course not, Roderick. You know I'd sooner step on a nail than betray a friend's confidence. Let's have a look and see what this mysterious customer of yours left you." Tapping a finger on his cheek, he scanned the words in front of him. "Hmm, fine hand-writing... There's that drawing of course of a hill with... maybe a cave in it. And then it says, 'B. H.,' and below that 'In adversity, we know our friends.' That's it. Doesn't mean much, does it?"

"No, I'd say not. Still, you have my thanks all the same." Roderick snatched back the note. Something was not right. "I—I've got to go now. I'll see you in the morning."

Old Tim scratched the back of his head, a concerned look on his face. "Very well, my friend. Give my regards to Miss Beth."

Roderick rushed back over to his stall and began collecting his things. He shoved the note and the precious gold coin

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into a secret pocket in the inner lining of his cloak. Scurrying about, he packed the clothes into the cart in half the usual time and with half the usual care. He felt a powerful urge to get home as quickly as possible. He needed to tell all this to Bethany. Surely she would be able to help him make sense of it all.



A group of unsavory looking men had been following Roderick since Crummet Street. Once he passed the row of yew hedges which marked the outskirts of town, they didn't even bother concealing their presence. They moved from the trees and undergrowth on the side of the road out into the middle of the well-worn path. Their brisk pace and long strides left no doubt as to their intentions. They meant to rob him, plain and simple.

Roderick began pushing his sartorial cart at a light trot. The men quickly matched his pace and then surpassed it. He worked his way up to a full run, but there was no way he could keep up that pace. The cart was too heavy and the men coming after him were under no such burden.

If I could just get to farmer Tullum's. With his pitchfork and his old dog Rivet we might stand a chance...

But he knew he'd never get that far. The Tullums' home was a mile away, just past his own cottage. Perhaps he should abandon his wagon, but the entire welfare of his family was packed up inside those wooden slats. He couldn't just give it up without a fight.

Oh, Adonai, what should I do?

He slowed and let the ruffians overtake him, hoping to have at least a little strength left for when he faced them. Not that it would matter. There were six of them—as roughly dressed and unkempt as any group of scoundrels from Briar's Glen to Talance. Yet the collars of their shirts and the cut of

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their pants showed that they were not from either of those towns, nor anywhere else in Vinyon province. The style was too angular, more reminiscent of the kind worn in the southern parts of the empire.

As they caught up to him, three of the men circled around front, blocking his way, while the other three came up behind.

Roderick stopped the cart in the middle of the road.

“A moment of your time, stitcher?” asked the big man in the middle. His torso was nearly twice as thick as Roderick’s. He had a large nose reminiscent of an onion.

“I’m sorry, but I’m in a terrible rush,” Roderick said.

“Well, we’re in a bit of a hurry too, mister,” the onion-nosed man said, a surly grin wriggling onto his face.

Roderick eyed the lock on the lid of the cart. His knife was inside. He would never be able to get it out in time.

“Um, what do you want?” he asked, gripping the edge of his cart protectively.

“Not what, sirrah, but *who*.” The big man took a step closer.

Another of the thugs standing next to the leader chimed in.

“We heard you might’ve made yourself a little friend, recently.”

“I—I’m not sure what you mean.” Roderick pressed against the cart so as to keep as much distance between himself and the ruffians as possible. Something rustled in the bushes running along the road. Perhaps there were even more of them there. There was no way Roderick was getting out of this.

“Ah, now don’t play daft.” The big man wagged his finger. “You know the boy we’re looking for.”

“If you’re talking about the one I gave the gloves to, that was three days ago, and I haven’t seen him since.”

“Haven’t seen him, eh? That don’t square with what we’ve heard. Five or six bumpkins said they saw him lurking around your cart this morning.”

“Well, if that’s so, it’s news to me. What do you want with him anyway?” Roderick peered longingly down the road in

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both directions, wishing that either the town watch or Farmer Tullum might chance along.

“Ah, now don’t you worry your fancy hat. We just want to see that he’s properly taken care of. We’re representatives of...an orphanage from down the road that’s come to take him home.” The sneer on the thug’s face betrayed his lie.

“But there are no orphanages in these parts. You’d have to go all the way to Massing to find one,” Roderick said.

The man’s sneer threatened to become a snarl. “Enough games! You’ve seen the kid. You know what we’re talking about. Now tell us where the little firework face is!”

Dull as this man was, it was obvious he knew about the motley’s skin as well. He was looking for him, just like the watch. But why?

Roderick took a deep breath to steady himself. Motley or no, these men were up to no good, of that he was sure. “Even if I did know where he was, I wouldn’t tell you. He’s no business of yours.”

The ruffian’s eyes lit up in anger. Roderick’s arm went up to ward off the impending blow, but at that same moment one of the other thugs tugged on the lock to his cart, mercifully diverting the big man’s attention.

“Eh? Lugdrum! What do you think you’re doing?” shouted the man who was interrogating Roderick.

“Just lookin’ for clues, Dart,” the man said with a snicker.

“Eck! Get your paws off,” Dart said. “You know we’re supposed to talk first and save the fingering for later!”

Lugdrum backed off, spitting on the ground in protest.

“Look, chump,” one of the other men addressed Roderick. “Just rat the kid out and we’ll leave you and your little diaper wagon be. But if we have to beat it outta ya, we will.”

Roderick guessed from the violent look in the man’s eyes that he was going to ‘beat it out’ of him whether he knew anything or not.

“So we’re giving you one last chance, sirrah. Hard or easy, what’ll it be?” The enormous bruiser called Dart clenched his fists and took one step closer.

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“I’m just a simple tailor...” Roderick mumbled, not bothering to try and sound brave or undaunted anymore.

The big man shook his head and placed his beefy hand on Roderick’s shoulder.

“That wasn’t the answer we were looking for.”

The man’s thick arm jerked back like a sling and flew into Roderick’s face. The snap of knuckles against bone rang out along the road as the world exploded. Roderick’s one saving grace was that he did not last long. Two more blows and he crumpled like a rag. He braced himself to hit the road, but the impact never came.



4

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A pair of worried eyes stared down at Roderick as he awoke. Shadows shrouded the face they belonged to, but Roderick could just make out the faint checkered pattern on the skin. It took a moment for him to realize that he wasn't dreaming. He cried out in fright and the noise turned his head into a big bass drum, beating a painful rhythm.

All the old tales of the motley chasing down children and turning them into dark, inky ghosts rushed back into Roderick's fuzzy thinking. His fears mastered him once more, for in the darkness, with his face all but shrouded inside his hood, the motley looked more monstrous than ever. Roderick waited for his mouth to sprout fangs or his eyes to light up with sparks, but instead they gazed down at him with childlike concern. His little hand dabbed Roderick's forehead with a damp rag. Roderick flinched each time he did so, waiting for the chilling touch. He wanted to run, but the pounding pain warned against it. He groaned and grabbed his down-stuffed head.

"Please don't hurt me," Roderick mumbled. The words thundered inside his ears, amplified by the cloud of pain hovering over him.

Imposing shadows and dark patches of moss loomed in every direction. Light from a half moon dribbled across the vegetation like spilled paint. Had he been dragged off to the creature's lair?

The motley pulled away with a heavy sigh. The unexpected

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withdrawal checked Roderick's fears. For the first time he noticed just how small and thin the motley was inside that tattered cloak of his.

"W-where am I?" Roderick asked, sitting up. He immediately regretted the movement. It set off an even worse throbbing in his head, like it was being squeezed repeatedly in a vice. Running was definitely out of the question.

"The woods by the road," the motley whispered.

Each moment that passed without a threatening gesture cracked a little chink in the armor guarding Roderick's heart. He took several deep breaths and calmed himself. Perhaps Bethany was right. The motley certainly didn't act like a monster.

"How did I get here?" Roderick asked as the encounter with the ruffians came rushing back. "And where's my cart?"

"They took it," the motley said, still whispering. He gestured towards the trees behind him. "They dragged you off the road and into these bushes and then they took your cart and went away."

At this news Roderick forgot all about the danger of being in the presence of a motley. His chest convulsed. For a moment he found it hard to breathe. His father had crafted that cart with his own hands forty years ago, before Roderick had even been born. Now it was gone, along with hundreds of hours of sartorial labor. He could try and replace what he'd lost during his annual trip to Evenspire, but where would he ever get enough coin to do so?

He swallowed hard and tried not to think about what would happen to his family. Then he remembered the coin the man in the skullcap had given him. He felt inside his cloak to see if it was still there in the secret pocket. His spirits rose when his fingers clasped the cold, smooth metal. At least they would have something to get by on for a little while. The note was still there as well.

"You saw it happen?" Roderick asked.

The motley nodded. "It wasn't right what they did to you."

"Have you been with me all this time?"

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“Yes.” The motley’s eyes flashed in a ray of moonlight. For the first time Roderick noticed how beautiful and brilliant they were. Green as sunlight on the grass, and full of gentle kindness.

Suddenly it struck Roderick like a blow from a ruffian’s fist how wrong he’d been. This was no motley. It may have been dark, but Roderick was seeing more clearly than he had all day. This was a lonely little boy in danger. Whatever was wrong with his skin, he was in trouble. Who knew if and when those ruffians might come back or what they’d do to him if they found him?

“How was it that you happened to be in the woods when they attacked me?” Roderick asked.

The boy shrugged and lowered his head.

“Those toughs said you were hanging about my cart this morning. Is that true?”

“Maybe.” The boy ran his fingers distractedly along the leaves of a nearby bush.

“So you followed me from the market?”

There was a long painful pause. Painful for the boy as he shifted anxiously under the weight of Roderick’s questions, and painful for Roderick as his throbbing head reasserted itself to the forefront of his awareness.

“I saw those bad men going after you,” the boy said finally. “I knew they wanted to hurt you because of me. I didn’t know what to do, so I followed you.”

Roderick’s pain subsided momentarily with this admission. Here was a boy, orphaned from his parents, living on the streets, with no place to go, and yet he was concerned enough about Roderick to risk following him out into the countryside when he knew him to be in trouble.

“Well, it was a brave thing you did,” Roderick said. “Thank you.”

“You’d do the same for me,” the boy replied matter-of-factly.

“I...well, I suppose I would,” Roderick felt his face flush in the darkness, embarrassed he had ever considered this child a

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threat. "I'm curious, though. Why were you hanging about my cart in the first place? And why didn't you show yourself? You must be very good at hiding since I never saw you."

"I ripped my cloak, sir. I thought maybe you could give me a new one, like the gloves." The boy held up a fold of his cloak, but it was too dark to see the extent of the damage. "But the men kept watching you, so I didn't think it would be safe."

"I'd be more than happy to give you a new cloak, but as you can see, I've lost my cart. I could sew up the one you've got, though, once I get to feeling a bit better."

The boy nodded and the beginnings of a smile crept into the corners of his mouth.

"What's your name, child?"

"Jacob," he said, barely above a whisper, as if it were a deep dark secret he was confiding.

"Well, Jacob, my name is Roderick. Pleased to meet you." He tried to lift his hand to greet him properly, but the effort made him wince and pull back in pain. He took several deep breaths and waited for the throbbing to die down. After a few moments he asked, "Is it true that you don't have any parents?"

Jacob quivered in response. Roderick had seen his daughter do the same thing countless times when she was hurt or frightened. Forgetting his broken body and all his old fears, Roderick reached up and put his arms around the boy, gritting his teeth and fighting through the fire knifing into his skull. Jacob melted in his embrace, weeping softly.

"There, there," Roderick said, patting his shoulder. "It'll be all right. We'll find a way to take care of you." After Jacob had spent most of his tears, Roderick said, "You know, I have a home and a family just up the road here. My wife makes the most delicious lentil soup. Would you like to come visit?"

"Do you have any fruit?" Jacob asked, sniffing.

"Oh, so you want another apple, eh? I'm sorry, but they're hard to come by these days. And we don't have any other kind of fruit either."

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“It’s okay. I can find some winterberries.”

“I’m sure we can find something you like, though. Besides, I want you to meet my family. And the needle and thread I need to fix your cloak are there as well.”

Jacob’s eyes shifted nervously, retreating behind a sudden wall of modesty and propriety.

“And another thing—who’s going to save me from the bullies if they come back?” Roderick asked, trying to coax a response out of him.

Jacob cracked a grin, a real genuine smile this time. His teeth shone like white glow-stones in the darkness.

“Okay,” Jacob said.

“Wonderful.” Roderick rose to his feet, steadying himself with a nearby tree. It took a moment for things to stop spinning.

“Well, I suppose we’d best be off. My dear Bethany—that’s my wife—must be worried sick.”

Roderick gingerly took a few steps, following Jacob through the shadowy woods.

“The road is this way,” Jacob said.

“You’re sure I can’t persuade you to try some lentil soup?” Roderick asked when they reached the road.

Jacob sighed, as if he were the adult and Roderick the child, a child who was not capable of understanding something no matter how many times he had it explained to him.

“Fruit. Only fruit.”



The Thaumaturge glowered at the mewling idiots before him. He would have used his own men to ferret out the motley, but he didn’t want to cause more alarm in the town than he already had.

“You have breached the terms of our agreement,” the

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Thaumaturge said icily. "And therefore you will receive no payment."

Dart, the thug with the bulbous nose, twisted the toe of his boot in the dirt as if to assure himself that the ground had not yet begun to sink beneath his feet.

"When I said, 'stay with him until the boy comes,' I meant for you to *stay with him until the boy came*, not rough him up and leave him beside the road half dead," the Thaumaturge went on.

"But those merchants showed up and—"

"I did not give you permission to speak. And those were not merchants. They were scholars from another part of the province. They are looking for the boy as well. If you see them again, I will pay you extra if you make sure they never find him." The leader of the ruffians nodded his head vigorously and raised his hand ever so cautiously. "You may speak," said the Thaumaturge.

"Thank you, m'lord." Dart's legs started to wiggle. He grabbed hold of them, but failed to corral them. The effort made him look like he was in desperate need of attending to certain bodily necessities (which may well have been the case). "We promise not to mess up any more. We'll get that nasty little motley for ya' sure as daylight. Just tell us what your needin'. The lads and I'll be on it right quick. We—We're, We're willin' to do whatever it takes to...to prove ourselves, m'lord."

The Thaumaturge feigned as if he were considering the man's words. "You do at least remember where the tailor's house is, don't you?"

The big man's head bobbed up and down. Stupidity and enthusiasm often went hand in hand, the Thaumaturge had discovered.

"Very well. If he's still alive you may want to interrogate him at his house this time. Perhaps threatening his wife and child will prove more effective than a beating. Every man has his weakness."

The brigands stared at him dumbfounded, either from

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terror or because they did not grasp what he was getting at.

“Well? What are you waiting for?” the Thaumaturge bellowed. “Go!”

The men gave a start, like they had just woken up by falling out of bed.

“And remember that if by some miracle you do find the boy, you are not to harm him. If you do, it will not go well for you,” the Thaumaturge warned.

The band of thugs scattered like leaves blown on the wind. The Thaumaturge doubted he would ever see them again, but he did not care. They were a mere distraction, a feint meant to flush his quarry out from the bushes. The real trap lay elsewhere, hidden in plain sight.



Roderick sat with Bethany as the two children played in front of the hearth. He adjusted the poultice she had made from one side of his face to the other. The comfrey compound inside the wet rag had already reduced the swelling considerably. Though she had added lavender and pine to mask the smell, it still had a strong stench of decay about it, but this was a small price to pay for the relief it brought.

“So the stories are true, after all,” Bethany said, shaking her head. She had been too overwhelmed by Roderick’s injuries when he first came in to pay much attention to Jacob’s skin, but in time the awareness had leapt onto her face with wide eyes and raised eyebrows. She and Roderick exchanged looks, but a shake of Roderick’s head told her he’d had a change of heart about the whole motley business.

“True and yet not true at the same time,” Roderick said.

“What does it all mean?” she asked.

“That I do not know, love. That I do not know.”

Aisha’s ball came bouncing over to his feet. For a moment Roderick forgot his soreness and shuffled his feet this way

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and that, keeping her from retrieving it.

“Daddy,” Aisha protested with a smile. “Let us play!”

He kicked the ball away and into the corner and Aisha squealed after it. She was too young to go very far from the house by herself and she rarely got to play with other children. For this reason she was soaking up every moment with her newfound friend. And around Aisha, Jacob’s shyness melted away. He cracked a little grin as she pounced on the ball triumphantly. His skin was even more beautiful when he smiled, the same way a basket is more beautiful when it’s filled with flowers than when it’s empty.

“What’s to become of him?” Bethany asked, lowering her voice. “Those ruffians are not the only ones looking for him.”

“The world won’t understand that he’s just a boy,” Roderick answered in equally soft tones. “They’ll just see his skin, like I did.”

Roderick felt a pang of remorse at how he’d let his imagination run off with him after that first encounter.

“Now don’t be too hard on yourself. You only got a glimpse of him,” Bethany said. “Most people would have thought the same thing.”

She touched his arm gently and rose to go dry the dishes. Ever graceful, ever grounded. That was his Beth.

Since they had no fruit to give him and Jacob politely declined to eat anything else, he had gone out back with Aisha before dinner and found some bright purple winterberries in the thicket behind the cottage. Roderick was surprised there was anything edible at all out there after the frost, but then again they were probably called winterberries for a reason, he supposed. He knew precious little about the surrounding woods for someone who’d lived in them all his life. Home was where Roderick’s heart was, and his body seemed to rather prefer it as well.

The berries were a paltry meal in comparison to the hot, thick soup Bethany served, but Jacob offered no complaints. He was the picture of manners, never speaking with his mouth full and never missing his “please’s” and “thank

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you's”.

Roderick closed his eyes and tried—without success—to rest and let the pain go away. His daughter's laughter, normally the music he cherished above all others, stung his head to listen to, but he was not about to ruin her fun by asking her to quiet down.

Bethany eventually returned from the dishes and took her place beside her husband. “Roderick, I've been wondering,” she said. “How do you think his parents got into trouble? Do you think they were falsely accused or that they were actual criminals?”

“Hmm...criminals...Ordinarily, I'd say we could go to the magistrate to find out, but I don't think we can trust him in this. If he found out Jacob was here he'd treat him little better than those ruffians, I shouldn't wonder.”

The two of them gazed at the children for a time without speaking, mesmerized by their antics in front of the fire. They were flicking Aisha's multi-colored ball through a little maze they had fashioned from walnut shells and pebbles, giggling whenever it left the path or they made an exceptionally fine shot.

“What are we going to do, Derick?” Bethany asked at length.

“I don't know, Beth. We could take him in, I suppose, but with all the people looking for him, we couldn't hide him here for long.”

And how would we feed him if we could? Roderick thought to himself. With the cart lost, they were in for a lean winter by any stretch. The boy couldn't live off winterberries.

“We have to do something,” Beth said. “If whoever wants him was willing to beat you like that, I hate to think what they'd do to poor little Jacob.”

“You're right. I suppose we'll just have to protect him for now until we can find a safe place for him. But if those men were bold enough to throttle me in broad daylight, I worry about leaving the rest of you here all day alone.”

Bethany crossed her arms in motherly fashion and leaned

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back in her chair.

“Don’t worry, my love. Adonai will protect us. It’s the right thing to do.”

But Roderick couldn’t help but worry. It was in his nature, unfortunately. He worried about every little snuffle or sign that Aisha might be getting sick, about his dwindling sales in the market, about Bethany’s hundred daily chores and the way her beautiful hands had grown so rough over the years. None of this he could control, he knew, and he couldn’t stop those thugs from coming back again either, but that did not keep him from worrying all the same.

At least I have the gold valin, he reminded himself, patting the coin in his secret pocket.

Oh! In all the commotion he had forgotten to tell his wife about the mysterious man from the market! He opened his mouth to do just that when Aisha’s ball came towards him once again. He picked it up on the bounce. This time Jacob reached out to take it.

“Ah, you want the ball, eh?” Roderick said, pulling it back. With sleight of hand, he made the ball appear to vanish.

“Daddy!” Aisha’s mouth was a fountain of giggles. She loved it when he did his tricks.

Jacob stared up at Roderick, a curious look on his face.

“You know magic?” Jacob asked.

“A little,” Roderick’s said. He reached behind Jacob’s ear and pulled the ball out from behind it. He dropped it into Jacob’s hand.

Jacob’s eyes went wide. “Can you teach me?” he asked.

“Of course. But not tonight. It’s getting late and my next trick will be getting the both of you into bed.”

“Oh, Daddy!” Aisha cried, this time with far less delight.

“You heard your father,” Bethany said.

Aisha stuck out a pouting lip, but Jacob asked in a quiet voice, “Where do I sleep?”

“Well, I think we can roll out the extra blankets on the floor of Aisha’s room. Will that be all right, Eesh?”

Aisha’s mood changed in an instant. She jumped up and

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clapped her hands together. “Oh yes! Come on, Jacob, I’ll show you where it is,”

“Ah, ah, ah. Not so fast,” her mother said. “You have to get your gown on and brush your hair first.”

Aisha sighed dramatically and managed a begrudging, “Yes, mother,” before clunking off towards the bedroom.

Bethany bent down to Jacob’s level. “I have some night clothes for you, too, if you’d like.”

“Thank you, ma’am, but I’ll sleep in these.”

“You know, I can sew a new pocket inside your cloak for you, if you’d like,” Roderick said. He pulled open his own to show him how it worked. It was on the inside on the left, just over his heart. It looked like nothing more than a fold in the cloth, one among many, until Roderick showed him how to open it. “It’s secret, you see? No one can tell it’s there if they don’t know. It’s another kind of magic, I suppose. You can keep whatever you like in there. Maybe even a bit of apple if you ever find another one.”

Jacob’s eyes lit up and he nodded enthusiastically.

“You’re welcome to stay as long as you like, Jacob,” Bethany said, hugging him gently.

Jacob flashed another of his rare smiles and his checkered cheeks caught the firelight for a moment. Since Roderick had realized that Jacob was not a motley, the strange skin made an odd impression on him each time he saw it. On the one hand, the brightly colored pattern made Jacob appear otherworldly, like he didn’t quite belong on the same plane as that of mere mortal men. It did look an awful lot like the way those stories of the motley described. On the other hand, it made him look oh, so terribly vulnerable, like it wasn’t something he was supposed to have, and he was all the more in need of help because of it.

“Heaven willing, we’ll keep you safe.” Roderick placed his hand on top of Jacob’s head, his words as much a prayer as they were a promise.



5

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The door to Roderick's bedroom creaked open, shaking him from sleep. "We need to go," said a small voice in the darkness. Moonlight crept in through the window, but Roderick's blurry vision made it impossible to tell who the little head in the doorway belonged to.

"What?" Roderick asked, still not altogether awake.

"They're coming."

He recognized Jacob's voice this time. It had a lump-in-the-throat sort of panic to it.

"Who? Who's coming?" Roderick sat up. Bethany stirred beneath the sheets, but did not awake.

"The bullies," Jacob said.

At those words the pain and soreness in Roderick's head flared to life, banishing the last vestiges of sleep. He threw off the sheets and put his bare feet on the chill midnight floor.

"Are you sure? How do you know? It's the dead of night."

"I just know...I always know," Jacob said.

Their conversation at last woke Bethany.

"What's going on, Roderick?" she asked.

"I'll go and maybe they will leave you alone," Jacob said, his voice weak with fear.

"No, wait. Bethany, Jacob thinks the men from yesterday are coming. I don't know how he knows, but I'd better go have a look just in case."

Bethany sat bolt upright.

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“Here? They’re coming here?” she asked.

“That’s what I’m going to find out.” He hoped Jacob was just having a nightmare. A shiver ran through him, but not from the chilly floor.

Bethany touched his arm before he started out.

“I’ll go and gather Aisha,” she said. “If it is them, maybe we can hide out back.” Her words lent a measure of calm to Roderick’s pounding heart. She was always the level-headed one.

“Jacob, you go with Bethany,” Roderick instructed, brushing past him down the steps.

“Hurry, please. They’ll be here soon.” Jacob said.

Roderick rushed downstairs and over to the window beside the front door and pushed away the curtain just enough to get a look at the road. The smooth dirt lane ran about two hundred feet from the cottage. It went past the Tullum’s off to the left and, off to the right, it wound around a stand of oaks five hundred feet or so from the front door. While it was a good sign that no one was visible, even the ruffians were probably not dimwitted enough to approach along the open road.

“Well, buttons. What to do now?” Roderick whispered to himself.

Jacob and Bethany, carrying a still sleeping Aisha, appeared behind him.

“Can you see anyone?” Bethany asked.

“No.” Roderick stepped away from the window.

Jacob gave him a desperate look which said, *if you don’t do something quick they’ll find me.*

First his cart and now his home. Was any place in The Glen safe anymore? Roderick’s peaceful little life was unraveling at the seams. But then he thought of Jacob. Who would protect him? At least Roderick, Bethany, and Aisha had each other.

“After what happened yesterday,” Roderick said, “we can’t be too cautious. Let’s go to the cellar out back. If they do come to the cottage I doubt they’ll think to look there. And we should be able to hear them and slip off into the woods if

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they do.”

“Right,” Bethany said, and headed for the back door.

Roderick flung on his cloak and opened the door slowly, thankful Bethany had oiled the hinges a few weeks ago and gotten rid of that nasty squeak. The cellar was about a dozen steps away and the back of the house was well shielded by surrounding trees. Roderick pulled the door closed behind him, locking it shut and heading for the cellar.

He fumbled with the cellar lock several times before he got it open, finally shoving the key into the hole and springing it. Unlike the house, the door here creaked like a mouse caught in a trap. Roderick could only hope the ruffians were not close enough to hear it. Or better yet that there weren't any ruffians at all.

They descended the dirt steps into the gloom, squeezing up against the earthen walls reinforced with wooden beams. A few stacks of empty jars and some garden tools lurked in the back, but that was all. In his parent's day the jars had been filled with preserves and there had been extra wood and bolts of cloth, but the years since his mother's death had not been so kind. For once Roderick was glad of the hard times for it meant there was enough room for the four of them to fit inside.

He was also thankful that Aisha was such a sound sleeper. She wheezed softly in the darkness, but otherwise made no sound.

Jacob clung to Roderick's arm as if he thought he would fall into a pit if he let go. Roderick stared through the gaps between the slats in the cellar door. The quiet around the cottage was only broken by the sighs of the night breeze through the trees.

Shattered glass cut through the stillness, followed closely by muttered voices and clunky footsteps inside the cottage.

Roderick flinched as if cold air had blown in his face.

“It's them,” Jacob whispered in Roderick's ear.

Them. Roderick had never known that word could evoke so much fear.

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Once inside the house, the burglars abandoned all pretense of stealth. The sound of doors opening, mixed with low talking, simmered through the night. It was only a matter of time before they boiled over.

“I don’t think we’re safe here,” Bethany whispered. “Maybe we should make a break for it before they decide to check out back.”

Roderick’s mouth cottoned up. He doubted those toughs were smart enough to check out back, and in the weak moonlight the cellar door blended in with the surrounding underbrush. Still, if they did find it, there’d be no way to escape.

“You’re right,” he croaked the words out. “Into the woods. Maybe we can make it to the Tullums.”

“But we’ll have to cross the open field. What if they see us? I don’t think farmer Tullum and you together would be able to stand against that band of ruffians.”

Bethany was right again. They’d be spotted for sure and getting Farmer Tullum up would take too much time. The way that big one Dart hit, it probably wouldn’t make any difference either.

“Where else can we go?” he asked.

“There’s the cave at Bald Hill where I used to go when I was a little girl.”

The words ‘cave at Bald Hill’ shot like a lightning stroke through his memory. The drawing of the cave. The note. The man from the market. Maybe that’s what he was trying to tell him—to meet him there! Hope glimmered to life inside him. Would that mysterious stranger be able to help? Would he even be there? Whatever the case, the cave was their only hope. It lay through the woods and even if the man wasn’t there, the tunnels inside were many and twisting. They might be able to lose the ruffians inside the endless warren even if they somehow managed to track them there.

“Beth, you’re amazing,” he whispered.

Gingerly, he pushed open the cellar door and stepped outside. A loud crash reverberated from inside the cottage, mercifully obscuring the loud creak. The crash was followed

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by more loud voices and curses from Dart. Roderick stared at the window to the back yard in utter fear. If the ruffians glanced out back, they would be on Roderick and his family in a flash.

Please, let us get through this night alive, he prayed.

Jacob came out next and latched on to Roderick's arm. Finally, Bethany and Aisha emerged. At that moment a stiff breeze blew through the yard and whipped through Aisha's hair. Her eyes flicked open.

"What are we doing out—" Bethany's hand clamped over Aisha's mouth too late. At that exact moment the house had gone dead quiet. It did not stay that way.

"Did you hear that?" someone inside the cottage exclaimed. "Out back! Quick!"

There was nothing for it but to run. Leaving the cellar door flung wide open Roderick grabbed Aisha from Bethany's arms and tore off into the woods. Bethany grabbed Jacob by the hand, a step behind.

They blundered in and out of the dense forest. Layers of leaves rustled as they passed, making an awful racket, but it couldn't be helped.

Roderick was out of breath almost before he started. Between his fright and his throbbing head, he barely had enough strength to keep hold of Aisha.

Behind them, their pursuers made enough noise to drown out a pack of wild dogs. Their shouts, and the swoosh and crunch of their stampede made it sound like an army had invaded the woods.

Everywhere Roderick looked he saw menace and misgivings. The shadows seemed to take on a life of their own. He was forced to slow down to avoid tripping on the tangled roots and underbrush. At this rate they would never make it to the cave in time.

Roderick shot a glance over his shoulder. Dark figures blundered through the trees. He spit out the bile rising in the back of his throat, forcing himself to run harder, heedless of the searing in his chest, the entangling roots, and the growling

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weight of Aisha in his arms.

Bethany was panting just as deep and heavy as he was.

The ruffian's shouts rang out through the trees.

"There! Over there!"

"Hurry boys! We've got 'em now!" one of them cried gleefully. Bulky mounds of darkness smothered the gaps between the trees.

Roderick didn't know how much longer he could go. Fear was the only thing keeping him on his feet. He lost all sense of direction. It didn't help that he hadn't been to Bald Hill in years. But Bethany barreled confidently ahead. All he could do was follow her now.

In front of him, Jacob faltered, but Beth quickly pulled him back to his feet.

"Come, Jacob," she said breathlessly.

Please, just let us hold out a little further.

Hot-headed shouts poured after them like an avalanche overtaking the woods.

"Where are we going, Daddy?" Aisha asked as they rushed out of the woods. Of the four of them, she was the only one who showed no signs of panic. They might as well have been out for a midnight romp for all the levity in her voice.

"It's...an...adventure." Roderick whispered between molten gulps of air.

The dark mound of Bald Hill loomed before them in the center of a wide, grassy clearing. The craggy hill shone stark in the moonlight, a silent fortress offering the promise of protection.

"Just...ahead." He pointed towards the hill across the meadow. The entrance to the cave was nowhere in sight, but Aisha murmured a submissive, "okay" in his ear.

Jacob faltered again, this time tumbling to the ground.

"He can't keep up," Bethany cried, helping him back to his feet.

Roderick passed Aisha into his wife's arms just before the first of the dark figures burst out of the woods.

His arms enjoyed a moment of relief before scooping

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Jacob up. "I'll take him," Roderick said. Grunting and chugging under the new weight, he staggered off in the direction of the cave.

It was hard to judge the distance in the dark. At times the cave seemed only a few dozen feet away, at other times a hundred yards. Roderick risked a backward glance. The moonlight shone cold and mercilessly upon the meadow and the six men loping across the wet ground. The large figure of Dart was impossible to miss. His massive fists pummeled the air as he ran. No doubt they would soon be pummeling Roderick's face again.

Roderick grew even more winded, falling further behind Bethany. He was only halfway to the cave. The ruffians, unencumbered, surged forward like a pack of wolves after a wounded doe. Roderick's head swam at the thought of what would happen to his wife and the children when they were caught.

"I'm scared," Jacob whispered, but Roderick was too busy gasping for air to reply. Instead he held Jacob tighter and pressed forward with the last bit of strength he possessed.

It was not enough. As they entered the scraggy terrain near the base of the hill, Roderick tripped on some of the loose rocks underfoot. He and Jacob went tumbling to the ground. Somehow, Roderick managed to shield Jacob from the worst of the fall, but he lost his hold on him as he collided with the hard packed dirt and moss.

Dazed and disoriented, he scrambled to his feet. Dart and the ruffians came charging up, closing the last few steps between them, screaming "The boy! Get the boy!"

Without warning, the clearing burst into light. The air shimmered in a dazzling, multi-colored display. It could not have been more colorful if Roderick had fallen inside a rainbow. Eruptions of light blistered the darkness. Dozens of colors consumed the meadow in prismatic rays. The woods and the hill disappeared in the effulgent light. The brigands' shouts filled the air, but the men behind them were invisible now, lost in the overwhelming light. Roderick not only lost

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sight of the brigands, but Jacob as well. He pawed the grass and rocks, calling out to him while shielding his eyes.

“Jacob! Jacob, where are you?”

“Here,” came the nearby answer.

Roderick fumbled towards the voice on his hands and knees, scraping them on the rocky dirt. At last he stumbled upon a tiny arm. Grasping it tightly, he rose and tried to guess which direction the cave entrance lay.

The ruffians screamed and cursed the light. As if called into existence by their bitter invective, a horrible black smoke spewed across the ground, quickly consuming the brightness. It came from all directions at once. Everything went black as coal. Besides the resulting blindness, the smoke had a horrible, acrid stench that made Roderick’s eyes water.

None of that mattered, though. Now was their chance to escape. He plunged forward with Jacob through the inky clouds, not knowing where he was going. As he stumbled through the dark mist, an awful realization hit him. Bethany and Aisha were gone. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d seen them.

“Beth! Aisha? Where are you? Can you hear me?”

“Here, Roderick,” Bethany cried from up ahead. “We’re over here!”

Her voice mingled with the cries of the thugs. “It’s a curse!” they screamed.

“Black sorcery!”

“It’s the motley! He’ll kill us all!”

“Run! Run!”

Bethany kept calling out while Roderick lurched forward, following the sound of her voice. The smoke began to thin. A vague, white figure materialized out of the mists. It looked otherworldly, a being made out of moonlight and smoke.

“Bethany?” Roderick ventured, though it looked nothing like her.

In response came a familiar voice. “Master tailor, well met,” said the man from the market, then added, in a tone of mild surprise, “Ah! I see you’ve brought the motley.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

DJ Edwardson traveled a lot when he was younger. Now he's busy crafting exotic destinations of his own. Although he has written both Science Fiction and Fantasy novels, he likes to say he writes in the "genre of imagination".

He has a degree in English from Cornell College where his emphasis was on the works of Shakespeare. He's tried his hand at both acting and directing in the theater, but these days is happiest with a pen in hand. He lives in Tennessee with his wife and three children and a rather large collection of board games. His family often gangs up on him so that he doesn't win, but he has fun anyway.



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