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The Warlock

R. J. Davies



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Contact through <https://rjdavies.ca>

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Lost in thought she stared at the mound of sand in front of her. She wondered if this was what her grandparents and their grandparents had hoped she would survive for. Her throat felt dry, it always felt dry. Looking up at the hazy sky, she would have cried but there weren't any tears left in her, no water to be wasted on tears. As her mom would always say, 'it is what it is'. 'Suck it up and get on with it.' Swallowing hard she cleared her dry throat and stood up. Surveying the area with her hand shielding her eyes. It was a wasteland for all eyes to see.

She had come too far to turn back now. Turning her attention towards her destination, her hand dropped to her side. Bending, she picked up her sack and shouldered it. Forging forward one shaky step after another. Pure determination was a wonderful motivator, at least that's what her mother would remind her of when things got tough.

This land was once called Canada; it was a country that people were free and allowed to pursue their dreams. Now it was mostly referred to as 'the wastelands', rumble and sand. Her mother would tell her stories when she was younger of snow, she had never seen it. But heard it was cold to touch and when it melted it turned to water. Looking around her, she couldn't imagine this being a place that had large buildings where people worked and lived. Surrounded by mounds of sand and rumbling, it had been a long time ago when cities graced this landscape. That was before the big war. The final war.

It was a tough time back then. When the war broke out most of the major cities were leveled and billions of people were murdered. Then it was the wastelands that took over. Many

who survived went underground, topside wasn't fit for humans. That was a few hundred years ago. Just a few ghosts of the past remain. Nothing like the stories her mom told her. She couldn't picture that kind of world.

One foot in front of the other. She kept pressing on. If she didn't get the medication for her mom soon, she wouldn't be able to listen to any more of those fairy tales her mom had a propensity to weave. The sun felt heavy but tired. The sun felt lazy today and slowly sinking behind the mountains. Soon it will be dark.

No one wanted to be topside when it got dark. This spurred her to move a little faster. There were too many dangers that lurked in the shadows. She could feel them itching to greet her. No, she had to get to the warlock's hut and beg the old man to help her.

The sun taunted her, as it slipped behind the mountains and twilight began to creep across the sands. In front of her as she rounded a bend, she found the warlock's hut. It was bigger than she had imagined.

A cold shiver seized her spine. Knock on that door and there was no turning back, but would she be safer there or out in the night with the creepy crawlies? Closing her eyes tightly she sucked in a lungful of air and found the courage to walk up to the front door and knock on it.

No one answered.

She knocked again and waited. The twilight was slowly melting into the evening skies. Stars were popping out across the velvety dark sky, everywhere. Funny how World War Three took place on this planet but the galaxy continued to thrive as if nothing ever happened. But then again why would anyone care what happened on this dusty little planet. There couldn't be more than a million humans left alive here.

The metal window hole slid open. "What do you want?" hissed a deep voice.

“I need help for my mother; she has taken ill and needs medication. She told me to come and ask you for help.”

“I don’t know you or your mother, why would I care? Go away! Be gone!”

“She said you would say that but told me to tell you, ‘Marmalade and crackers.’”

There was a long pause, the opening suddenly closed. She was greeted with more silence. Hesitating, she wondered if she should knock again. Knowing she couldn’t leave without the help she came for. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see the shadows behind her moving. There was something outside behind her a few feet away that was watching her, waiting for her to move away from this door. Food, she was going to be whatever lingered in that shadow’s food. Closing her eyes tightly, she wanted to cry. Again, she didn’t have any tears left, no water for tears, and no heart left to cry out.

The door creaked open. “Suzette?”

“Yes, that is my mother’s name. She is sick with the fever. I need your help.

Grunting, the door opened a little more so she could enter. The shadows were getting impatient and crept closer to where she stood. Stepping through the opening, the door quickly closed behind her, and she heard something thumping against the outside of the door. It was a predator that would have taken her if she had stayed out there a moment longer.

“Suzette is a good friend of mine. Long time friend. I know her from when we were kids.” The large man prattled on and motioned for her to follow him. Complying, she followed him, the hallway was made of stone walls and the gentle yellow glow from the candle danced as the warlock led the way into his hut. Inside was vastly different to any place she had been to. It reminded her of the stories her mother would tell of buildings long ago. Inside had walls of strange material, and doorways that led to halls and other rooms. The place was larger on the

inside because they went downwards under the ground. This fortress was underground but nothing like she had ever seen.

“What is this?” she stammered.

“My home.”

“You live here alone?”

He paused, turned around and looked her in the eyes. He nodded, “Yes, alone.”

“It’s just so big.”

“Yes, very big.” He turned and she continued to follow him. They came to a door and stopped. She almost ran into him. He turned the doorknob and opened the door. Inside there was a soft glow from a fire, the room was large and inviting. There were things lined up on the wall. All around the room. The ceiling was high, yet the room felt warm and cozy.

“Come sit, I will get us some tea.”

She crossed over to a large inviting sofa and sat down. Rest her bag on the seat. A heavy sigh escaped her. Her eyes slowly drank in the room from her vantage point.

The warlock was bent over the fire fixing tea; he wasn’t as she had imagined. In her mind he was someone big and scary. Now, after meeting him, he was just a man. An old and frail man. He stood in front of her with a tray and two steaming mugs. He nodded to her. Reaching out she took one of the mugs and stared into the cup. It was tea. Real tea. He nudged the tray at her, nodding to the biscuits. Reaching out she grabbed two biscuits and looked up at him. He smiled and nodded then took a seat across from her.

“How long has Suzetta been sick?”

“Six suns.” She took a sip, and it was a hot party in her mouth. It was nothing like she had ever tasted.

He frowned, nodded. “She is strong.”

Her mother was one of the toughest people she knew, yes, she was very strong. The image of the last time she had set eyes on her mother contradicted the statement. Her mother looked weak and fragile.

“You are strong too,” he nodded at her. “Drink the tea and eat the biscuits”

Biting one of the biscuits, it was hard. She watched as he dipped his biscuit in his tea and followed the same method. Within minutes there were no traces of the biscuits left, most of the tea was gone as well.

Her body betrayed her, relaxing on the sofa she pulled her feet up under her and rested her head against her arms, against the arm of the sofa. The fire danced in front of her and felt hypnotic as she let her guard down and sleep took over.

Waking she blinked hard and felt alarmed. Where was she? Sitting up quickly she surveyed the room.

“Good sun up.” The Warlock greeted her.

Memories from the night before flooded back. Her mother had sent her to the Warlocks’ hut to get her medicine. Against all odds she managed to find the Warlock and he invited her in, fed her and gave her tea. She slept.

The Warlock was in front of her with a tray of biscuits and more tea. She helped herself to the tea and biscuits greedily eating them and sipping the tea. The stories her mother had told her of this mystery man was that she could trust him. The others felt her mother’s faith was misguided. She wasn’t sure what to think and after meeting him in person she wondered why others would be so scared of this man.

After she was done with breakfast, he asked if she wanted any more. She shook her head no.

“Good, come. We get the medicine for Suzetta. Come with me.” He nodded and motioned her to follow him. She got up, grabbing her bag and slipping it over her shoulder. Following the man out of the room and down the hallway, they passed other doors. He led her down another hallway, this one considerably shorter, they came to a large decorative door. He waved his hand over something on the wall and the door creaked then slowly slid open. Inside was a cavern, in the middle of it there was a raised pool. The water looks so clear and blue. She hadn’t seen water so clear.

“Don’t touch it. Looks can be deceiving,” he chuckled.

Heeding his warning, she wanted to jump in and drink up as much water as possible. He walked over to the pool and dropped something into the pool. The water began swirling and turning dark blue, then purple and then black. In the middle of the pool a woman made of water and much larger than herself rose up. The water woman looked like an angel. So pretty. She found herself cemented her shoes as she kept a watchful eye, the water woman looked down at the warlock. The water woman must have been ten feet tall.

“Yes master,” the water woman smiled.

“Suzetta a dear friend of mine is ill with the fever.”

“I am sorry to hear that master.”

“Velda what can we do?”

“If I were to receive a small token of appreciation I can provide you medicine for Suzetta to live a long life.”

“Can I provide a piece of myself?”

“No master. I see she is very dear to you. Her.” The water woman pointed to her.

“Suzetta’s daughter?”

“Yes, I will require a small token from her.”

“Come here child,” the Warlock ordered.

Swallowing hard, her feet and legs felt heavy as she moved herself towards them.

“Ah yes, I will require your small finger on your left-hand child.”

“I’m sorry what?”

“Your finger, reach out your hand and I will relieve you of your small finger in exchange for the medicine you seek.”

“Is there any other way?” she heard herself asking. Giving up a finger she didn’t feel like a great plan.

“No that is what I require.”

Closing her eyes tightly she walked closer until her feet were touching the base of the pool, stretching her hand out towards the water woman she her left hand become wet, a sharp stinging pain shot up her left arm. Opening her eyes she saw that she was missing her small finger on her left hand and the skin was grown over it like it never was there.

Swallowing hard she rubbed the skin where her small finger once was. Looking up at the Warlock, who nodded to her. Then to the water lady who smiled down at her and was extending a small bottle with liquid in it.

“Have your mother drink this. She will feel better instantly.” The water woman nodded.

Reaching out her right hand she grabbed the bottle and stuffed it in her sack for safe keeping.

“Thank you, my lady,” the Warlock bowed.

“Thank you both for letting me help.” The water woman slowly retreated to the pool which turned back to a clear blue water that looked refreshing.

The Warlock leads her back up to the main entrance of his home. Patted her on the back as he opened the door. “Tell Suzetta that I am always here for her.”

“Thank you,” nodding she took her leave.

It took her all day to travel back to her home, but when she arrived her friends and family were waiting for her. Leading her to her mother’s room, gently she pulled the bottle with the cure out of her sack.

“Drink this momma, the Warlock said it would make you feel better.”

Her mother nodded, taking the bottle with shaky hands, she unscrewed the lid and greedily drank down the contents. Laying back in the bed, her mother closed her eyes and continued to breathe slowly. “How was he? The Warlock?”

“He seems old.”

“He is. Let me rest child.” Her mother fell asleep in a soft quiet slumber.

It had been two suns since she brought back the medicine, her mother was up and back to normal. In fact, her mother was better than normal. It was almost like she was a new person. Her mother scolded her for losing a finger but nothing more was said on the topic. Today when watching her mother go about her daily work she wondered if that woman was still her mother or was someone else living in her skin. That was a crazy thought she scolded herself for it. Yet, the thought lingered in the back of her mind as she kept a watchful eye on this new person.