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Robin Jarvis

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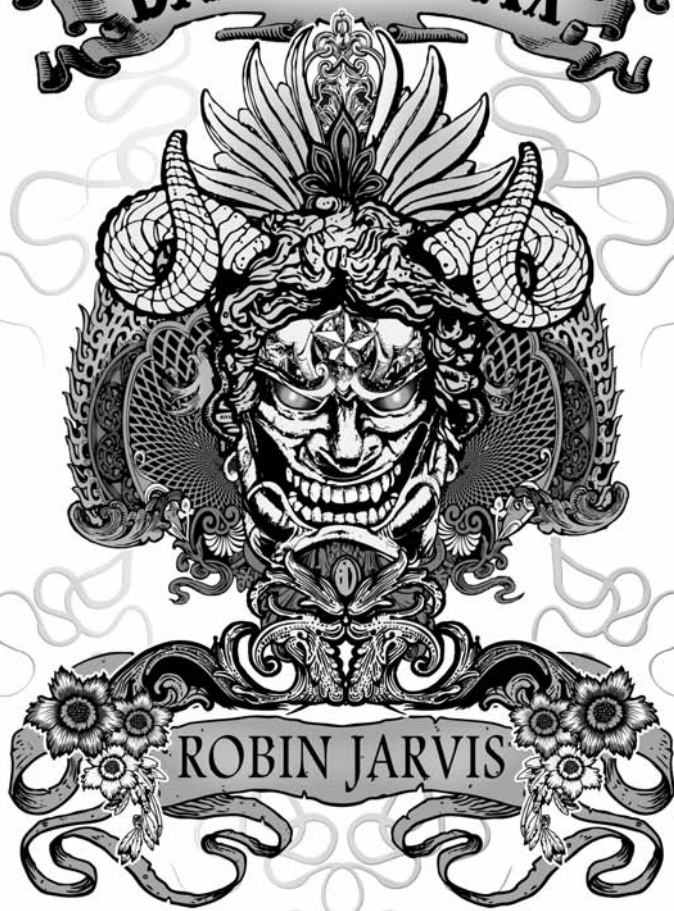
HarperCollins Children's Books

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DANCING JAX



ROBIN JARVIS

HarperCollins *Children's Books*



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Beyond the Silvering Sea, within thirteen green, girdling hills, lies the wondrous Kingdom of the Dawn Prince. Yet inside his White Castle, the throne stands empty. For many long years he has been lost in exile and thus the Ismus, his Holy Enchanter, reigns in his stead – till the day of his glorious returning and the restoration of his splendour evermore.

1

THE DOOR SHIVERED. One more powerful kick and the lock ripped from the rotting frame.

It burst inward with savage force. Splinters and crackled paint exploded into a large, deserted hall and decades of dust rose up in a dry cloud. For the first time in too long, fierce daylight bleached its way in and insects clattered their escape over bare and lifting floorboards.

A pair of greedy eyes darted round the empty house as the man leered across the threshold.

"Nice one."

Dragging the back of one grimy hand over his mouth, he stepped inside and the glittering dust whirled around him.

"Damp and the urination of rats."

He was describing the stale must of the house, but the description suited him just as well.

He was a wiry stoat of a man, dressed in scuffed jeans and a torn biker jacket that had known three different owners, in almost as many decades, before it had come to him. He liked that it had a history and often claimed that it owned him, rather than the other way round.

His face was always alert, never still – feral and filthy and hostile. The skin that clad it was white and clammy and poorly nourished. When other substances were available, food was spurned by Jezza.

Even now his nicotine fingers were trembling and twitching. It was half eleven in the morning. All he'd had was a can of Red Stripe and that was only because he'd finished the last of the stolen vodka the night before.

Behind him a female voice asked, "Was this worth our last spit of petrol then?"

Jezza's magpie eyes danced over the dingily patterned wallpaper that ran up the stairs to the landing. It was blotched here and there with black mould. The house was a big one and must have been impressive in its Victorian heyday, but now it was dark and damaged through years of neglect. Yet the man knew there were treasures to be harvested.

He was determined to gut the place and make a few quid. There



was a bloke in Southwold who paid cash without questions for this salvage junk. Original fireplaces were bloody good money. If they'd already been snatched, there were always copper pipes, taps and internal doors. Most of the windows were boarded over and those that weren't were smashed so there was nothing to be had there. Jezza's rancid gaze ran over the banister rails. Yes, even them.

The girl edged in behind. She was no more than twenty, but the knockabout life with Jezza and the others had leeched the bloom of youth from her face. The peroxide had long grown out of her dark hair and now only the spiky tips remained a lifeless yellow. A straggling streak of turquoise at one temple was the last effort she had made, but that too was faded.

"Told you it was a big old place," she said. "Keep us juicy for months this will."

Jezza shrugged his narrow shoulders.

"Depends what's left," he answered, swaggering down the spacious hall towards a blistered door. He paused to circle a covetous, dirty finger around the tarnished brass knob, sourly reflecting that it was exactly the same colour as her hair tips, except that the doorknob had retained some shine. He wrenched it around.

"Sod all come here," the girl muttered to his back. "I told you."

Behind her, two figures pushed through the entrance. The first was around six foot tall. The other had a much shorter, slighter build. The burly one was dressed in a shapeless camouflage jacket, with a long, ratty ponytail hanging down his back and an unkempt beard half covering his face.

"Hello, home, I'm honey!" he announced, throwing his arms wide.

The other gagged as he pushed him inside. "Have you blown off again?"

"I'm a fart starter – a twisted fart starter!" sang the laughing reply.

"Your backside makes my eyes bleed, man."

"Mmm… Bisto. You can dip your bread in that one, Tommo."

The man called Tommo dodged around him and fled deeper into the hall. He wore grubby denim and his brown hair was loose and curly. "There's got to be a rotting alien in your guts, Miller," he spluttered. "Them guffs aren't human."

"Grow up, for God's sake," the girl told them irritably. "We should've brought Howie and Dave instead."

"Howie and Dave don't have our power tools," Tommo answered, raising his hand and pressing an invisible trigger as he made a drill sound behind his teeth.

Miller lumbered further in and flexed his arms, sucking in his stomach at the same time. "And we is the muscle," he declared. "Jezza needs he-men to rip this place to bits."

"By the power of Greyskull!" Tommo called out, holding an imaginary sword aloft.

"The power of the Chuckle Brothers," she observed dryly.

Before the girl could stop them, he and Tommo seized her hands and started pulling her from side to side.

"To me, to you, to me, to you!" they chanted in unison.

"Get off!" she yelled, which only encouraged them to do it more.

"You lot!" Jezza's voice called out to them sharply. "In here – now."

The game stopped immediately. The girl threw them filthy looks. "Saddo losers," she snapped, but there was a smirk on her face when she turned her back and followed Jezza into the nearest room.

"She meant you," Miller told Tommo.

Tommo pressed his forefingers against the other man's temple and made the drill noise again.

The girl's grey eyes flicked about the spacious reception room. At first she could not see Jezza. The rags of light that poked through the imperfectly boarded windows contrasted with the deep wells of gloom around them. Apart from a card table and a red leather armchair, blackened with mildew, the room seemed empty. Then, as her vision adjusted, she found him. He was standing before a grand fireplace, leaning on the mantel as if he was already master of the house.

There was a sneer on his face.

"No one ever goes there, Jezza," he said, repeating her words of the previous night and nodding at the opposite wall.

The girl turned and looked at the rotten panelling. It was covered in painted scrawl.

"Only kids," she said with a shrug.

"Kids have sticky mitts," he spat in reply before returning his attention to the fireplace and running his hands over it.

"Marble," he announced, trailing his fingers through the mantel's grime. "You have to tease these out dead gentle. Should fetch in

plenty, and if there's more, we'll be laughing."

The young woman touched the graffiti-covered wall, quietly reading the peeling words.

"Marc Bolan, The Sweet, Remember you're a Womble, Mungo Jerry… this was a kid from a long time ago," she said with a faint smile. "They'd be old as my mum now."

"Young Wombles take your partners!" Miller sang as he and Tommo came waltzing in. "If you Minuetto Allegretto, you will live to be old."

"You two won't if you don't stop dicking about," Jezza warned them.

The men ceased and Tommo pointed to the mouldy chair.

"That's what your fetid innards look like," he muttered at Miller.

"You're obsessed by my bowels," the man answered with a bemused shake of the head.

"That's because I can't escape them! You keep making me breathe them in all the time!"

"You love it!"

Any further bickering was quelled by a fierce glance from Jezza. Then his eyes darted back to the girl. She was kneeling and rustling paper.

"What you got there?" he demanded.

"Kids' magazine," she answered, not looking up. "All yellow now and crinkly – look at those flares and the dodgy hair! There's some old cans and sweet wrappers here too, Fresca and Aztec bars. Been a long time since this break-in."

"Is it a girly mag?" Tommo asked brightly.

"For kids?" she snorted. "It looks like it's all about the telly, besides – you've got enough of them mags already, Tommo."

"He could open a library," Miller agreed.

The girl looked at the magazine's faded cover. Bold chunky type declared it was called *Look–in*, but there was also a name written on the corner in biro by a long retired newsagent:

Runecliffe.

She let the magazine fall to the floor.

Jezza stared about the room, his face twitching. "I don't get it," he said. "How come no one comes here? How come this place hasn't been knocked down or tarted up by some rich knob with three cars and a split-level wife and an illegal immigrant nanny for their spoilt Siobhans and Zacharys? Prime, this place is, prime and begging for the developers."

"The location, location, location's no good," Miller said, "We're in the middle of nowhere here, and it was a long drive down that track full of potholes. We wouldn't have guessed this place was here if we didn't know about it and were looking."

"Dirty big places like this don't vanish off maps or land registries," Jezza answered. "It don't make sense. It must belong to someone."

"If it does, they can't care about it," Tommo said. "Look at the state of it. Mr Muscle, where are you now?"

"We could squat in it," Miller announced. "Get everyone over and fix it up a bit. Be a palace this would."

"No!" the girl interrupted, rubbing her arms. "This is a sad house. It's sad and depressing and I don't like it."

"All the more reason to pull it to pieces," Jezza stated. "Nice, sellable, chopped-up pieces, and who's going to complain? Perfect job this one, couldn't be tastier!"

"I'll start unloading the van," Tommo said. "Come with me, Gasguts."

"There you go again!" Miller cried. "You're obsessed!"

"Wait!" Jezza barked suddenly. "Leave the tools for now."

He was looking at the girl. She had risen and was staring into space, the expression drained from her features.

"Shee," he said. "Shee!"

The girl started.

"How did you know about this place?" he asked.

The question nettled her and she moved towards the door.

"I just did," she answered evasively. "I need a smoke and my lighter's in the van."

She hurried from the room, through the hall and out into the bright sunlight. The large, forbidding bulk of the house reared high behind her and she shivered as she fled back to the shabby camper van, parked up the overgrown drive. It was a horrible house. She hated it. She couldn't wait to get out of it.

The VW's familiar orange and cream colours reassured her and she let out a great breath of relief as she leaned against the dented passenger door.

"Stupid beggar," she rebuked herself, pulling a cigarette out of

her pocket and letting it hang in her lips as she lifted her eyes to gaze back at the imposing building.

It was a drab, ugly edifice, built of dull, grey stone in the heavy-handed, Victorian Gothic style, with a corner tower and too many gables. Planks and boards obscured the ground-floor windows, but higher up they were mostly uncovered and shaped like they belonged in a church.

Shiela hissed through her teeth at it. “Don’t you look at me like that,” she whispered.

Tall, misshapen trees crowded around it; there was even a tree growing in the middle of the drive, which was why they had to park the van so far away.

A rook or a crow cawed somewhere above and the lonely, unpleasant croaking made her shiver.

“Like a graveyard,” she murmured. “A graveyard for dead houses. There’s no life in that place, no life and never no love.”

Then a jangling rattle dragged her attention back to the front porch, where Jezza was standing, shaking the van keys.

“What freaked you out in there?” he asked as he sauntered over.

“I wasn’t freaked out. The air was bad. Stuffy and stale.”

“You put up with worse, with Miller in the back seat.”

“OK, I just don’t like that place. Give me them keys, I’m gasping.”

He snatched his hand away from her, dangling them just out of reach.

“That’s two questions you’ve avoided now,” he said, beginning to

sound irritated. “Do you want me to force the answers out of you?”

“No, Jezza!” she said. “Just let me light up – for God’s sake!”

He threw the keys at her and a minute later she was dragging on the cigarette. Her fingers were trembling.

“It’s just a place I’ve heard about,” she explained, blowing out a stream of pale blue smoke. “Every town has one – the deserted old house. A place other kids dare you to go to, knock on the door, break in and spend the night.”

“What is this?” Jezza sounded annoyed. “Scooby sodding Doo? Don’t give me that crap.”

“It’s bloody true!” Shiela swore. “If you were from round here, you’d know, you’d have heard about it. Only in this case it’s not made up. That’s a… I dunno – a sick place. Not even kids dare each other to come here any more.”

“They’re too busy stuck in front of their Xboxes or glued to the Net to do anything real these days,” the man said.

“Good for them,” she muttered.

“The Web’s for rejects,” he pronounced. “All them misfits hiding in their rooms yakking away to other people they’ll never meet, using fake pictures and pretending to be someone else. No one knows who they are any more and those who do aren’t satisfied with it. You never know who you’re really talking to on there.”

She understood it was no use arguing with him. Jezza liked to make sweeping, preaching statements and wouldn’t listen to anyone who disagreed with him. He certainly hadn’t listened to her for a long time now. As for “misfits”, what else were they?

"It's good for finding out stuff," she said half-heartedly.

Jezza smirked sarcastically. "Yeah," he said. "All that information, branching out from here and there. It's the tree of knowledge of good and evil, Shee – and how mad is it that people are accessing it via their Apples! Ha – it's Genesis all over again and we're cocking it up a second time."

"I wouldn't call this Eden," Shiela said.

"And you're not Eve," he told her bluntly, before considering the house again. "And you're not blonde enough to be Yvette ruddy Fielding either. Got ghosts, has it?"

She shrugged and flicked some ash on the ground.

"No such thing," he stated. "Only real things matter in this life, and there's enough nasty realness to keep you worried and scared without inventing other mad stuff. The things to be frightened of in this world are just round the corner, hiding in your beans-on-toast existence. That's where true evil breeds best. Under your noses, in plain sight: it's the domestic abuse of the terrified wife three doors down and her neighbours who turn the telly up to drown out the noise; it's the nurse in the care home who hates herself and takes it out on the patients; it's the kids too scared to speak out; it's the man kicking his dog in the ribs because it doesn't bite back… it's everywhere around us. Society, that's the Petri dish where evil flourishes, not in empty old houses like this beauty."

Shiela looked at him, at the sharp features that she had once found attractive: the sly, crafty shape of his narrow eyes and the unhealthy pallor that had marked him out as different and interesting. Then,

unexpectedly, he turned his crooked smile on her and she was surprised to find that she still fancied him. She was always surprised. Jezza possessed a mesmeric charm, a way of making her overlook his bullying ego and ruthless self-interest. He exerted it over the others in the group too. He was, without question, their leader, and gathered waifs and strays to him like some kind of street prophet, and in their own inept, confused way, they were his disciples.

Taking the cigarette, he leaned beside her and stared intently up at the great, unlovely house.

"We could live off this dump for a year or more," he said. "Must be all sorts in there. Might even be stuff left in the attics – or the cellars, and the odd stick of furniture too. You did good, Shee."

"Wish I'd never said anything about it," she said softly.

"I might just keep you around a while longer," he chuckled with a wink, but she knew he probably meant that veiled threat.

Suddenly, inside the house, a man's voice screamed.

Jezza sprang forward like a cat and rushed back to the porch. Shiela lit another cigarette and waited.