THE SPICK AND THE SPAN



Pil Van Martin

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‘. . . Only to a magician is the world forever fluid, infinitely mutable and eternally new. Only he knows the secret of change, only he knows truly that all things are crouched in eagerness to become something else . . .’

– Peter S. Beagle, *The Last Unicorn*

‘The magic in that country was so thick and tenacious that it settled over the land like chalk-dust and over floors and shelves like slightly sticky plaster-dust. (House cleaners in that country earned unusually good wages).’

– Robin McKinley, *Spindle’s End*



Welcome To Helm

Like an old sponge that has tried to soak up too much questionable brown water from a leaky pipe, the city of Helm was sopping with magic.

It was the magicians' fault. They liked their magic so much they had forgotten to pay heed to the phrase 'all good things in moderation'. They used magic to tie their shoelaces, to turn the pages of their spell books – even to itch their noses. Every flick of their wand, stamp of their staff or crook of their spell-casting fingers released a little more magic into the air until almost every corner of the city was heaving with it.

This had hazardous effects. Leave any household item alone for too long, and you could bet that magic would begin to settle on it – and eventually it would begin to change. It would start small: your kettle might begin to whistle in time to the radio, or your carpet

would complain if you walked on it with muddy boots. Then it would progress: suddenly your kitchen tap would only pour cough syrup, your cool box would open and turn your kitchen into an arctic tundra or your pot plants would gigantify and try to eat you in your sleep.

Helm was so treacherous that visitors were given a warning pamphlet at the gate:

While we appreciate that our city is a unique and exciting attraction, it is essential that you adhere to the following rules if you value your life.

PLEASE:

- *Watch your step. We are currently at such a state of magical saturation that the walls between worlds have worn thin. As such, portals to other worlds will open at random in the air, under your feet or right in front of you. (You may have arrived in our city unexpectedly due to such a phenomenon; if the portal back to your world has closed, please see page 68 of this pamphlet:* What Do I Do Now That I'm Stuck Here?)

- *Swimming in the city river is not a good idea (and neither is drinking from it). It is polluted with so many potions and other spells that if you somehow manage to*

avoid being turned into a frog, tortoise, hare or other creature, you will almost certainly be spending the next few days on the toilet with explosive diarrhoea.

- *Do not sit beneath the great ash tree in the city square. The meliae living there are aggressive and will try to attack you. (In such an event, please see page 12 of this pamphlet: Advice on Magical Injury.)*

- *Avoid the lullaby bridge in the southeast - its song makes anyone crossing it fall asleep instantly, and we do not presently have enough deaf cart drivers to deal with the sleeping bodies.*

- *Avoid the Chosen Ones - at best, they will get you into trouble with a troll or a harpy; at worst, they will get you enslaved to a demon. A notable nuisance is the man in the city square who will challenge you to a sword-pulling competition. His name is Arthur, and it is very well prophesised that only he can pull the sword from that boulder; don't let him fool you otherwise.*

The pamphlet continued in this manner for several pages, but it neglected to detail how the city was still running in such chaotic circumstances.

Of course, the magicians liked to pretend it was them who kept the worst magical hiccups in check, but the real heroes of the whole sorry situation were of a wholly different occupation: equally well known but decidedly less respected.

They fought back the worst symptoms of the magidemic year by year and day by day. They were the wizards of the wash pots, the witches of the mops, the magicians of the scrubbing brushes, the sorcerers of polishing cloths.

The heroes of the city of Helm were cleaners.

THE SPICK AND THE SPAN

Meet the Team

WELCOME *to the Spick and Span Cleaning Agency, mopping up magical spills for longer than you've been alive!*

We are one of the oldest magical cleaning agencies in Helm (probably). Our founder, **Alfreda B. Estraven**, *loves cleaning so much that even death hasn't stopped her from continuing to provide incomparable cleaning services. Her excellent team includes:*

Jezebel Sharazi, *our vampire manager who, like Alfreda, hasn't let her 'grave' situation stop her from breaking out the feather duster. Jezebel has previously managed the magical crime scene clean-up operation Blood Out of the Carpet and was a member of The Drag Cleans: an all singing, all dancing street cleaning collective.*

Nessus Novia, *our sharp-spraying team leader and polishing specialist. Nessus's peaceful elvish demeanour is useful for calming hordes of black mould demons, while his hardcore polishing elbow leaves no surface unshined. Nessus is the (mercifully) friendly face of our cause, so come to him with any questions or queries - just don't go to . . .*

Ward Kyanite, *our super-talented magical cleaning expert, who hails from the Ayalami Mountains. When all the other dwarves his age were learning how to blow up rock with dynamite and how to tell sapphire from topaz, he was brewing his own cleaning solutions and crafting his own scourers. His personality, unfortunately, is more wire brush than sponge, but there isn't a magical accident that he can't harass into behaving.*

Magda Marinara, our newest recruit, hails from the city of Emor in the proud warrior world of Molteni, and is just as handy with a vacuum cleaner as she once was with a battle-axe. Like many residents of Helm, Magda is stuck here until she finds the elusive portal that will take her back home, but she's happy to pass the time beating back the magidemic with us for a while longer.