

The Stanger's Hands

TAD WILLIAMS

Tad Williams became an international bestseller with his very first novel, Tailchaser's Song, and the high quality of his output and the devotion of his readers has kept him on the top of the charts ever since. His other novels include the Memory, Sorrow and Thorn series (The Dragonbone Chair, Stone of Farewell, To Green Angel Tower), the Otherland series (City of Golden Shadow, River of Blue Fire, Mountain of Black Glass, Sea of Silver Light), Caliban's Hour, Child of an Ancient City (with Nina Kiriki Hoffman), and The War of The Flowers. He is currently finishing the Shadowmarch series (Shadowmarch, Shadowplay, and Shadowrise). In addition to his novels, Williams writes comic books for DC Comics (Aquaman, The Next, Factory) as well as film and television scripts. He lives with his family in the San Francisco Bay Area.

In the ingenious story that follows, he suggests that the problem with using magic to get your Heart's Desire is that you might actually get it. . .

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EOPLÉ in the village had been whispering for days about the two vagabonds in Squire's Wood, but the boy Tobias was the first to speak to them.

Tobias was a somewhat wayward lad, and the fact that he should have been grazing his father's sheep on the hill above the forest at that hour more or less assured the sheep in question would be wandering along the shady edges of the wood instead, with Tobias wandering right behind them.

It was not until he saw a drift of smoke twining like a gray scarf through the trees that the boy remembered that strangers had been seen in the wood. He felt a moment of fear: why would anyone live out of doors in the cold nights and flurries of autumn rain if they were God-fearing folk? Only robbers and dangerous madmen dwelt under the un-sheltered sky. Everyone knew that.

If he had been a fraction less headstrong, Tobias would have turned around then and hurried back to the hillside, perhaps even remembering to take his father's sheep with him, but there was a part of him, a strong part, that hated *not knowing* things worse than anything. It was the part that had once caused him to pull the leg off a frog, just to find out what it would do. (It did very little, and died soon after with what Tobias felt guiltily certain was an accusatory look in its bulging eyes.) It was also the reason he had dented his father's best scythe when he had used it to try to cut down a tree, and why he had dumped the contents of his mother's precious sewing basket all over the ground—a search for knowledge that ended with Tobias spending all afternoon in the fading light on his hands and knees, locating every last needle and pin he had spilled. Once this rebel voice had even led him several miles out of the village, on a quest for the town of Eader's Church, which he had heard was so big that the streets actually had names. His father and two other men had caught up to him an hour after sunset as he sat exhausted and hungry by the side of the road. He had got a whipping for it, of course, but for young Tobias whippings were part of the cost of doing business.

So now, instead of turning and leaving the woods and its perilous inhabitants behind (for the sake of his father's livestock if nothing else), he followed the trail of smoke back to its source, a small cookfire in a clear-ing. A small man with a ratlike face was tending the flames, his wrinkles made so deep and dark by grime he looked like an apple-doll. His large companion, who sat on a stone beside the fire and did not look up even when Tobias stepped on a twig and made the little man jump, was so odd to look at that the boy could not help shivering. The large man's head was shaved, albeit poorly in some places, and the skull beneath the skin bulged in places that it should not. His bony jaw hung slack, the tongue visible in the space between top and bottom teeth, and although he did not seem blind, the eyes in the deep sockets were dull as dirty stones.

If the big man was paying no attention, the little man was. He stared at Tobias like a dog trying to decide whether to bark or run.

"Your wood's too wet," the boy told him.

"What?"

"You'll get mostly smoke and little fire from that. Do you want smoke?"

The small man frowned, but in dismay, not anger. "I want to cook this fish." He had the sound of a southerner, the words stretched and

mis-shapen. Tobias wondered why they couldn't learn to speak properly. He squinted at the man's supper with the eye of an experienced angler. "It's small."

"It's better than starving," the man pointed out.

"Well, then, I'll show you." Tobias quickly found enough dry wood to rebuild the fire and within a short time the little man was cooking the fish over it on a long stick. His large companion still had not moved or spoken, had not even seemed to notice the newcomer in their camp.

"Thanks for your kindness," the small man said. "I am Feliks. "We are new to this."

"My name's Tobias," the boy said, basking in the glow of his own helpfulness. "What does that mean, 'new'?"

"We have been living somewhere there was food." Feliks shrugged. "The food ran out."

Tobias stared at the other man, who still gazed at nothing, only the slow movement of his chest behind his dark, travel-worn robe showing that he was something other than a statue. "What's *his* name?"

Feliks hesitated for a moment. "Eli." He said it in the southern way, the last syllable rising like a shorebird's cry—*Eh-lee*. "He was my master, but he ... something happened to him. He lost his wits."

Tobias now examined the big man with unhidden interest—if he had no wits, it couldn't be rude to stare, could it? "What happened?"

"The roof fell on him." Feliks took the fish from the stick, burning his fingers so that he almost dropped it—Tobias was amused by how many things the man didn't know how to do—and then cut it into two pieces with a knife, handing the larger piece to the silent giant. Eli moved for the first time; he took the fish without looking at it, put it in his mouth, and chewed with bovine patience. Feliks began to eat the other piece, then turned shamefacedly to Tobias. "I should offer some to you, for your kind-ness."

Tobias was old enough to understand this would not be a small sacri-fice for Feliks. "No, I'll eat at home. And I'd better go now or Father will have the strap out." He looked through the trees to the angle of the sun, which was definitely lower than he would have liked. "He'll have the strap out, anyway." The boy stood. "I'll come back tomorrow, though. I can help

you catch better fish than that one.” He hesitated. “Have you been to other places? Other villages, even towns?”

Feliks nodded slowly. “Many places. Many cities all over the Middle Lands.”

“Cities!” Tobias swayed a little, faint-headed at the thought. “Real cities? I’ll be back!”

The tall man named Eli suddenly put out his hand, a gesture so startling after his hour of near immobility that Tobias recoiled as though from a snake.

“He ... I think he wants to thank you,” Feliks said. “Go ahead, boy—take his hand. He was a great man once.”

Tobias slowly extended his own small hand, wondering if this might be the beginning of some cruel or even murderous trick—if he had been too trusting after all. Eli’s hand was big, knob-knuckled, and smudged with dirt, and it closed on the boy’s slim fingers like a church door swinging closed.

Then Tobias vanished.

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WHEN two days had passed with no sign of the boy, suspicion of course fell on the two strangers living in Squire’s Wood. When the man named Fe-likes admitted that they had seen the child and spoken to him, the shireward and several local fellows dragged them out of the forest and chained them in wooden stocks beside the well in the center of the village, where every-one could see them and marvel at their infamy. Feliks tearfully continued to insist that they had done nothing to harm the boy, that they did not know where he had gone—both things true, as it turned out—but even if the two men had not been strangers and thus naturally suspect, the villagers could see that the big one was plainly touched, perhaps even demon-possessed, and almost no one felt anything for them but horror and disgust.

The lone exception was Father Bannity, the village priest, who felt that it was a troubling thing to imprison people simply because they were strangers, although he dared not say so aloud. He himself had been a stranger to the village when he had first arrived twenty years earlier (in fact, older villagers still referred to him as “the new priest”), and so he had a

certain empathy for those who might find themselves judged harshly simply because their grandfathers and great-grandfathers were not buried in the local churchyard. Also, since in his middle life he had experienced a crisis of faith, leading him to doubt many of the most famous and popular tenets of his own religion, he was doubly unwilling to assume the guilt of someone else simply because they were not part of the familiar herd. So Father Bannity took it on himself to make sure the two prisoners had enough food and water to survive. It would be a long wait for the King's Prosecutor General to arrive—his circuit covered at least a dozen villages and lasted a full cycle of the moon—and even if the two were guilty of killing the poor child and hiding his body, Father Bannity did not want them to die before this could be discovered for certain.

As the small man, Feliks, grew to trust him, he at last told Bannity what he swore was the true story of what had happened that day, that the boy had touched big Eli's hand and then disappeared like a soap bubble popping. Father Bannity was not quite certain what to think, whether this was a true mystery or only the precursor to a confession, a man easing gradually into a guilty admission as into a scalding bath, but he stuck by his resolution to treat them as innocent until they told him otherwise, or events proved the worst to have happened.

One day, as he was holding a ladle of water to Eli's dry lips, the big man suddenly looked at him almost as if seeing him for the first time, a flash of life in the dull, bestial eyes that Bannity had not seen before. Startled, the priest dropped the ladle. The big man lifted his hand as far as he could with his wrist restrained by the stocks and spread his long fingers like some strange flower blooming.

"Don't," whispered Feliks. "That's what the boy did."

Father Bannity hesitated for only a moment. Something in the big man's strange gaze, something solemn and distant but not unkind, convinced him. He reached out and allowed Eli's hand to fold around his.

For a startling moment Bannity thought he had become a fish, jerked thrashing out of the river and up into the daylight, blinded by the sun and its prismatic colors, dazzled by the burning air. Then, a half instant later, he realized it was as though he had been out of the water for years, and now had suddenly been plunged back *into* it: everything that had withered in him suddenly sprang back to life, all the small losses of the passing days and months—color, feeling, ecstasy. The feeling was so strong, so overwhelming, that he could not even answer Feliks's worried questions as he staggered away.

Bannity *knew* again. He had forgotten what it felt like, but now he remembered, and the thunderous force of belief returning betrayed how much he had lost. God had sent him a miracle in the person of the silent gi-ant, and with that single touch, a world that had slowly turned gray around him over the years had been kindled back into flaming life.

God was in everything again, just as He had been when Bannity was a child, when he had been able to imagine nothing better than to serve Him.

God was alive inside him. He had experienced a miracle.

It was only when the first surge of ecstatic happiness had become a lit-tle more ordinary, if no less pleasurable, that Father Bannity realized noth-ing tangible had actually changed. It wasn't so much that God had shown him a miracle, a sign, it was more as if touching the giant's hand had reawakened him to the love of God he had once had, but which had slipped away from him.

It was Eli, he realized, although undoubtedly acting as God's messen-ger, who had given him back his love of the Lord, his belief in a living Cre-ation, and most of all, his certainty that what *was was meant to be*.

The silent, damaged man had given Bannity his heart's desire, even though the priest himself had not known what it was.

Grateful, renewed, the priest resolved to speak on behalf of the two prisoners when the Prosecutor General returned to the village, to tell the truth even if it meant admitting that he had, for a time, lost his own faith. Father Bannity would undoubtedly have been their only defender, except that on the day before the traveling lawspeaker rode into town, the boy named Tobias came back.

He had been, the boy told the villagers (and very gleefully too) in the town of Eader's Church, and it was just as big and wonderful as he had imagined. "They have lots of dogs!" he said, his eyes still bright with the specta-cle he had seen. "And houses that go up and up! And people!" He seemed to feel that the whipping his father had just given him—on general principles, since the actual mechanics of the boy's disappearance were still a mystery— was a small price to pay for all he'd seen.

Tobias knew nothing about how he had got from the village to the far-off town—it had happened in an instant, he said, from clasping Eli's

hand to finding himself in the middle of the Eader's Church marketplace—but unfortunately there had been no equally magical way of returning. It had taken him all the days since he'd been gone to walk home.

When the Prosecutor General arrived the next day, there was no longer a case for murder to be tried, although several of the villagers were talking darkly of witchcraft. The Prosecutor General, a small, round, self-important fellow with a beard on his chin as small and sharp as an arrowhead, insisted on being taken to see the two former prisoners, who had been released to their campsite in Squire's Wood, if not to their previous state of anonymity.

Holding out his rod of office, the lawspeaker approached Eli and said, "In the name of the State and its gracious Sovereign, His Majesty the King, you must tell me how you sent the boy to Eader's Church."

The big man only looked at him, unbothered. Then he extended his hand. The Prosecutor General, after a moment's hesitation, extended his own small plump hand and allowed it to be grasped.

When Father Bannity and the other men watching had finished blinking their eyes, they saw that instead of his prosecutor's tunic, the Prosecutor General was now unquestionably wearing a judge's robes, cowl, and wreath, and that a judge's huge, round, golden emblem of office now hung on a chain around his neck. (Some also suggested that he had a stronger chin as well, and more penetrating eyes than he had heretofore possessed.) The ex-Prosecutor General, now a full-fledged Adjudicator, blinked, ran his fingers over the leafy wreath on his head, then fell down on his knees and uttered a happy prayer.

"Twelve years I've waited!" he said, over and over. "Thank you, Lord! Passed over and passed over—but no more!"

He then rose, and, with fitting jurisprudential gravity, proclaimed, "These men have not practiced any unlicensed witchcraft. I rule that they are true messengers of God and should be treated with respect."

Finding that his pockets were now richer by several gold coins—the difference between his old salary and new—the new-minted Adjudicator promptly sold his cart and donkey to Pender the village blacksmith and left town in a covered carriage, with a newly hired driver and two new horses. Later rumors said that he arrived home to find he had been awarded the King's Fourteenth Judicial Circuit.

In the wake of the Prosecutor General's astonishing transformation, Squire's Wood began to fill with people from the village and even some of the surrounding villages—for news travels fast in these rural areas—turning the two men's camp into a site of pilgrimage. The size of the gathering grew so quickly that Father Bannity and some of the wood's nearer and soberer neighbors worried that the entire forest soon would be trampled flat, but the squireward could not turn the newcomers away any more than he could have held back the tide at Lands End.

Although none of this swarm of postulants was turned away, not all received their heart's desire, either—Eli's hand opened only to one in perhaps three or four, and it was impossible to force the issue. One man, a jar maker named Keely, tried to pry the big man's fingers apart and shove his own hand in, and although he succeeded, nothing magical happened to him except that he developed a painful boil in the middle of his forehead the following day.

Some of the pilgrims' wishes turned out to be surprisingly small and domestic: a man whose sick cow suddenly recovered, a woman whose youngest son abruptly discovered he could hear as well as he had before the fever. Others were more predictable, like the man who after clasping Eli's hand discovered a pot of old coins buried under an ancient wall he was re-building.

To the astonishment of many, two blighted young folk who lived on neighboring farms, a young man with a shattered leg and a girl with a huge strawberry blotch on her face, both went to Eli, and both were gifted with a handclasp, but came out again looking just the same as they had before. But within the next few days the young man's drunkard father died of a fit, leaving him the farm, and the girl's cruel, miserly uncle who treated her like a servant fell under the wheels of a cart and died also, leaving her free to marry if anyone would have her. The two young people did indeed marry each other, and seemed quite happy, although they both still bore the disfigurements that had made them so pitiable to the rest of the village.

The only apparent failure of Eli's magical touch was Pender, the blacksmith, who went to the campsite a massive, strapping man with a beard that reached halfway down his chest, and went away again with the shape and voice and apparently all the working parts of a slender young woman. He left town the same night, trading the Prosecutor General's old cart for a pair of pretty dresses before setting off on the donkey toward the nearest city to start his life over (at least so he told his neighbors), so no one was ever able to find out exactly how such a strange thing had happened when others had been served so well.

Soon the lame youth and other grateful folk came and built a great tent in Squire's Wood for Eli and Feliks to shelter in, and began bringing them daily offerings of food and drink. People were coming to see the two strangers from all around, and even the villagers who had not obtained a supernatural gift from the silent giant came to realize how valuable his presence was: the village was full of pilgrims, including some quite well-to-do folk who were willing to pay exorbitant prices to be fed and housed near the miracle worker.

Father Bannity, still basking in the joyful light of his newly recovered faith, did not doubt that Eli and Feliks were gifts from God, but he had not lost all caution or good sense, either, and he was worried by what was hap-pening to his quiet village. He sent a messenger describing recent events to Dondolan, the nearest accredited wizard, who had an eyrie near the top of Reaching Peak. The wizard had not passed through the village for years, but he and the priest had met several times. Bannity liked the mage and trusted his good sense, certainly beyond that of the village elders, who were growing as greedy of pilgrimage gold as children tumbled into a treacle vat, happily eating themselves to death.

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DONDOLAN the Clear-Eyed, as he had been named back in his Academy days, took one look at the priest's letter, then leaped out of his chair and began packing (a task that takes a wizard a much shorter time than the average traveler). The messenger asked if there would be any reply, and Dondolan told him, "I will be there before you." Then, suiting deed to word, he promptly vanished.

He appeared again in the village at the base of the mountain and took his horse from the livery stable there—even an accomplished wizard will not travel by magic for twenty leagues, not knowing what he will find at the other end, for it is a fierce drain on the resources—and set out. Other than an ill-considered attempt by some local bandits to waylay him just outside Drunken Princes' Pass, an interaction that increased the frog population of the highlands but did not notably slow Dondolan's progress, it was a swift journey, and he reached the nameless village within two days. Spurning more ordinary couriers, he had sent a raven ahead, and as a result Father Bannity waited at the crossroads outside of town to meet him.

When they had greeted each other—fondly, for the respect was mutual, despite their differences on the theological practicalities—Bannity led Dondolan through the fields around the outskirts of the village, so as not

to cause more ruckus and rumor than was necessary; already the village practically breathed the stuff, and the pilgrims arriving daily from all over only made things more frantic.

“Do you wish to speak to the two of them?” Bannity asked. “It will be difficult, but I might persuade the village elders to let us close off the camp, although it will not be easy to remove all the addled folk who are living there now—they have practically made a new town in the middle of the forest.”

“We should decide nothing until I see these miracle men,” Dondolan said. “Although I must say that the description of them in your letter gave me an unpleasant feeling in the pit of my stomach.”

“Why?” asked Bannity with some alarm. “Do you think they mean harm? I worried mainly that so many pilgrims would jeopardize the safety of our little town, drawing thieves and confidence tricksters and such. But surely God has sent those two to us—they have done so much good!”

“Perhaps. That is why I will restrain my conjectures until I have seen them.”

They made their way through the woods, between groups of revelers singing and praying, gathered around so many campfires it seemed more like the eve of a great battle than twilight in the woods outside a quiet vil-lage too unassuming even to have its own name. As they grew close to the great pale tent and the crowd of people waiting there—some patiently, oth-ers loudly demanding that they be allowed to be next to see the wonder-workers because their need was so great—Bannity found it increasingly difficult to make headway through the throng. It was a mark of how many of the people were strangers to the area that the village’s well-respected priest almost got into two fights, and only Dondolan’s discreet use of a quelling-charm got them past those at the front of the line without real violence.

They slipped through the tent’s flap-door. Dondolan stared across the big tent at the miraculous pair sitting like minor potentates on high-backed chairs the villagers had built them, the small man Feliks and the big man with the misshapen skull. Feliks was scratching himself and laughing at something. Eli was staring down at one of the kneeling postulants before him, his expression as emptily self-absorbed as a bullfrog waiting for a fly of sufficient size to happen past. Dondolan swallowed, then stepped back out of the tent again, and Bannity followed him. Even by torchlight, the priest could see the wizard had gone quite pale.

“It is indeed as I feared, Bannity. That is no poor traveler, innocently touched by God—or at least that is not how he began. The large man is the dark wizard Elizar the Devourer, scourge of the southern lands, and great-est enemy of the archmage Kettil of Thundering Crag.”

“Elizar?” Bannity suddenly found swallowing difficult. Even a village priest knew the Devourer, who had burned whole towns because he liked the gloomy skies their smoking ruins provided, who had performed vile rites to turn men into beasts and beasts into men, and whose campaign of violent conquest had only been stopped by Kettil himself, the greatest wizard of the age, who had come down from his great ice caverns atop Thundering Crag and helped the young King defeat Elizar’s vast army of slaving beast-men at the field of Herredsburn. Kettil himself had dueled Elizar before the gathered forces of both armies—the skies above Herredsburn, everyone remembered, had lit up as if with half a dozen simultaneous thunderstorms, and although neither had managed definitively to best the other, it had been Elizar who had fled the field, his plans in ruins, and retreated into a dark obscurity that had covered him for years—an absence that had lasted until this very moment. “*That* Elizar?” murmured Father Bannity. “Here?”

“I would stake my life on it,” said Dondolan, “and may be doing so. Even if his mindlessness is real, just seeing someone like me that he has known might shock him back to his prior self.”

“But we cannot simply . . . leave it. We cannot leave things this way.”

“No, but I dare not go near him. His miracles, you tell me, are real, so he still wields mighty powers. Even if he stays witless, I cannot afford the chance he might decide to give *me* my heart’s desire.” Dondolan shook his head, his white beard wagging. “The heart of a wizard, even a relatively decent one like myself, is full of dark crevices. It is the world we inhabit, the wisdoms we study, the powers we have learned to harness, if not always to understand.” He smiled, but there was not much pleasure in it. “I truthfully do not know my heart’s desire, and have no urge to discover it this way.”

“I’m . . . I’m not certain what you mean.”

“What if my heart’s desire is to be the greatest wizard of my age? I felt that way once, when I was young and first entering the Academy. What if that desire has not gone, only hidden?” He shook his head again. “I dare not risk it.”

“But what if an ordinary mortal—someone not a wizard—has the same

thing as *his* heart's desire? Or something worse, asking for the end of the world or something."

Dondolan gave the priest a shrewd, sober look. "So far, that has not happened. In fact, the power Elizar wields seems not to have harmed much of anybody, except, by your account, a pair of nasty old folk who deliberately stood in the way of their children's happiness. And even there, we cannot prove that coincidence did not carry them away. Perhaps there is something to Elizar's magic that is self-limiting—something that prevents him from grant-ing any but mostly benign wishes. I do not know." He looked up. "I *do* know that we must discover more before we can make up our minds. We cannot, as you said, simply leave things be, not with Elizar the Devourer here, sur-rounded by eager supplicants, busily creating miracles, however kindhearted those miracles may seem." Dondolan ran his fingers through his long beard. "Not to mention the evil chance that this is all some cruel trick of Elizar's— that he only shams at having lost his mind, and plots to seize the Middle Lands again." He frowned, thinking. "When do they stop for the night?"

"Soon. When my sexton rings the church bell for evening prayer."

"Wait until that bell rings, Father, then bring me the man Feliks."

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THE small man seemed almost relieved to have been found out. "Yes, it is true. He was once Elizar, the greatest wizard of all."

"After Kettil the archmage, you mean," said Dondolan.

Feliks waved his hand. "My master poured his soul into five thousand beast-men at Herredsburn, animating them throughout the battle. Even so, he dueled Kettil Hawkface to a standstill."

"This is neither here nor there," said Father Bannity impatiently. "Why is he the way we see him? Is this some new plot of his, some evil device?"

"Tell the truth, minion, and do not think to trick me," Dondolan said harshly. "Even now, Kettil himself must be hearing news of this. He will not take longer than I did to deduce that your Eli is in fact his old arch-enemy."

Feliks sighed. "Then we must be moving on again. Sad, that is. I was enjoying it here."

“Damn it, man, one of the most dangerous men in the world sleeps twenty paces away! Talk to us!”

“Dangerous to you, perhaps.” Feliks shook his head. “No, not even to you—not now. There is no trick, wizard. What you see is the truth. The old Elizar is gone, and dumb Eli is what remains.

“It was after Herredsburn, you see, when the King and your Wizard’s Council turned us away. With all his beast-men dead or changed back to their former selves, my master left the field and retreated to his secret lair in the Darkslide Mountains.”

“We suspected he had a bolt-hole there,” murmured Dondolan, “but we could never find it.”

“He was determined to have his revenge on Kettil and the others,” continued Feliks. “I have never seen him thus. He was furious, but also weary, weary and distraught.” The small man peered at the priest and the wizard for a moment. “Once, in middle-night when I was awakened from sleep by a strange noise, I found him weeping.”

“I cannot believe that,” said Dondolan. “Elizar? The Devourer?”

“Believe what you will. There was always more to him than you folk on the Council understood. Whatever the case, he became fixed on the idea of securing the Amulet of Desire, which can grant its possessor whatever gift he most wants. He spent many months—a year, almost—pursuing its legend down many forgotten roads, in old books and older scrolls. He spoke to creatures so fearsome I could not even be under the same roof while they were conversing.” The memory still seemed to make Feliks fear-ful, and yet proud of his bold master. “At last the time came. Deep in our cavern home in the Darkslide Mountains, he prepared the spells. I helped him as best I could, but I am just a servant, not a necromancer. I stoked the fires, polished the alembics, brought the articles he needed from our reli-quary. At last the hour came when the spheres were in alignment, and he began the Summoning of the Empty Gods.

“He had been nights on end without sleep, in the grip of a fever that I had never seen in him before, even on the night before Herredsburn, when dominion over all the world was still at his fingertips. Pale, wide-eyed, talk-ing to himself as though I was not even present, he was like a prisoner des-perate for release, whether that release came from the opening of the prison door or from the hangman’s rope.”

Feliks sighed and briefly wiped his eyes while Dondolan tapped impatient fingers.

“The spell went on for hours,” the small man continued, “names shouted into the darkness that hurt my ears. At one point I fled, terrified by the shadows that filled the room and danced all around me. When I came back, it was because I heard my master’s hoarse cry of triumph.

“He stood in the center of his mystical diagram, holding up something I could barely see, something that gleamed red and black ...”

“Something cannot gleam black,” Dondolan said—a trifle querulously, Bannity thought. “It makes no sense.”

“Little of what had happened that night made sense, but I will not change my tale. It gleamed red and black. Elizar held it over his head, crying out with a ragged voice, ‘My greatest wish made real . . . !’—and then the roof collapsed.”

“Collapsed?” said Bannity. “How? I thought you were in some mountain cavern.”

“We were,” Feliks agreed. “I still am not certain how it happened—it was like being chewed in a giant’s mouth, chewed and chewed, then spit out. When I woke up, we both lay on the slope beneath the entrance to the lair, which was choked with fallen rock. Elizar was as you see him now, crushed and silent, his head all bloody, poor fellow. The Amulet was gone. Everything was gone. I helped him up, and we stumbled and crawled down the hill to a cotsman’s deserted shack—the owner had fled when the mountain began to shake. I shaved my master’s head and doctored his wounds. We ate what supplies the cotsman had laid in, but when we ran out, we had no choice but to become wandering beggars.” The small, wrinkled man spread his hands. “I can do no magic, you see.”

“Was the boy in the village, the one Elizar sent to Eader’s Church, the first to be ... touched?”

Feliks shook his head. “My master took a few people’s hands, mostly folk who gave generously to our begging bowl, and sometimes things happened. None were harmed, all profited,” he added, a little defensively.

“And you,” Dondolan demanded. “You must have touched his hands many times since this occurred. What of you?”

“What could happen? I already have my heart’s desire. All I have ever wanted was to serve him. From the first moment I saw him outside the Academy, I knew that he was my destiny, for good or bad.”

Dondolan sighed. “For bad, certainly, at least until now. You are not a true villain, Feliks, but you have served an evil man.”

“All great men are thought evil by some.”

“Not all great men graft the heads of wild boars onto the shoulders of peasant farmers,” Dondolan pointed out. “Not all great men wear the skins of other wizards for a cloak.”

“He killed only those who turned against him,” said Feliks stubbornly. “Only those who would have killed him.”

Dondolan stared at him for a moment. “It matters little now,” he said at last. “As I said, Kettil will have heard by now and guessed who is here. The archmage will come, and things will change.”

“Then we must go,” said Feliks, rising to his feet with a weary grunt. “We will move on. There are still places we can live in quiet peace, if I can only help my poor master to keep his hands to himself.”

“I dare not try to stop you,” Dondolan said. “I fear to wake your mas-ter if he really sleeps inside that battered skull—I admit I was never his match. But even if you flee, you will not outrun Kettil’s power.”

It does not matter. What will be, will be, Bannity thought to himself, but a little of his newfound peace had gone with Eli’s unmasking. Whether Elizar is a man transformed or a villain disguised, surely what happens next will be as God wills too. For who can doubt His hand when He has shown us so many miracles here?

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BUT Eli would not leave the wood, despite Feliks’s urging. The mute man was as resistant as a boulder set deep in mud: none of his servant’s pleas or arguments touched him—in fact, he showed no sign of even hearing them.

Dondolan and Bannity, armed with the knowledge of the miracle worker’s true identity, convinced the suddenly terrified village elders that for

a while at least, the crowds should be kept away. With a contingent of soldiers from the nearest shirepost, hired with a fraction of the profits from the long miracle-season, they cleared the forest of all the supplicants, forcing them out into the town and surrounding fields, where local sellers of charms and potions gleefully provided them with substitute satisfaction, or at least the promise of it.

Even as the last of the camps were emptied, some of the latest arrivals from beyond the village brought news that Kettil Hawkface himself was on the way. Some had seen nothing more than a great storm swirling around Thundering Crag while the sky elsewhere was blue and bright, but others claimed to have seen the archmage himself speeding down the mountain on a huge white horse, shining as he came like a bolt of lightning. In any case, those who had been turned away from Squire's Wood now had something else to anticipate, and the great road that passed by the nameless village was soon lined with those waiting to see the most famous, most celebrated wizard of all.

Father Bannity could not help wondering whether Elizar sensed any-thing of his great rival's coming, and so he walked into Squire's Wood and across the trampled site of the camp, empty now but for a couple of hired soldiers standing guard.

Inside the tent wrinkled little Feliks looked up from eating a bowl of stew and waved to Bannity as if they were old friends; but Elizar was as empty-faced as ever, and seemed not to notice that the crowds of pilgrims were gone, that he and Feliks were alone. He sat staring at the ground, his big hands opening and closing so slowly that Father Bannity could have counted a score of his own suddenly intrusive heartbeats between fist and spread fingers. The man's naked face and shaved scalp made the head atop the black robe seem almost like an egg, out of which anything might hatch.

Why did I come here? he asked himself. *To taunt the blackest magician of the age?* But he felt he had to ask.

"Are you truly gone from in there, Elizar?" The priest's voice trembled, and he prayed to God for strength. He now realized, in a way he had not before, that before him sat a man who was of such power that he had destroyed whole cities the way an ordinary man might kick down an anthill. But Bannity had to ask. "Are you truly and completely empty, or is there a spark of you left in that husk, listening?" He had a sudden thought. "Did you bring this on yourself, with your magical amulet? When the time came for your heart's desire to be granted, did God hear a small, hidden part of you

that was weary of death and torment and dark hatreds, that wanted to perform the Lord's work for your fellow men instead of bringing them blood and fire and terror?"

Eli did not look up or change expression, and at last Father Bannity went out. Feliks watched him go with a puzzled expression, then returned to his meal.

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HE came down the main road with crowds cheering behind him as though he were a conquering hero—which, after all, he was. Bannity watched the people shouting and calling Kettil's name as the wizard rode toward the vil-lage on his huge white horse, the same people who only days before had been crouched in the dirt outside Eli's tent, begging to be let in, and the priest wondered at God's mysterious ways.

Kettil Hawkface was younger than Bannity would have guessed, or else had spelled himself to appear so. He seemed a man in the middle of life, his golden hair only touched with gray, his bony, handsome face still firm in every line. His eyes were the most impressive thing about him: even from a distance they glittered an icy blue, and up close it was difficult to look at him directly, such was the chilly power of his gaze.

Bannity and Dondolan met the archmage at the edge of the wood. Kettil nodded at his fellow wizard but hardly seemed to see the priest at all, even after Dondolan introduced him.

"He is in there ..." Dondolan began, but Kettil raised his hand, and the lesser mage fell silent.

"I know where he is." He had a voice to match his eyes, frosty and authoritative. "And I know what he is. I have battled his evil for half my long life. I do not need to be told where to find him—I smell him as a hound smells his quarry."

Strange, then, that you did not find him before, thought Bannity, then regretted his own small-minded carping. "But he is not the monster you knew, Archmage ..."

Kettil looked at him then, but only a moment, then turned away. "Such creatures do not change," he said to Dondolan.

Bannity tried again. "He has done much good . . . !"

Kettil smirked. “Has he revived all those he killed? Rebuilt the cities he burned? Do not speak to me of things you do not understand, priest.” He slid down off his massive white horse. “I will go, and we will see what de-vilry awaits.”

Bannity had to admit the archmage was as impressive as legend had promised. He strode into the forest with no weapon but his staff of gnarled birch, his long hair blowing, his sky-blue robes billowing as though he still stood on the heights of Thundering Crag. Bannity looked at Dondolan, whose face bore a carefully composed expression that betrayed nothing of what he was thinking, then they both followed the archmage Kettil into Squire’s Wood.

To Bannity’s astonishment, Eli himself stood in the doorway of the tent, looking out across the great clearing.

“Ho, Devoured” Kettil’s voice echoed, loud as a hunting horn, but Eli only looked at him incuriously, his large hands dangling from his sleeves like roosting bats. “I have found you again at last!”

The hairless man blinked, turned, and went back into the tent. Kettil strode after him, crossing the clearing in a few long paces. Bannity started to follow, but Dondolan grabbed his arm and held him back.

“This is beyond me and beyond you, too.”

“Nothing is beyond God!” Bannity cried, but Dondolan the Clear-Eyed looked doubtful. A few moments later little Feliks came stumbling out of the tent, flapping his hands as if surrounded by angry bees.

“They stand face-to-face!” he squawked, then tripped and fell, rolling until he stopped at Bannity’s feet. The priest helped him up, but did not take his eyes off the tent. “They do not speak, but stare at each other. The air is so thick!”

“It seems ...” Dondolan began, but never finished, for at that instant the entire clearing—in fact, all the woods and the sky above—seemed to suck in a great breath. A sudden, agonizing pain in Bannity’s ears dropped him to his knees, then everything suddenly seemed to flow sideways—light, color, heat, air, everything rushing out across the face of the earth in all directions, pushing the priest flat against the ground and rolling him over several times.

When the monstrous wind died, Bannity lay for a long, stunned instant, marveling at the infinite skills of God, who could create the entire universe and now, just as clearly, was going to dismantle it again. Then a great belch of flame and a roar of rushing air made him roll over onto his knees and, against all good sense, struggle to sit up so he could see what was happening.

The tent was engulfed in flame, the trees all around singed a leafless black. As Father Bannity stared, two figures staggered out of the inferno as though solidifying out of smoke, one like a pillar of cold blue light, with flame dancing in his pale hair and beard, the other a growing, rising shadow of swirling black.

“I knew you but pretended, demon!” shouted Kettil Hawkface, waving his hands in the air, flashes of light crackling up from his fingertips. “Devourer! I know your treachery of old!”

The shadow, which had begun to fold down over the archmage like a burning blanket, instead billowed up and away, hovering in the air just above Kettil’s head. A face could be seen in its roiling, cloudy midst, and Bannity could not help marveling even in his bewildered horror how it looked both like and unlike the silent Eli.

“I will make sure your dying lasts for centuries, Hawkface!” shrieked the dark shape in a voice that seemed to echo all the way to the distant hills, then it rose up into the air, flapping like an enormous bat made of smoke and sparks, and flew away into the south.

“Master!” screamed Feliks, and stumbled off through the woods, following the fast-diminishing blot of fiery blackness until he, too, disappeared from sight.

Kettil Hawkface, his pale robes smeared with ash, his whiskers and hair singed at the edges, strode away in the other direction, walking back toward the village with the purposeful stride of someone who has completed a dangerous and thankless job and does not bother to wait for the approbation he surely deserves.

As he emerged at the forest’s edge, he stood before the hundreds of onlookers gathered there and raised his hands. “Elizar the Devourer’s evil has been discovered and ended, and he has flown in defeat back to the benighted south,” the archmage cried. “You people of the Middle Lands may rest safely again, knowing that the Devourer’s foul plan has been thwarted.”

The crowd cheered, but many were confused about what had hap-pened, and the reception of his news was not as wholehearted as Kettil had perhaps expected. He did not wait to speak again to his colleague Dondolan but climbed onto his white horse and galloped away north toward Thundering Crag, followed by a crowd of children crying out after him for pennies and miracles.

Bannity and Dondolan watched in silence as the ramrod-straight figure grew smaller and then eventually disappeared. The crowds did not immediately disperse, but many seemed to realize there would be little reason to collect here anymore, and the cries of the food sellers, charm hawkers, and roving apothecaries became muted and mournful.

“So all is resolved for good,” Father Bannity said, half to himself. “Elizar’s evil was discovered and thwarted.”

“Perhaps,” said Dondolan. “But a part of me cannot help wondering whose heart’s desire was granted here today.”

“What do you mean? Do you think . . . they clasped hands?”

Dondolan sighed. “Do not misunderstand me. It is entirely possible that the world has been spared a great evil here today—Elizar was always full of plots, many of them astoundingly subtle. But if they *did* touch hands, I think it is safe to say that only one of them was granted his heart’s desire.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Elizar may not have seemed entirely happy as Eli the dumb miracle worker,” Dondolan said, “but he did seem peaceful. Now, though, he is the Devourer again, and Kettil once more has an enemy worthy of his own great pride and power.”

Bannity was silent for a long time, watching the sky darken as the sun settled behind Squire’s Wood. “But surely God would not let Elizar’s evil back into the world simply because his enemy missed it—God must have a better plan for mankind than that!”

“Perhaps,” said Dondolan the Clear-Eyed. “Perhaps. We will think on it together after we return to the church and you find the brandy you keep hidden for such occasions.”

Father Bannity nodded and took a few steps, then turned. "How did you know about the brandy?"

The priest thought Dondolan's smile seemed a trifle sour. "I am a wiz-ard, remember? We know almost everything."

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