

#1 *New York Times* Bestselling Author

PATRICK ROTHFUSS

A dark, gnarled tree stands on a grassy hill under a night sky with a crescent moon and stars.

THE NARROW ROAD BETWEEN DESIRES

Illustrated by Nate Taylor

ALSO BY PATRICK ROTHFUSS

The Kingkiller Chronicle

Day One:

THE NAME OF THE WIND

Day Two:

THE WISE MAN'S FEAR

Tales from Temerant

THE SLOW REGARD OF SILENT THINGS

THE NARROW ROAD BETWEEN DESIRES

THE
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BETWEEN DESIRES



PATRICK
ROTHFUSS

ILLUSTRATIONS BY NATE TAYLOR



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For my sweet boys: Oot and Cutie.

My favorite stories are the ones we tell each other. You're the best part of my life. You deserve a perfect father, but I'm glad you have me instead.

—Pat

For Grace, who shows me how to be bold and reminds me of the magic in ordinary things.

—Nate

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AUTHOR'S FOREWORD

You might not want to buy this book.

I know, that's not the sort of thing an author is supposed to say. But I'd rather be honest with you right out of the gate.

First, if you haven't read my other books, you probably don't want to start here.

My first two books are *The Name of the Wind* and *The Wise Man's Fear*. If you're curious to try my writing, start there. They're the best introduction to my words and my world. This book deals with Bast, a character from that series. And while I've done my best to make this story stand on its own, if you start here, you're going to be missing a lot of context.

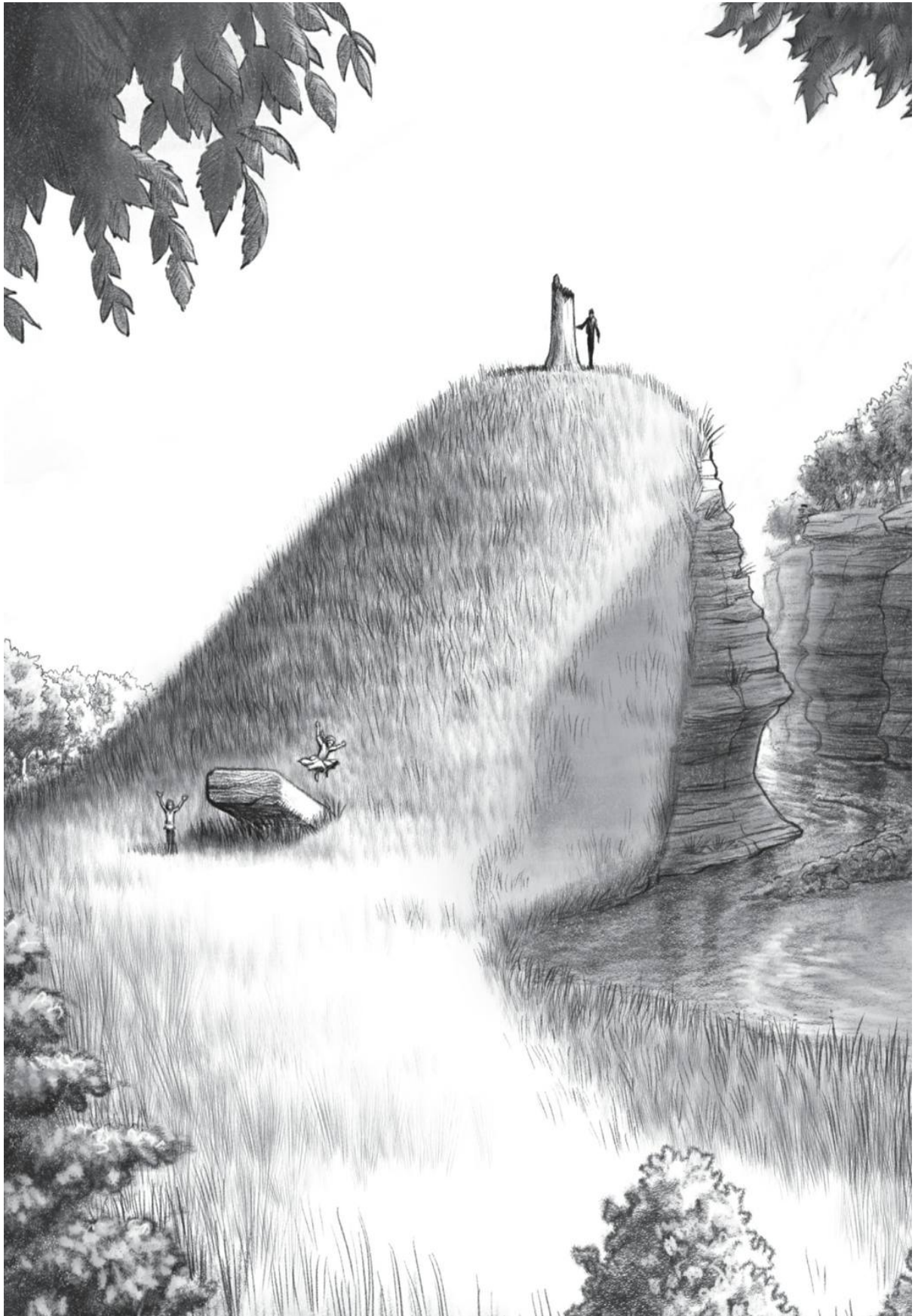
Second, if you *have* read my other work, you should know a version of this story was published in the beforetimes. Back in the long, long ago. Back before COVID. Back when Twitter was fun, and the world was green and new.

Which is to say a little less than ten years ago. I published a version of this story under the title "The Lightning Tree" in an anthology called *Rogues*. I talk about this a little in my author's note at the end of the book, but suffice to say that the version you're holding is wildly different: I've obsessively re-written it, added 15,000+ words, and worked with the fabulous Nate Taylor to add over 40 illustrations.

That said, if you read "The Lightning Tree" back in the day, you know the shape of this story. There's much that is different, much changed, much added, but the bones are the same. So if you're looking for something *utterly* new, you're not going to find it here.

On the other hand, if you'd like to learn more about Bast, this book has a lot to offer. If you're curious about faerie bargains and the secret desires hearts can hold. If you're curious about magics only glimpsed in my other books. If you want to know more about what Bast does in his spare time in the small town of Newarre....

Well, then this book might be for you.







DAWN: ARTISTRY

BAST ALMOST MADE it out the back door of the Waystone Inn.

Technically, he *had* made it outside. Both feet were over the threshold and the door was only a crack away from being closed.

Then he heard his master's voice and went perfectly still. He knew he hadn't given himself away. He was intimate with every subtle sound the inn could make. Not just the simple tricks a child would think clever: carrying their shoes, leaving creaky doors open ahead of time, muffling footsteps on a rug....

No. Bast was better than that. He could move through a room barely stirring the air. He knew which stairs sighed when it had rained the night before, which windows opened easy and which shutters caught the wind. He could tell when a detour out and over the peak of the roof would make less noise than the straight way through the upper hall.

That would be enough for some. But on the rare occasion when he actually cared, Bast found success as dull as ditchwater. Let others settle for mere excellence. Bast was an artist.

Because of this, Bast knew true silence was unnatural. To a careful ear, silence sounded like a knife in the dark.

So when Bast glided through the empty inn, he played the floorboards like an instrument. A sigh, a pause, a click, a creak. Sounds that would catch a guest just drifting off to sleep. But to someone who lived there...it was nothing. It was *less* than nothing. It was the comfortable sound of heavy timber bones settling slowly into earth, easy to ignore as a familiar lover stirring next to you in bed.

Knowing all this, Bast eyed the door. He kept the bright brass hinges oiled, but even so he shifted his grip and lifted so the door's weight didn't hang. Only then did he ease it slowly closed. A moth would make more noise.

Bast stood to his full height and grinned, his face sweet and sly and wild. In that moment, he looked less like a rakish young man, and more a naughty child who had stolen the moon and planned to eat it like a thin, pale silver cake. His smile was like the final crescent of remaining moon, sharp and white and dangerous.

"Bast!" The call came from the inn again, louder this time. Nothing so crass as a shout. His master did not bellow like a farmer calling cows, but his voice could carry like a hunting horn. Bast felt it tug him like a hand around his heart.

Bast sighed, then opened the door and strode briskly back inside. He made walking look like dancing. He was dark, and tall, and lovely. When he scowled, his face was still more sweet than others might look smiling. "Yes Reshi?" he called brightly.

After a moment the innkeeper stepped into the kitchen. He wore a clean white apron and his hair was red. His face held the stolid placidness of bored innkeepers everywhere. Despite the early hour, he looked tired.

He handed Bast a leather-bound book. "You almost forgot this," he said without a hint of sarcasm.

Bast made a show of looking surprised. "Oh! Thank you, Reshi!"

“No bother, Bast.” The innkeeper’s mouth made the shape of a smile. “While you’re out today, would you mind picking up some eggs?”

Bast nodded, tucking the book under his arm. “Anything else?” he asked.

“Maybe some carrots too? I’m thinking we’ll do stew tonight. It’s Felling, so we’ll need to be ready for a crowd.” His mouth turned up slightly at one corner as he said this.

“Eggs and carrots,” Bast repeated dutifully.

The innkeeper started to turn away, then stopped. “Oh, the Tilman boy stopped by yesterday, looking for you.”

Bast tilted his head to one side, his expression puzzled.

“I think he’s Jessom’s son?” the innkeeper provided, holding up a hand to roughly chest height. “Dark hair? Name was...” He trailed off, narrowing his eyes as he tried to remember.

“Rike.” Bast dropped the name like a lump of hot iron, then pressed on quickly, hoping his master wouldn’t notice. “Tilmans are the woodcutters off to the south of town. No wives or kids. Was it Rike Williams? Dark eyes. Grubby?” Bast thought a moment, wondering how else he might describe the boy. “Probably looked nervous? Like he was making a point of not stealing anything?”

The last brought a glimmer of recognition to the innkeeper’s face, and he nodded. “Said he was looking for you, but didn’t leave any sort of message...” He raised an eyebrow at Bast. The look said more than it said.

“I haven’t the slightest idea what he wants,” Bast said, sounding honest. He was being honest, too. But better than anyone, Bast knew what *that* was worth. All that glittered wasn’t gilt, and sometimes it was worth a little work so that you seemed to be the thing you truly were.

Nodding, the innkeeper made a noncommittal noise and moved back toward the common room. If he said anything further, Bast didn’t hear it, as he was already running lightly through the dewy grass and the startling blue-grey light of dawn.



MORNING: EMBRIL

BY THE TIME Bast arrived, the sun was peering up above the trees, painting the few thin clouds with pale shades of pink and violet.

Two children were already waiting in the clearing. They kept a respectful distance from the top of the hill, playing on the huge greystone that lay half-fallen at the bottom, climbing up the side, then jumping down to land laughing in the tall grass.

Knowing they were watching, Bast took his time climbing the tiny hill. At the top stood what the children called the lightning tree, though these days all that remained was a broad, broken, branchless trunk. The original tree must have been vast, as even this remnant was so tall that Bast could barely reach the top.

The bark had long since fallen away, and years of sun had bleached the bare wood white as bone except for all along its ragged top. There, even

after all these years, the wood was a deep and jagged black. Trailing down the remaining trunk, the lightning had charred a wild, dark, forking image of itself into the bone-white wood, as if to sign its work.

Bast reached out with his left hand, touching the smooth trunk with his fingertips as he slowly walked a circle around the tree. He walked widdershins, turning against the world. The way of breaking. Three times.

Then he switched hands and paced around the tree in the opposite direction, moving the same way as the turning sun. Three slow circles deasil. The proper way for making. Thus he went while the children watched, back and forth, as if the tree were a bobbin he was winding and unwinding.

Finally Bast sat and rested his back against the tree. He lay the book on a nearby stone, the rising sun shone red against the hammered gold of the title: *Celum Tinture*. Then Bast amused himself by tossing stones down into the stream that cut sharply into the slope of the hill opposite the greystone.



After a minute, a round-faced blonde girl trudged up the hill. She was the baker's youngest daughter, Brann. She smelled of sweat and bread and...something else. Something out of place.

The girl's slow approach had an air of ritual about it. She crested the small hill and stood there for a moment, the only noise coming from the other children gathered below, gone back to playing.

Finally Bast turned his head and looked the girl over. No more than nine, she was a little more well-dressed and well-fed than most of the town's other children. She carried a wad of white cloth in her hand.

The girl stepped forward, swallowing nervously. "I need a lie."

Bast nodded, his face impassive. "What sort?"

Brann gingerly opened her hand, revealing a shock of red staining the cloth. It stuck to her hand slightly, a makeshift bandage. Bast nodded, realizing what he'd smelled before.

"I was playing with my mum's knives," Brann said, embarrassed.

Bast held out his hand and the girl took a few steps closer. Bast unwrapped the cloth with his long fingers and examined the cut. It ran along the meat near the thumb. Not too deep. "Hurt much?"

"Nothing like the birching I'll get if she finds out I was messing with her knives," Brann muttered.

Bast looked up at her. "You clean the knife and put it back?"

Brann nodded.

Bast tapped his lips thoughtfully. "You thought you saw a big black rat. It scared you. You threw a knife at it and cut yourself. Yesterday one of the other children told you a story about rats chewing off soldier's ears and toes while they slept. It gave you nightmares."

Brann gave a shudder. "Who told me the story?"

Bast shrugged off the question. "Pick someone you don't like."

The girl grinned viciously.

Bast began to tick off things on his fingers. "Get some fresh blood on the knife before you throw it." He pointed at the cloth the girl had wrapped her hand in. "Get rid of that, too. The blood is dry, and obviously old. Can you work up a good cry?"

The girl seemed a little abashed and shook her head.

“Put some salt in your eyes,” Bast said matter-of-factly. “Maybe a little pepper up your nose? Get all snotty and teary before you run to them. Then,” Bast held up a cautionary finger. “Try *not* to cry. Don’t snuffle. Don’t blink. When they ask you about your hand, tell your mum you’re sorry if you broke her knife.”

Brann listened, nodding slowly at first, then faster. She smiled. “That’s good.” She looked around nervously. “What do I owe you?”

“Any secrets?” Bast asked.

The baker’s girl thought for a minute. “Widow Creel is tugging the miller’s husband?” she said hopefully.

Bast waved his hand as if shooing away a fly. “For years. That’s not a secret,” he said. “Everyone knows, including his wife.” He rubbed his nose. “What have you got in your pockets?”

The girl dug around and held up her uninjured hand. It held a tangle of string, two iron shims, a flat green stone, a blue button, and a bird’s skull.

Bast took the string. Then, careful not to touch the shims, he plucked the green stone out from among the rest. It was a flat, irregular shape, carved with the face of a sleeping woman. “Is this an embrid?” he asked, looking surprised.

Brann shrugged. “Looks like part of a Telgim Set to me. They’re for telling fortunes.”

Bast held the stone up to the light. “Where’d you get it?”

“I traded it off Rike,” Brann said. “Said it was an ordal, but...he only....”

Bast’s eyes narrowed at the boy’s name, his mouth making a flat line.

Belatedly realizing her mistake, Brann went still. The girl’s eyes darted around nervously. “I...” She licked her lips nervously. “You asked....”

His expression sour, Bast looked down at the stone as if it had started to smell. He briefly considered throwing it down into the stream from pure spite.

Then, thinking better of it, he flipped it up into the air like a coin instead. Catching it, he opened his hand to reveal the other side of the stone. On this side, the carved woman’s eyes were open, and she smiled.

Bast rubbed it between his fingers thoughtfully. “This then. And a sweet bun every day for a full span.”

“That emerel or whatever,” Brann said, “*and* the string you took, and I’ll bring you one bun later today, warm out of the oven.” Brann’s expression was firm, but her voice turned up at the end.

“Two buns,” Bast countered. “So long as they’re maple, not molasses.”

After a moment’s hesitation, the girl nodded. “What if I get a birching anyway?” she asked.

“That’s your business.” Bast shrugged. “You wanted a lie. I gave you a good one. If you want me to haul you out of trouble personally? That’s a different deal entirely.”

The baker’s girl looked a little disappointed, but she turned and headed down the hill.

Next up the hill was one of the Alard boys. There were an uncountable ruck of them, formed by several families constantly blending and merging. The lot of them looked similar enough that Bast struggled to remember which was which.

This one looked as furious as only a boy of ten can be. He wore tattered homespun and had a split lip and a crust of blood around one nostril. “I caught my brother kissing Grett behind the old mill!” the boy said as soon as he crested the hill, not waiting for Bast to ask. “He knew I was sweet on ’em!”

Bast spread his hands and looked around helplessly, shrugging.

“Revenge,” the boy spat.

“Public revenge?” Bast asked. “Or secret revenge?”

The boy touched his split lip with his tongue. “Secret revenge,” he said in a low voice.

Something about the gesture jogged Bast’s memory, this was Kale. He’d once tried to trade Bast a pair of frogs for “a curse that would make someone fart forever.” Negotiations had grown heated before falling apart. He was thicker than a prince’s porridge, but Bast still held a grudging admiration for the boy.

“How much revenge?” Bast asked.

The boy thought for a bit, then held up his hands about two feet apart. “This much.”

“Hmm,” Bast said. “How much on a scale from mouse to bull?”

The boy rubbed his nose. “About a cat’s worth,” he said. “Maybe a dog’s worth. Not like Crazy Martin’s dogs though. Like the Bentons’ dogs.”

Bast tilted his head back in a thoughtful way. “Okay,” he said. “Piss in his shoes.”

The boy looked skeptical. “That don’t sound like a whole dog’s worth of revenge.”

Bast made a calming motion with the hand holding the green stone. “You piss in a cup and hide it. Let it sit for a day or two. Then one night when he’s put his shoes by the fire, pour the piss on his shoes. Don’t make a puddle, just get them a little damp. In the morning they’ll be dry and probably won’t even smell—”

“Then what’s the point?” Kale burst out, throwing his hands into the air. “That’s not a flea’s worth of revenge!”

Continuing as if the boy hadn’t spoken, Bast said. “Do it for three nights. Don’t get caught. Don’t overdo it. Just get them a little damp so they’re dry by morning.”

Bast held up a hand before Kale could interrupt. “After that, whenever his feet get sweaty, he’ll start to smell a little like piss.” Bast watched Kale’s face as he continued. “He steps in a puddle? He smells like piss. Morning dew gets his feet wet? He’ll smell a little like piss.”

“Just a little?” Kale said, baffled.

Bast gave a gusty, exaggerated sigh. “That way, it will be easy for him to miss and hard for him to figure out where it’s coming from. And because it’s just a little, he’ll get used to it.”

The boy looked thoughtful.

“And you know how old piss smells worse and worse? He’ll stay used to it, but other folk won’t.” Bast grinned at the boy. “I’m guessing Grett isn’t going to want to kiss the kid who can’t stop pissing himself.”

Admiration spread across the young boy’s face like sunrise. “That’s the most bastardy thing I’ve ever heard,” he said.

Bast tried to look modest and failed. “Have you got anything for me?”

“I found a wild bee hive,” the boy said.

“That will do for a start,” Bast said. “Where?”