

# The Prize

The day they both dreaded had finally come: Brian was turning 18. The cake had been eaten, the gifts were opened, and the chit chat was dying down. The moment was arriving. Laura, his mother, fretted nervously with a napkin, casting anxious glances at Brian. David, his father, looked frustrated and ill-at-ease, but not as miserable as his wife.

“Brian, honey,” his mother began. “There’s something I have to tell you. I hate to have to tell you this on your birthday, of all days, but that’s part of the whole thing.” David looked at her warily, while Brian just looked disinterested and ready to make his exit. “Brian, there is a claim on your life.”

Brian cocked an eyebrow, but nothing else. His father however jumped to his feet at the table.

“How do you know about that?” he practically shouted at his wife.

“What do you mean? You can’t possibly know what I’m talking about. I’ve kept it a secret for years—from you and from everyone else,” Laura responded in surprise.

David got halfway to sitting back down before stopping midway to his chair. “So you’re not talking about—never mind. Sorry, go ahead. I’ve got something to say too, but maybe you’d better go first,” David stuttered as he finally came to rest on his seat.

“Yes, I think I should. Brian, as I was saying, someone has a claim on your life. Now, this is going to sound impossible, and perhaps plain crazy, but I made a pact when you were just a little boy. A pact to... well, do you remember when grandpa got very sick?”

“Yeah, I think so. I was in 3rd grade, right? He got cancer and almost died, but then didn’t.” Brian pulled the answer from a faded memory.

“That’s right. He didn’t die, but he would have if I didn’t do what I did. And I just had to, Brian, I had to! I couldn’t stand to watch him die in pain like that! I just couldn’t!” The tears were coming now, Laura’s shoulders quaking under the emotional strain. Brian looked concerned now, but David was staring in disbelief, wide-eyed, at Laura. “I promised that when you turned 18, I would give you over to a dark gnome I met while walking in the woods one night in exchange for my father’s life

and health. I feel terrible about it, but I was so desperate and didn't know what to do! And you had been acting up so much at the time... Please forgive me, Brian! Please!"

Laura collapsed in a heap on the table, racked with sobs, as Brian looked at her dumbfounded. "Well, holy shit," David muttered.

"Oh, please don't judge me, David! Not now! I know what I did was wrong, and I can't bear it as it is!" she wailed.

"No, it's not that. It's just, well... I pledged Brian to someone, too."

Laura's crying stopped abruptly and both she and Brian looked sharply at David, who was nowhere near as broken up as his now-puffy-eyed wife. "What are you talking about?" she asked.

"Well, there was this leprechaun I stumbled across while jogging one evening, and I sort of made a deal with him. A deal for Brian when he turned 18." Brian's expression went from confusion mingled with pity to absolute incredulity.

"David, what did you trade him for?" Laura pressed.

"It was just-" David shifted uneasily in his chair, avoiding both Laura's and Brian's gaze. "Well, uh..."

"Oh my god, David, not that car!" Laura practically screamed.

"Well, like you said, he'd been acting up a lot at the time, and that was my dream car ever since I was a kid! And I finally had a chance to get one. What was I supposed to do?" David rebutted.

"I knew you didn't get a bonus that big! You never had before and never have since! You lying, selfish bastard!" Laura was back on her feet now, rage engulfing grief, her face taking on new, undiscovered shades of red.

"Look who's talking! You did the same thing!"

"I was saving my father's life, not getting myself some ridiculous toy!" Laura shouted across the table at David.

"You call a mint condition 1967 Jaguar XKE a toy?" David shouted back.

"Uh, Mom? Dad?" Brian stammered as he stared open-mouthed at the kitchen window, through which the most vibrant rainbow he'd ever seen was pouring into the kitchen. It was so vivid it seemed nearly solid. All three turned their heads in time to see a plump little leprechaun come sliding along the rainbow into the kitchen and land neatly on the countertop.

"I've come to claim that which was promised to me. I've come for Brian," he piped with ominous cheerfulness. Brian just stared, still trying to cope with the apparent fact that all the nonsense his parents were discussing was suddenly and unbelievably coming true.

“Oh please, please don’t take him!” Laura begged.

But just as the Leprechaun began to wave away her protests, there was a rumbling under their feet. Out of the floor, just beside the table at which the family was sitting, burst the dark gnome Laura had spoken with over a decade ago. He immediately set eyes on Brian, a wicked grin spreading threateningly from under his long, hooked nose.

“There is my prize for a boon granted. I come for it now at the appointed time. Withhold him not lest—Conor? What are you doing here?” The gnome broke off in mid-speech when he noticed the leprechaun still perched on the kitchen counter. “Don’t tell me these rubes managed to catch you?”

“Of course not, you old fool,” retorted Conor. “I’ve caught them—caught their son there, at any rate. But what’s all this about him being your prize now? The father there promised the boy to me.”

“Well, the mother pledged him to me years ago in exchange for a favor,” the gnome replied. “I saved the life of her father in exchange for him. What did you grant the boy’s father?”

“A roadster.”

“Ha!” guffawed the gnome. “He traded his only son for an automobile. What sort of man does that? Ha, ha!”

“A 1967 Jaguar XKE,” Conor clarified.

“Oh, OK. Nice,” the gnome conceded.

David spoke up. “So, are you guys gonna battle it out, or have some sort of duel or something to see who gets him?”

“David!” Laura hissed at him.

“What? I’d be interested to see it,” said David a little excitedly. “You ever see a leprechaun fight a troll?”

“We’re not going to fight each other, ya tool,” retorted Conor indignantly. “It’s you and your missus that messed everything up, double-pledging your doughy-faced boy over there. I’ve got nothing against Grak here. Who’s a gnome and not a troll, by the way. And a fine gnome he is, too.” Conor gave a friendly nod to the gnome.

“Yes, yes. You’re alright, Conor,” sighed Grak. “Let’s get on with it. I’ve got eight more kids to claim today, and it’s already almost lunch time,” the gnome grumbled.

“Eight kids! In one day? Impressive, Grak. Very impressive. How do you manage snagging all those young souls?” inquired the rather awe-struck leprechaun.

“I’ve got something going with a few Lexus dealerships on the west coast. You’d be surprised how desperate folks get on a regular basis in those finance cubicles. They’re practically throwing their first born at you the moment their credit card declines,” Grak said, a bit haughtily.

“Very savvy, Grak. Very cunning. Well, as far as this lad goes, we both have valid claim to him. How do we settle up?” Conor asked the gnome with a slyness twinkling in his eyes. “Shall we do the old body-soul split?”

“Would you honestly take the body half of that deal?” Grak pressed incredulously.

“Alright then, something else. How about a shared custody situation?” Conor suggested. “We could alternate decades perhaps. Or centuries, if you’re not too worried about it.”

“Nah, I’ve moved down into the Caverns of Obsidian Unrest,” the gnome answered dismissively. “I wouldn’t want to make the haul to your place for him, and I know you aren’t coming down to mine.”

“Hm, right you are,” agreed Conor. “I think we shall have to let the boy decide. We shall let him hand his soul over to them which he chooses.” Brian’s eyebrows nearly popped into his hairline as all eyes shot toward him.

“And,” Conor continued, “Since both parties offered him up for a valid reason: the life of a loved one, as well as a sufficiently badass car-”

“Ha! Thank you. See, honey? I told you-” burst out David triumphantly.

“-we will allow for a third option,” Conor broke back in, “of allowing the boy to choose to remain at home with his parents. So long as Grak agrees to the arrangement. Grak? Do you object?”

“No, no, fine, whatever,” Grak said impatiently, seeming on the brink of losing interest in the whole affair.

“Oh!” yelped Laura in sudden joy. “Brian, you can stay home! Isn’t that wonderful? Thank you, Mr. Conor, thank you! I don’t know how to-”

“The leprechaun,” interjected Brian flatly, yet abruptly.

“Wait, what? Honey, what did you say?” mumbled the completely aghast Laura.

“I’m going with the leprechaun.”

“Ha! Good lad!” Conor gloated.

“Brian, honey, you can’t be serious!” His mother implored.

“Wonderful,” muttered Grak, already descending back into the hole in the floor. “Have fun with your new human, Conor. Gotta go.” And he was gone.

“Well, Brian, we’ll miss you, bud. Would you mind taking the trash out with you?” David mumbled, already getting distracted with something else.

“Shut up, David!” Laura screeched. “Why Brian? Why would you choose to leave?”

“Gee, I don’t know. Maybe finding out both my parents sold my soul on two separate occasions has something to do with it,” Brian snarked. “You’ve got that cereal with the marshmallows in it, right?” he asked, turning to Conor.

“The what? Oh, right. Yeah, er, loads of it. All over the place. Shall we?” Conor gestured toward the rainbow.

Brian looked back briefly at his parents—his mother gaping with glassy, tearful eyes, his father scrolling through emails on his phone. “Well, see ya.” And in one swift movement, he and the leprechaun were whisked up along the rainbow and into the blue, never to be seen again.

Laura’s lip quivered as she gazed in shock at the window through which her only child had just vanished. She felt a hand slide across her shoulders, followed by David’s voice doing its best to sound smooth and coaxing. “You know, hon, now that the house is empty, we could maybe take a whack at making a replacement for that one.”

David woke up some time later, piled into his Jaguar with a couple of packed suitcases and a ringing headache. “Ugh,” he moaned, rubbing his aching head and leaning back against the plush, leather seat. “She’d better hope I don’t get my hands on another leprechaun.”



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