

HALF A
WIZARD

Also by Stefon Mears

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HALF A WIZARD

Stefon Mears

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Halloween Concept. Male Wizard With Fireball Photo

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For Melissa, as always.

*Many thanks to my father. Among all the other things he
did for me, he was my first Dungeon Master.*

1

WHEN ASSASSINS BURST THROUGH the door, what angered Cavan most was their timing.

After six weeks on the road, half of them just crossing the Dwarfmarches — which smelled just as bad as everyone said they did — Cavan would have liked to pass at least one pleasant evening without someone trying to kill him.

And this inn, the Bent Spike, should have been perfect. First, because it was on the edge of town, so no one important should have had time to spot Cavan, much less pass along his whereabouts to anyone who wanted them. Riverbend wasn't even much of a town, just a way station for those who shipped their cargo down the Red River.

And second, the Bent Spike bustled with people who should have been too busy with their own business to worry about Cavan's. The inn stood three stories tall, the first of fitted stone and the top two of some local green hardwood. Two main rooms on the first floor, on either side of a central kitchen. One full to bursting with travelers and another featuring privacy for those willing to pay extra for a table to themselves instead of sharing space at long bench tables. Cavan and his fellows had even joined the throng in the more public room rather than draw attention by dining in the more private room.

The inn boasted good enough ale to satisfy Amra, and

that alone was an accomplishment unachieved in at least a season (to her constant lament).

And upstairs the Bent Spike featured *private rooms* with private baths on the third floor for those with the coin to pay. Amra and Ehren shared a room on the second floor, but Cavan never skimped when he had coin.

Now he had a corner room all to himself. With six thick beeswax candles in sconces along the greenwood walls, all already lit and filling the room with a pleasant smell and gentle light. Shuttered windows — painted red — that could bar to keep out thieves. A hammered copper bathtub along the wall, already steaming with hot water. Next to the tub a shelf with a copper ewer, a brush, towels, and a yellowish chunk of actual soap.

So much space to call his own. Well, for a night, at least. Six strides across each direction, and Cavan was not a short man. He was long and lean like the warrior he should have been. The warrior he was supposed to be. With swarthy skin and brown hair as soft as his brown eyes could be hard. When he needed them to be.

He had the *look* of a warrior. He still carried the longsword he'd trained with for so long, but he lacked some of the most important instincts. Or at least, that was what Ser Dreng said when he sent Cavan away.

The room's bed was long enough that only his feet dangled off the far end, and wide enough that only his hands dangled when he lay in the middle and stretched his arms to the sides.

That was the first thing he'd done when he finished his dinner — roast duck with barley and carrots — and finally saw just what his coins had bought him for the night.

An actual bed. With pillows instead of a rolled up cloak. And both stuffed with duck feathers. So soft Cavan had almost fallen asleep immediately.

But he'd arranged an assignation with a barmaid named Polli, a slender lass with fiery hair and smiling eyes. And he had no intention of being either asleep or road filthy when she arrived.

So he had hung his undyed roughspun cloak on the hook beside the door, along with his sword belt and pouch. His pack he set beside them on the floor. He stripped off his pale green tunic, brown riding breeches and calf-high leather boots. Those he laid out beside the tub, to see to later.

He might have locked the door. He might have even barred it. But he wasn't sure exactly when the barmaid would arrive and the thought of her entering to find him in the tub was not unpleasant.

But Cavan's life rarely worked out that way.

Thus, he was naked, wet, and soapy when the door burst open.

Two assassins, but not professionals. Members of the False Dawn all wore thin, trim mustaches dyed purple — regardless of their sex — and these two were smart enough not to pretend to be what they weren't.

What they were was free-swords hoping for easy coin.

Shaggy black beards and short, field-hacked black hair. Weather-beaten skin. Gray wool cloaks and leather breast-plates over roughspun. They both had naked steel in their hands, whereas Cavan was only naked. And sitting in a tub full of water.

The assassins laughed.

Cavan shunted power into a double-handful of water, tossed it in the air, and said in a ringing voice, "*Zeha da.*"

Thick white mist filled the room. Cavan slipped out of the tub. He touched wet fingers to his eyes — wet from the water he'd thrown, not redunked in the tub — and whispered another word.

Now he could see through his own mist.

True, Cavan had failed to become a warrior. And he hadn't quite managed to become a proper wizard either, before Master Powys sent him away. But Cavan did have his ways.

So did these assassins, unfortunately. They might not have been from the False Dawn, but they weren't stupid. They already had the door closed and stood back to back, half-crouched, swords waving back and forth to ward off any blind approach. Effectively blocking the only civilized exit.

"Doesn't have to be like this," one said. Rough voice, like something tore in his throat and never healed right. "Offer us your room and your money and we'll forget we saw you."

Interesting. Or a trick to get Cavan to give away his location.

Truth was, Cavan would rather have paid them than killed them. But pay men like this once and more would show up. And more after them. Not a sustainable practice, and besides, it would mean he couldn't afford to treat himself to rooms like this one.

The mist wouldn't last much longer. If only Cavan's sword and pouch weren't on the other side of the assassins, he might have been able to dispatch them easily. But as it was...

Cavan picked up the copper ewer, dumped its cold water into the tub.

The assassins heard, began side-stepping that direction, staying back to back with swords still swinging.

Quietly as he could move, Cavan crossed the length of the tub. The swinging swords getting closer and closer to his naked flesh now, goosebumped as it was after getting out of the nice hot bath. Cavan kept his focus and laid the ewer across the ridge of the copper bathtub.

He shunted power through the ewer.

"Zehanis skul!"

The ewer clung to the tub as though it were frozen in place. And the two swinging swords yanked down at it, flats

of their blades sticking to the ewer as though tub, ewer and blades had all been forged from a single huge ingot of blended metal.

The assassins stumbled as their swords came down, tried vainly to pull them free.

Cavan tackled the closest assassin, the one with the rough voice. Took him to the floor, slamming the assassin's head against greenwood. Dazed him. Cavan had just enough time for a solid punch to Rough Voice's jaw. Stung like hell, but worse for the assassin. Not out cold, but Rough Voice was dazed and shaky when his partner pulled a dagger and turned.

Unfortunately for Partner, the dagger got caught in the spell and yanked out of his hands to bind against the ewer.

Cavan rolled over and kicked his shin between Partner's legs as hard as he could. A groan of pain, and Partner bent forward.

The mist began receding.

Cavan grabbed Partner and yanked him down. Cavan roared and used one assassin as a weapon to attack the other, smashing Partner's head into Rough Voice's head until they both stopped moving. By then the mist had long since cleared off.

Blood on the greenwood floor now. Apparently both assassins had gotten their noses broken somewhere in there. Their lips cut up too. At least they were still breathing. Out cold, but not dead.

Cavan was naked, sweating and shivering both from the cold and the attempt on his life.

He was sitting in blood beside the two assassins when the door opened.

There stood Polli, slender and pretty in her blue linen dress, with all those red curls.

The spell on the ewer finally broke, and the ewer, swords and dagger clattered to the floor.

Polli screamed. She turned and ran, still screaming.

Cavan shook his head. Poor girl. He couldn't blame her a bit. He'd have to find some way to make apology before he left.

He stood and closed the door. Turned back to the two assassins, taking a better look at them now. He could see why Rough Voice sounded so harsh — deep scar all the way across his throat.

Cavan recognized them now. He'd seen them three times on the trek across the Dwarfmarshes, guarding a caravan. They'd stood out among the other caravan guards. Partly because they'd literally set themselves apart, keeping to themselves and riding slightly to one side. Mostly, though, Cavan had noted the way they'd looked at him.

Like they knew who he was.

So much for Cavan's pleasant evening.



OF ALL THE PEOPLE Cavan had met in his twenty years of life, Ehren was the one he never wanted to travel without. Not just because of the man's humor — he even smiled in his sleep — but he seemed to have endless pockets secreted about his person, and his backpack seemed to contain a never-ending list of wonders.

Magic had to be involved, but Cavan had no idea how.

Most recently, Ehren had produced thirty feet of silk rope. *Silk*. Which they'd used to tie up the two assassins before bringing them back to consciousness. When they were done, the assassins' wrists and ankles were bound, and they sat on their outspread knees. Their swords and daggers were laid out on the other side of the room, where they could see them.

Cavan had yet been naked, and just wondering how he was going to get word to his friends, when they knocked on his

door. That was Amra's doing, of course. Let three people run screaming through an inn and Amra could accurately guess why all three of them were screaming.

Or at least, that was how it seemed to Cavan.

Cavan had let them in immediately, despite his nudity. Travel long enough with anyone, and modesty beats a hasty retreat.

Ehren, of course, looked fresh and clean as ever. The man could sleep a full hour in a swamp, and when he stood at the end — smiling, naturally — his fair skin and long blond hair would look fresh and clean, his white linen shirt and breeches spotless, and his low, white doeskin boots wouldn't even smell. And that brown leather pack of his? The contents wouldn't even be damp.

All marks of favor from his sun goddess, Zatafa. Signs of a priest in good standing. Except possibly the pack. Cavan wasn't certain about the pack.

Ehren even had the courtesy to be short. A full head shorter than Cavan, which Cavan considered the only reason any women noticed him when Ehren was around.

Now Amra, Amra was a true warrior. She stood shortest of their three, a head-and-a-half shorter than Ehren, with "more curves than any woman this strong had a right to." Her words, not Cavan's, and she always smiled when she said them. And she *was* strong. Over her shoulder she carried a two-handed sword as tall as she was, forged from some dark metal harder than steel. And in her hands it all but sang when she fought. Her tanned skin, short black curls, and equally black leathers were as clean as Ehren's which meant he'd blessed them since they'd arrived.

Unlike Ehren, Amra arrived without her pack. But then, she was more like to address any problems with her sword than anything else she carried.

The two of them had sighed when they saw the assassins,

and Amra got to work tying the two with Ehren's rope while Ehren blessed Cavan and his clothes clean. The latter was especially important, since Cavan couldn't take time to scrub his clothes, but didn't want to don the dirty things when he, at least, had bathed.

Then the two of them made jokes while Cavan dressed.

"You know, Cavan, when you told us you'd arranged an assignation we were assuming something else."

"I want to know what they did with the ewer."

Cavan had ignored them then, singing a small tune to himself to keep from hearing their words.

But now he was dressed, and he'd told them what happened and where he'd seen the two before.

"You're sure they *recognized you*, recognized you?" Amra asked. "We've been through this town before. Maybe one of your past ... dalliances was married."

"That can't be ruled out," Ehren said. He had the grace to sound like he wasn't enjoying that possibility as much as Amra was. "It's not as though it would be a first. I've warned you before that you ought to be more careful."

"I *told* you," Cavan said for the thousandth time, "in Myrapek that's not a big deal. Their marriages are for..." Cavan drew a deep breath. "We need to wake these two up and ask them."

Amra shrugged, grabbed the ewer, and splashed the assassins in the face with Cavan's now-tepid bathwater.

Cavan still had to smack the sides of their faces a few times before they came around, moaning and blinking and squirming against their ropes. Snorting bloody bubbles through their broken noses.

Once they got their bearing, they looked back and forth among their three captors, focusing on Ehren because he just had the look of someone in charge.

"So," Amra said, "are you two just stupid enough to

jump people at random in an inn? Or is there a specific reason you went after our friend here?"

Rough Voice did the talking for them, and his words ground so hard they sounded painful.

"We didn't want to kill him. Heard he wanted a bath, and —"

"Yeah, yeah," Cavan said, "you figured you'd rob me instead."

"Nothing doing!" Rough Voice shook his head as though deeply offended. "Paying assassins to go away is a long established tradition. It's not like we're with the Order."

"I'll thank you not to mention the False Dawn in my presence," Ehren said, his baritone voice rumbling with menace. His order took particular offense that an order of assassins associated themselves with the sunrise in any fashion.

"Just saying," Rough Voice said.

"What you're saying is that you came through my door," Cavan said, "swords drawn, intent on assassinating me if I didn't pay you off."

Rough Voice shrugged. Amra snickered, green-and-gold eyes dancing with amusement at the brazen admission.

"So who offered you money to kill me?"

Rough Voice and his partner looked at one another. His partner whispered something, and Rough Voice's eyes grew wide.

"You don't know?" Rough Voice said, with a laugh that sounded so harsh it should have coughed up a lung. "The Duke of Nolarr is offering a hundred crowns for your head, Cavan Olthead. Two hundred if it's not attached to you at the time."

"The Duke of Nolarr..." Cavan said.

"Ridiculous," Ehren said. "Someone is playing the both of you."

"Then the duke's hunters are chasing a lie," Rough Voice said. "Four of them came along with our caravan, all bearing

the duke's sigil on their shoulders. Crossed black spears on a field of yellow. Asking after you. Had your description down to the horse and your laugh. Wasn't even sure it was you until we heard you laughing downstairs."

"The duke's hunters?" Amra said, and Cavan heard the thread of excitement in her voice. She was already looking forward to fighting the best the duke had to offer.

"What was the crime?" Ehren said. His voice came out tight too, but that wasn't excitement Cavan heard. It was worry.

"Didn't say." Rough Voice shrugged. "Don't care. Not for that kind of money. Not when we could try to snag you ourselves."

Rough Voice's partner laughed, then spoke in a voice as smooth as a gentle sea. "Told 'em we saw you boarding a barge down the river. Looking around all furtive-like. Heading for Daeron's Bridge."

Daeron's Bridge was a likely destination to give. Maybe a week downriver, but at least a dozen roads fanned out from there.

Cavan should have been asking questions too. But he was trying to remember the last time he saw the duke. Trying to remember if he'd done something to offend him...

"Tell me you didn't sleep with *his* wife," Amra said, but Ehren must have seen the look in Cavan's eye. He grew quiet.

"Cavan," Ehren said, voice low. "What is the Duke of Nolarr to you?"

"He's..." He looked at the two assassins. But before he could say anything Amra had her sword out. In a single swift motion, she brought the flat of her long blade down against the backs of both assassins' heads.

They went out like candles in a strong breeze.

Ehren winced. "Twice in short order? They'll feel that for some time, you know. The rest of their lives maybe, if they

can't afford the healing."

"And they can praise whatever gods will listen that they have those days left to them," Amra said, sliding her sword back into its sheath. "And that I didn't just cut their heads off for trying to kill Cavan."

"The Duke of Nolarr is my uncle," Cavan said. "On my father's side."

"Your father..." — Ehren started, but Amra finished for him — "is King Draven of Oltoss?"



CHAIRS. A ROOM THIS nice should have had chairs. But apparently the Bent Spike expected that those who wanted to sit would do so where they could have a ready supply of drinks and food, and that anyone who retired to a room — even a private room on the third floor with its own copper bathtub — intended only activities that involved a soft feather bed.

Cavan sighed, and spared a thought for Polli the fiery barmaid, and the evening that almost was. Maybe it was the beeswax of the candles around him, but Cavan imagined she would smell like honey. He forced the thought from his mind with shake of his head, then sank down onto the greenwood floor. Bare feet tucked under him and hands on his knees, Cavan's body reflexively chose one of the focusing poses he'd learned in his attempt to become a wizard.

Ehren sat in what he called the Dawn Pose: knees together, doeskin-booted feet under his rear for support, one hand on each knee and leaning slightly forward. Amra lazed with one leg tucked in close and the other outstretched, her back resting against the greenwood wall near the tub. Eyes half-lidded as though she weren't paying attention to everything around her. Which Cavan knew she was.

A study in contrasts, those two. Her in black leather,