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A Hairrowing Tale

Jacob panted as he ran. His pursuer had disappeared at some point in the last few seconds, but he

of rocks. It was quiet for a moment as he caught his breath. A tuft of his auburn hair fell into his eye. He blew it aside. There was a familiar whisper in the wind, distinct, but not quite audible. He strained to hear what it was saying. The rocks shot up from the ground. Levitating, they began to pile on top of him, pinning his legs, his arms, his back. Jacob struggled, feeling the rocks press down harder than they were ever intended to.

"You're dead!" A familiar face with curly brown hair peeked out from the branches of the apple tree. Brian dropped down and ran over to his friend laughing.

"But we are best friends."

"Seriously? Of all the places to hide, you chose a pile of rocks?" "I didn't think you would expect it!" Jacob said, wedging an arm free and throwing a loose pebble. It missed. "How did you get ahead of me?"

"Tunneling! You'd be amazed at how easy it is to get around down there. Merlin has been showing me the routes." Brian reached out a hand to help his friend up, allowing the rocks to fall away in the process. Jacob stood up and rolled his shoulders. "I wish I had the hair for tricks like that. All I get to

learn is how to make people trust me and forget their things."

"Are you kidding me?" Brian laughed. "That's about the coolest thing you can do! What good is the ability to crush you with a rock if you can just convince me we're best friends?"

"Well, how do I know that? Maybe I was an assassin sent to kill you an hour ago, and you just convinced me that we've grown up together?" Jacob laughed at the thought. "If someone wanted to kill me, they'd have to send someone a lot more competent than you."

"Says the guy who just got buried alive." "See, you've proved my point. Your abilities are way more powerful than mine!"

Brian paused for a moment. "That's not- Wait, how did I end up arguing for you?" Jacob spread his arms wide, grinning. "You said it yourself, your powers can beat mine. Accept it."

"Hey!"

themselves. Jacob chuckled. "What?" Brian asked.

Brian flicked a pebble at him. "Fine, I'm better than you."

"This afternoon! I still haven't gotten over it."

"Look, just because I hit a tree..."

"Brian, you knocked it out of the ground!"

Brian hid a smile as he rubbed his head. "It wasn't that funny."

"It didn't hit anything!" "It crushed Merlin's falcon!" "Oh, come on," Brian said, "he hasn't been hunting in years!"

"He was going to take me out tomorrow!" Jacob said. "But ah well." He smiled again. "You're never

"You know," Brian decided, "next time I'm gonna leave that pile of rocks on top of you."

"Aw come on, I'm too valuable for that. Who else would you use for target practice?" Jacob

Jacob laughed and slapped at a spark on his tunic. "By Coloman, that was a low blow. But I

"Hey, at least she can put up a decent fight."

something."

elbowed his friend playfully. "Surely not Alina?"

suppose that might be a compliment to a fossorial such as yourself."

gonna live that down, you know that?"

Merlin, I didn't see you there. We were just talking about Jacob's allergies. He's dreadfully allergic to dust mites, you see, and we were discussing how to best--" Merlin waved him down with his fingertips. "Now, now, students. I see you've been paying closer attention to the history of

Tollemache than I thought, though I don't believe I intended for you to use such words as insults."

Merlin led the boys deep into the castle, through winding corridors and ancient stairways that they

had walked past but never noticed. Eventually they came to a dark walnut door, engraved with a

lattice of lines that varied in thickness and length. Merlin touched his thumb and forefinger to an

dominated the left side of the room, the one disorderly area in sight. Books lay open, tiny notes

on a table. It gradually faded to yellow as the boys approached, spinning faster and faster until

Merlin slammed the book shut, dissolving the shape into a gentle mist. The old wizard grinned at

scribbled in the margins of the pages. One book had a pale green halo spinning above it like a ring

The boys shrugged, sheepish. Merlin cracked a dry smile. "Come with me. I want to show you

intersection at about eye level. The grid pulsed with a dim purple light, fading almost before it could be noticed. As they watched, the door opened up to reveal a lofty cove, lit along its vaulted walls by torches that burned with soft white flames. There were hundreds of books, neatly organized on countless shelves, each one painstakingly crafted over the centuries. Merlin sat down at a table that

"Most of them, yes," Merlin replied. "I did have some help from various students over the years. Most of them are long gone, but they left behind some true masterworks. Why, you've even learned from a few of them. Ivaylo's studies in navigating around crops and plant life are core tenets of brownweaving these days. Perhaps you too will add to these works in time." Merlin gestured for the boys to join him around the table. "But that's not the reason I allowed you to enter my study." He pulled out an old scroll that had been tucked in the spine of a nearby book and unrolled it in front of them. The boys gasped. It was a map of Tollemache. "I didn't think these existed!" Jacob said. He reached out a tentative hand, as if the scroll would dissolve into mist at the slightest intrusion of its sanctity. "Weren't they all destroyed by the Untouchables in the War of Kacte?" Merlin chuckled. "Karte, yes. One of their priests at the time received a 'revelation' that maps were an expression of the power that kingdoms hold, and therefore must be destroyed to prevent temptation." His hand brushed lightly over the central dominance. "He made it his life's work to

destroy every map that had their land depicted on it, and no one could keep him or his acolytes

from doing so. Only a few survived." He pinned down the curling edges with a book and a

candlestick, gesturing at it with pride. "This one is my own personal design, though. The map I

based it on was a bit charred and torn, and I had to visit the Northern Isles to fill in that missing

corner, but it is now one of the only maps in the world to depict the whole of Tollemache. Now

watch closely. This is what I wanted to show you." Merlin plucked a long strand of white hair from

the back of his head, laying it lengthwise across the map. He placed his hands over it and raised

them slowly, methodically, speaking a few words under his breath. The hair melted into the scroll,

"Look closer," said Merlin. As the boys watched, tiny specks of blue and green light began to appear above the kingdom. They grew in numbers quickly, forming somewhat geometrical patterns where they had the most numbers and spreading out over the countryside in a looser, more sporadic

fashion. They turned a rich shade of purple over the land of the Untouchables, and the Forgotten

"What are all these?" Brian asked, waving his fingers through the specks of light. They tickled as

"Every dot you see here is a person going about their life in the real world," Merlin explained. "I

where these people are on its own, but I have joined it with my mind for the time being. If another

precognitiant used their own hair for this, such as Lionel, it would correlate to the knowledge that

they have. I simply keep track of people's locations and their emotional states when working at this

scale, which are displayed through their spot on the map and the colors they give off. It helps me to

created this map to give my precognition a way to visualize itself for others. The map does not know

Lands replaced the blue with shades of orange and red. In a second, the whole map was covered

"Oh, I do bring it to the palace with me," Merlin agreed. "But only a very few people know about its existence. If there were any more radical Untouchables out there, I'd hate to lose this map to carelessness." "So why are you telling us?" Brian asked. Merlin laughed. "Why, I thought you boys would've figured that out by now." He dropped his voice to a playful whisper, looking each of them in the eyes. "How would you feel about apprenticing with me?" Some time later, in another chapter

The boys' wrestling was interrupted by old Ector. "Ho there, fellows, break it apart, break it apart.

"Both of you," Ector agreed, "and the rest of the Valiant, too. He's declared a state of emergency."

blanket. Jacob brushed at his pants. Ector made eye contact with both of them. His face seemed to

have aged ten more years overnight. He turned his gaze to the coals of the fire. "You'd best prepare

around the old weaver, bombarding him with questions about the night before. Merlin could only sit

there and shake his flaky head, lost in his own thoughts. Jacob felt a touch of regret for what Merlin

must have been going through, but the thought quickly vanished as the king pounded his staff on the

"Is there anyone here who is not yet present?" he called out. He waited a moment, and a green-

robed weaver with braided auburn hair materialized dangerously close to a standing torch. His

The king grunted. "Good to see you, Gawain. Anyone else?" When no one else threatened to light

"As many of you know, Merlin was compromised last night. Someone seems to have infiltrated his

The Valiant erupted into shouting again; the king pounded his staff again. "Quiet! Thank you. I can

see that you all recognize the gravity of the situation. Someone wants to attack us, and they've now

weakened our defenses severely. We can't let this news spread further than necessary, but I still aim

The black-haired weaver spoke up. "There have been the usual raids along the eastern borders, but

themselves on fire, the king sat down. The Valiant grew silent and began to step down from the

throne room steps. The king looked drained, but he held his head high.

The boys stood up quickly. Brian closed his eyes for a moment and the dust fell off of him like a

The king has summoned you both. You are to join him at the castle immediately."

Brian looked up from a headlock, surprised. "Both of us?"

yourselves, boys. We've lost our most powerful weaver. Merlin has been shaved." Jacob could barely see Merlin sitting in his usual place next to the king. The Valiant crowded

green eyes twinkled. "Present!"

floor.

nothing out of the ordinary. Perhaps one of the raiders got a bit too full of himself?" The king nodded. "I don't know how one of those would-be weavers could've gotten through Merlin's defenses, but we shouldn't disregard anything at this stage."

Another knight with a gray beard called out from the back. "I don't want to cause undue alarm, yer

highness, but the Untouchables have proved to be a dangerous foe in the past, an' wit' their skills..."

The king nodded again. "We have been at peace ever since the Great War, but they do remain

few men to spy out the land. Perhaps Kay and Brian."

weaver joined him.

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Previous

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weavers as yourselves. I imagine you could teach him a thing or two."

stepped forward. Bors turned back to the king. "This is everyone I'll need."

always finds a home, even among criminals."

largely mysterious. We have to know if they intend to rise up against us. Gawain, you are to take a

The king turned back to his remaining men. "As for the eastern front. Bors, you will take a party to the Forgotten Lands and find out whatever you can. I trust that you know who would be best suited to that task?"

Bors nodded and stepped forward. "Lionel, Tor, and Bedivere, will you join me?" The old friends

The king nodded approvingly. "I don't doubt that. Perhaps you can take Jacob, as well. Diplomacy

"Of course, your highness." Gawain bowed, stepping to the side as Brian and the gray-haired

possibly do in a place like that?" Bors laughed then, a deep, low belly laugh. "You? You, boy? You can prevent the need to fight in the first place. You could make this journey the most uneventful in years. What I wouldn't give to trade places with you. I've seen plenty enough action to last me the rest of my days. Come with us!"

in the north, fill in the holes that our travelling companions are leaving behind. You from the west, stay here with me. I need men who can travel anywhere as soon as we get word from the others." The king paused for a moment before addressing them again. "I am honored to have such excellent men with me in times like these." He smiled, his gaze penetrating. "This enemy of ours has made a grave mistake, and I intend to make them pay for it."

By Solomon Taylor

didn't have time to see where they had ended up. He ducked past trees and punched his feet

through at least three overripe apples before he finally flattened himself out behind an outcropping

Chapter 1—Rocks

As the sun began to tuck itself into the trees for the night, Jacob sat by the fire with Brian. Training was over for the day and the portcullis had been shined, so they were given the rest of the night to This time Jacob burst out laughing. "Are you kidding? You came up straight into a tree! The closest route was thirty feet away! How in the earth did you miss it that badly?"

"Yeah? Well I'll remember that the next time I blow dust up your sagacious nostrils." "The dusts of Pendragon's masterworks are dishonored by your manipulations." Brian laughed. "No, they're dishonored by that blowhole you call a--" He froze as Merlin materialized on the other side of the fire. Both boys stood up. "Ah-allergies. Allergies. Yeah. Oh, hi

them. "With a library like this, one can never be too careful. Wouldn't want the anarchists getting a hold of one of these books while I'm away." Jacob chanced a glance at the cover of the book. The Fiery Eyes of Vasily and Other Dismemberment Spells. He quickly stepped back again. "What are all these?" "These, my young friends, are the most prevalent styles from the third age of weaving. I chronicled them about four hundred years ago. Even I can't remember all of the branches our art has taken over the centuries, so I study them from time to time."

Brian stared incredulously around the room. "Did you write all of these?"

spreading impossibly wide to cover the entire map with a white sheen before fading. They waited in silence for a few seconds. Jacob blinked. "Is that it?" Brian asked.

with lights, illuminating its contents.

they dissolved and reformed around his hand.

keep an eye on the area, just in case anyone decides to plan an invasion." Jacob thought about that. "So why do you keep it down here? Why not have it on display in the palace or somewhere that it can be used more readily?"

study, despite his protections around it, and they cut his hair while he was asleep. We must recognize that we no longer have our greatest practitioner in the case of war. Without his magic, we are vulnerable."

to find out who our enemy is. Bors, is there any hint of unrest from our eastern borders?"

"Brian? Are you sure? With all due respect, he's only just come of age." The king nodded. "And yet he's advancing much faster than you ever did." Gawain smiled and nodded, conceding the point. "Besides, he's been cooped up in the castle grounds his whole life," the king continued. "It'll be good for him to see what else lies beyond our gates, especially in the company of such fine

Jacob looked surprised. "Me? But I—" He stopped, embarrassed. The king raised an inquiring eyebrow. "I mean, my highn— I mean, your lord— highness, I—I'm not a fighter. I mean, Lionel makes sense. With a beard that intimidating, he could just stare them out of existence. Tor's got more muscles than an ox, and Bedivere's manipulation of water can always turn the tide..." He

paused for a moment. No one laughed. "...in her favor," he mumbled. "But me? What could I

Still far from certain, Jacob slowly moved to join the others. The king looked around at each of the faces present. "As for the rest of you, we must prepare. If our enemy is expecting to catch us with our tunics down, they'll be sorely mistaken. Each of you, return to your provinces. Make war preparations. We don't know where this enemy will turn up, so be ready for anything. Those of you

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