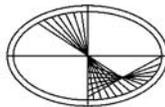




# A Twist of Fate



Mark W. Johnson



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*Dedication*

*Dedicated to Helene, Benjamin, and Andrew.*



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# Chapter I

Dressed all in black, Jovy, the priest of Adannac, frightened almost as many adults as he did children.

“Pardon me, sir.” The gnarled old man hunched over, hiding his six-foot frame, his voice surprisingly strong. “What gods do you and the lady worship?”

“Why are you asking? What do you want?” Standing in his doorway, Mlaer’s face grew red. The young man with dark hair and receding hairline was aghast at the questions.

“Well, we all know the lady may not be long for this world, and I just thought you might like for me to say a few nice words for her. You know, when the time comes.” An attempt at a smile simply made Jovy’s hideous face even more frightening.

“She will recover!” With that, Mlaer slammed the door.

§ § §

Mlaer fingered the pendant that he always wore around his neck, one of the few things his father had given him, a sort of cross between a bull’s head and a human head. Packing for a journey into the unknown, and leaving his wife for a time, was harder than he had expected.

“Boy, you ought to be staying.” The raspy voice of Krath, the apothecary, startled Mlaer.

“You know I have to go,” Mlaer told the wicked-looking man. “The Duke’s man said it was the only chance...” Mlaer saw a twinkle in Krath’s eyes. “You just want me to stay so I can keep making potions that fatten your purse.”

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“Not me,” Krath replied, grinning. His face reminded Mlaer of a ferret, but his evil appearance concealed a heart of gold. “I don’t trust that Dubesh. Never trust a man that’s got no hair—the gods let honest people keep theirs,” Krath said, while gliding one hand over his own clean scalp. They both laughed.

After an awkward pause, Mlaer whispered, “I’m going to miss you.”

The older man put his hand on Mlaer’s shoulder. “I’m going to miss you, too, Mlaer.” Their eyes met for a moment, with the apothecary’s misting over, and then Krath abruptly turned away and said, “You’ll be all right.” Mlaer had never seen this side of his business partner, as Krath had told him before that a “real man” never allows his feelings to show. It took a moment to return to his packing.

Mlaer gingerly lifted a small book bound in red leather, and blew off the dust. Blank when his master gave it to him, Mlaer thought of the long hours spent copying into that book, with equally long hours spent studying it. He glanced at his bookshelf, reflecting on the fact that none of the volumes he used from day to day contained the sort of spells he would require on such a journey. This small book that he had used only on occasion was what he needed now.

“Being a wizard is more up here,” Master Elgrin had said, pointing to Mlaer’s head, “than in here,” pointing to the book. “When you leave my tutelage, you will have far more than a book. You will have weapons and abilities, the like of which you have never even dreamed. I pray you will never need all the tools I shall give you, but they will be there if you do.”

§ § §

Mlaer went home to Tarna, wanting to remember every detail of her face, her voice, her laugh. Mlaer traced the ever-more prominent lines creasing her once-full face, now gaunt from her illness. Her long brown locks looked almost black in the afternoon shadows, hiding some of her features as they wasted away. He wanted to fill

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his heart with her, and his head with a three-dimensional picture of her so detailed that she would almost be going with him.

§ § §

Eromit had begun his preparations long before this day; he started preparing when they learned of a healer that might be able to help. He knew then that, with only one slim chance for Tarna's recovery, Mlaer would go. He also knew that he could not let his friend go alone.

Trebor may have had shoulders and arms as strong as the iron he forged, but his heart was soft. An honest, simple man who would help Mlaer himself if he could, Trebor knew that all he could do was let Eromit leave.

"Well, son," Trebor began, not accustomed to saying goodbye, "you know you can take anything you need with you..."

Eromit nodded. "Thanks."

"After all," the big man continued, "I know how close you and Mlaer are." Trebor knew more of the bond between Mlaer and Eromit than either of the young men themselves. With all of the scars on his massive hands, no one ever noticed a scar on Trebor's own left thumb, similar to one that both Mlaer and Eromit bore.

Eromit had worked harder and longer than usual each day, trying to make sure that Trebor would be left with no backlog of work while he was gone. He also dusted off and sharpened his sword, a source of great pride for Eromit since he made it himself. It was a fine sword, with the look of Damascus steel and a hilt covered in spun copper wire.

His actual preparations on the day before they left amounted to organizing his materials, packing food and other necessities, and saying his goodbyes. Naturally, Eromit's farewells to Trebor and his wife were the most difficult, for Eromit had no immediate family. Trebor and his wife were like parents to Eromit.

"You both know that I'll be back, don't you?" Eromit struggled with his words.

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“It’s so dangerous,” Trebor’s wife told him. “And nobody really knows what’s on the other side of the Green Forest.” Now she was starting to whine.

“Stop it, Soorie.” Trebor could see that she was only making Eromit’s decision more difficult. “The boy’s brother needs his help, and Eromit gave his word.” Trebor returned his attention to Eromit and continued. “We just want you to come home safely. And don’t you worry about Tarna; we’ll look in on her.” Eromit knew that Tarna was acquiring a virtual new set of parents, so he was not worried about her.

“Oooh.” Soorie started for the kitchen. “If you’re leaving tomorrow, I’d better do some baking for that poor, sweet girl.” She disappeared into the next room.

Trebor and Eromit exchanged glances, and both laughed.

“Typical Ydani mother, right? If you’ve got a problem, feed it.” They laughed again.

## § § §

Eromit lay awake for some time that night, thinking of what was to come. This was the sort of adventure they had dreamed of as children: striking out into the unknown, traversing dangerous territory. Here they were, about to live the bread and butter of childhood play, under circumstances far from the realm of juvenile dreams. The security of home and hearth is hard to leave, especially for a journey with such an uncertain conclusion, but true friendship often shows itself only when tested in time of distress. This was the time, and Eromit would not let his friend down.

Mlaer did not reflect on such things when he lay down that night. His mind was occupied by thoughts of Tarna as he watched her sleep, her breathing more uneven than it should be, her eyelids fluttering through her dreams. She woke once or twice, but quickly returned to sleep each time, perhaps to dream again of a world in which she was strong and healthy. Mlaer dozed, but it was not a good night’s rest.

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Tarna woke in the night and quietly spoke to her husband, who lay staring at the ceiling. “Are you still awake?”

Mlaer rolled on his side to face her. “I’m okay. I just hate to leave you.”

“Why don’t you stay?” Her voice sounded weak and puny. “You don’t even know if that Landa woman can heal me.”

Mlaer wiped away a tear. “I know, but it’s a chance. Fate can’t be cruel enough to take you away from me, so I have to go. I’ll take any chance to have you well.”

Tarna nestled into a comfortable position in his arms and quickly returned to sleep. He could not know how much longer she would survive in this condition, and could hardly bear the thought of being away from her. As Tarna’s health deteriorated, Mlaer treasured each of her heartbeats, each of her breaths, more and more each day.

Morning came all too early. As the time to leave approached, Mlaer held Tarna tightly, not wanting to ever release her. A knock at the door interrupted.

“That’s Eromit.”

They said a few more farewells, kissed again and again, and Mlaer promised to be back as soon as possible as he walked out the door. He and Tarna had been holding each other since the wee hours of the morning, and Mlaer knew that he could not look back.

Mlaer and Eromit walked in silence until they reached Trebor’s house. As they reached the door, Eromit cautioned his friend, “Let me warn you. There’s breakfast waiting, and Soorie expects us—especially you—to eat.”

They stepped inside and were greeted by a table set with bread and cheese, milk, sausages and coffee.

“Eat, eat,” Soorie told Mlaer. “You used to be such a fine, fat fellow, but just look at you.” She poked him in the ribs. “Skin and bone. Eat!” She slid some eggs from her frying pan onto Mlaer’s plate. “You start with three, and I’ll fix some more after I fix Eromit’s.”

“Dear,” Trebor interrupted, “if they eat ‘til they bust, they won’t be able to go anywhere.”

Soorie gave her husband a stern look.

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“These boys have a long road ahead of them, and they need to eat. Now, unless you want to sleep in the smithy tonight, you’ll sit down and eat, and let me run my kitchen.” She was not smiling, so Trebor sat quietly. “Now then, Eromit, your eggs are almost ready.” She stared at Trebor and pointed to the table. “Pass those boys some sausages, and bread, and cheese.” He meekly complied.

The two young men ate as much as they wanted, then struggled to consume another plate or two of food to placate Soorie. Finally finishing their meal, the two strapped on their belongings, Mlaer took his staff, and Soorie’s tears flowed as she hugged them both. Trebor held them in check, but his own tears were not so far from the surface. Final goodbyes said—they began walking to the east.