

Any Excuse For Adventure

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The first in a little series. Meet the kids of Grovewood Ruins, a gang of orphaned bandits living in what remains of a wizard's sanctum. With police on their tails by the day and Lord Black becoming more and more interested in the gang. Will they all find themselves in the Education Centers or will they continue to live in the forest?



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Any Excuse For Adventure : Chapter 1

Twitch held the back of his head "Ouch! God, Rog why'd you do that?" he said picking up his hat.

"What 'ave I told you 'bout talkin' 'bout the den when we's in the town, Twitch? You wantin' the pigs to find out were we's hidin'" Rog was the eldest of the three boys standing in the town square eying up the rich, the well off or the slightly less impoverished, as such he was also the authority.

"No Rog" said Twitch holding his head low "All I was saying was that I want to go back... I don't like it here, the pigs know what we're up to" Rog was forced to hit him again.

"All I is doin' is takin' my two darlin' little bruvahs out for a day trip."

"Rog?" boomed the tallest, widest and fiercest looking of the three.

"Yes Buffalo?" Rog asked folding his arms and staring up at the mountain that was Buffalo Billy, biggest bandit this side of Brookridge (Under twenty three years of age).

"We's not bruvahs though... We's orphanins" Buffalo for his large frame had a peculiarly small brain. Rog buried his head in his hands and sighed.

"Orite, lads what we's goin' do is, see that toff ovah there, yeah that one, wit' the fancy coat on. We's gonna see if he's... Gonna make a donation to our little cause."

"What cause is that Roger?" came a fourth voice from behind the elder male.

"Blimey to goodness, Missy. Near gave me a heart attack you did, you better watch out for that too... What got my old man it was"

"I thought your old man was killed by ogres down in Southcliff durin' the battle for Black Hall" replied the Missy, the sole female of this gang, being the same age as Rog she had as much authority over him as he did over the others, and down to his deepest and most honest of pledges he could never hit a girl, and this was used to Missy's advantage every hour of every day.

"He was, them Ogres are big I say. Even sword wielding heros get scared to death y'know" said Rog pulling his hat down tighter.

"Anyways that toff bloke over there has nothin' worth stealin'... Not no more anyways." Missy said pulling out a black velvet money pouch. Rog snatched it off her.

"I'll take that darlin' don't want you spendin' this weeks food cash on Raggy Maggy dolls now does we?"

Buffalo and Twitch both nodded in agreement.

"Orite then, but I'm coming wif you to get the food... I know what you buy wit' the cash."

Rog only blushed and replied "Orite Missy, Fellas think you can get back to the den- Youch what was that for!?" Rog said holding his head in pain.

"Thought I told you not to talk 'bout the den in town!"

"Sorry Missy" They purchased their weekly goods from their usual source. They knew a man in Old Town that knew enough, judging from various scars, not to ask too many questions. On their way out of the city limits a band of police officers walked by them, eying the pair up. Rog spat on the ground in front of them publicly displaying his dislike of them. "Oi, Rog! Why you do that all the time? You'll get us in trouble you will acting like that!" Missy exclaimed grabbing him by the cuff of his coat.

"Watch it, pal. I'll have you know that this coat was hand tailored"

"But not for you, it barely fits you."

"Beggars can't be choosers my dear, and in any case the pigs deserve what I give 'em... Right bunch of rotters they are."

They began to walk through the woods, still carrying their bags of produce. There was a path laid here once, covered now by fallen leaves but still distinguishable by the worn look of the soil sandwiched between fertile green grass. They got in deeper until they eventually came to the Den. The Den was a large building, or rather what remained of a large building. Only a good half of the original structure remained, none of the inhabitants were aware exactly how old the ruin was or how it came to be, all they knew was that it was home. Nicely nestled in amongst the trees, there was an abundance of old chairs, tables and even a few beds. Burnt marble bricks were littered around the area, suggesting a fire had been the plight of this poor building. There were books and scrolls and all sorts of weird looking instruments lying around. Its various exposed rooms housed

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around thirty runaway, orphaned or just unlucky children all whom were happy under the council of Rog and Missy. There was a thud from behind them and Rog turned just in time to dodge a blow from something that had just leapt from a near by tree. "Oh, Gosh... Sorry Rog, thought you was a pig there" chuckled his attacker. "A pig!" Rog spat "Well I never! I ought to have your head for that one Slips"

Slips was a skinny boy rarely seen without his trademark red cap. He wasn't much in the brains department, but he fought with the best of them and could disappear as if into thin air if the police showed up at the wrong time.

"I said sorry Rog, that means you gotta let me keep me head..."

Rog pointed his finger and narrowed his large oval eyes "You got me this time Slips... Say Did Buffalo and Twitch get back yet?"

"Ya-huh, there wif Brains just now though. Brains says he wants to show you somefin too..."

"Not another of his gadgets is it Slips?"

Slips only shrugged "He just says to me 'Slips when Rog shows up you go..' uh... 'Contract him'"

"You mean collect don't you Slips?" Missy corrected.

"Yeah! Yeah! Thats the one!"

Chapter 2

Brains spent most of the day in what he liked to call his Lab. Really all it was, was the only part of the building that had four walls. In this room he kept the following, One writing utensil, several books he claimed to know to the letter and a collection of stolen magical goods. Yes even though Brains was as intellectual as the best professors in the best of the Education Centers in the best parts of the best cities, he was like the others a down and out thief. Rog hated him with a friendly passion, as the self elected leader of the group he liked to think of himself as the smartest. Luckily Brains rarely ventured far from the "Lab".

"Hey, Brains! What you want me for eh?" Rog proclaimed pushing aside the gray rag Brains used as a door.

"Sh, Rog I'm working." Brains was staring through his looking tube, it was some magic beyond Rog's comprehension that made small objects appear larger.

"Well maybe I'll come back when your not so burdened in your work?" "No, no. Wait a moment"

"Blimey..." Rog strutted over to where Brains was working and stared over his shoulder, "What you lookin' at anyway? More beetles, I tell you Brains that kind of work will get you some nasty ailments it will"

"No, I'm looking at this dust" Brains said standing up from the tube and offering it to Rog.

"Corr, how do you lead such an exciting life? Blimey, thats dust?!" what Rog saw through the tube was a dancing spiral of various shades of blue and purple.

"I found it on some of the bricks, I image its magical I do. Think maybe we should get it checked out we should"

"No bloody way Brains, who we gonna go to? A wizard who will say 'Blimey where'd you dashing gentlemen get a thing like that' and I'll say 'Well Master Wizard we been livin' in a big ruin in the Grovewood forest we have' next thing you'll know is the pigs will be on us like rat on Chef's cooking!"

"What if we don't say where we got it?" Brains asked.

"Not in a million years Brains, sorry but I can't allow it." Rog sealed the deal in his usual way, folding his arms and nodding, making the rim of his top hat fall over his eyes.

"What if I asked Missy?" asked Brains attacking Rog at his weakest point.

"I'd bet five pounds she'd tell you were to shove yer dust too, I says no!" It began to get dark and Chef served up the evening meal at the large dining room table that fitted all the refugees. The dining room was as grand as three walled rooms get, a chandelier lay crashed on the side open to the air and a fire place remained at the end Rog sat at. The evening meal was usually something liquid with something solid floating in it. While eyeing up the troops going over each of their names, every child was allocated a nick name on arrival simply by chance. Rog's was obvious Roger Dickens was hardly the name any heroic outlaw would give themselves, Twitch was a coward by trade and so twitched whenever confronted with any type of danger, other names were just plain random. No one was quite sure how William Collins adopted the nickname Badger Faced Barney, but no one thought anything of it. Two faces however were not in the line of people preparing to dig into their meal. Missy and Brains were not present. At this Rog marched out of the dining room and into Brain's lab, and as he suspected Missy and he were eyeing up his dust. "Orite! Now you got both our attention we can tell you, no together right Missy?"

"Rog, we're livin' in a magic place! We needs to get this check out" Missy said to his horror.

"You double crosser!" Rog cried out, clenching a fist and relaxing it, remembering never to hit a lady.

"Look Rog, in case you haven't noticed we've been livin' in half a building for years, hells you've been here most of your life,"

"All me life Missy," Rog corrected

"And you've never wondered why its in half? What if this magic is dangerous?" Missy sounded genuinely upset about the situation.

"More dangerous than Chef's dinners? Unlikely"

"It could be worth a lot of cash Rog" Brains picked up.

"Thats all you had to say! Blimey we've got a whole mansions worth of the stuff! Orite, one week. That gives us time to do emergency pig raid drills... And enough time to collect eh." Rog walked out of the room and pulled his hat on a little tighter. Brains and Missy were alone in the lab, "You really think the dust could be

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worth summin Brains?"

"Probably not, but you know how he can get... Has he really been here all his life?" Missy shrugged.

"Been here as long as I have, Rog doesn't talk much 'bout where he came from... I don't reckon he knows himself..."

Chapter 3

Lord Black paced the breadth of his study. He was perplexed over the notes and writings he had gathered from the wizard's home. Even after sixteen years he was no closer to cracking the location of the prize he sought. The other two would have been useful now, but they were long since disposed of a clue may have rested with the child, but to the Lord's own disgust he felt his ambition in destroying the wizard had ended the life of the boy as well.

He marched over to his desk and toppled it over with a roar. "Perhaps I came at a bad time?" came a voice from the door.

"About time you arrived I always assumed you magical sorts never ran late." the lord's companion was a middle aged man, thin and pale with a large plaited beard and a tall pointed hat covering what remained of his black turning grey hair.

"My apologize my Lord," said the wizard removing his hat in respect, holding it by his stomach. Lord black only waved a wrinkled hand.

"Your predecessor I am sure you know, did not manage to aid me in translating these scripts perhaps you will prove more useful?"

The wizard swallowed hard "Yes, my Lord. I shall try my best" Lord Black's face twisted in disgust.

"Those that try are doomed to fail, wizard! You will succeed or I will show you all the mercy I showed the several wizards I employed before you. Now, the papers have found themselves in quite a vile state but they are over there in various small piles on the floor. You will start today."

The old, skeletal figure that was Lord Aaron Black walked out of his study leaving the wizard alone. Osgood Milkbottle, as the wizard was known, had recently been promoted to Grand Mage of the city of Thorstone, and as such had attracted the attention of the wealthy Lord Black, renown for his cruel workings. He had employed several Grand Mages in his time to do the job Osgood was now set, clearly each one had failed and disappeared. In Thorstone city, people can disappear very easily, even Grand Mages.

He picked up the papers, they were flimsy and weak, old words were written on them in dark blue ink. He eyed them up, casting some minor spells to try and translate them via magic, nothing happened. He rubbed his bald spot and sighed. Hours past and still the only words that were written on his notebook formed the first draft of his will. Until he noticed something peculiar, upon looking closely the letters seemed to move. He looked closely and gasped at what he saw, was it possible none of the other Wizards had noticed that the scrolls were written in pure magic! He summoned his Lord instantly, to the wizard's horror he merely shrugged his frail shoulders and said "And what exactly does that mean?"

"Well, I suppose, my Lord it means we can tell who wrote it"

"I am fully aware of who wrote it, why they wrote and where they wrote it... If it does not translate the material I am not interested."

"Well, I suppose if we had a sample of the Wizard's magic, we could use it in a translating spell."

The Lord grew red in the cheeks "The Wizard is dead! All his spells long canceled and his mansion home obliterated! You will have to find a way to deal with the translations without digging up the past spells of Hector Morbid."

At the mention of Grand Arcanist Morbid's name, Osgood only gasped, the wizard in question was perhaps the most powerful wizard ever to walk the earth.

"Sir, I hate to say it but... I have no chance of translating the works of Hector Morbid." "Then I am afraid I have no use for you, if you do not supply me with some result by the end of the week... Well I will have to praise a new Wizard on their promotion to Grand Mage."

With this the Lord left again, leaving Osgood Milkbottle shaking.

Chapter 4

Rog's deadline arrived, one week had passed since the decision that they would take the dust to the the correct authority. Over the week Missy had organized various jobs for the children. One third, made up of the most skilled thieves, were ordered to "borrow" the best looking clothes they could gather from the market places and washing lines within the city. Some others had been ordered to gather the all the dust they could find, hiding on the shattered remains of vases on the broken windows and the burnt rocks. And the final group was given the job of running the protection drills, slingshots, catapults and other impromptu weapons were fashioned. "I'm havin' second thoughts, Missy" Rog said shaking his head as he stood dressed in the most ridiculous attire he had ever been shoved into. The trousers were too long and had to be tucked into the boots that were alarmingly uncomfortable, the shirt was too small and flashed his stomach, Rog attempted to hide this with a coat missing one tail. He tried to convince himself this was all worth seeing Missy in a long, pink dress fully accompanied with a matching bow in her squirrel red hair.

Of the three going on this mission, Brains looked the best. The main bulk of his "Respectable Young Male" costume actually fitted. "No, Rog. We have to do this okay, for the money 'member." Missy reminded him, she carried the small burlap sack filled with the blue, dancing, dust in a pearl clasped hand bag. At the end of the gathering the sack was only half full however the dust had proven quite dense in weight and weighed just over a kilogram.

"Yes, Roger. Remember this is as much a benefit to you, and the children as a whole, as it is for the scientific community" Brains added.

"Hush up smarty before I hit some of 'em brain cells into better use."

Missy and Brains exchanged exasperated looks. Once behind the city walls the true problem surfaced, where does one hand in magical artifacts. The local alchemist was one of Rog's friends in the city, over the years he had gathered quite a few helpful companions in the adult world, but they doubted he would know what to do with pure magic. The Mage's council was of course the first thought, but they were incredibly tight with their hearings and would certainly not meet with three children dressed like court jesters. "We could try the Town Hall" Brains suggested, "I mean even if we can not hand it in there they could at least tell us where we could". "Good Idea that is." Missy agreed,

"I'm not too sure, there's pigs at the town hall... I'm stayin' right here and I'll look for somewhere else."

Reluctantly the trio split leaving Rog to wander the streets alone, this was of course his more favorable past times. He snatched a loaf of bread from a stall and slid it under his coat until he was a reasonable distance away from the seller and ate it. It was on these occasions he would dream up his stories, the tales of his mother and father. There wasn't an island in the ocean or a cloud in the sky the Dicksons had not had an adventure on, at least in Rogers' mind. In truth, he simply assumed his parents were low down thugs, killed by bandits that had spared him. He had little memory of his life up until he was ten years old, standing in the forest looking up at the broken remains of the Den. There was a thud, and Roger found himself sitting on the hard cobbles. A large man stood with a cane in his hand, his stomach bulged like a frog's throat. He wore a long orange robe and on his head sat a pointed grey hat.

"I do say, watch where you are going you horrid little street urchin" said the Mage.

"Oi, who you callin' an urchin!" Rog responded angrily.

"Oh begone pest, I have very important businesses to attend to." with that the Mage waddled off like a plump goose in the direction of the Town Hall.

Chapter 5

Missy and Brains walked in silence for the most of their journey. Missy grew more and more restless in her dress and began to twitch with annoyance, Brains on the other had continued his stride with perfect grace and poise. They neared the town hall, which stood out in the cityscape as the only pristine white building. It appeared to be of marble, white columns added to the decoration as did several large bronze lions perched on either side of the enormous black wooden doors that were swung open at this time. The pair looked at each other and exhaled.

"Here we are" Missy said extending her arms to draw attention to the colossal building.

"Mhm, yes. Well we should seek out help from the information desk. Com on"

Missy shook her head angrily at Brains' back, how dare he be so demanding of her. They scaled the steps, Missy found difficulty to move in the enclosed spaces of her clothes and stumbled more than once. Once at the top they entered the building, the inside was lavishly decorated even the people seemed to glow as they trotted around doing their business. The information Desk was situated at the very front of the building, where a timid looking woman with short cropped brown hair and extravagantly large glasses perched at the tip of her long pointed nose.

"Excuse me," Brains began, the woman shot up right and grabbed a long quill from the desk and nodded sternly.

"Yes? Yes? Fire away I'm listening" the woman said as she looked at the pair intently.

"My sister and I are wondering where we can hand in magic samples? We found-" "Office thirty four, floor seven, Oscar Belch's office..." The woman almost screamed out at the pair. They found the stairs and ascended, "Wonder what her problem was..." Missy asked rolling her eyes.

"Well when you think about it, Missy, she's probably never been confronted by a pair of children dressed like circus performers."

"Still no reason to act so rude..."

"Hmm, Well here we are, floor seven." The corridor was as beautifully decorated as the foyer. There was a golden carpet under their feet that sunk as they stepped on it, the walls were painted a dark red and the many doors to offices were black with name plates on them.

"Room thirty four wasn't it?" Brains confirmed.

They walked down counting the numbers on the door. At room thirty four they knocked on the door and waited, a man's voice replied "Enter!" They stepped in and sat behind a large desk was a man, bigger than anyone either of the pair had ever seen. His hair was almost the same shade as the carpet, a bright crimson, his eyebrows looked like two red seagulls nesting on his face and his hair was neatly trimmed to fall at his shoulders, in which he had two braids at either side of his head. At a guess the man appeared quite young.

"Children?" The man boomed "You have magic samples?"

The pair nodded and Missy protruded the small sack and thudded it on the table, the giant frowned.

"You want name of caster? Type of spell? Date of casting?"

The pair thought it over, "Probably type of spell," they replied almost in unison. The man peered into the sack, and his eyes widened and muttered under his breath, "Great Ghostly specters of all my sainted aunts..." he looked flustered and put the sack aside.

"Cloaking.... Spell..." he panted.

"Something wrong, Sir?" Missy risked.

"Honestly, its quite a powerful spell... Where did you find it?" The man's voice returned to its usual thunderous pitch.

"W-we bought it.... We thought it was candy... Sir..." Brains added quickly. The man went to say something more, but the two bid their farewells and ran from the office as fast as they could.

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