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Opening extract from

The Wizard of Crescent Moon Mountain

Written by

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For Ella

You are the key who unlocked the door

CHAPTER 1

THE WIZARD'S GUESTS ARRIVE

It is a dark and frosty night. A small man smartly dressed in a fine brown suit and fine brown leather boots, well kept but windswept, is being chased by something, or someone, through snow-covered woods. The man being chased is called Connor Perrywinkle.

Plumes of smoke, created by warm breath catching cold air, swirl behind him as he attempts to run faster and faster away. Looking back, over his shoulder, it becomes apparent that it is not something that is chasing him but some *'things'*, and they are gaining ground quickly. Shadows holding swords, axes and daggers high up above their heads bay for his blood and will not stop until they get it. Perrywinkle has been running for a long while now and cannot keep up his pace.

And then, Perrywinkle's attempt to escape is brought to an abrupt end by the simplest of things. Sliding on the slippery, snow-covered ground, his foot catches on a stray branch, tripping him up. Flying forward, unable to control or balance his body, he falls heavily onto the cold, hard ground. It is not long before he is surrounded by his attackers. With his face down in the snow, Perrywinkle whimpers and closes his eyes, hoping for someone or something to take him away from his tormentors.

"Oooh, we're gonna do nasty things to yer – just like he asked!" he can hear one of the bloodthirsty creatures threaten.

Suddenly, everything goes black. The woods, the trees, the snow and his attackers have all gone. He is in another place now, full of nothingness and silence. The face of an old man with a long grey beard, surrounded by a bright white light, appears out of the darkness.

"Connor Perrywinkle! Connor Perrywinkle! You owe me a favour, and it is time for me to come and collect it," the old man bellows in the most intimidating of manners. "Do you remember your promise to me?"

"Yes, sir. No, sir. Yes, sir, I do," replies Perrywinkle with a

whimper and a cry, half-hoping for the 'things' to come back and take him.

"Good, because I'm coming for you, and you'd better be ready for me. I have something special in mind for you, Connor." And with that, the old man is gone.

Connor wakes up with a scream, his bedclothes and red-blanketed bed are wet with sweat.

"It can't be. I've just had a nightmare, that's it! A nightmare. Have I just had a nightmare? It felt so real and he *is* a wizard. But no, it cannot be. Invading dreams? Impossible!" he says, trying to reassure himself.

The morning sun tries to peer through worn, grey curtains. Cream-coloured paint on old walls stained yellow, flaking and peeling, glistens in the sunlight. An easel sits in the middle of the room by the bed. A painting of a middle-aged woman wearing a green headscarf sits on the easel, paints and paintbrushes littering the floor immediately around it. Paintings propped up against walls fill all sides of the room, as do stray pieces of paper, books and journals.

To the right of where Perrywinkle lies is a wardrobe full of expensive-looking suits. A chest of drawers with socks and underpants hanging out of them sits to his left. On top of the chest of drawers is a bowl with water in it. Next to the bowl is a bar of soap and a toothbrush that has been used too many times.

Connor pushes the red blankets away from him and jumps out of bed. Barefooted, he walks along his dusty, dark brown, wooden floor, opens his dour grey curtains and looks out towards a mountain in the shape of a crescent moon. Hidden on the side of that snow-covered, crescent moon-shaped mountain is a house in a cave. Little does Perrywinkle know that in that house, looking right back at him, is the wizard: the Wizard of Crescent Moon Mountain.

"No good looking back at me through your window, Connor. Why do you imagine an escape? You'll never get away from me," comments the wizard.

The wizard, sitting at the window in the house of the cave, is very tall and wiry, so much so that ordinary men pale in comparison to his stature, although it must be said now that wizards come in all shapes and sizes.

"That Perrywinkle fellow… lazy, very lazy, but bright – special even. I'll make sure he pays me back well enough," mumbles the old man under his breath.

The old man's long grey hair and long grey beard curls and winds, covering the most part of his face, right down to his chest. His eyes are dark brown and he has long, bushy eyebrows. The wizard's nose is reasonably long but not overly pointed. His forehead is wrinkled, and so is the skin around his eyes when he smiles or frowns. This old wizard can be caught smiling and frowning regularly, if you wait long enough, although today he is frowning a lot.

Dressing in garments typically associated with wizards, he wears a long olive-green coat with an olive-green hood over a long olive-green smock that stops at his ankles, so as not to drag on dirty floors. He refuses to wear a pointed wizard's hat, as that would make him look silly and this old wizard is not silly at all – at least he would have you believe that. Whilst the old man prefers to wear sandals, because they allow his feet to breathe, he also likes his feet to be warm. So, when he ventures outside into the cold, harsh snow, he likes to wear a warm and comfortable pair of sheepskin boots.

"And where are those guests of mine? They're always late. You'd think that I wasn't important. Surely they could have made their way here by now. Time is precious. I'm sure I've mentioned that once or twice before," grumbles an increasingly grumpy wizard.

The fact is that this old man is a dominant figure in the world of Everlast (called Everlast as most creatures here assume this particular world will be around forever). He has lived for an age, and his adventures are recounted in many tales told by many creatures. But, at present, he is taking time out from adventuring.

For the past ten years, this wizard has chosen to live in a cave deep in the Falcon Gorge mountain range, which sits at the very centre of Everlast. The mountain range is the only one of its kind here. It splits the north and the south and the east and the west of this land. Hundreds of mountains make up this range, many touch the sky, and for the most part, the tips of these mountains are unseen due to a constant cover of cloud. Very few creatures

have traversed the range, though some creatures, much like the wizard, call it home.

Although the wizard lives in a cave, it is not how you would imagine a cave to be because, from the outside, this cave looks cosy, homely and light. The front of the cave-house is made of red brick, and the roof of this house is the natural curvature of the cave itself. Protruding out from the centre of the red-brick frontage is a porch with glass-paned windows and a small, pointed, red-tiled roof.

Upon entering the porch, you are greeted by a large, red, wooden front door, with an ornate knocker in the shape of a falcon's head. If you knock on the door using the falcon-headed knocker then, invariably, the wizard will come to meet you… as long as you are friendly that is.

On either side of the porch are two large, oak-coloured, wooden sash windows. Etched into the stone and brick on the upper half of the house are a number of smaller, oak-coloured, wooden windows. There are many of them, generally circular in shape, like the eyes of a spider. On the far right of the house, set a little way in front of the cave, a brown, wooden shed contains lots of wood the old man has chopped for the fires that keep this house warm.

"Hmm! Where are they?" the old man grumbles. "I'd better turn down the heat on the stove. We can't have the rabbit stew sticking to the pan, can we? Oh and where did I put that cake? Ah yes, it's in the pantry. I'd better not forget that – I'm sure they'll be very impressed by it. Book, I'm very sorry to have to move you but I need you to go back from where you came."

A book, that was indeed content to sit on the wizard's warm lap, closes shut, levitates off his knee and hovers to the back of the room, where there is a bookcase spanning the whole wall. The book tucks itself back in to its designated place on one of the shelves amongst the old man's favourite books and parchments.

"Where was I? Oh yes, I need to check on that rabbit stew," he remembers.

Forgetting in an instant about the stew, the old man looks out of the lounge window again. Light snow has started to fall outside. Admiring the vast landscape from his window, he can see the village of Kardarnath in the distance and on its outskirts,

the Whispering Woods. There is a track from this village that leads all the way to the wizard's front door, it is so well established that even in heavy snow you can find your way.

A quarter of the way down the track from the mountain, next to a river that weaves its way to Kardarnath and beyond, is a solitary tree. On this tree there are a thousand branches, and on those branches thousands more twigs shoot out in all directions. For the most part, it is a dark and leafless tree appearing dead to those who happen to see it. There is a time, however, when it does come alive, and at this time many leaves and small pink-coloured flowers adorn it. Sometimes, generally every twenty to thirty years, it bears a perfectly round, rich red-coloured fruit the size of a cherry. The fruit is called a dangleberry because it dangles precariously on a long thin stalk off the twigs of the branches.

Prized by the villagers of Kardarnath due to its healing powers, it is said that dangleberries have brought creatures of all races back from the brink of death. Growing very, very rarely and only in small harvests means that, when it is collected, the fruit is dried to preserve it for as long as possible.

All of a sudden there is a knocking of the falcon-headed knocker at the door.

Knock, knock, knock!

The old man, who had been waiting with a feverish expectation, runs out through the door next to the window and into the hallway. With the front door to his left, directly ahead is the kitchen and dining room.

Against the wall, by the front door, there is a long staff made from the branch of the strongest tree. Carved out of the wood at the top of the staff, about the size of a fist, is the ornately-decorated head of a bear, mouth wide open and baring its teeth. Sitting in the mouth of the bear is an opaque pearl-like ball. The ball is called an oric; it has a magic about it and is a good friend to the wizard, although more about it will become apparent as this tale unfolds.

Opening the front door, the old man bellows, "Hello. Welcome, friends."

On the doorstep are three dwarfs wearing dark brown cloaks, dark brown boots, light brown tunics, chain mail around their chests and bellies, large black belts around their waists,

The Wizard's bear-headed staff

helmets on their heads and backpacks on their backs. The dwarfs look identical, most probably because they are brothers. All have dark bushy hair, long black beards hiding large full lips, large flat noses and deep-set dark brown eyes.

The only way to tell these three dwarfs apart is by observing the weapon they choose to carry. Igralf, as he is called, has an iron hammer which could, if wielded correctly, cause the earth to move violently. Gendralf carries a large axe which can chop through the largest of trees with one swing, and Wattlespalf wields a sword which can cut through stone itself. The weapons of the three dwarfs were all forged in the north-eastern mines of this land; all were made of the same metal and all have a touch of magic added to them.

"Greybeard," the dwarfs holler. Greybeard is one of many names this wizard is known by and the most common one used. One by one they hug the wizard, and in turn Greybeard hugs each and every one of them back.

"Please come in, Igralf. Good afternoon, Gendralf. Wattlespalf, you look very fine today."

The dwarfs head straight into the kitchen in search of food and ale. Dwarfs are partial to the finer things in life, and will always seek those finer things out before committing themselves to idle chatter.

In the kitchen there is a large iron stove burning brightly. A pan sits on top of it, and inside the pan is the rabbit stew that Greybeard talked of earlier. It is filled with potatoes, carrots, peas, lentils, sage, rosemary and thyme – oh, and rabbit, of course. Rabbit stew wouldn't be rabbit stew without rabbit in it. The smell of the stew infuses the air in the kitchen and it is glorious.

"Ah, smell that hearty stew. Greybeard, it smells better than my own grandmother's cooking," enthuses Igralf.

"Anything is better than grandmother's cooking," laughs Wattlespalf. "Although, saying that, the stew does smell absolutely delicious."

"It is obvious to me that you have been practising becoming perfect in pastimes other than magic since your retirement, old man," compliments Igralf.

"I am not retired, Igralf, and as for age, I still have many, many years ahead of me… so less of the old," grumbles Greybeard.

Towards the back of the kitchen is a long, wooden table with eight wooden chairs. There are two bottles of blackberry wine on the table, surrounded by a number of clay mugs. Three freshly-cooked loaves, a block of churned butter, bowls and spoons also grace it. Nearby, on two stools, sit two kegs of ale.

"I see that you have got us some ale," says Gendralf eyeing up the brew. "There is nothing better than a strong ale after a long journey's end."

"May we?" asks Wattlespalf, gesturing his head and eyes towards the ale.

"Of course you may," replies Greybeard.

At Greybeard's response, all three rush towards the table. Each grab hold of a mug, run over to the kegs and pour the ale into them, before supping it quickly down their throats.

"Be warned, you three. It is a strong brew, and as we have much to talk about, I don't want you falling over yourselves – or worse, asleep! Besides, I am expecting other guests soon and I can't have you making fools of yourself," the wizard says grumpily.

"I will heed your advice. Don't worry," comments Igralf.

"Yep, every word," adds Gendralf.

"I will try my best not to fool anyone," promises Wattlespalf.

Greybeard rolls his eyes.

"Now you have your refreshment, would you mind telling me if you had a good journey or not? You think of your bellies over pleasantries too much, where others think of pleasantries over bellies," continues the old man.

"Oh, sorry. Where were our manners? Pleasantries… erm, yes. Well, we had an eventful journey," informs Gendralf, not declaring whether it was a good or a bad one.

"Yes, especially at night. A lot of creatures are stirring, mainly the bad sort," reveals Wattlespalf.

"They are becoming more confident – a plethora of unpleasant things, the ogres, and goblins and other foul beasts. It is a long time since we have had to keep our wits about us even at night," interjects Igralf. Greybeard is unsurprised and remains silent.

"Needless to say, we had a lot of enjoyable battles, though all were small and easy to overcome," hollers Gendralf.

"I take it we can help ourselves to the stew?" asks Wattlespalf.

"It is there to be eaten," replies Greybeard.

No sooner has Greybeard made his reply when there is another knock at the door.

Knock, knock!

The old man makes his apologies to the dwarfs, leaves them mid-conversation, runs to the front door and opens it.

Standing out in the cold are two young-looking men, well armed, tall, slim, weather-beaten and with deep blue eyes. Both are dressed in long, brown leather coats, which drape against their ankles, and underneath they wear white collarless shirts, dark hemp canvas trousers and brown leather boots. Again, these two are obviously brothers, though distinguishing them is quite easy. Stryker has long, dark hair, is unshaven and has a broadsword strapped to his back. Forester, in contrast to his brother, has short hair, a clean-shaven appearance, a bow over his left shoulder, a quiver of arrows over his right, as well as a sheathed sword hanging from a belt holding up his trousers.

"It is a long time since we have seen you, old friend," Forester says quietly and gently, his voice deep but clear, "but it is a blessing to see you all the same."

Stryker continues in the same tone of voice. "It will be interesting to hear why you have called us. I dare say that it can only be exciting news on the back of the journey we have had."

"Hmm, by the tone of your words it sounds as eventful as the journey had by my other guests. You might well be pleased to see them," Greybeard reveals. "Stryker, Forester, come in and make yourselves at home. I have ale, blackberry wine and a stew to greet you. Let us make a little merry and tell each other stories of what we have experienced since we last met." Greybeard smiles and pats both Stryker and Forester on the shoulder as they enter the house.

Walking into the kitchen, Stryker and Forester are greeted by the dwarfs, who have all grabbed a bowl and are ravenously tucking into the rabbit stew.

"Hello… what has the cat dragged in? I can see two vagabonds coming to steal this gorgeous-tasting food and fine ale," teases Wattlespalf, talking with bits of stew running down his beard and a large grin on his face.

"Ha, it is a long time since we've had the pleasure of *your* company. How are you all? Merry yet?" asks Forester with a laugh and a grin.

"Ha! Merry? Remember the last time we met? We shared an ale or two, and if I remember rightly, you two were passed out at the end of the night," Igralf says jokingly.

"That's right! We had to carry you two to your beds. Isn't that right, Wattlespalf?" Gendralf goads the two new arrivals.

"Yes, I think you're absolutely right," confirms Wattlespalf. "It is safe to say that these two cannot take their ale at all."

Stryker and Forester can be seen visibly wincing. The dwarfs snigger and Greybeard pulls a wide grin, enjoying the banter and horseplay.

"So, Greybeard, can we partake in this stew before these pigs clean out the pan?" asks Forester.

"Less of the pigs," shouts Gendralf, pulling his nose out of his bowl.

"Of course you can. Grab a bowl and help yourselves," gestures Greybeard. "I've also made a cake with the finest jam and cream for afters. If the stew is not enough to fill you, that is."

The room goes quiet. A few sniggers and then all-out laughter fills the room.

"What?" asks Greybeard. "It is a lovely cake." His cheeks fill with a red hue, as he becomes more and more embarrassed at his friends' playful derision. The laughter gets louder.

"The last few years must have been very interesting, making stews and baking cakes," patronises Igralf.

Greybeard's embarrassment at Igralf's jest is quite clear, but the wizard has a wizardly retort. The old man is not going to let himself be outdone by a dwarf. Turning his head away from the others, so no one can see or hear him, he mumbles, "Bubbilous mouthir."

Igralf's laughter suddenly turns to a cough and then, as if by magic, clear bubbles begin to come out of his mouth (of course it was magic). One by one they leave Igralf's mouth until dozens of bubbles float around the kitchen, popping randomly.

Pop, pop, pop.

Igralf looks at Greybeard, mouthing curses at him, but as he

does even more bubbles are created. The others, including Greybeard, laugh hysterically at the absurdity of what is happening.

"Sorry, Igralf. It was a little unfair of me to use my magic on you as I did," the wizard apologises, ending Igralf's blushes with the wave of a hand.

As suddenly as it started the last bubble leaves Igralf's mouth.

"Yes, that was unfair, you old goat. Obviously you have lost your sense of humour during your self-imposed exile."

"I've said I'm sorry, but you've got to admit it was funny. My 'self-imposed exile', as you call it, has not drained me of my humour, so much as changed it a little," protests the old man.

"Yes, well, I suppose I would have found it funnier if your trick had been aimed at someone other than myself. Just make sure you don't do it again."

"Of course I won't, I promise," assures the wizard. "Hmm, bubbles. Yes, of course. Have you all finished your stew?"

Everyone nods.

"Then I'll set about the washing up," comments Greybeard, staying firmly seated.

"No, please let us do that. You have been too kind to us already," offers Stryker.

"You are my guests. Please, it will only take me two seconds. Watch!" Everyone looks at the wizard, wondering what he might do. "Washus Uppus," the old man mumbles. And with that, the plates, knives, forks and spoons begin to fly up off the table. By the kitchen window is a sink, and in it the plates, spoons and knives are washed clean before a tea towel, held by no hands, rubs them dry. Next to the stove is an old dresser housing all matter of kitchen things. Once dry, well-behaved plates, spoons and knives fly back into the dresser, which opens its drawers and cupboards to let them in.

"Shall we take our conversations into the lounge now the washing up is done?" Greybeard says, pleased with himself. "Better there sitting on comfortable chairs next to a roaring fire as opposed to here on chairs that are stiff and straight," suggests the wizard.

"Oh yes, that would be very nice. Travelling is all very well but the comforts of a home are always welcome, and a nice

comfortable chair would be more than that," Igralf enthuses, stretching his limbs.

"Come on then. Let us all retire and chat some more," Greybeard orders, rising up from his chair.

Dwarfs and men, upon the wizard's suggestion, arise from their seated positions at the dining table and proceed to make their way out of the kitchen, through the hallway, towards the lounge.

Walking into the lounge, cream-coloured walls are the first thing our friends see. Scattered all along the walls are pictures, some drawings and some paintings. Portraits of people and places, past and present, invariably their subject matter.

At the right-hand side of the room there is a large, arched, iron fireplace, a wooden mantle sits atop it and a mirror hangs above the mantle. Logs burn slowly on this fire and the room is warm (in contrast to the wintry chill you can feel outside).

In the centre of the room are two large, wooden settees at angles to each other, adorned with feather-filled cushions and covered with multicoloured blankets in bright reds, greens and blues. The dwarfs, Stryker and Forester jump onto the settees with glee and begin to remove their shoes and socks. Some of the smells which emanate from some of the creatures' feet are very unpleasant and noses turn as horrid whiffs invade them, but they are happy for this comfort.

A handmade green rug sits between the settees and the fireplace. The floors, which were originally a cold stone, are now a soft, warm wood.

After everyone else has made themselves comfortable, the wizard sits in his rocking chair. Positioned right next to the fire, he puts his feet in front of it and lets them toast in its warmth.

So it is, everyone talks and chatters. Time flies by with tales of the past and present. The copious amounts of ale, wine, rabbit stew, cake and nettle tea consumed makes those telling the tales exaggerate and exploit facts, albeit no one tells a lie. Stories told of glorious battles involving the slaying of ogres, goblins, alluan, trolls, barghest and erlking are delivered eloquently. Tales of sword-play satisfies the warrior element in these men. Indeed, these are warriors talking, well-travelled miscreants protecting the boundaries of their kingdoms and others. Some warriors