

EVERYTHING HAS A PRICE

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Everything Has a Price

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First edition September 2025

Published by D. Dante Zehavi

<https://www.ddantezehavi.com/>

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EVERYTHING HAS A PRICE

THEY ROSE UP A spiral staircase made of finely cut limestone, each of their steps returning an echo from the darkness. Sconces holding black iron torches sparked with blue flame as the two figures approached, casting their shadows on the walls—one large and round, the other short and slim—then dimmed and died as the figures grew distant.

Theryn was captivated by the fire, keeping his gaze forward in anticipation of the next set of torches to light up and push away the darkness. And so they did, every time, without fail. He wondered what it was that made them work; how did the torches know when to light up, and when to dim?

He ruled off the mundane explanation first, not necessarily because it was impossible, but because it was dull. Sure, there *could* have been pressure plates under the stone, connected through a mechanism inside the walls to a system of tubes, feeding the torches with oil, and igniting them with a spark. That wouldn't explain the color of the flame, but Theryn was sure there was a way to account for that through non-magical means. Now that he thought about it, he had to admit that a mechanism like that would be rather impressive. But no, this was magic, he was sure of it, and magic had rules.

Was it based on distance? He wondered and hesitated for a moment, hovering his foot over the next step. What would happen if he made his way back down, or stood in place while his father continued upward? If it were based on distance, the next set of torches would—

“Come along, son, we haven’t got all day!” Brevon scolded, his deep voice echoing through the spiral stairwell. He shivered as he heard it return to him and looked ahead into the darkness. He wasn’t nearly as impressed with the torches as his son was; there was an eeriness to it he couldn’t explain, a feeling that they were being stalked by something, or someone.

He shook his head and clicked his tongue, shoving the thought out of his mind, then continued on his way up the stairs. Theryn followed obediently, his book hugged tightly to his chest, and his head lowered with the shame of being scolded.



The stairs ended in an enormous double door, and torches sparked to life, one at each side, as the two of them came before it. The door’s cast-iron surface was etched with a large arcane symbol, the Pentacle of Pentacles, an encircled five-pointed star, with five smaller duplicates at each end of its star-points. Being at the center of the door, the symbol was cut in half by the vertical slit where the two doors met.

Theryn stared at it with wide-eyed recognition; the thick book he held in his hands had an identical arcane mark embossed on its old, wounded cover.

“Alright,” Brevon sighed, short of breath after the long climb. He drew a handkerchief from his jacket and wiped off his brow, then continued to sort out the rest of his clothes in an attempt to appear more presentable. “I hope you are ready, boy,” he said, while tightening a leather belt, hidden under the folds of his belly, then reached beneath his thick beard to straighten the collar of his shirt. “You don’t get a chance like this often... most people don’t get a chance like this at all, so for once in your life, do me a favor and do *not* screw this up!”

Theryn lowered his head again, wide-eyed wonder replaced with another pang of shame. He knew he was a ‘screw up’, in his father’s eyes, in the world’s

eyes, but it wasn't like he was doing it on purpose. He had tried to be good, do things the right way, but somehow, that never seemed to work.

It was all very confusing; sometimes the right way was the right way, but other times it wasn't, and there seemed to be no way to tell which way was which until the situation was resolved. Like that one time, when Theryn stole his brother's toy horse and lied about it. That was the wrong thing to do; the right thing would have been to tell the truth and give it back. But then, on another occasion, when Brevon told a client that a vase which was sculpted three weeks before, was in fact centuries old, well then, *then!* Telling the truth and correcting his father was the wrong thing to do. It didn't make any sense.

People were always like that, they would say one thing and mean the other, and it was impossible to tell what they actually meant, or wanted, or thought—at least, Theryn had no way to tell. That was why he preferred books, especially teaching books, about history, theology, and philosophy, about different cultures and faraway places, about magic and the Five Immortal Realms. They were complicated, and there were many times he couldn't understand them, but they never lied, or tried to mislead, or obfuscate. Books *wanted* to be understood, and so, they said what they meant, and meant what they said, and you either understood or you didn't. And if you didn't... Well, you could always come back later and try again.

People weren't like that, life in general wasn't like that, and when he thought about it, Theryn decided that books were really so much better than life, or people, for that matter.

"Are you listening to me, boy?" Brevon squeezed Theryn's shoulder.

"Yes, father... I-I'll do my best."

"Good," Brevon smiled. "Maybe that book of yours will do some good for a change."

Theryn didn't know what his father meant to imply, but whatever it was, he didn't like it, and his grip tightened around the tome.

It was a tattered old thing, but Brevon thought it could still fetch a good price if sold to the right collector. Unfortunately, whenever he tried to trade it, the

boy would throw a tantrum, and whatever price was offered, it was simply not worth the headache.

Setting his jacket straight, Brevon decided they were ready and reached for the door knocker, but before he even touched it, the doors began to move on their own, creaking and thrumming as they opened inward, revealing a long hall ending in a study. A red carpet covered the floor, paving the way forward, and natural light shone in through several long windows, at the sides of the hall, and at the back end of the study.

“Enter,” said a tall old man with a long white beard, seated behind a shiny wooden desk at the end of the study, his eyes cast down on the many manuscripts before him.

Brevon cleared his throat to release some of his nerves. The old man was alone and far away, and there seemed to be no natural explanation as to who—or what—opened the doors. That, like the blue torches, made the hairs stand on the back of his neck, festering in him a paranoia: that they weren’t alone, that the tower itself was alive, that an invisible force was haunting their every step.

“Yes, the doors opened on their own. No, you are not crazy. Now, could you hurry it up?” The old man dipped his quill in an inkwell. “I am not getting any younger,” his hand moved over the parchment, writing with precise, practiced movements. “My... time... is... rather... precious.” He said absently, his attention divided.

Brevon shook his head, clicked his tongue, and forced himself forward. Theryn followed him in, and both of them startled as the doors began creaking shut behind them. The old man smiled to himself. It was the little things in life.

Brevon let out a nervous chuckle, tipped his flat cap to hide his uneasiness, then rubbed his hands together before clearing his throat. “I’ve heard you are looking for an apprentice, Master Wizard,” he said, barely managing to don his characteristic wolfish grin. Wizard or not, a trade was a trade.

“You have heard correctly,” the wizard’s voice echoed down the hall, his words pronounced slowly, sharply, clearly, and with a dramatic rhythm—as if reciting from a practiced play. “And though I am never one to discourage

another's ambitions—"it is never too late to learn", as they say—I think you are a bit older than what I had imagined for my apprentice, Mr. Fendrick."

"Why, I—" Brevon let out another chuckle. He didn't recall telling the wizard his name. "Um, well... of course I don't mean me," he and Theryn passed the archway at the end of the hall, and entered the study. There were two chairs on their side of the desk, and, without looking up from his scroll, the wizard gestured for them to sit. "I meant my son."

"Aha!" The wizard exclaimed, as if an important point had been clarified. He took a few long moments to finish writing his script, then put his quill to rest in the inkwell, before looking up at the two. He examined Brevon first, and the man became alert as he noticed the wizard's intrusive piercing gaze, his irises as blue as the torches in the stairwell. "Umph..." the wizard grunted, then turned his gaze on Theryn. The boy met his eyes with curiosity and wonder, and the wizard smiled. Then, he noticed the book. "Ah..." he leaned back in his chair.

"What do you have there, boy?" The wizard asked.

"A book," Theryn answered defensively, and his father sent him a displeased glare.

"A book, you say?" The wizard lifted a quizzical brow and reached an empty hand forward. "May I see it?"

Theryn had seen this trick before. It starts with 'may I see it,' becomes 'let me hold it, I just want to check something,' and ends with 'oh, you want it back? Too bad, it is mine now.' The old man would have to do better than that.

"No!" Theryn pulled the tome to the side, away from the wizard and his father. "It's mine, and you can't have it!"

"Theryn!" Brevon yelled, "I am truly sorry, Master Wizard. He can be a bit stubborn sometimes, but I am sure—"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Fendrick, I was under the impression you did not wish to be my apprentice."

"I, ah—" Brevon stammered. "I do not."

"Then, would you please refrain from interrupting me? I am in the midst of conducting an interview with a potential apprentice, and I am afraid that if you continue to interrupt, I might have to... remove you."

Brevon's jaw dropped, his imagination running wild with what 'remove you' might mean practically, or, more likely, magically. "I-I-I— Ah— A thousand apologies, Master Wizard, but... he is my son, I just thought... I was trying to..."

"There'll be time for us to talk, but for now, don't."

Brevon pursed his lips shut, and Theryn blinked in disbelief. He had never seen his father so... compliant.

"Is the book important to you?" The wizard directed his attention back to Theryn.

"Um... yes."

"Why?"

Theryn knew the answer, but didn't know how to communicate it, or how to explain it; he wasn't sure it was even possible.

"I-I don't... I can't..." he searched for the right words, tried to grasp them, desperately, but they all seemed to slip right through his fingers. He felt his father's judging eyes on him and lowered his head. "I like books..." he said eventually. "Books are never disappointed in you."

Both men opened their mouths to speak, but were at a loss for words, and a few long moments passed in silence.

"Have you read that book, cover to cover?" The wizard pointed to the tome.

"Yes, a number of times, but it's missing some pages, so... I couldn't read everything."

"You read through it more than once?"

"Yes, but... It's hard to say how many times exactly, sometimes I'd read a chapter, and it would remind me of something written in another chapter, so I'd jump around, and... then it would happen again with that chapter, and... then I'd have to go to sleep, so..." The boy trailed off.

"Do you understand what the book is about?"

"Yes, a little bit, but there are some parts that are... confusing."

"Like what? If you can think of an example..."

"Well..." Theryn had spent weeks lost in thought over all the questions he had, all the little bits and pieces he hadn't fully been able to understand. Never in his life did he imagine he would have someone to share those thoughts with.

His parents, his brother, his brother's friends, none of them found any interest in those things. And now, when it was finally happening, he was struggling to think of even a single thing. Damn it all! Why now of all times—

“Alright! Here's something!” He said as the thought finally popped into his head. “In Chapter II, the book talks about the Second Precept,” he rose to stand on his chair and laid the book on the desk, opening it and flipping to the right chapter. “*Everything that is, has an exact opposite,*” he trailed the quote with his finger as he read. “That's the Precept of Polarity, right? And the rest of the chapter talks about all sorts of things that have an opposite. Like the Five Realms, which... are really six realms when you think about it.”

“It is a little strange, isn't it?” The wizard agreed.

“Yes, well, there are six realms, and each of them is a... sort of contradiction of the other: Heaven and Hell, Faenir and Felhein, Astral and Mortal. But, because the Mortal Realm is... well, mortal, while the other five are immortal, we don't count it—which is why we call them the ‘Five Immortal Realms’.”

“Right.”

“Well, then there is Chapter IV, that says...” he flipped the pages over, some of which were completely torn from the spine, and were kept inside the book just by the friction applied by their neighboring pages. “This one was difficult to understand, and there are plenty of pages missing, so I'm still not sure I got it, but... *Every pattern is repeated and reflected, above and below, within and without,*” he trailed the words again.

“And what does that tell you?”

“At first, I thought it was just like the Polarity thing, but then I thought... If Polarity itself is a pattern, wouldn't it repeat within itself? And if that is true, then that would apply to the Five Realms as well. So, Heaven, within itself, would have two opposing forces, and so would Hell, and Faenir, and Felhein, and Astral and—”

The wizard squinted at the boy. “And you got that from what you read in Chapter IV?”

Brevon let out an annoyed, sharp grunt. He knew the book was filling his son's head with all sorts of weird and terrible ideas, but two sides to Heaven?

What sort of blasphemy was that? And to say it out loud to the Master Wizard, during an interview no less? He was screwing it up! It was no surprise, really. Brevon should have expected this.

Theryn frowned, becoming tongue-tied. A single grunt was all he needed to know what his father was thinking. He was failing, just like he knew he would. That's why he never held hopes of actually becoming an apprentice. Him? Theryn the wimp? Theryn the bookworm? A wizard's apprentice? Yeah, right.

"From whatever's left of it," Theryn said bitterly, and flipped a few more pages over, showing that a large chunk of the book was missing. "78 pages are missing from Chapter IV alone; all in all, 159 pages are missing, incomplete, or damaged."

"I see," the wizard grinned.

Theryn's brows furrowed. Was the wizard making fun of him? It wasn't his fault the book was so damaged, well, not entirely. In the process of wrestling with his father over the tome, inevitably, some damage was done, and then there was his elder brother, thinking it would be 'funny' to tear up some pages and throw them into the river. But most of the damage was done before Theryn ever laid his hands on the book. "Do *you* know the answer?" Theryn challenged.

"I know many answers. What is your question?"

"Are there two sides to Heaven, and Hell, and all the rest?"

The wizard ran a hand through his long white beard, thinking. "Do you know who wrote this book?"

Theryn pursed his lips. The wizard had changed the subject; he didn't know either. "Eldaron ec Marakin," he said triumphantly, without having to look.

"Do you know what that name means? What the 'ec' means?"

"No..."

"Do you know what my name is?"

"Eldaron... ec Marakin?" The boy asked warily.

The wizard laughed, "Do I look two centuries old to you? Wizards do tend to live a bit longer, but even that is excessive."

"Then..."

“My name is Talador ec Eldaron.”

Theryn looked at him blankly, turning the idea over in his head, trying to guess at what the implication of that was—but before he could reach a conclusion, Talador turned to his father.

“I believe we have a contract to write up.”

Brevon blinked, glanced at Theryn, then looked back at Talador. “Ah... did he... did he pass?”

“How much were you thinking, Mr. Fendrick?” Talador said casually, pulling an empty parchment from one of his drawers.

Brevon grinned and squeezed Theryn’s shoulder, “Well done, boy! Well done!”

The squeeze hurt, but Theryn didn’t mind; he could tell his father’s excitement was genuine, and his encouragement sincere. His father, for once in his life, was proud of him.

“We were thinking that 50 Crowns a month would be a fair price, at least to start with. If you can teach him magic—actually teach him magic—then we can renegotiate in thirteen months.”

Teach him magic, Theryn thought, then realized the ‘him’ was... him. *He* was going to become an apprentice, learn magic, history, the Realms, and all the other things he was always curious about.

“That is unacceptable, Mr. Fendrick,” Talador said coldly.

Theryn’s heart sank, and Brevon cleared his throat, preparing for what he thought was going to be a bit of bargaining. “Well, we can go up to 55 Crowns, but any more than that would be excessive, at least, not until we can see some results.”

“Ah,” Talador frowned, his quill, wet with ink, hovering over the new parchment. “I’m afraid there might have been an error... a misunderstanding.” He put the quill back in the inkwell. “I am not asking you to pay for your son’s education, Mr. Fendrick, but rather, I am hoping to purchase *my* son’s parentage and education from you.”

“I-I wasn’t aware you had a son.”

“I don’t, not yet, that’s what the contract is for.”

Brevon's head spun, trying to follow the Wizard's words and their implication. Contract. Son. Education. Parentage. "You... You want to buy my son?"

"No, no, you've got it all wrong. I am not trying to buy your son... I am trying to buy your fatherhood."

Confusion and befuddlement struck Brevon like a slap to the face, and he became too stunned to speak. Theryn slumped back into his seat, similarly confused.

"Ten years is a long time to raise a boy, I am sure he caused you much pain and trouble, and that you had to spend a small fortune just to feed him, bathe him, clothe him. He has his letters, and I am sure that was quite the investment as well, but whatever it had cost you, I wish to pay it and then some.

"So, now that we have cleared it all up, I should ask again... How much were you thinking, Mr. Fendrick?"

"This is... outrageous..." Brevon said listlessly, his mind still catching up with the sharp turn in the conversation.

"I think one thousand Crowns per year sounds like a good place to start, that would be a sum of ten thousand for ten years. He *is* ten, isn't he?"

Brevon rose to his feet sharply, knocking his chair back, his face red. "I-I will not—" he stumbled over his own anger, unable to get the full sentence out.

"Yes, of course, you are right," Talador put his hand up in a conciliatory gesture. "To buy a man's fatherhood for one thousand per year..." he shook his head. "That was quite rude of me, I'm not sure what I was thinking," he smiled kindly, and Brevon seemed to relax, only then noticing that his hands had been balled into fists. He let them go. "How about two thousand?"

"Come on, Theryn," Brevon snarled. "We are leaving," he turned and began making his way out.

"But—"

"Now, boy!" Brevon yelled, and Theryn made to follow, but... he was torn. The opportunity to study magic was right there, so close, and yet... what of his father? What of his family? Did he really have to leave them behind if he wanted to become an apprentice?

Would he?

Could he?

It wasn't his choice after all, his father had to decide, and his father... His father was finally proud of him. Finally! For once! How could he be asked to turn his back on that? Family was... family. It was important, it meant something, it couldn't be bought or sold, just like that, not for anything... could it?

"Everything has a price!" The wizard declared, and somehow Theryn felt that was directed at him, as if in answer to his thoughts. "As a trader, I am sure you'd agree with that, Mr. Fendrick," but Brevon ignored him, heading for the exit. "You can leave now if you want, but we both know that within a week or two you will remember what brought you here in the first place, and regret turning down this offer."

Brevon Fendrick took three more steps before grinding to a halt, halfway through the hall. His son was beside him, clutching his stupid, rotting book. The boy was useless, too honest and awkward to be a trader, too weak and fragile for any physical labor. The best Brevon could hope for was making an accountant out of the brat, and even that wouldn't be terribly useful considering how small their business was. Traveling from town to town, selling odd trinkets and goods, it wasn't that hard to keep track of things; in fact, Theryn keeping track of things was part of the problem. 'Buy low, sell high,' was a concept too complex for his naive little brain to understand. If they bought something for 30 Crowns, then in Theryn's eyes, it was worth 30 Crowns, and that was that. How could such a hopeless fool be his son? Blood of his blood?

Brevon gritted his teeth, seething, thinking.

"Forty thousand Crowns, Mr. Fendrick. Forty for ten years." Talador said.

Forty. Forty thousand Crowns. That was more money than he had held in his entire life, and he could make it in a single day.

Brevon looked down at Theryn. The boy's black hair was his black hair, and his brown eyes were his, too. He was his son. Blood of his blood. How could he give that away?

"I see," the wizard chuckled, "you drive a hard bargain, Mr. Fendrick. Very well, I am willing to go higher - sixty thousand Crowns. Sixty thousand for your fatherhood. What do you say?"

Brevon squeezed his son's shoulder, "Go outside, Theryn." He smiled... warmly, kindly... fatherly. "Tell your mother I'll be right out."

Theryn lowered his head and obeyed. He didn't notice the doors open up before him, all on their own, to clear his path; nor did he notice the torches light up as soon as he got close, and dim as he drifted away. He wasn't going to be a wizard's apprentice, he wasn't going to study magic, or history, or any of that other stuff... but he wasn't sad, because when it came down to it... When it really came down to it... His father chose him.

As the last torch faded and he reached the bottom of the stairs, the exit—another double door—creaked open to clear the path outside. Sunlight shone in through the expanding slit between the doors, blinding Theryn, and as he raised a hand to shield his eyes, in his heart, he made a promise. He would try harder, he would improve, he would become a better son. His father chose him, and he would do everything in his power to ensure that that was a choice he would never regret.



The Fendricks' wagon was parked only a short way down the trail from the wizard's tower. It was a spacious vehicle, covered by a canopy, and pulled by a strong mule. The Fendricks relied on it for everything; it was their home, their store, and of course, their means of travel.

Domund, Theryn's older brother, stood at the back of the wagon, leaning his back and elbows against it, while Silla lay at the front, across the perch, and under the canopy's shade. Theryn could see her slender legs sway back and forth from the side.

She wasn't their real mother, just a young woman Brevon met on the road and decided to marry. She didn't look half bad and loved children, while he had an income. It was a match made in Heaven.

Theryn's real mother died at his birth, and for a while, he had blamed himself for it. One of the reasons, he supposed, he liked the book so much was that in it, he found an alternative explanation for his mother's death, one that didn't hold him accountable.

The secret lay in the Second Precept: Polarity. Life and death were tied together as exact opposites; it seemed only right then that if one person was born, another should have to die, and only fitting that the one who would die was the one giving birth. And so, considering this, Theryn rationalized that it was natural for a woman to die while giving birth, and the real puzzle was why it didn't happen every time. Indeed, sometimes a child would be born without either of their parents dying, and that—Theryn concluded—was a real crime against the cosmos. It was like humans were cheating the universe. It wasn't fair, and as he thought about it more, he remembered that dogs and cats gave birth in litters. None of it seemed right. He wondered if the wizard could explain it, he should have asked when he had the chance.

Domund noticed Theryn approaching and snorted. "Ha! I knew you'd fail!"

"I didn't fail!" Theryn said, coming to stand before his brother. He was three years younger and one foot shorter. "I passed the test, and he agreed to make me his apprentice!"

Domund frowned at that, and Silla sprang up to her feet.

"Really, Theryn? That's great news!" She said, then looked around. "Where's your father?"

"Um... well, he said he'd be down soon, but, um... I don't think I'll be the wizard's apprentice after all."

"What? Why not?" She thought for a moment, guessing the answer. "Did your father ruin things again by bargaining too much?" She frowned, placing her hands on her hips.

"No, well... not exactly. The wizard, he... he didn't just want me as his apprentice, he wanted me as his son. He tried to buy me."

"Buy *you*?" Domund laughed, "For what, 60 Crowns?"

"More like sixty *thousand*!"

"Wait a moment, the wizard tried to buy you?" Silla said. "That's absurd!"

“He is clearly lying,” Domund scoffed. “Sixty thousand? For a wimp like you? Yeah, right.”

Silla sighed with relief, “You shouldn’t joke about things like that, Theryn.”

“I am not lying! I heard them argue, the wizard offered sixty thousand, and father said no!”

“Then, why isn’t he with you?” Domund challenged.

Theryn opened his mouth to give an answer, then realized he didn’t have one. Why did his father stay behind?

He smiled at me, Theryn thought, he told me to go outside, and that he would come down right after. He wouldn’t have done that if he was going to—

Then, it dawned on him. His father never refused the last offer that was made to him, not explicitly, not outright. Theryn gulped and turned to look at the tower. Silla and Domund did the same.

It was a few long minutes before the tower’s doors opened, and Brevon passed through the archway, carrying a large chest before him with great effort.

Theryn’s face darkened.

Silla put her arms around him from behind and over his shoulders. “It’s fine,” she said, but her voice trembled with uncertainty. “Everything is going to be fine.”

“Domund!” Brevon yelled, his face red and huffing as he descended the stairs leading to the tower’s door. “Don’t just stand there, you oaf! Come help me!”

Domund lingered, his mind still processing what his eyes were seeing.

Brevon went down a step too fast, and as his weight shifted, he tripped, falling to his knees, dropping the chest from his hands. It crashed to the ground, its top unlatching, and gold coins spilled out on the stone steps, dirt trail, and green grass. “Damn it, Domund! Get over here, right now!”

The boy shook, as if waking from a trance, and ran to help his father.

Silla’s fingers tightened into fists over Theryn’s chest, crumpling his shirt into wrinkles. “I knew your father wasn’t a good man when I married him,” she said mournfully, as Brevon began gathering the scattered coins back into the chest, piece by piece. “And Gods know, I am no angel either,” She continued, as Domun caught up with his father, and the two finished collecting the gold, then

latched the lid shut. "But I always believed there were limits, lines we wouldn't cross... that some things..." She choked. "That some things were sacred."

Brevon and Domund carried the chest, holding it between them, slanted to the left as Domund was shorter and reasonably weaker than his father. "Come on, son! Really put your back into it, we don't have long." They wobbled down the trail at a rapid pace and increased their efforts as they reached the wagon, raising the chest to load it onto the cart.

Silla left Theryn, moving with purpose, and pushed Brevon to the side of the wagon, so they were hidden behind it. "What the Hell are you doing?" Is all Theryn heard her say, before the two lowered their voices, arguing in hushed whispers.

"You are welcome to stay if it bothers you so much, *we* are leaving!" Brevon yelled, ending the discussion, and reappeared from behind the wagon. He found the two boys staring at him expectantly. "Go on, get in," he nodded to the side, indicating the wagon.

Domund glanced at his brother, then mounted the back of the cart and got inside. Theryn balled his hands into fists.

He wasn't going to let them abandon him; he wasn't going to be left behind.

With that resolve, he moved to board the vehicle, holding on to his book with one arm.

"Not you," Brevon blocked him.

"But—"

"Got a problem?" Brevon snarled, "Take it up with your father." He threw his arm at Talador, who Theryn was surprised to find standing right beside them. You'd think a man as tall as he was, wearing a long blue robe and a pointy blue hat, and holding a large staff etched in arcane runes, would have more of a presence, but he didn't. He was still, and silent, and watching.

"He is not my father," Theryn stomped his foot. "You are my father!"

"Not anymore," Brevon reached into his jacket and drew out a scroll. "And I got the papers to prove it." He returned the document to his inner pocket and shoved past Theryn to get to the perch at the front of the wagon.

Theryn felt a chill pass through him. They were abandoning him, leaving him behind, and there seemed to be nothing he could do about it—but there had to be, there had to be something!

He threw down his book and lunged at Brevon's leg, clinging to it tightly, as strongly as his slender arms could manage. "No!" He yelled. "Just because it says so on a stupid piece of paper doesn't make it true!"

"Let go of me, boy, you are wasting our time," Brevon tried to pry him off, but Theryn held on. The trader clicked his tongue.

One million, he had demanded after Theryn left. *If you want him, then the price is one million Crowns!*

As I already explained, Mr. Fendrick, Talador responded, a splash of amusement in his blue eyes. *It is not him that I am purchasing, it is your fatherhood, and let us be honest*, his lips curled into a devious smile. *You are not THAT good a father.*

Brevon's nostrils flared at the memory. "Enough!" Frustrated and furious, he grabbed the boy's hair and pulled, peeling him off and thrashing him to the ground.

Theryn fell on his back and remained down, lying at the wagon's shade, curling up, whimpering, and weeping.

"Brevon!" Silla sent the man a smoldering glare and crouched down beside the boy.

He grunted in response. The boy was making it harder than it needed to be. The deal was already made, there was no changing it, and there was no reason to. This was, by all accounts, a good deal. Talador could give Theryn a better future than Brevon ever could have, and with the money they received, the Fendricks would be set for life; they could buy land, maybe even become nobles... Lord and Lady Fendrick.

And little Theryn... Well, he would get to read books as much as he wanted, on whatever topic he wished, and learn magic, to one day become a full-fledged wizard in his own right. This was supposed to be a happy occasion, filled with bittersweet tears and joyful goodbyes. Instead, it was this... violence, and pain, and fury.

And whose fault is that? Brevon thought to himself guiltily. But what else could he do? Admit to his son that he was a bad father? Explain to him that it was all for the best? No. He was too proud for the former, and as for the latter, though his son could be extremely logical at times, he doubted even he could accept such a cold answer.

“Say your goodbyes, woman,” he tried to sound tough, but his voice cracked, and he cleared his throat. “We have places to be,” he added, and climbed to sit on the wagon’s perch.

Theryn cried into her lap, crumpling her hay colored dress, staining it with snot and tears. He knew he would have to let her go soon, but until then, he held on to her as tightly as he could. She ran her fingers through his dark hair and caressed his back, “You are going to be alright,” she told him. “I promise, everything is going to be—”

“Mrs. Fendrick,” Talador said gently. “If I may,” he reached his long, slim-fingered hand to help her up.

She refused his help, getting up on her own, and Theryn rose with her. She intended to send her smoldering glare at the wizard next—he was just as much at fault as Brevon was, proposing a ridiculous trade like that—but when she met his intense, piercing eyes, she hesitated.

“Everything has a price...” he started. “But some things... are priceless,” Talador lowered his head and tipped his hat. “I should consider it my great luck that you were not his birth mother, otherwise...” he let the sentence hang, and Silla wasn’t quite sure how to interpret that. “At the risk of being even more inappropriate than I already am, allow me to say to you just this, Mrs. Fendrick.” Talador raised his head and looked at her squarely. “You deserve better.”

Silla pursed her lips. “People rarely get what they deserve,” she responded coldly.

The wizard opened his mouth to contradict her, but thought better of it. She was wrong, of course—people always got what they deserved. There was no escaping it; it was one of the Five Precepts, one of the laws of the cosmos, but there was no point in arguing.

"If you believe anything, Mrs. Fendrick, believe that I'll take good care of him," Talador said solemnly. "He is my son, in every way that matters."

Silla rubbed Theryn's back, and slowly, he let go of her dress.

"Silla!" Brevon yelled. "Let's get moving!"

The woman cursed under her breath and shook her head. "I need to go, Theryn."

The boy nodded, and she bent down to kiss his head, then... she left.

The wagon started moving, its back wheels slicing through the discarded book, crushing its spine, and sending the old pages flying in the wind.

"No—" Theryn began to protest, but Talador laid a gentle hand over his shoulder.

"Let it go," he said calmly.

As Theryn sniffed and wiped away tears on his sleeve, he spotted Domund sitting at the back of the wagon. His brother locked eyes with him and gave him an awkward wave goodbye. They didn't get along very well, constantly fighting, and Theryn, being younger, received more blows than he had given. But it wasn't all bad; there were some good memories.

Like the time they had stolen apples from Mr. Glent's shop at the market. He had spotted them and even chased them down a long way, but they were quick and small and managed to lose him in the alleyways. Thankfully, they had their faces covered, and he hadn't recognized them; so later, when they heard him complain to their father about the couple of rascals who stole from him, it had taken all of their willpower not to burst out laughing. They were never found out, and those apples were some of the sweetest that Theryn had ever tasted. It was Theryn and Domund's little secret, and they'd both take it to their graves, because despite all of their disputes and disagreements, their teasing and fighting, their lies and betrayals, they were, first and foremost, brothers... used to be... used to be brothers.

"Let it go."

The pages of the book flew far in the wind, and the wagon got further and further away. Theryn kept hoping that they'd stop. That they'd turn back and get him, and throw away the gold, and tell him that they were wrong, and that

they loved him, and that they didn't mean it. But the wagon kept moving, further and further. Until it disappeared beyond the hill.

"Let it go."

Theryn burst into tears again. They had abandoned him; they really did leave him behind.

"Yes, they have left you," Talador said. "But no, you haven't been abandoned, for you are not alone," he drew the boy in, and Theryn cried into the wizard's robe. "You are my son and my apprentice, Theryn ec Talador, and my tower will be your home, for as long as you live."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dante always had a passion for storytelling, regardless of the medium, and has accrued years of experience drawing, role-playing, and writing. His books and art can be found on his website.

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