

Resistance is Feudal

by Barry Lyga

This is not my story. It's the wizard's story; it is *his*, and if God had not seen fit to arrange otherwise, he would write these words.

But I alone am left to tell this tale.

I was only a child when the wizard came to us, but I remember that day well. The sky was cloudless and cornflower blue. It was harvest season, and I was in the field with Da and my three older brothers, gathering the wheat. We would give half to the lord, keep another quarter for ourselves (Ma would make rolls and bread and Da's beer), and sell the balance in the village. Tilling and sowing was hard work, but Da would hear no complaining. "Better to bend your back in a field, Edward," he'd say, "than to break your

leg chasin' a cow or a goat or a damn chicken. Chickens is worst of all.”

A man of serious wisdom, my Da.

I stooped to pull up a weed, and I guess that saved my sight and maybe even my life. I heard a crack like a tree splitting in two. My hair stood on end and my whole body felt like water had frozen along it in a flash, then melted away.

I went blind.

It was just for a second, but I couldn't see. The weed disappeared, present only by touch. The ground dissolved to white nothing.

I heard screaming. The whiteness broke up into patches like clouds, or fog, and drifted away. I looked up.

A few rods away, a fire burned on the field. Two of my brothers ran from it, terrified. Da had been knocked to the ground and wasn't moving. I couldn't see Harold, my oldest brother. Smoke poured up from the ground where the fire's tongues licked.

In the middle of the flames stood the troll.

I gasped and began to back away. It was taller than a rod, its body blackened, as if scorched by the flames, but it stood still, as if the fire did not bother it. Light flickered and glinted from it—it had patches of strange, almost metallic scales, like snakeskin, but rigid and hard. Oily shadows

danced along those parts of its body. It was bald, its pate mottled, one eye surrounded by a protruding ring of scales.

As I watched, Da started to get to his feet. The troll raised its right arm—it was tipped not with a hand, but with some sort of long, thin claw, a single spike that spat a bolt of red lightning. Da screamed and fell down again.

Then a figure came around from behind the smoke and flame. It was Harold, with his hoe and sickle. His hair was burned and one eye was swollen, but he swung the sickle anyway.

Over the crackle of flames, I heard a loud clang as he struck the troll. The troll turned, slapping Harold's weapon out of his hand. Its left arm had a hand at the end, as mottled and decayed as the skin on its head. Harold started to back away, but the troll grabbed him by the wrist and pulled him closer.

I struggled to my feet, casting about for a weapon. I could find only a rock, part buried in the soil. I started to dig it out. Harold cried out. The troll was choking him with its one hand, hoisting him inches off the ground with no effort at all. Harold kicked and flailed. No good.

I finally pried the rock loose. I rose up, turned to throw it—

Another figure had risen up from the ring of flames that now sputtered on the ground. The dust and ash of burned wheat drifted by. The newcomer was

no bigger than Da, but he wore a strange tunic the color of dried mustard, and it seemed to connect to his pants somehow, so that they looked to be all of a piece. He had cuts and bruises on his face, and his tunic was torn. The troll turned to look at him...and raised its lightning wand arm.

I threw the rock.

I had been practicing all summer with my sling; my aim was good. I hit the troll in the back of its head. It jerked, and turned to look at me, fixing me with that strangely armored eye. I panicked and would have run if not for a sudden high, piercing sound.

The newcomer, the man standing in the flames, had brought up some sort of wand and a blast of bright lightning flared out at the troll.

He was a wizard! Using a magic wand to blast at the troll!

The troll lurched backward, turning to the wizard again. It threw Harold down to the ground. The air came alive with bolts of crimson lightning, flashing and wheeling in the clear day. Nearby wheat caught fire and burned to dust almost instantly.

Soon, they were so close that they stopped throwing lightning at each other. Instead, they grappled and fought. The wizard put his wand against the troll's head and I saw a great explosion of light. The troll screamed once, its voice something like the stretching sound leather makes when boiled in

the smithy. It smashed its heavy lance-like arm into the wizard, knocking him down, then turned and fled up the hills, out of the fields and into the wilderness.

Da groaned, and Harold crawled to him. Edmund and William, my other two brothers, were long gone, having run away already. Harold held Da's head in his lap.

I walked over to him. "Is he all right?"

Harold was bleeding where the troll had hit him, coughing from the smoke and from being choked. "I think so."

The fires died down, leaving a ring of scorched turf on the field. And in the middle of it lay the wizard.

I went to him. He lay sprawled there on the ground, dead. His garment, now that I was closer, was black and gold, shiny, as if wet. I'd never seen anything like it.

I knelt down next to him. His magic wand lay next to his hand, and there was a wallet near him. I wanted to touch it, but I was afraid. I had heard tales of what wizards carried in their pouches.

What could we do? We would have to bury him, but where?

And then he opened his eyes.

Five weeks passed.

“Edward!” I shrank at the sound. Da was yelling for me again. I felt as though the only time I ever heard my Christian name was when it was bellowed.

“Edward! God damn your eyes, you lazy skulk-about! Get in here!”

I was outside, near the little shed where the wizard lived. The troll’s lightning had almost killed Da. Ever since then, he’d been unable to work hard. His heart would start to pinch and pound whenever he did too much. That left me and my brothers to work the fields. Along with the wizard.

He didn’t like being called a wizard, claimed he knew no magic. But I had seen him use his wand that day. I knew the truth.

At first, when he’d finally woken up, he hadn’t been able to talk. Well, that’s not true. He spoke, but not English. It sounded like it might be English, but it had strange words to it. Every now and then, I’d pick out a word—man, woman, church—but they were pronounced wrong, as if he was strangling on something. He was speaking in tongues, I knew. Strange words. I tried to write them down as I sat over him. (Harold and Edmund and Ma took care of Da. But I was intrigued by the wizard, and I watched over him while he tossed and thrashed in his sleep.)

He said strange things like “starfleet” and “endeavor” and “warpcoreflux,” none of which made any sense. Magic incantations to heal himself.

He recovered after a few days, began speaking again, but couldn't remember anything before he had appeared in the field. He didn't even remember using his magic wand to drive off the troll. I had been afraid to touch his wallet or wand, so I had left them in the field when we helped him to the house. A few days later, when he felt better, we went back to the field. A blackened circle marked the spot where he and the troll had appeared. By now, he had beard growth on his cheeks and he wore proper clothing: an old pair of Da's breeches and a woolen shirt with cloak. He still couldn't speak, cocking his head when I talked, as if he understood partly. Certain words would make his eyes light up, as if understanding lurked somewhere in his mind but could not come forth, like a creature afraid to leave its lair.

He took up his wand and wallet without fear, studied them, then shrugged, indicating that they meant nothing to him...

But that wasn't it. They meant *something* to him, but he wasn't sure what.

Ever since then, the wizard had become my responsibility. Da wanted nothing to do with him, but Ma wouldn't let us turn him out of doors, especially after I told how he'd fought the troll, which surely would have

killed all of us otherwise. Da had allowed the wizard to live in the old tool shed. The roof leaked horribly, worse than the house's roof, but he took it. Da made him work the fields, to make up for the fact that Da couldn't work any more. The wizard spent every spare minute in his little shed, looking at the strange tunic-pants he'd worn that day, and the magic implements in his wallet.

“Edward!” Da yelled again. He probably wanted another flagon of ale. “Get your lazy arse in here or I swear by God, Christ, and John that I'll have ye tonsured before the sun sets!”

That was Da's latest threat—to send me off to the monastery up in Dunberry. I was no good for fieldwork, he claimed, and would be better off in the monastery, where at least I wouldn't waste his time and food.

I kicked the dirt and went back into the house. Da lay covered in a blanket near the fire, coughing. “*There* you are, you layabout! Skulker! When I call your name, you come, you hear? You hear?”

I nodded and mumbled something.

“And talk clear! I can't understand you half the time, talkin' under your breath like that! Cursin' my name, no doubt!”

“No, Da.”

“I give you food, clothes, roof, and you curse my name, you do!”

“No, Da.”

He sniffled, his face red. He’d lost weight in the time since the troll attacked him, and what weight was left had settled in his jowls and his waist, like it was dragged down his body. “Get me my mead.”

“Yes, Da.” I took his horn from him—my fingers brushed against his clammy skin for a moment and I shuddered, pausing. Da’s eyes lit up and he clouted me on the side of the head. He had lost weight, but he was still a big man. My head rang and it felt like a fire started under my left eye.

“Hurry!” he barked. “None o’ yer layin’ about! When I give you a God-damned chore, you’ll do it right away, by Christ!”

I held back tears as I nodded, apologized, and ran out to the mead barrel. I filled Da’s horn and ran it back to him. I wanted to leave as soon as Da had his drink, but he grabbed my wrist and held me there as he drank his first. I watched him, gulping and greedy.

“Useless, scrawny...” He wiped his lips with the edge of the blanket. “Get out in the field! If you can’t help your brothers with honest work, maybe they can use your useless skinny body as a rake!”

He shoved me away from him, and I gladly let him, then ran out the door, around the back of the house, to the shed, where I finally let the tears come. I leaned against the old, splintered timbers and sank to the ground, crying.

I hated him! I hated Da! His stinking breath and his wheezing and snoring that kept me up all night, and...and...*everything!* I hated him! I kicked at the ground with my heel, chunking out a bigger and bigger hole with every blow.

After a while, I stopped crying—the rhythm of kicking the ground calmed me down.

I heard something behind me. I turned to face the shed, peered in through a gap in the timbers. The wizard was sitting on his straw pallet, his legs drawn up under him. He had the magic wand in his hands and was turning it over and over. At one point, he pointed it at his face and squinted at the end. I caught my breath. What if it went off?

He shrugged and put it down. I kept watching. He took up something else—black and small, hinged like a clam. He opened it. I gasped—what if it ate his face?

He paused and turned. He had heard me! I froze, desperate not to make any more noise, but he came over to the wall, hunkered down, and peered through the gap. “Edward? It’s you, right, Edward?”

I didn’t say anything.

“Edward, it’s all right. I don’t mind. Come on in.”

I had seen a wizard with his secret magic items, and he still wanted me to

come in! Maybe... maybe I could be his apprentice! Maybe he would teach me magic, and I could learn how to conjure...

And no more beatings from Da.

I went into the shed. The wizard smiled and motioned for me to join him.

“You don’t have to be afraid. I won’t hurt you. I probably owe you my life.”

“Will you teach me magic?”

His face fell. “Edward, we’ve discussed this before. I don’t *know* any magic.”

“That’s not true!” I pointed at the wand where it lay. “I saw you use that! Against the troll!”

“I don’t remember that. I don’t remember *anything*. You know that.”

“But—”

“Look. I can read these things, but they don’t mean anything. Look at this.” He showed me the magic clam. It had a piece of glass inside, with colors swimming on it, like when a bit of oil is spilled in a puddle of rainwater.

Stranger still, some of the colors formed letters. I recognized the letters, but they didn’t make words I knew.

“This says,” and then he said something I couldn’t understand. It sounded like “purse-uh-null ih-murge-encie bee-kin.”

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” he complained.

“Then how do you know how to pronounce it? Maybe it’s another language. Maybe it’s your wizard’s cant.”

“I don’t know how I know. I just *do*.” He frowned. “Can you hear that?”

I fell silent, listening. The little clam he held was making a sound, like a bird’s chirp, only not as pretty. It came every few seconds.

“I don’t understand any of this.” He was getting more and more frustrated. He pulled another item out of the wallet—a black and gold box. It had knobs and wheels on it, and things like looked like buttons, only they were sunken inside it so that you could press them with your fingers. “When I push these two”—here he did so—“it says:” More words I couldn’t understand: “Enviern-mint saaf. Class-emm.”

“What does that mean?”

For a moment, I thought he’d get angry, but then he just sighed. “I don’t know. I feel like...like there’s a hole in my head. And all of my memories, everything I ever knew... It’s all in that hole.” He looked at me sadly, then his eyes narrowed. “What happened?”

“What do you mean?”

He touched my chin with a finger and turned my head to one side. “You’re bruised here. Did your father hit you again?”

I flinched. “Yes. So?”

“It doesn’t seem right.”

“Right? Da can do whatever he wants.”

“But it’s not...” He was struggling. “I don’t know how to explain it. Parents shouldn’t hit their children. I know that, somehow.”

That didn’t make much sense. “Then who should?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, if parents shouldn’t hit their children, who should? *Someone* has to.”

He stroked his beard. “No. I think— I think *no one* should.”

I laughed. I couldn’t help it. The wizard would sometimes speak strange ideas like that. Like the time he told me I should be glad that all we have to eat is vegetables, not meat and pastry like the lord and lady. Sometimes something would pop out of that hole in his head. It drove Da to distraction, all these crazy ideas.

“You keep saying things like that,” I told him, “and they’ll shave a cross in your head.” He looked puzzled. “That’s what they do to crazy people,” I told him. “To drive out the spirits.”

He opened his mouth to say something, but just then, Da screamed for me again. “Edward! Edward! Where are you?”

I leaned out the door. “I’m outside, Da! I’m—” I thought quickly. “I’m building a rabbit trap!”

“The hell you are! I can tell by your voice! Stop wastin’ your time with him! And tell him to get out to the fields!”

The wizard put his magic items under his bed. “Your father doesn’t like me.”

“Da doesn’t like anyone. Not since the troll hurt him so bad.”

“And since I came with the troll, I guess he blames me.”

“He shouldn’t. You stopped the troll from killing us all.”

The wizard stood and stretched. “Did I? I wish I had.” And with that he went out into the fields, leaving me alone.

I sat under a tree near the edge of the fields, and listened to the scream.

I had been wrong, and the wizard had been right. He had only stopped the troll that one day. In the time since, the troll had come to the village several times, always in the dead of night, sweeping a magic light over the huts and pathways, a reddish glow that frightened away even the shadows.

At first, some of the men tried to fight it, rushing it with blades and rocks.

They stopped trying that after the first funerals.

It took things. Gold rings. Bits of copper. Iron from the smithy. And

sometimes...

Sometimes it took *people*.

From a cave on the outskirts of town, we heard horrible noises. High-pitched whines like the lightning wand. Banging. And screams. Awful, horrible screams.

“We need to stop it,” the wizard said once to a group of men. “We know it lives in the cave. We need to go and kill it.”

But no one would go. There were six new tombstones behind the church, after all, and plenty of people in town. Good odds that on those occasions when it stole a body, it wouldn't be yours. And who would miss a little gold, a little copper, a little iron...if you still had your heart in your chest?

I listened to the scream. It was high and keening. A week ago, my friend Gwendolyn had vanished at night. I recognized her voice and I hated myself for being small. And afraid.

The sun went down, and Harold and the others—including the wizard—came in from the field. Da grumbled and complained that they'd probably ruined the crops, we'd have another bad yield, he'd show 'em how to do it, if he could only get out of the damned house.

Ma put food out. We prayed. I reached for a roll.

“No!” Da smacked my hand. “You lie around all day, day-dreaming about magic and wizards”—he glared at the wizard here—“while your brothers sweat. Let them at it first.”

I waited until everyone else had taken their food. A trencher came around to me. “I *did* make a rabbit trap,” I said quietly. I had made it while sitting under the tree, listening to Gwenny. It was a good trap. We’d have plenty of rabbit meat.

“What did you say?” Da asked.

“Nothing.” I bent to my food.

“You said something. Something about a rabbit trap.”

I looked up. Across the table, the wizard was watching me. His eyes flashed. They were green, like old copper.

“I made a rabbit trap today, Da. A good one. I didn’t lie around. I did something.”

“A *rabbit trap!*” Da laughed. “Well, that’s good, son! In a whole day, you made a trap that catches a bunny! Why, look around!” he gestured to the entire table—my three brothers, the wizard, Ma. “How many rabbits do you suppose you can catch in a day with your trap? Enough to make maybe one bowl of stew...after you give your tithe to the lord and lady?”

Ashamed, I looked down at my trencher. He was right. It was only one—

“Look at me when I talk to you!” He swept out his hand, knocking my trencher to the floor. Hot vegetables and broth spilled out onto the dirt.

“Da!”

“What? Are you going to complain? Why should you eat what you don’t grow?” He cuffed me on the side of my head. “Pick up your food and eat it.”

“But—” I looked at it, oozing there on the dirt floor.

“Pick it up!” He grabbed my hair and dragged me off the bench. I fell to my knees in front of my food. I heard Da’s breath coming hard and fast.

When I looked up, he was sweating and red, but he didn’t care. “Get it! No waste! No waste in this house but you!”

I bent to my task, picking up the food, trying to get as little dirt as possible as I put it back into the trencher. Footsteps came to me, and then the wizard was kneeling down, helping me.

We got as much as we could into the trencher, which he brushed off and put back on the table. Then he helped me onto the bench. I thought he would go back to his place at the table. Instead, he stood by me, drawn up to his full height, waiting patiently until Da finally looked up from his meal. “What?”

“Sir, you’ve been...kind to me these few weeks. And I’ve tried to repay that kindness with hard work in your fields, and respect and silence in your house and at your table. But I’ve decided that I won’t let you hit this child again.

Never again.”

Da choked and coughed. His face went bright red until he was able to catch his breath again. “*You’ve* decided? And I suppose you’re King Aethelred himself, to make such a proclamation?”

“It isn’t right. I won’t let you hit him.”

“Oh? Really?”

“If you try again, I will stop you.” The wizard clenched his fists. “However necessary.”

I heard something behind me. Harold had gotten up at some point and was coming up behind the wizard with a rake.

“Look—” I started.

“You’ve overstayed your welcome,” Da said, and Harold brought the rake down.

“No!” I cried. The wizard spun just in time, bringing up his arm to block the blow. Harold stepped back, raised the rake again—

I jumped up and stood between them. “Don’t do this. No one has to be hurt.”

I felt the wizard’s hand on my shoulder. “That’s right. No one has to be hurt.”

“Get back to the shed,” Da grumbled. “Take your foolish things and get

out. I've given you enough of my hospitality."

The wizard patted me on the shoulder again, then brushed past Harold and went to the door. I watched Harold lean the rake against the wall and take his seat. Then I ran to the door myself.

"Edward!" Da called, but I went outside. I found the wizard in the shed, rocking back and forth on the floor, as if in a fit. "You have to go," I hissed. "I can help you find a place to sleep. But Da's mad. He'll have Harold kill you if —" He wasn't paying attention to me. "What wrong? What—"

He waved me into silence and sat there, holding his head in his hands. "My head's spinning," he said. "I don't know what— Just be quiet, OK?"

"Be quiet what?" I asked. "Oh-kay?"

"Yes. OK. It means..." He stopped. He sat up, holding his head as if it would fall off. "OK. God. You don't know what OK means, do you?"

"No. Is it a magic—"

He giggled. "You don't know, but I do. It's... Oh, God! Of all things to make me— OK! OK!" Over and over, the magic word, the incantation, chanting it until he stopped laughing and threw back his head with a sharp intake of breath, as though in tremendous pain. "Oh, it's all in there! It's all coming back!" He started babbling in his strange tongue: "Fire in the warp core. Shields down and the sensors picked up transporter residue in the engine

room. You see?” He grabbed me by my shoulders, his eyes alive and dancing like there were rushlights behind them. “We’d been boarded. The main ship was destroyed, but even one drone could wreak havoc, especially near a computer core. I went to investigate and...and...” He let me go and fell back, closing his eyes, lost. He gritted his teeth. I could *feel* his anguish, even though I couldn’t understand a word he said. “It had plugged into the power conduits and the artificial intelligence. Power was ramping up. Drive thrusters shut down, but the core kept rising. Warp eight-point-five and accelerating, all while the ship was standing still. Chrono... Ah, God, why didn’t I think of it? Chronometric pressures would have been too much. Tachyon regurgitation on a nanoscopic level...”

I took a step back. Any moment now, I expected his spell to conjure a dragon or a sprite, something to kill Da for daring to cast him out. Maybe burn the whole village for the insult. I just hoped he would remember I had always been nice to him.

He kept up his incantations: “The odds are astronomical. A self-contained chrono-phasic event. I only survived because of my proximity to the—”

He stopped. He looked up at me again, terror in his eyes. When he spoke again, it was in English, and he said two things that chilled my heart solid.

“Edward, it’s not a troll. What year is this?”

We gathered his things quickly and left the shed before Da could send Harold out to make sure he was gone. We went to the tree where I'd spent my day whittling and building my trap.

“So you remember everything now? All of your magic and your past?”

“I'm not a wizard, Edward. I told you that from the beginning, and it's true.” He rummaged in his wallet and took out the lightning wand. I had seen him handle it before, but this time was different. *This* time, he knew what to do with it.

“Charge is low,” he muttered. “Great.” He took out the magic clam and opened it. “No good. Nothing in range. Of course not. What was I thinking? It's 1002 A.D.”

“Are you going to go back to your wizard's lair now?” The thought both frightened and thrilled me. I didn't want him to leave...but maybe he could take me with him.

He stopped and put his things back into the wallet. “I can't go back to where I came from. No one knows I'm here. And even if they did, there's no way to come for me.”

I jumped up. This was almost as good! “Then you can stay! You have your memories and your magic now! You can stay and we can—!”

“Stop it!” He took my hand. “Calm down. Look, I can’t stay. There’s a—”
He grimaced, frustrated. “Your English is too old. It doesn’t have the words I need. There’s a law where I come from. It says that when we go someplace new, we can’t interfere with that place.”

“I don’t understand.”

“These things...” He opened the wallet to show me the three magic items and his tunic. “Just by their presence, they can change things. And me being here...”

Just then, we heard a scream. From the cave.

“And *it*.” He gritted his teeth. “I have to face it. I have to destroy it.”

My eyes widened. Fight the troll? So many had died! Even with his wand, did he stand a chance?

“You can’t! Why can’t we just run away? Let the village worry about the troll!”

“I don’t think you understand, Edward. If the...if the troll is able to take over your village...” He paused, thinking, his eyes sliding skyward. “He could make you start mining.” He kept talking, but he wasn’t talking to me any more. He was talking to himself. “Mining. Of course. You could mine iron and copper, gold for conductors. It would take a while. But he could spread out. Take most of the country in short order. Even the Egyptians had primitive

batteries.” He punched his palm. “It’s not even a question of technology, don’t you see? It’s a matter of free labor! With enough people and enough time, he could build a prototype communicator. It would probably be ten kilometers across, but that doesn’t matter. He just needs to use it once.”

“Kilometers?” I asked. It was only one of the words I didn’t understand, but it was the most recent, too.

“Miles,” he said, and went on. “He could broadcast a signal, hook up to the collective... They’d be here in a century or two. Not even the Renaissance yet. You’d have no shot at all.”

“I don’t understand what you’re saying.”

He sighed and pulled himself upright. “No. Of course you don’t. I need to fight him.”

“He almost killed—”

“I know. But this isn’t about me. This is about everything. If I don’t stop him... Look, I know this is difficult for you to imagine, but if I don’t stop the troll, he’s going to do something worse than kill people. Imagine a million trolls with, uh, lightning wands.”

I pictured it in my head. Legions of them, marching through the village, sweeping their red eyes and their lightning over everyone...

“Now imagine them turning everybody you know—and even everyone you

don't know—into trolls, too.”

I swallowed. Hard. I thought of Gwenny’s screams. “Is that—is that what it’s doing in there? Turning them into trolls?”

He stroked his jaw, then shook his head suddenly, as if surprised by his own beard. “Could be. I wouldn’t doubt that it’s trying.” He took out the lightning wand again, studied it. “One shot,” he said. “One shot at maximum power. That’s my only chance to kill it.”

“What do you mean?”

“There’s only so much lightning in the wand, Edward.” He looked out over the trees and the waving grasses of the field. Towards the hills and mountains to the west, the thin line of setting sun, and the cave. “Only so much lightning.”

We shared more words, and then he took the magic gold and black box, and did some sort of reckoning with it. “At least this works,” he muttered. “Tricorder’s picking up his wavelength...”

He ruffled my hair and went west, towards the cave. But I cried out and ran after him. He stopped, turned, and hugged me, fiercely, like Ma. “You be good, Edward. Keep building your traps. It’s all right to use your mind instead of your back.”

He broke the clinch and kept walking. He walked past the shed and past the house. I followed him at a distance, hesitated, stopped at the house. Inside, the warm light of the fire set the window aglow and spilled light through the gaps in the timbers. The sun down, it was already cold outside. I shivered.

Da yelled from within. “Edward! Edward, get in here now! I see ye out there! Get in here right now and help your ma with the cleanin’!”

The wizard grew smaller and smaller, more and more faint as he receded into the dark and the distance.

“Edward! Now, God-damn your eyes!”

“No,” I whispered. “No, God-damn *your* eyes. He’s *already* damned ‘em, ‘cause they don’t see a thing.”

I ran after the wizard, my breath hot in my chest, puffing out into the chill night air. My strides were short and slow compared to his—I fell behind, running, desperate to catch up, only falling more and more behind.

“Wait!” I shrieked, tears burning like my lungs. “Wait for me!”

But it was no good. I came to a stop, collapsed on the ground. He was gone. I had waited too long to follow.

As I lay there on the cold, damp ground, it hit me: I didn’t have to follow him! I already knew where he was going—the troll’s cave!

I picked myself up off the ground, renewed. I ran with all my strength, my legs pistoning, my feet kicking up sod. I knew exactly where to go, whether I could see him or not.

By the time I got to the cave, it was too late. Some hellish red light burned from within. I heard screams.

I danced back and forth from one foot to another. I had to make water fiercely. I was terrified.

And then I thought of the wizard in there, all alone. And Gwenny.

I charged inside. It was hell in there, just as the monks and traveling priests preached it would be; a knothole in the side of the hill, filled with shadows made bloody by crimson light. I saw bodies—some I recognized, some I thanked God I could not—scattered about the ground like trash, torn open, with glistening bits of gold and iron jammed into them.

A squeal came. It was familiar. Lightning again. But whose?

I pressed deeper into the cave, where the shadows ran from the boiling reddish light. The wizard was hiding behind an outcropping of rock, clutching his magic wand. The troll was deeper in the cave—it almost melted into the darkness...if not for that glaring, baleful red eye and the flash of its own wand.

What was he waiting for? Why was the wizard hiding?

There's only so much lightning, he'd said.

A blast of lightning from the troll shivered the outcropping where the wizard hid. I noticed now that he was hurt—bleeding, his clothes torn, barely able to keep steady as he braced himself with one hand on the ground to keep from collapsing out into the open.

The outcropping shook with lightning again. The troll said something in the same wizard's cant that the wizard used. The wizard groaned and leaned forward a bit.

I wasn't thinking. Then again, even if I *had* been thinking, I imagine I'd still have done the same thing.

I ran towards the wizard.

The lights in the cave changed. I risked a look over my shoulder. The troll was turning to me, bringing its wand-arm up.

“EDWARD!” the wizard screamed. “NO!”

I was dead. I knew it. But I turned away from the troll and looked ahead, at the wizard. He would be the last thing I would see—

I heard another explosion of lightning, high and piercing, but my body did not melt or fall into a thousand pieces.

I crashed into the wizard, who had struggled to his feet, holding himself erect against the outcropping. He was aiming his wand at the troll, who had

been distracted by my charge across the cave. The blast of red lightning was brighter and lasted longer than any other I'd seen. At its end: the troll, caught in a pose of shock and surprise.

And then, as I watched, the troll screamed—the cursed thing itself finally screamed as it exploded into nothingness.

The wizard slumped against the wall of the cave, his chest heaving. I bit back a cry at the sight of him. His clothes and beard were burned, his hair gone in patches from his dome. He looked at me dully, then dropped to his knees...and then collapsed entirely.

“Edward...” He fought for breath, gulping air like a dry man gulps mead or wine. “Edward, it’s dead.” He tried to get up—the motion inscribed pain over his entire face.

“I know. I saw. Rest,” I told him. “I’ll get the barber—”

He shook his head angrily, though I could tell it caused him greater pain to do so. “No! No. I don’t matter. Listen—” He took my face in his hands and made my eyes meet his. “Listen. The Prime—the law I told you about. I have to follow it. I can’t change things here any more than I already have.”

“But—”

“Take this.” He shoved his wallet into my hands. I forgot my fear of his magic for a moment as he glared at me. “Take it. You have to destroy all of it.

All of the evidence of my presence.”

“All of it?” I echoed.

“Yes. Even my uni— My clothes. The clothes I wore when I came here.

Destroy it all.”

“How? How do I destroy magic?”

He cried out with pain as something deep within him twisted. “Burn it all!” he moaned. “Burn it all!”

“First I’ll get the barber—”

“No! Go now!” He lay flat on the ground, his breath coming faster and faster. “Do it now. If you care at all, Edward, you’ll do it now.”

I realized then that I *did* care. I didn’t *understand*, but I cared. I nodded solemnly and clutched his wallet to my chest. I spared him one final look as his eyes closed.

And then I ran again. I ran as if the troll were behind me, as if the whole world of demons and devils nipped at my heels. I ran faster and stronger than I ever thought I could, bearing for the smithy.

The door was barred, but I spied the low light of the forge within. The smith, Godwyn, never let it die, not even at night. I pounded on the door.

“Go away!” came the cry from within. “Do ye ken the hour?”

“Open up!” I yelled. “Open up for Edward Haraldson!”

“Go away, you brat!”

The wallet and clothes weighed heavy in my arms. My faith flagged. My breath wound down in my chest. I gasped and heaved, unable to talk, and then I took in a breath...

And when I released it, a great bawling torrent came with it. I screamed. I ranted. I bellowed.

I used every curse Da had ever bestowed on me, every foul blasphemy he'd ever hurled in my direction. Almost before I knew it, the bolt to the door sang, and the door flung open. Godwyn towered over me in breeches and nothing else, his great black beard wild around his face, a patch of heavy fur over his chest and stretching to his shoulders and down his arms, where it ended at the forearms, singed off by years of sparks and flames.

He was pale and shaking, and his eyes spoke of fear. I felt, of a sudden, taller than the mountains. A giant. Godwyn, who could lift timbers and split logs, was a pixie before me.

“sblood, boy. Your mouth...” he whispered. “You’ll be tonsured for sure.”

“Let them,” I growled, pushing my way past him into the smithy. “Let them.”

The forge was dim. “I need it hotter,” I told him. He stood there, watching me, dumb. “Hotter!” I yelled, pointing to the bellows.

He fell to, heaving at the bellows, tossing more wood and coal into the forge. When the yellow-red blaze within grew white, I opened the wallet. I took up the lightning wand, that item of such fear and wonderment. Powerless now. I threw it into the fire and watched it melt, then vanish. The gold and black box, with its buttons and wheels and levers, went next. The clam kept chirping, then finally squealed as it melted, then silence.

The wallet and clothes went in last. They did not burn, as I expected, but instead melted like the other things, reduced to a golden and black slurry that purred forth as smoke and finally vanished.

“It’s done,” I said.

“You’ll be tonsured,” Godwyn said again. He was trembling. Actually trembling! “They’ll shave a cross in your head and—”

“Go to hell,” I told him, and left.

I went back to the cave. The wizard lay dead at its entrance, where he’d fallen and entreated me to destroy his things. I thought I might weep, but I found I had no more tears in me. And that was just as well.

I sat next to his body and took his cold hand in mine. “It’s done,” I told him. “I destroyed it all.”

His eyes fluttered open. “Good boy,” he said.

That was ten years ago. In time, he healed. The village, overjoyed that he'd vanquished the troll, treated him as a hero. The best barbers and surgeons tended to him, and many ladies were offered with fine doweries.

But the wizard could not stay. I understood this now. He had his law to follow, after all.

I stayed with him while he healed. I cared for him and aided him as best I could. He watched me while I built my traps, thrilled when I figured out some new wheel or pulley.

"You've a fine mind, Edward," he told me. "Never let anyone take that away from you."

"Fine enough to be a wizard?" I asked once.

And he smiled. "Where I come from, the ones with the fine minds *are* the wizards."

When he was well enough, he packed his meager belongings. Some clothes and some food. Tinder and candles and torches.

"The longer I stay, the better the chance I'll say or do something that shouldn't be said or done," he told me. "I need to go away and never be around people again. It's the safest way. You understand?"

I didn't...but at the same time, I did. "OK," I said, using his own magic

word.

He smiled sadly. “You must promise me that you’ll never say that again.”

I nodded. I would never again abuse the incantation.

That night, I watched him walk over the horizon with his pack over his shoulder, stooped and sad. I went back to the house of my childhood once—just once. I walked past Da, who sat silent and stony at his place by the fire, and took my few things—a knife, some clothes—before I left for good. For the monastery in Dunberry, the place I’d once feared. But a place where I had the days to think and to ponder the mystery of the wizard, and the nights to whittle and create, much to the delight of my brother monks. I made them rabbit traps and sand clocks and a new kind of hoe.

Before the wizard left, he told me his true name. His wizard’s name. But he made me promise never to tell it, never to write it down. “Even my name could change the course of... It could change things,” he said.

And so I’ve kept my word, and I’ll not tell you his name. But I know it. And when I lie out in the monastery field at night, gazing up into the endless sky, the stars a-twinkling and flashing like the sun on a fish’s scales, I whisper it to myself, like another incantation, my own private magic, and I know that all is right in the world.