

Chapter 1

The coachman was a frozen and forlorn figure in his greatcoat and cloak. A foggy miasma surrounded him. To his old, weary eyes the drizzling rain seemed not to fall out of the night sky, but rather to hover suspended, intently awaiting his arrival. Powerless under the yoke of his master's command, the coachman drove his team through the thick air in a great rush. And so he was miserable, from whiskered cheek to rheumatoid ankle.

The track they followed was overgrown from a summer's disuse and never intended for such a magnificent carriage. At the corners of his great four-wheeler lamps of sculpted brass and frosted glass described every rut, every jarring bump in their perilous course. Sadly, the lamps served no practical purpose, too feeble to break the night gloom, too wan to shed a trace of warmth against the cold. The poor, belabored coachman and his team of matched chestnuts were all but blind in the night.

At yet another unexpected twist in the road- if such a track could be delineated as such- the coachman's heart clogged in his throat and he hauled upon the reins in a near panic. The steeds drew up short, their hooves tearing the boggy turf. The carriage rocked to a standstill. And with the creak and clamor of axle and team now silenced the definite patter of rain came loudly to his ears. A heavy drop spattered the bridge of his nose. It ran off like a misplaced tear. Affecting a weary sigh, the driver set his brake and climbed from his box to scout the way ahead.

"Have we arrived then?"

An impatient hand from within the cab snapped aside the curtain of oiled leather. It was a heavy, powerful hand set with rings that glimmered: knuckles of polished silver.

The owner of that hand, of those rings, of the coach and coachman alike, repeated in his forceful baritone- as he did at every such delay- "Petresky! Petresky, why have we stopped? Where is the house? I do not see it! Have we arrived then? Petresky! Petresky-!"

Out of the darkness, clutching tight his cloak about the neck, the servant stepped forward and begged forgiveness. To the stumbling, worn excuses, the master barked:

"Curse the weather! Curse the weather and bedevil the hour! Drive on! The steeds shall find their way! Press on!"

And the stiff curtain of leather snapped back into place, a drumhead for the rain.

Head lowered to more than the weather, the coachman crawled back to his box. Before taking up the reins anew, he stole a nip from the flask in his belt: a ward against the chill in his bones. Then, throat afire, he uttered his strident call and the team jumped forward initiating yet another leg of their nocturnal journey.

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A landscape of primeval forest drifted past unseen, inscrutable in the rain and darkness. Like ghosts in the attic, the towering, ancient boles made their presence known through eerie creaks and ominous groans. Although a perfect night for tales of gloom and spooks and goblins, the coachman's vivid and superstitious imagination had no time for conjuring thoughts of hungry wood trolls or blood-lusting toadstool fairies. Every instant his attention was occupied by the bounce and sway of his charge. One moment he was bracing his legs against the possibility of being thrown, and the next he was pulling at the reins to guide his team around some last-instant pitfall. He had no time for supernatural frets or worries. The grim reality of a steed's broken leg or- worse- the

rollover of his master's coach kept the servant's imagination firmly rooted in the here and now.

The winds were howling in a frenzy when the frame of a lighted window hove into view. Small as it was, its yellow glow spilled across the wild landscape like the glory of a god. The weary coachman took heart and spurred his team forward. The way ahead was clear of obstruction, a narrow lane of neatly scythed grass. It lead right to the door of a tiny cottage.

To the muted clump of hooves and the jingling cadence of tack, the four-wheeler rolled to a halt. For the first time that evening they had come to rest upon even ground. Sensing their arrival at last the master threw open his door and burst forth with all the urgency of life or death. Ignoring both the storm and established protocol, he jumped to the ground before his servant could scabble from his perch and fetch the wooden stepbox stored in the boot. Drawing up his hood as he moved, the master called over his shoulder:

"Turn the carriage 'bout, Petresky! We shall be leaving forthwith! We've no time to spare on pleasantries!"

His giant strides took him quickly past the lathered steeds, through standing puddles, and up to the tiny cottage. "Open up! Open up, I say! Time is of the essence! Open, I say! Open up in there! Open up-!" He applied a forceful fist to the door. And again.

The door parted a crack and a fan of warm, golden light sliced the stormy evening. Without proper invite or invitation the visitor pressed his way across the threshold. Once inside, he stamped his feet and shook the rain from broad shoulders like

a bear. Such presumptuous airs should mark him lord and master of this humble abode, rather than the unexpected- uninvited- guest he was. He straightened.

The first impression, the same every time he called, was the closeness of it all. His coach was spacious by comparison. There was always the compelling urge to walk stoop-shouldered. No obvious changes since his last visit. Nothing new. The sitting room filled the entire ground floor- a floor of packed earth he marveled, somehow having forgotten this quaint detail. Two sitting chairs faced each other, dangerously close to a tiny hearth. A few shelves and a leaning bookcase piled with tomes obscured the low walls. To one side a narrow ladder climbed to the bedloft above. And that was all. The midnight caller shifted beneath his cloak, feeling claustrophobic. Unconsciously he licked his lips, repulsed by the tang of poverty.

"Ha! You took so long to answer, I thought you might've had a woman with you!" he laughed, pulling back his hood. He turned, watching his host push the door shut against the storm. A momentary lapse in the wind allowed the latch to be firmly set.

"Adrian!" the visitor boomed a greeting.

His host looked up from the doorwell. The trace of a smile touched his lips, softened his eyes. "Welcome, my brother. You look well."

The two faced each other in a quiet moment of reflection. Their common heredity was most pronounced about the eyes: quick, bright lights recessed beneath heavy brows. There was also a similarity in the crook of the nose, though only slight. For the rest, they were stark contrasts of hot and cold, light and dark. He, the older, in his dripping cloak, had the body and features of a wolf: lean, powerful limbs, a strong jaw, a veritable muzzle covered with a shaggy, red-brown beard. He was the hunter of the two, the predator, the killer. The other, the younger, had more the cast of a cat or a fox: slim,

sleek, a clean-shaven face that had more than once been described as delicate. His eyes did not shine with the piercing thrill of blood-lust. Rather, they hovered aloft, above such animal passions, filled with a tranquil ease of introspection and profound thought.

The older barked a short laugh, breaking the swell of silence. "How the old maid you look!" he chided. "Dressed in your nightshirt and slippers! Ha then! Ha!"

Adrian smiled faintly. He wore a blanket wrapped about him like a shawl, and indeed the old maid he must have looked. "It is a cold night, Malcolm. Winter will be upon us in a few weeks."

"Winter!" his brother agreed heartily. His shaggy face split in a grin that belied uneasiness. There was an unexpected distance between them, a coolness that kept his younger brother held in reserve. Was there some harbored grudge against him, some unspoken argument yet lingering in the vast annals of his brother's mind? Or was this merely Adrian's way these days? His mood? Malcolm was surprised to find he could not answer his own questions. At one point in time he could have gauged his brother's every thought by the way he held his shoulders or tilted his head- or furrowed his brow. Yes, that was always the tell-tale sign of Adrian's thoughts, the rise and fall of his brow. But now, as Adrian stood before him in his rumpled bedgarb, Malcolm realized he faced a stranger. "How long has it been?" he caught himself muttering aloud. How much time had slipped away so that he no longer knew his own brother?

"Nearly a year," Adrian answered coming forward. In his simple, quiet way he suggested, "May I take your cloak? I will have tea on in a moment. Would you care to invite your livery to warm themselves by the fire?"

"Hmm? Oh! No- no," Malcolm responded, remembering his urgency. "There's no time, A. We have to leave at once. Get dressed! We have to go. I'll help you pack-"

He threw back the folds of his cloak to free his hands. The traveling clothes beneath were the finest available, tailored in exquisite detail: a doublet of black velvet with silver trim, clinging hose that molded to every swell and depression of his muscular legs. Even his low boots of black felt, muddied as they were, lost none of their opulence with their delicate embroidery and shining silver buckles. He rubbed his hands together quickly. "Come! We must pack-!"

"Pack?" A faint hint of alarm widened Adrian's eyes. "Whither are we bound, brother? Has there been an illness? ...Father?"

"No- no. Nothing of the sort. Opportunity, my boy- opportunity!" His grin was hungry. The confidence of the wolf was back. "I shall explain in the coach. Plenty of time for details on the ride- 'tis a blasted ordeal to drive that trail which serves as your road! Not a moment's rest the entire trek! It will be good to share the ride back, at least. Why you choose to live so far from the civilized world I shall never fathom- Adrian-? A? Do not sit down. We have to go."

The frail, blanket-wrapped figure moved toward the sitting chairs, shuffling on ragged slippers. *Opportunity*. Adrian needed to hear no more. Facing into the flames of the hearth, he muttered, "Tea then?" He picked up a battered kettle and swished to gauge its contents. Sufficient for two, he placed it by the flames on a warming stone.

"No time, brother," Malcolm was insisting. "No time...!"

Adrian settled himself in his cozy chair by the fire. Arranging his blanket wrap higher about his shoulders, he glanced about for the book he had been reading before his brother's arrival.

"No, A. You don't understand-"

"I think I do," Adrian replied blandly from his chair. He discovered the hiding place of his book (he was sitting on it) and squirmed and fussed to bring it once again to the surface.

Malcolm chuckled. His brother's indifference would change once the news was divulged. "You haven't heard, A. There are big happenings in the north. All of Stokeold is abuzz- from the king himself down to the lowliest of peasants! Magden Keep has fallen!"

Adrian was sitting upright in a prim manner, back straight, hands placidly crossed upon the book now in his lap. "I have heard, brother. Sometime in late summer, was it? Magden Keep fell to the giant, Kress, and his ice trolls-"

"It has fallen again!" Malcolm said triumphantly. "Kress and his beasties have been routed! The prince regent drove a host north into the mountains and vanquished the foe!"

Adrian made no immediate reply. His slim, mouse-like fingers played with the frayed edges of his book. Wordlessly he stared up at his brother who now stood tall and proud, as if he had played a personal role in the campaign.

"You're trying to piece together the opportunity I mentioned," Malcolm nodded knowingly. "I can see it in your eyes, that distant look. It's the same as when we were boys. You're trying to see the opportunity, but you can't! I guarantee you cannot!"

"Oh? No...," Adrian confessed with a disinterested shake of his head. "I was merely thinking it is full winter that far north. The Dragon's Spine must be choked with snow and ice. Prince Janus and his men must have faced many hardships in reaching Magden Keep. The mountains are treacherous this time of year. Any time of year..." He

shrugged, bringing himself back to his brother's question. "But if it is opportunity you wish me to guess, I would speculate you have some interest in the silver mines-"

The *guff guff guff* of the tea kettle rose to an incessant hiss. Responding to its call, Adrian dropped the conversation as if it were yesterday's weather. Setting his book aside, he slipped from his patchwork cocoon and crossed the tiny room to the cupboard- nothing more than a small shelf- which bore the weight of his modest collection of dishware. Selecting two of the least chipped and discolored cups, he placed them upon matching saucers and carried them back to the hearth.

Malcolm watched his brother go through the motions of preparing tea. Where Adrian's hands glided smoothly from task to task, unwavering and sure, Malcolm felt his own fingers become jittery, his palms hot with growing excitement. At last, fearing his brother had forgotten their conversation entirely, he repeated, "...the silver mines?"

"Yes," Adrian nodded, pouring for both. "I suspect, now that Magden Keep is once again flying the banner of the king, the silver mines will resume their daily toils. That was the drive behind the prince's march north, was it not? Cream? It will take but a moment for me to run out to the cold pantry and fetch it."

Malcolm accepted the cup and saucer, baffled. He carried news of fortunes to be won and lost, and his brother's primary concern was cream for tea. "No- no," he muttered, shaking his head. Cup and saucer were carelessly set upon a bookshelf and immediately dismissed. "No- no. No cream, A. No tea, no silver mines-! This is bigger than silver, A. Bigger than all the silver mines in the world!"

"A gold mine then?" Adrian said with a wry smile. Taking up his tea, he settled in his cozy chair. Catching Malcolm's expression, he could not resist one more poke between sips. "A diamond mine?"

"Make sport, A, if you like. But you must believe me when I say- *bigger!* This is the opportunity that will put the Coleby name above all others! Above even- dare I say it?- above even the Royal Family! We could very well snatch the seat of power from the Crown! Can I say such a thing?" He laughed out loud.

"Careful, dear brother. I may have to report you for treason, conspiring against the throne." Adrian's eyes glittered with a dry mirth. His words were nothing more than that, just words. His little joke prompted a hearty guffaw from his brother.

"Ah, the very thought! No- no. We cannot steal the Crown- not without a revolution. Too much work for that. Wasted effort! No, the opportunity I speak of will make royal heads bow and scrape to the Coleby House!"

"Indeed!" Adrian grinned into his cup.

"A- listen to me- listen!" Malcolm came forward, dropping to one knee. Eye to eye, he explained in a quiet, yet forceful voice, "They found something. The prince and his men- they found something!"

Despite himself, Adrian was compelled to hold his tongue. The undercurrent of urgency in Malcolm's voice made the nape of his neck shiver. He sat motionless, staring into his brother's wild eyes. Cup and saucer were frozen in his raised hands.

Seeing he had captured his brother's attention at last, Malcolm quickly told his tale:

"As the story goes, after Janus and his men stormed Magden Keep they slaughtered the ice trolls and cornered the monster, Kress, in the great hall. It was a bloody affair by all reckoning. But when it was done the giant fell, bleeding from a hundred arrow barbs and lancepoints.

"But the battle is not the important thing here. It is what they discovered after, during the cleansing of the place. What a sight it must have been! Can you imagine, ice trolls and that monster? Furniture and fixtures had been cast down and destroyed, everything down to the bare walls. Their own filth and vileness sat in pools about the place- well! Well! Once order was regained, the prince regent salvaged the duke's papers; the Duke of Magden Keep, loyal vassal to the king. All the bookwork on the silver mines. Their daily toils. The tallies, the figures! His personal notes! Apparently the duke had foreseen the giant's attack against his keep and managed to hide the thing- But no! I've gotten ahead of myself!"

Putting a hand to his befuddled brow, Malcolm rose and paced the room aimlessly.

Realizing his ridiculous posture, Adrian set aside his cup and saucer. Balancing them upon his knee, he attempted to organize his brother's thoughts for him. "You say they found something. Who? What did they find? Why is it so much of a concern?"

"Yes, they found something. Something in the silver mines. One of the tunnels broke into a cavern- or a series of caverns- I've heard it both ways. Not important. They found something and they took it back to the keep, the miners did, the dwarves in the duke's employ."

"What exactly did they find?"

Malcolm spun on his heel, his face bearing a frank expression. "I don't know." He nodded at his own ignorance. "*I do not know*. No one does! No one alive, at least." Anticipating his brother's next question, he added, "When the thing was first discovered, the duke sent a messenger to Stokeold. The rider carried a letter describing the find in detail. It requested the king's attention and advice. It was a letter meant only for the eyes

of the king. But..." He licked his lips. "But the messenger never made it out of the Dragon's Spine. He fell to the trolls. And thereby did Kress discover this treasure beyond all treasures. This is what prompted the giant to mass his minions and assault the keep. It was this unknown object that moved him to attack, not the silver mines as everyone has assumed!"

Adrian sat silently, a blank stare doused his face. Malcolm knew his brother was engrossed in the story.

"The Duke of Magden Keep saw his foe coming," Malcolm recounted. "Whatever fortune this item represents, the duke felt it imperative to keep it from the hands of the Foul Folk. Calling upon a mage in his service, the duke bid him cast a spell of protection upon it. The item was stored in a coffin, the spell cast, and then the whole of it was taken to a secret chamber and sealed up!"

"And how did this ruse fare?" Adrian asked calmly.

"Oh, they found it!" Malcolm said with a wave of his hand. "Kress knew it was there- it was his whole intent! The intercepted message left no detail unmentioned. He knew what he was looking for and his trolls tore the place down, stone by stone, in their search for it. Far below the keep they came across a secret room, bricked over and hidden by a fresh coat of plaster. But the magic held them at bay. They had found the room, but none could touch the stone coffin, nor disturb it from afar. The enchantment prevented any and all from approaching. Neither Kress nor his trolls could break the barrier. Nor Janus and his men when they arrived. They were warriors, armed men expecting trolls and giants- not magic. They were as helpless against the glamour ward as the Foul Folk had been."

"And you say the prince regent returned to Stokeold... empty-handed?"

Malcolm nodded, grinning like a thief. Crossing his arms, he invited his brother to draw his own conclusions. Adrian saw everything at once, and with the utterance of one word, a single name, the entire evening was laid bare in his mind.

"Cortez."

"Aye, Cortez."

Adrian strove to quell his mounting impatience. "Naturally you thought of me."

"Naturally."

"No."

"Oh, yes-"

"No-!"

"Adrian! Think for a moment. You-!"

"No, Malcolm! I do not, I *will not* work in the ways of magic. I turned from that path years ago. I will not start down it again. It is not for me!"

Judiciously Malcolm hesitated, allowing his brother's temper to cool. Few things in the world incite Adrian Coleby to anger, and this was the chief offender topping that list. "A, I know you gave it up. Believe me when I say I respect your convictions, even if I do not understand the motivation. I respect the choice you made- for whatever reason you hold in your heart. I'm not asking you to play the part of Court Mage with laurels. I simply need someone who can break a ward of protection-"

"Rob the king's treasures, is that it? You expect me to drop my life and run north with you-!" Choking on his outrage, Adrian closed his eyes. He must compose himself. When they opened again the rage was contained, though its heat burned in his every look and gesture. "You do realize, dear brother, that Magden Keep- and everything in it- is property of the Crown? Including this unknown find."

"Not if we get to it first." Malcolm's eyes became almost sinister as he exposed his thoughts of a daring escapade. "We sneak in, you demagic the coffin, I remove its contents and place a substitute therein-"

"A switch?"

Malcolm nodded, not for a moment letting up in the telling of his plan. "-then you magic it again with a similar spell of protection. When the prince arrives with Cortez- they'll never know! Aha! No one knows what to expect in that coffin! We could put anything in its place and they would not know the difference! All who know of the item firsthand were slain in the siege of Magden Keep-"

"No, Malcolm. No-"

"A, it's a sure grab."

"No."

"Listen, Janus will need at least two more days to provision another host for the march north. Word has it he's bringing a garrison to Magden Keep to replace the men who fell to Kress. Once they are under way, we have another advantage: he cannot set too strenuous a pace. Cortez is not a hardened traveler. He has not set foot outside the palace in years. It will do the prince no good to have his wizard die from exertion. So, if we leave tomorrow from Stokeold, first thing, and ride north like the wind, we can be there and back before Janus even enters the Dragon's Spine! A sure grab!"

Adrian said nothing. He had been pushed beyond his tolerance.

Malcolm read the message in his brother's eyes. Exasperated, he threw up his arms. "What?" he boomed. "What is it? What are you afraid of, Adrian? This is the fortune of a lifetime waiting to be grabbed, and you would sit here and let it pass you by! If you are afraid of failure, don't be! I don't know who the duke had for a mage, but I'm

positive his skill is nothing compared to yours- even if you haven't uttered a spell in years. I have confidence in you- and you should too! Gods and devils! You were the blasted Court Wizard to the king before Cortez stepped in! I don't think you have to worry about failure!"

Adrian remained silent.

"Is it Cortez?" Malcolm sneered, trying to rationalize his brother's reluctance. "Are you afraid of besting your old rival?"

"...not my rival," Adrian muttered.

"Fine! Besting a peer? A fellow mage? Is that what you are afraid of? Or is it cheating the Crown that makes your bones quiver? I should think you would enjoy it- a sort of revenge! I cannot understand you! What is it you are afraid of?"

The same tranquillity that had greeted Malcolm upon his arrival resurfaced in Adrian's eyes. "Fear is not what keeps me here, my brother. It is a simple thing. I have no interest in fortunes to be made. I have a harvest to finish before the snows come. I have crops to gather. If I ignore these duties, I shall not survive to see the spring-"

"Devils take your harvest!" Malcolm scowled. "I'm offering you a fortune worth a thousand harvests!"

"I do not require a thousand harvests. One is enough."

Malcolm pulled at the chin whiskers of his beard, a sign that he was in a quandary. To no one he bellowed, "He will not come! He will not-! A fortune- he will not-! A fortune passed over for a plot of wheat and turnips-"

"Rye."

"Rye! Rye then! So be it! So be it-! Father was right about you- all along! Here I offer you the chance to aspire to success by the easiest of avenues! And you

would rather stay here in this hovel of obscurity! So be it! So be it-! I, for one, am a man- a man of action! If you do not have the spine for such a venture, I shall find someone who does! There are others steeped in the ways of magic, others who show ambition! Here I thought a favor I would extend to my own brother- flesh and blood of my own- no! No!" Tugging at his cloak, chest heaving, Malcolm stormed for the door.

"Malcolm..." Adrian's quiet, gentle voice brought his brother to a halt upon the threshold. He did not turn around, however. To his back Adrian declared, "Malcolm, you knew I would not go. You knew before you made the journey here. You knew."

No response.

"Why did you come, then? If you knew I would not go, why did you come?"

The broad span of his brother's shoulders rose and fell in a sigh. For half an instant Adrian thought he might receive a reply. And then the door jerked open and the night storm blew in. Lumbering like a beast, Malcolm leaned into the rain. The door banged shut behind him, but not before a gust of wind knocked his teacup from the bookshelf. The dingy porcelain bounced off the floor with a muted chime and Malcolm's untouched tea made a black pool.

Adrian sat for long moments watching as the tea slowly, slowly sank into the packed earth.