

Chapter 2

Malcolm left his brother's cottage in a state of great agitation. He wanted- and wanted only- to sit and sort his turbulent thoughts. But the road home was as bumpy as before and he spent long hours cursing the unpredictable pitch and roll of his carriage. Iron fists clutched at the edge of his seat. It was not enough to keep him from being jounced about the cab. The chaos of mind was not soon in being soothed, and his ire compounded at every bounce and jostle.

Then there came the whistle of his driver to the team and their pace quickened to a strong, steady trot. At last the forest was behind them! A clear and open road stretched beneath their wheels. Peace at last. Time to think. Releasing a pent-up sigh, Malcolm gathered the scattered cushions of his cab and sat back in comfort to contemplate his dilemma. His eyes grew wide, staring at manifestations perceptible only to the mind's eye. Occasionally he stroked his bearded jaw in a pensive, impatient fashion. More often he clutched at the whiskers of his chin, squeezing the wiry tuft tight so that knuckles pressed against lips.

"You and I, we are men of action, Father," he said into his fist. "We ride forth to take our fortunes, to conquer our due. While others... others hide like rabbits in their warren."

A scowl creased his forehead. After all these years Adrian was still a mystery- a mystery to the entire family. Such an offer- refused! Yes, yes, he knew his brother had no love for gold, for making his fortune as other men would in his place. But surely this was only a reflection of some laziness on Adrian's part, some lax mindset that kept his younger brother all these years from aspiring to greatness, to fortune.

"Gods and devils...!" he swore. "I thought this would be it! An easy deal, hardly an effort at all. The chance to prove himself, to reestablish his name in society. And still he-!" Malcolm scowled again. And still Adrian had refused. It wasn't a question of low ambition, there was *no* ambition. It was as if the boy had been born deficient in some way, blind, but not in the usual sense. He simply did not, could not, see the opportunities in life.

The blame for this foul mood, Malcolm knew, lay not entirely upon the shoulders of his ingrate brother. Refusal was Adrian's right, after all. Malcolm's plan required a mage for success. He himself was no wizard, no conjurer to break magical locks. He was a warrior, a man of the steely edge, no master of musty tomes or archaic lore. Alternate sources for wizardry were few. And those options Malcolm was loathe to explore, so much so that he thought to turn his coach back into the untamed forest and beseech his brother's aid again. A dozen times he considered, and a dozen times he abandoned the notion. Adrian's mind was set. The boy could be stubborn- a true Coleby in that one regard. There was better chance holding the sun or moon than convincing him to don sorcerous robes.

"We are men of action, Father!" he repeated, coming to a desperate conclusion. "If we cannot get over an obstacle, we go around, or under- or through! 'We are gods in mortal guise, not babes mewling like kittens!' " he quoted from his favorite epic opera.

"Petresky! Petresky!" He thumped the cab's ceiling with his fist. "Petresky!"

The coach slowed at once to a lurching halt. The coachman's dismount came through the walls in a series of muted bumps and shufflings. Over the rain Malcolm heard Petresky's miserable voice outside his window:

"My lord, my master?"

Malcolm snapped the leathery curtain aside. The servant's face hovered at the window, lit in stark relief by the coach lamps. He was a pitiful sight buffeted by wind and rain. "Have we reached the main highway?"

"Not as yet, my master."

"How long then?"

"Not long, my lord." He sneezed. "You shall be home abed before midnight."

"No, home is not for us. We have business yet! Take the main highway south-"

"South-!" Petresky could not help interject. His eyes darted nervously.

"Aye- south to the Gypsie Camps."

"The-?"

"Go!" He let the curtain drop.

Petresky shuffled his feet, but did not leave his place. His lips, dripping wet, felt suddenly dry. Timidly he called, "My lord, my master...?" He stammered on his words speaking into the faceless, rain-streamed curtain. "Far be it from me, lowly base creature that I am, to remind his lordship of the time...?"

The curtain snapped back. "What of it!"

Petresky cringed. "Only... only that it is late, my lord, my master. It is some distance to the Gypsie Camps. Perchance my lord would care return home, making a fresh effort on the morrow...?"

"I've no time to spare!"

The poor coachman's eyes rolled like those of a spooked horse. "...to enter the Gypsie Fields after the Witching Hour..."

Malcolm Coleby lost patience. "Blast your superstitious peasant hide, Petresky! Drive on!" He drew the curtain closed a final time. Raising his voice to a thunder, he

commanded, "Drive to the Gypsie Fields or I'll apply the drop lash to your cowardly spirit! Drive on!"

Miserable as a criminal sentenced to hang, Petresky climbed into his box atop the carriage. Cold, wet, distraught, he pointedly drained his flask to the last drop before taking up the reins.

"Drive on!" his master's voice raged from within the cab.

Icy fingers in the wind caught Petresky's hood and whipped it off his balding head. Drive on! he thought to himself in despair. Drive on! Petresky drive me here, drive me there! Petresky! Petresky! Drive me to my brother's house in the country! In the wood? The jungle more like. Accessible as a beaver's dam! And now, to the Gypsie Camps! "Might's well drive upon the Abyss. Better demons and imps than Gypsies after midnight-"

"Petresky-!"

"Hup hup!" Petresky cracked his whip. "Hup! Hup!"

* * *

It was well after the Witching Hour when the bonfires of the Gypsie Camp appeared in the distance, baleful eyes glimmering through the rain. Petresky slumped in his box. Here they were. Despite his efforts to drive his team quickly, hard and fast, here they were, entering the Gypsie Fields *after* midnight. It was hardly superstition to believe evil roamed freely at night. Everyone knew that to be fact. It was also well-known that the Gypsies trafficked with any sort- be they mortal or otherwise. Nervously he cracked the whip.

Wind and rain and late hours meant nothing to the Gypsie mind. They were up, their bonfires burning to mock the darkness. Under their open-air pavilions they carried

on with their singing and dancing and drinking, making merry as if it were a New Year's celebration. Their drunken music and merriment came to Petresky on the choppy wind. It was a harsh noise to his simple ear, discordant, almost painful. Like demons and imps they danced and cavorted, arms and legs flailing, their mass strobed by the flicker of orange firelight.

"Now you've done it, Petresky," he admonished himself, shivering from more than the rain. "Better to drive unto the Abyss, you'd said. Trying to be fresh you were! Well the gods hear all- they do. You've gotten your wish. Driving right into the firepits of the Abyss you are!" He shrunk lower in his seat.

Steering off the dirt track of the main highway, the iron-shod wheels of their carriage trundled easily over the rolling grassland of the Gypsie Fields. Entering the camp, the wheels rolled just as easily over the guy lines of a dozen tents sitting too close to coachman's impromptu thoroughfare. Tie lines and stakes were uprooted with impunity.

Oblivious to the damage in his wake, Petresky drove on.

Knowing his master's tastes, the coachman headed for the heart of the camp, picking out the largest and most crowded of the pavilions. In short order he reigned the impressive four-wheeler broadside so that all may witness the grandeur of his master's wealth. The glossy, lacquered woodwork of the cab shone like polished obsidian in the rain. Its brass lamps and other ornaments glimmered like gold in the firelight.

The Gypsies noted the coach from afar. Heads turned and fingers pointed. Their music and dancing stumbled to a halt. Voices raised in song and laughter now quieted before the prospects of this stately carriage. They drifted forward, the Gypsies, dressed in their patchwork vests, flaring skirts, thick-seamed trousers. They moved to the very

edges of their protective awnings, straining to catch a look while still keeping out of the rain.

Petresky set the brake and went through all the formal motions of debarking his master. The wooden step stool was fetched and situated, then the cab door opened with a flourish and a bow.

Malcolm emerged like a king. Imperious, aloof to even the inclement weather, he stepped down and marched for the pavilion on even, measured steps. Under the awning the Gypsies gave ground before his approach, regarding their visitor coolly, dark eyes framed by darker hair. The women were decorated with cheap jewelry, brass and copper and pewter, and every blouse was cut in a low décolletage to the point of indecency. The men resembled scarecrows in their ill-fitting, threadbare garments mottled with crudely-sewn patches. Those men that did not carry a smoldering pipe sported instead the musical instruments of their entertainment: squeeze boxes, flutes, tablas, tambourines, and other strangely-crafted and curious items. Each and every soul, from the youngest wit to the oldest gaffer, went barefoot as was their custom.

Malcolm doffed his hood and fixed the crowd a menacing stare. To back it, he parted the folds of his cloak and displayed rapier and dagger girded about his lean waist. The weapons were fanciful, a matched set decorated with topaz and amethysts. They were also capable blades that he knew well how to employ. Resting his hands lightly upon their hilts, he addressed them:

"I would speak with your master."

The wall of dark eyes registered no sign of comprehension. Only the sound of the rain answered him. It drummed upon the tent overhead. It ran off the awnings in a steady, chattering waterfall. Gypsies from other pavilions darted through the rain and

splashed through the puddles so as to add their numbers to the crowd. All were curious for a closer look at this newcomer. Malcolm turned his uneasiness into impatience.

"Your master- I would speak with him!" When he received still no reply, Lord Coleby muttered rudely, "What's this, then? Have you no master, or do you not speak the king's own tongue?"

"Ah, we do..." said one of the older men, slowly. He bore a contemplative air, clacking the stem of a clay pipe thoughtfully upon the sole tooth that remained in his head. "Ah, we do speak the tongue of the king. We do."

"Are you the master here, then?"

The old man shrugged, puffing his pipe.

Devils and demons, Malcolm thought irritably. An infuriating lot, these people. Silent, suspicious- as tight-lipped as convicts on trial! He glanced here then there, searching the sea of penetrating eyes for someone who could serve his need. None, however, looked a better prospect than the old grandfather Gypsie with the pipe and the tooth.

"Very well, then, old man. I would have words with you- alone."

The old Gypsie chuckled quietly to himself in good humor. Nevertheless, he came forward to answer the call. Waving away the crowd with the stem of his pipe, he chuckled again, "Back to your songs and drink, my children. Go now- celebrate the storm! Dance to the storm spirits..."

Slowly the crowd broke, returning to the center of the pavilion, or back to the tents from whence they had run. Malcolm waited for the backward glances to subside. The dancing and merrymaking resumed, and soon the curiosity over stranger and coach was forgotten. Against the growing tumult, Malcolm tossed over his shoulder, "Petresky!

When I said alone, I meant it!"

"Me, my lord?" the servant asked in disbelief. "Surely you do not mean to send old Petresky away-?"

"I do. Stop hovering like a vulture. Go warm yourself by the fire!"

Petresky glanced warily at the cavorting figures. Something in the Gypsie manner and their music, in the way they danced as if unseen strings plucked at their limbs, made his blood turn to water. And their eyes, so dark, penetrating, mistrustful...

"Petresky! I have no time for your childish qualms! Go warm yourself."

"My lord, my master..." the coachman stammered. "Perchance I shall... I shall remain at the coach..."

Malcolm groaned impatiently. "Suit yourself- just go!"

At the coachman's retreat, Malcolm caught a glint of amusement in the eye of the Gypsie grandfather. In it he saw opportunity. Here then was a chance to gain the old man's favor. Malcolm smiled. "Worse than a dog, that one can be." He affected a tired sigh. "But until I can find a dog that can drive a coach and take my cloak I suppose I'm stuck, eh?"

"Ah!" The old man's twisted grin neither grew nor waned.

"Very well then," Malcolm muttered. "Old man, I am looking for someone..."

"Ah!" He nodded knowingly. His face wrinkled in a conspiratorial manner. He puffed at his pipe. "Ah, I have daughters. Many daughters. Granddaughters, too... young?"

"No no, nothing of that sort."

"Ah?"

Malcolm hesitated. "I have heard... It is known... Well... it is no secret that

there are those among your people who have... powers?"

"Ahh-h-h..." The bowl of the old man's pipe glowed as he sucked thoughtfully. His eyes narrowed and Malcolm had the impression the Gypsie was sizing him, gauging the test of his mettle. "The women have the power," he admitted, a wisp of acrid smoke escaping with his words. "With their dances and their laughter... and their touch. They can charm any man-"

"No no. You misunderstand. I need someone who can break a spell- an enchantment-"

"Hexed are thee? Cursed? A cure you seek. A totem charm!"

Malcolm rubbed his forehead. Was the old man making sport of him? Or was he simply daft as a bat?

"No. No... you do not understand... I am not making my case clear-"

"Miya is your hope," the Gypsie grandfather whispered carefully. Tugging at Malcolm's cloak, the old man directed his attention with the stem of his pipe. "Miya's tent- there. It is she who can fix, fix what ails thee. A cure for all, she has. But..." He puffed his pipe, eyes opening. "...but always a price to be paid. Always...!"

The old Gypsie took a long pull on his pipe. The smoke came from his lips in a wide ring. Malcolm coughed on the tainted air wreathing his face. He stepped back from the clinging tendrils.

*...Leave whilst you can, Rich Man... ...You are but a boy.. ...Foolish...
...Nothing is worth Miya's price...*

"What was that?" Malcolm coughed, blinking his eyes. "Say again? I hardly heard..."

But the old man was gone.

"Gods, what *is* the hour?" he wondered aloud, placing a palm to his head. It hurt, throbbing with a dull ache. Was it the lateness of the day? The clamor of Gypsie merrymaking? The noxious fumes of the old man's pipe? What was it that should bring on such sudden... fatigue. Tired... So... tired. Vision blurred and wits befuddled, his feet carried him dutifully back to the coach.

Petresky jumped to attention, opening the door with a bow. "Gladly, my lord!" the servant replied with alacrity. "Straight away, my master!"

Malcolm did not recall uttering any commands.

A foot was upon the step stool and hand reaching for the door rail of the carriage when a wave of rainwater blew over the edge of the roof. The waterfall splashed Lord Coleby full in the face and the shock of cold water knocked him back a step. Sputtering and spitting, he looked left and right as if waking from a trance.

"My lord?" Petresky queried.

Malcolm shook himself. What was this? Leaving? No, he could not. Not now! He needed a mystic. He could not leave without one.

"A moment more, Petresky," he muttered, his words lost in the rain.

Pulling close the folds of his cloak, Malcolm left the coach and crossed the soggy grassland. He went directly to the tent of the Gypsie mystic. It was a little construction that sat apart from the others. Piecework walls of animal hide and homespun glowed from the light of a lamp within. A vague shadow moved inside. Malcolm gripped the hilt of his dagger. Gypsies were Gypsies, after all. With his free hand he threw open the flap of canvas that served as a door.

She sat atop a pile of pillows facing him- awaiting his arrival. The lurid crimson glow of a single lamp left most of the tiny tent shrouded in shadow. Of her he could

make out no details, except a shock of unkempt hair, black as ink, and a pair of full lips puckered in the center of a ghostly-pale face. Her eyes were hidden behind a veil of matted tresses. A forearm bedecked in copper bangles chimed at her gesture. Enter...

"I'm looking..." He paused on the threshold, caught like a thief with one hand upon his sheathed dagger, the other holding open the flap. Rain and wind swept inside. "...I am looking for someone..."

"No," she corrected, her voice sibilant, husky, and- like everything about the Gypsie culture- mysterious. She seemed not to mind, nor even to notice the storm as it blew into her abode. "No, Miya sees you seek *something*..." Again she motioned for him to enter, to take his place across from her on the floor.

Letting the tent flap fall, Malcolm knelt warily upon the indicated pillows. "I have a-"

"Hst!" She held up a hand for silence. Her painted nails flashed like bits of flame, jagged, red. The same hand dipped into the front of her blouse and produced a small orb. It rested easily in her palm, dark and glassy. Malcolm repressed a sneer. Such cliché notions, indeed! Crystal balls, subdued lighting, petty parlor theatrics! A biting remark was forming upon his lips when the Gypsie did something unexpected. Thrusting out the object, she hissed, "You must hold! Miya will see all- tell all! Hold! Hold tight!" She kept her arm raised, waiting for him to accept the device.

One hand ever upon his weapon, Malcolm humored the woman. How much could she could guess with her crude fortunetelling? Amusement touched the corners of his mouth as he extended an arm. The Gypsie returned the smile and placed the orb in his palm. It was warm and had a strange feel. It did not have the weight of crystal.

"Tight!" she insisted, pressing his fingers closed with her own.

The orb yielded like a wet rag. Alarmed, Malcolm jerked his hand away, breaking the Gypsy's grip with such force that her bangles jangled loudly. He opened his fist to stare. It stared back at him- an eye!- a black orb with a golden iris.

"Ugh!" He recoiled with an unmanly cringe, casting away the disembodied eye.

The Gypsy's deft hand shot out and plucked the orb from empty space as if it were transfixed, suspended, immobile. Crooning to it, she brought the ghastly item to her lips and bestowed a tiny kiss.

"Are you mad?" Malcolm blurted, wiping his hand upon the hem of his cloak.

The woman heard not his words. She gazed deeply into the dead, dilated pupil. "Thou wouldst see the road ahead? Or the road behind? Miya cannot see the stones of tomorrow unless she knows the sands of yesterday..." She muttered a few moments longer, rocking where she sat, not once pulling her gaze from the eye. "Ahh-h-h... the past is troubled... There is strife.... The road ahead-" She sat up sharply.

"- death!"

Malcolm scoffed. Parlor tricks and tired prophecies after all. Macabre props to divert the attention. "Everyone dies some day."

Gypsy eyes hit him, thunder bolts from behind that screen of unkempt coiffure. "You have no gold..."

He snorted again. "No, none for the likes of you!" He rose to take his leave, piqued by the avarice of a charlatan. The old man was wrong. He would find no help here. Only a beggar eking out her pathetic trade. "I make my own fortunes, woman. I do not need them told to me. Good night!"

She shrilled, "Miya says! Miya says you *have* no gold. You-" she pointed a blood-red fingernail, "-you have no gold. You are poor man in rich man's clothes-s-s!"

He laughed off the comment. "You'll win no regular clientele with such insults."

She gave him a meaningful look before returning her gaze to the totem. "A long journey... cold... to seek that which cannot be held! An unbreakable wall!"

Despite his contempt, Malcolm found himself snared by these words. A certain amount of truth could be read into them. Coincidence? A mad woman's ramblings? Or were there powers at work? Guardedly he ventured, "Yes, a wall- of sorts. I have an obstacle, a barrier to overcome. One magical in nature."

She gazed into her fetish as if it called to her. "Miya will see... is there magic...? Where is the barrier...? Where is the poor rich man's barrier...-AHHH!"

Malcolm sprang at her abrupt scream. He stood poised for confrontation, his bared dagger drawn and ready for a vicious uppercut. The Gypsy mystic did not notice. Kissing the eye, she tucked it back down the front of her blouse and struggled to her feet. "Ah!" she said once, and then several times more in quick succession, "Ahhh!"

Some palsy, some deformity of the spine prevented her from standing upright. In a perpetual stoop, using sidelong glances to see her way, the mystic shuffled about her tiny tent like a tiny crab. The brief swell of sympathy that arose in Malcolm's breast was crushed at once when he realized, to his astonishment, she was packing. She meant to accompany him!

Gods no! he thought anxiously, blurting, "I need a sorcerer, a mage- not a- a..." He held his tongue, the gentleman in him curbing further outburst. Nevertheless, the last thing he needed on this venture was a demented Gypsy woman who kept vile things in her blouse! "No- I must go now-" He headed for the door.

"Miya is the poor man's only hope," she insisted. "No one else is there for thee!"

"I feel I should at least try," he said quickly. "You are ill," he added, meaning

her deformity. "You cannot travel. It would not be right..."

The mystic was not to be denied. "None else more powerful than Miya! None else willing- willing to stand against the king's man."

Malcolm inhaled sharply. His bared blade wavered in the lamp light. "What of the king?"

"Miya sees...!" she hissed, patting the front of her blouse. "Miya sees great fortune to be had... opportunity. Opportunity! The king's *man*, I say. Not the king... his man..."

Malcolm had no ready reply. His mind worked in a fever. The king's man- that could be the prince... or Cortez. The very thought of the High Court Wizard made him anxious. Could the king's wizard know his plan? Know his plot to reach the item first and make the switch? Secrecy was his greatest ally in this daring scheme. If Cortez was on to him, now, already before he even began... Malcolm swallowed. Who knew what magics the wizard would employ to thwart ambitious rivals. Without Adrian's sorcerous protection...

Malcolm watched the bent and crooked woman pack her meager belongings into a sack sewn from carpet scraps. He did *not* want the woman along. She had a feel to her that made his skin crawl. Nevertheless, she did have powers- of some sort. It was no small feat to associated him with the king- of all the straws she could have grasped, the king by chance? Unlikely. She knew he was seeking *something*, not *someone*. Something he could not touch. If this was merely clever guessing, the woman was damn good at it! But fortunetelling and breaking spells, he reminded himself, were very different things. His fundamental problem still confronted him: he needed someone who could break a magical lock. And soon. Time was wasting.

"Can you do the deed?" he asked airing his thoughts. "Fortunetelling is one matter. Hardly any effort there. But breaking spells- another entirely."

Her laugh was a watery hiss. "Are they? Your dagger, your sword, poor man. They are two very different things. Or are they? Both are for killing. One requires more effort to lift..." She slung her bag over her humped shoulder. Gracing him with her crooked smile, she shuffled out of the tent and into the rain.

As he followed, Malcolm sheathed his dagger and contemplated calling off his venture. Perhaps there was too much against him this time. With Adrian at his side he would not question success. It would be assured. But without his brother...

The Gypsie fortuneteller hobbled her way to the waiting coach.

Malcolm shook his head. He had doubts. Serious doubts. It was painful to watch the woman walk. So bent and deformed... painful! Arriving at the coach, it took every ounce of her spindly limbs to open the door and climb into the cab.

Malcolm straightened. Where was Petresky? Roustabout! He should be present, helping the woman. But he was nowhere in sight. A disgrace to the coat of arms on the carriage door! On long strides Malcolm circled his coach in search of the errant servant. He was nowhere to be found.

"Petresky! Petresky! Blast his hide. Where has the loafer gone to now? Petresky! Pet-!"

"My lord!"

The coachman came trotting from under the central pavilion. He drew up short before his master, his face flushed with drink and physical exertion. He wobbled. The soggy ground seemed to have much more give than usual.

Malcolm pulled his grin into a frown. "So... you decided to warm yourself by the

fires after all?"

"Yes sir!" In his drunkenness, Petresky forgot his station and addressed his master in the familiar. His lips felt like wet noodles. So did his legs. He leaned too far to the left and staggered to keep an even keel. He laughed. "Charming people- really!"

"That so? Friendly?"

"Friendly, sir!" He swayed again, this time to the right.

"And free with their drink, I see."

"Swut I said, sir- friendly!"

"Can you-"

"And the women, sir!"

"-drive us home now?"

"Friendly! Friendly as-"

"Petresky-"

"-friendly can be-"

"PETRESKY!"

The thunder of his master's voice brought the coachman to his senses. "My lord...?"

"Drive us home."

"Straight 'way, my master!"

Somehow the drunken coachman managed his duties without serious mishap. With his master safely inside, he climbed to the driver's box and drove his team into the night. Their departure prompted a rousing cheer of farewells and laughter from a certain cluster of young women. They waved their well-wishes at the edge of the central pavilion. Petresky "Halloed!" in passing, cracking his whip and spurring his team into a

showy canter.

"Wonderful people!" he commented to the night air. The wind and rain he no longer felt. His high spirits remained the duration of the ride home. "Charming! Splendid people! Simply charming, inviting a fellow in from the cold! Splendid! Simply!"